

Made in Palestine

May 3 through October 23, 2003.

The river Jordan is not wider than a creek where it ekes out the border between Jordan and Israel at the Allenby Bridge border compound. Multiple rolls of razor wire and Israeli rifle-boxes more strongly mark this boundary; Israeli soldiers too. Palestinians arrive on different buses, stand in different lines, and receive rougher treatment than incoming internationals. We were there in late Ramadan. Doves of Muslim men and women returning home from pilgrimages to holy sites were crushed together in security holding stalls like livestock.

Movement and passage through the nebulous intra-territorial borders, even exits, is a problem for many Palestinians. The occupying military power, Israel, refuses to delineate its borders, opting instead to chart and re-chart its boundaries arbitrarily by the placement of armed divisions, militarized zones, and the construction of the Apartheid Wall. In addition to including the land of Palestine '48 and the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza many of the government figures, settlers, religious leaders, and military outfits in Israel claim territory in Jordan, Syria, and parts of Egypt.

Contemporary Palestinian films like Hany Abu-Asad's feature film *Rana's Wedding* use checkpoints and security stops as plot devices. Many of the works in this exhibition make reference to blockages and checkpoints. Emily Jacir and Anton Sinkewich's *Untitled* installation of books (every book by a Palestinian author) within the doorframe to a gallery is an attempt to make an audience understand the endless obstructions to free passage that Palestinians endure-- the checkpoints, closures, roving borders, and the recent construction of a mammoth separation wall. At the same time, this piece draws attention to a canon of literature that includes the Christian *Bible*, Edward Said's eloquent essays, and Mahmoud Darwish's poetry of *sumoud*.

***Sumoud* is, loosely, the concept of steadfastness, patience, and inexhaustibility in the face of adversity. It is the virtue that encourages people to withstand the inhumanity of occupation, compels artists to make art under circumstances that hardly tolerate life itself. Ashraf Fawakhry's donkey demonstrates *sumoud*. In this selection of his work, the image of a donkey resides in all things-- behind inky clouds, within the camel cigarette logo, amidst Arabic script and Hebrew characters. It is festooned with markings, sequins, false faces, and true obsessions. This donkey performs duets with Egyptian singers, and it bears the signs and distractions of modern life, even as it awaits the passing of invading armies and occupation forces. The title of this exhibition comes from Fawakhry. His donkeys embody a rugged type of self-recognition and slow-burning confidence; they resist attempts to pigeonhole them, and they**

even admit to moments of humor. Fawakhry himself lives in Haifa, an Arab under Israeli law like the martyrs remembered in his installation *Line 13*, who were killed in the first days of the current Al Aqsa Intifada.

There is no way into Palestine except via Israel. The Israeli Defense Force, IDF, controls the borders. Israel looks like California, banal and bountiful; passing through one of the militarized checkpoints, the only way to cross into Palestine, you see the roads have been torn up by IDF tank treads. The large stones in Rajie Cook's *Ammo Box*, an ironic commentary on unfair fighting, could have been picked up from the devastated ground just beyond Kalandia. Homes and buildings of every kind are riddled with holes where IDF machine guns and mortars have shelled them day and night.

At every checkpoint, Israeli soldiers subject long lines of Palestinians to rough handling and degradation. After artist Jawad Ibrahim had procured the numerous visas required for exiting Palestine, crossing Israel, and entering the United States, he, along with a busload of other Jordan-bound Palestinians, was turned back at the Jordanian border by an Israeli soldier who explained, brusquely, that too many Arabs had crossed that day.

Peace activists are also on the lists of the watched. As Gabriel Delgado, one of the exhibition's curators, and I stepped off the Arab bus to the border an Israeli soldier diverted us from the main line and detained us for several hours. The soldier insisted that we were there for "Terrorism, not tourism." We were strip-searched and interrogated. One soldier absconded with Gabriel's personal journal. Another rifled through my things, complaining that too many of my books were "political." It turns out that they thought we were with the International Solidarity Movement, a non-violence resistance movement comprised of Palestinians and international activists. This was our introduction to that famous "democracy" in the Middle East where everything is done for the cameras, and anything that isn't caught on camera is quickly denied.

Palestinians are aware that they must conduct their lives as if on camera. Vehicles marked TV are less likely to be shot at by IDF marksmen than Red Cross/Red Crescent ambulances. Despite this, suicide bombers make international headlines while the murders of Palestinian civilians by Israeli soldiers and settlers go unnoticed, except when these deaths can be retrofitted to the Israeli apologia of security related measures. This does not even take into account the IDF policy of shooting to injure and maim.

