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The Arab Weekly

How Palestinian art evolved under siege

Nabil Anani, Sliman Mansour, Vera Tamari and Tayseer Barakat reviewed the development of Palestinian art at a lecture in parallel with "Challenges of Identity," their first collective exhibition in Lebanon.

Sunday 12/05/2019



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Unique insight. "Wedding" by Tayseer Barakat. (El-Nimer Collection)

BEIRUT - The first intifada was a turning point in the evolution of Palestinian art, which had been locked for decades in traditional practices using invariable narrative and symbols. Modern Palestinian art was pioneered by four artists after the uprising, introducing new materials and multidisciplinary practices.

Nabil Anani, Sliman Mansour, Vera Tamari and Tayseer Barakat reviewed the development of Palestinian art at a lecture at Dar el-Nimer for Arts and Culture in Beirut in parallel with "Challenges of Identity," their first collective exhibition in Lebanon.

"The Palestinian art movement started effectively in 1972. Before that date there was no infrastructure or any framework for art," Mansour said.

"That year, we had the first exhibition in the occupied territories, a collective show by artists based in the West Bank and Gaza. We were about 18 artists. We later established the League of Palestinian Artists and opened Gallery 79, the first art space in the West Bank."

Many challenges prevented the development of art, Mansour said.

"We were living in a kind of cultural ghetto, isolated from cultural developments. Movement was difficult. Many artists were banned from travelling. Artists were often arrested and their works confiscated. I, myself, was thrown in jail four or five times," he said.

"Universities were also banned from establishing art academies. There was no internet at the time, any art infrastructure or art critics, galleries or museums. It was an attempt to kill any creative and artistic spirit of Palestinians."

Palestinian art, like any other art, is inspired by its milieu and entourage.

Anani explained that before the Nakba in 1948, artists painted landscapes and religious or historical subjects as icons, the Dome of the Rock or Saladin's entry in Jerusalem after defeating the Crusaders. They also used symbols reflecting opposition to colonialism.

"After 1948, symbols figured prominently in Palestinian art," Anani said. "For instance, many artists painted cactuses as a symbol of destroyed

Palestinian villages. (The plant was commonly used as a fence in the villages). They painted doves as a symbol of peace. Iron fists and barbed wire as symbols of imprisonment, anger, steadfastness and resistance to Israeli occupation.”

“Artists also painted Palestinian women wearing the traditional dress as a symbol of reaffirming national identity. They drew olive trees, which are abundant across Palestinian territories, for their beauty and deep roots in the land, in addition to the fact that olives are an important source of revenue for the Palestinian economy,” Anani added.

The first intifada in the late 1980s was a turning point in the development of Palestinian art, Barakat said.

“The art movement shifted to a new and totally different phase in which the symbols were no longer that prominent. We wanted to relay our message and the Palestinian story through modern and contemporary practice, a new language that communicates with the outside world, not only with the Palestinian public,” Barakat said.

The four artists founded "New Visions," proposing a margin for more individualised outlets and experimentation. They turned to earthwork and mixed media assemblage using materials derived from the Palestinian environment to boycott Israeli art suppliers in protest of the occupation.

Anani used leathers and dyes such as tea, coffee, henna and spices, which made up the colours for his work on leather. Mansour and Tamari worked with clay, adding hay to give it more consistency. Barakat chose wood and fire as materials for his art.

"The intifada mainly liberated us," Sliman said.

"Our art became more expressive of ourselves and more abstract. We were no longer limited to the traditional way of doing art to please a specific public.

"For example, I began working with clay and this made me engage in sculpture. I believe that was the link between traditional and modern art that the younger generation is producing now."

The four artists are among the founding members of the Palestinian Association of Contemporary Art. After the creation of the Palestinian Authority

in the West Bank and Gaza in 1994, they established the International Academy of Art Palestine in 2006, which was later integrated into the University of Birzeit as the first academy of fine arts in the Palestinian territories.

Today, fine art students receive contemporary art education with multidisciplinary practice, including painting, drawing, photography, installation, printmaking, sculpture, video, film, sound and new media.

The parallel exhibition "Challenges of Identity" featured works by the four artists that were drawn from private collections in Lebanon.

"It is very difficult to bring out the works due to Israeli restrictions. The works on display were bought some time ago by private collectors here," Sliman said. "They mostly highlight the symbols that we painted to reaffirm our national identity and fight attempts to erase it."

"Challenges of Identity" was on display April 30-May 11 at Dar el-Nimer for Arts and Culture in Beirut.

Written By



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