We visited Ramallah a day after Israeli soldiers had killed an eighty year old woman there as she was entering a taxi cab. CNN reported that it was a Palestinian militant that had been shot, not, as was and is so often the case, an innocent civilian caught in a cat's cradle of blocked roads and sniper fire. The horrors of the occupation are real. Many of them, the deaths, the home demolitions, the arrests, the collective punishments, are immediate; others, like the ecological disasters and territorial gerrymandering, have far-reaching consequences.

The walls of homes, fences, and buildings in Palestinian cities are covered with the posters of martyrs. The posters are memorials to the dead, often children and women, shaheed, those persons killed while

following God's way. Jawad Ibrahim's expressionist ink drawings portray the terrified death gazes and the shrouded bodies of the murdered. By and large, these are unwitting martyrs, witnesses to brutality, hardly suicide bombers. Describing all martyrs as suicide bombers maligns the majority of the Palestinian dead.

Noel Jabbour's photographs from the series *Vacant Seats* portray families in their homes, gathered around photographs and other reminders of their murdered loved ones. Natural light suffuses these photographs with a metaphysical quality. The edges disappear into diffuse light. These people occupy real, albeit undefined, space, likewise without clear borders. Otherwise, the photographs display a minimum of framing, staging, and premeditated composition. A more obvious point is gently made-- these families grieve their losses. They are still grieving. The occupation that claimed these lives is still busy claiming others.

Nida Sinnokrot's *Al Jaz-CNN* consists of two monitors displaying live-feed broadcasts of the leading Arab and American news networks. The difference in coverage is at times ordinary and predictable, at other times remarkable, particularly relating to profoundly devastating regional events such as the US invasion of Iraq. The CNN coverage of the war was full of racing tanks, high-tech videoscopes, and the breathless reports of embedded journalists. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, presented a gorier account of the toll of war, its dead bodies and bomb-ravaged cities.

Everything I used to believe about Palestine is wrong. The common notion of a two-sided religious confrontation, stretching back over thousands of years, has little to do with the reality of a place in which a poorly armed population has been systematically dispossessed, stripped of its collective identity, and subjected to constant violence and rapine by the occupation forces of Israel. Most Palestinians live in exile, deprived of their right to return to their birthplace and ancestral home. Like Mary Tuma's dresses, they hover in liminal spaces, casting a shadow on current events, real, but, dispossessed, disembodied as she suggests. The Palestinians in Jordan are told not to refer to themselves as Palestinian, and Jordanian secret police monitor the roads and telephones, paying particular attention to international visitors to the Palestinian refugee camps. Here the artists Abdul Hay Mussalam and Adnan Yahya live in a huge community of Palestinian refugees. Mussalam's sawdust relief paintings depict Palestinian life before and after Al Nakba, folk scenes and pastoralia give way to scenes of Israeli destruction and Palestinian resistance.

Cross one of the checkpoints, like Kalandia, and you begin to see the toll the occupation takes on every aspect of Palestinian life. The blooming desert of Israeli myth ends where the occupation begins. The forced leap to industrialization has drained the rivers and aquifers. The infrastructure is nearly totally destroyed-- amoebas pollute the water supply. The roads are torn up by tanks. The horizon line is spiked with sniper towers and pillboxes. Random bands of Israeli soldiers stop traffic, cruise their tanks through residential neighborhoods, and announce curfews and closures capriciously. Otherwise the neighborhoods are normal, cultivated places.

Vera Tamari's installation alludes to the destruction of the olive tree, the staple of Palestinian agriculture. Hundreds of ceramic trees, each daubed in a pastel, are suspended above the ground on a

transparent plexiglass plane. Above this grove hangs a wall-mounted black and white image of an olive tree. Entire fields of olive trees and orange trees have been systematically razed by the ominous two-story military bulldozers that the Caterpillar Corporation makes especially for the Israeli army.

As we crossed the Surda checkpoint that separates the Palestinian town of Ramallah from a number of nearby Palestinian towns we passed a few IDF soldiers scanning the crowd, their rifles braced at eye-level, frequently interfering with the passage of students, vendors, and elderly women. Emily Jacir was accosted by these same soldiers while she was making her video *Crossing Surda*, which documented her passage through this makeshift military installation on her daily journey to work at the University of Birzeit a few miles down the road. Her experience was an ordeal. She was held at rifle-point in freezing rain. The soldiers threw her American passport in the mud and repeatedly threatened her with violence. When she used her cell phone to call for help, the operator at the American Embassy said, "Sorry there is nothing we can do to help you. Good luck!" and hung up the line. The next day, however, she cut a small hole in the bottom of her handbag in order to hide her camera and resume filming surreptitiously. *Sumoud* indeed.

Shortly after our visit, the IDF escalated their policy of terrorizing International peace activists. American peace activist Rachel Corrie was run over and killed by an Israeli bulldozer in March, 2003, while protesting the demolition of a Palestinian home in Rafah, Gaza. American peace activist Brian Avery had his face shot off at a demonstration in Jenin, the West Bank, and British peace activist Thomas Hurndall was shot in the head by Israeli soldiers in Rafah, Gaza within a week of each other in April, 2003.

Gaza is a tiny sliver of land divided by military checkpoints. In the Breijj refugee camp we came across a wall covered in human blood where a helicopter had flown in the night before and blasted seven young men. Two young men survived the first blast, so the helicopter made a second pass and strafed them with machine gun fire. The artist Mohammed Abu Sall lives in this camp, where tank divisions regularly carry out assassination missions. He showed us shell fragments, shrapnel, pieces of depleted uranium that he found in the walls and streets surrounding his home. The paintings exhibited here depict five close views of a tank—its treads, its camouflaged profile in the landscape, and the empty void at the center of its cannon barrel.

Rula Halawani's *Negative Incursion* series of photographs document the March 2002 incursion of the IDF into the West Bank. During this time soldiers ransacked Ramallah, looting offices, private homes, government centers, and forced their way into the Sakakini Cultural Center, home to the offices of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish among others. Israeli soldiers destroyed the door to this small art space, shot paintings and sculptures, broke open the safe and stole its contents, and ransacked the offices. During the same incursion, soldiers defiled the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Culture's offices. They defecated in file cabinets and desk drawers, smeared fecal material on the walls, and left bottles of urine throughout the offices.

Halawani's photographs emphasize the strange airless horror of these incursions, during which tanks loom over the prone bodies of terrified Palestinian men. Packs of soldiers fan out in public markets and

open streets, their gazes hard and rifles drawn, ready to fire on anything that moves, and where families huddle in tents on the lots where their homes, now demolished, once stood. These prints capture the alien and inhuman character of these incursions, during which tanks run roughshod through civic areas, crushing cars and demolishing homes and buildings.

Abdel Rahman Mozayan's drawings of the April, 2002 Jenin massacre are stylized so that their harrowing subject—the ruins of Jenin refugee camp, will not terrify children. At the same time, they are loaded with cultural information. Kuffiyehs and palm trees emblazon a dress worn by the central figure of the Canaanite goddess Anat. Stately, clear-eyed Anat represents the Palestinian people. Her back is hunched beneath a sack of doves, as if the burden of peace is hers to carry. She carries a key, representing the Palestinians' dream of returning to their homes. Anat is throwing stones, the symbolic act of resistance. She brings to mind the subject of Darwish's poem "The Lover":

Her eyes and the tattoo on her hands are Palestinian,
 Her name, Palestinian,
 Her dreams and sorrow, Palestinian,
 Her kerchief, her feet and body, Palestinian,
 Her words and her silence, Palestinian,
 Her voice, Palestinian,
 Her birth and her death, Palestinian.

Palestinian art is sophisticated, circumspect, and charged with strong slow-burning emotions. It is densely packed with history, both the recent fifty-five years of Israeli occupation and also the several thousand years of history that preceded it. History, like the glass of Rana Bishara's *Blindfolded History*, an installation of silk-screened chocolate on 55 glass panes, can never be totally erased. Chocolate dissolves on the tongue, but its taste lingers in memory. The paradox extends to these images of suffering, naked Palestinian boys held at gunpoint, grieving women, Israeli soldiers regressing to pre-moral states. At one point they were news, the larvae of history. Now they join the world of art, transformed.

Emily Jacir's tent, John Halaka's mural, and Mervat Essa's ceramic sacks reclaim a history that is otherwise lost. The title of Jacir's tent, *Memorial to 418 Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948*, announces her intent to debunk the widespread Zionist myth that Palestine was "a land without a people." The tent itself is the same kind of United Nations issued refugee tent that is used today by dispossessed families in the West Bank and Gaza. Its billowing form swarms with names like *Abu Shusha* and *Deir Yasin*. Some are stitched in thick black thread. Others are ghostly, penciled in. Each village name is a piece of retrieved history.

John Halaka's mural painting *Driven From Their Homes and Stripped Of Their Identities* depicts the forced march as one of the universal constants in the history of oppression. The trudging figures are made up of tiny printed words, specifically the phrase "Forgotten Survivors," rubber-stamped over and over again on the canvas. His dispossessed figures could be the Palestinians in the Negev desert or the Cherokee marching the Trail of Tears. If a common sentiment can be found in these works it is that suffering, even the large-scale suffering of people like the Palestinians, is not exclusive to any one

people.

Essa's sacks recall those used by the Palestinians expelled from their homes in 1948. Villages like Bir'am, home to the artist's grandmother, now lie in ruins, unoccupied, and off-limits by tribunal decree. Weeds crawl up through the broken doorframes of empty homes. The surface work on each sack ranges from intricate and illusionistic, simulating embroidery, to rough and hurried, as if the weaving of the sacks themselves was interrupted by the appearance of soldiers at the door. Essa's sacks physically resemble the abstracted human form. Very few of them are inert; many appear to reach for succor, others are frozen in tortured poses. These forms re-enact the pained marches of expulsion, calling to mind the unhappy soldiers in Wilfred Owens' anti-war lament *Dulce Et Decorum Est* who are "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks."

Discussions of Palestine are too often sidetracked by symbolism. Myths crowd the landscape. In response to this, there is a tendency among Palestinian artists to use materials in a literal way, discounting the more traditional symbolic or idiosyncratic uses of materials and imagery. Part of this is a reflection of international art world trends. Sinnokrot's paired television monitors comprise a meta-critical study of media. Another part of this tendency dates back to the Intifada of 1987 when, a number of artists, including Suleiman Mansour, Nabil Anani, and Tyseer Barakat, participated in the boycott of Israeli products, which included art supplies. During this boycott they used the available raw materials, mud, animal hides, and natural dyes and pigments. Clay, as in Suleiman Mansour's *I, Ismael* series, represents the land itself.

Other artists opt for the symbolic, figurative, and abstract modes of expression. Hani Zurob's post-imprisonment paintings, *I Tell You No, It Means No*, juxtapose inner and outer landscapes. They tell the story of a military squadron kicking down a young Palestinian artist's door in the middle of the night, his unexpected arrest and his torment while imprisoned without charges. Blank spaces, unpainted portions of canvas infringe upon these landscapes where the artist seeks to depict the prisoner's retreat from the constant cruelty of his captors into his mind, where intermittent colorful dreams of a free Palestine interrupt his immediate suffering.

Samia Halaby's abstract expressionist paintings connect, by way of title, her idea of place, her childhood home in Palestine, with a flowering, emotionally expansive mode of lush pointillism. *Mountain Olives of Palestine* is a nearly monochromatic study of the olive tree. Her paintings bustle with vital energies and organic forms. Grapelike clusters and fernlike pendants hang side by side, buzzing with near-tropical Mediterranean colors that imbue *Palestine, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River* with the vitality of a living place, with crowded marketplaces and blooming orchards.

Mustafa Al Hallaj's masonite-cut print *Self-portrait as Man, God, the Devil* is a fable in which he cast himself as man, god and devil, released from the boundaries of political regimes. It is a master work, a continuum of fantastic and folkloric imagery that spans ancient and modern times. He juxtaposes a vast and often idiosyncratic menagerie of symbols — bulls, camel men, birds, lizard-like creatures and fish, with fantastic landscapes and episodes of ancient and modern Palestinian life. The animal hybrids of Hallaj are reminiscent of Hieronymous Bosch. It reads cinematically, frame by frame, and is over 100 yards long. It is intricate, outlandish, and epic, full of figures from ancient mythology-- bulls, birds, fish, and hybrids. Scenes from *Al Nakba* and the universal history of human oppression, such as mass

hangings and forced marches, spill into representations that draw from his extensive erudition and his own syncretic imagination.

A number of artists, including Ismael Shammout and Tamam Al Ackal, withheld their work from this exhibition in protest of the imminent U.S. invasion of Iraq. Other artists restricted our choice of works for personal reasons. Adnan Yahya, for example, would not release any paintings that had not been previously exhibited in the Arab world. The painting he did send contains a scene within a scene, a political parable inculcating the United States for the subsidy, encouragement, and arming of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Inset within a trompe l'oeil framing device with a gilt plaque marked 'USA' a grotesque caricature of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon roasts a young Palestinian boy's head over a gas-burning flame. A matchbox bearing the US flag sits just beneath the flame. The painting is nightmarish, mean-spirited, and impeccably executed. The meaning is clear.

Clearly these works of art are steeped in politics. As long as their land is occupied, there is no place where Palestinians can escape the language of politics. Their daily existence is a litany of resistance to a military junta that negates not only their human rights but also their very existence. At the same time, art moves towards autonomy, both political and personal. These works of art demonstrate awareness of advances in art, a deep understanding of history, and deeply felt emotion.

Tex Kerschen

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