

# Tea for two

## Art in Palestine



By Khaled Hourani

In search for common features between a contemporary artist in Palestine today and his or her predecessors, I would like to explore with you the history of art in Palestine. Far away from Palestine, yet very close to its soul, is Mona Hatoum, an international artist of Palestinian origin who transcends time and borders through her impeccable and intense visual language. She exhibits throughout the four corners of the world; there is no major museum or gallery that does not display one of her works, and her installations are presented in numerous places. Mona's paintings and sculptures reflect the turbulent political condition of people's lives today, in Palestine and elsewhere, conditions that overwhelm with their implications and meanings.

*Tea for Two* is the name of one of Mona Hatoum's works, and I chose it for this article in order to highlight expressions of love in a world characterized by violence and disturbances. Hatoum reflects the harshness of life in her diverse works, holding on to the tense moments that invite human beings to think about life and its meaning. She has created a visual language of tales and paradoxes, of injustice, occupation, and distortion that she shares with other Palestinian artists. She addresses questions of identity, displacement, war, and of the contradictions that are permeating and prevailing in today's world. It is crucial to include Mona Hatoum when writing about Palestinian art today, not only because she has gained international fame, but also because her work is making an impact on a whole generation of young artists, in Palestine and around the world.

Palestinians have painted, sculpted, and authored before and during successive eras of occupation. They drew pictures of human beings, animals, landscapes, and trees; they decorated their lives with embroidery, jewelry, architecture, calligraphy, and ornaments – just like any vibrant lively people whose arts are derived from the backyards of their houses, their farms, ancient buildings in their city centers, and cherished holy sites. Like any other people, Palestinians



*Tea for two by Mona Hatoum 1998.*

developed handicrafts, tools, icons, and paintings that decorate the walls, tiles, and ceilings of their houses.

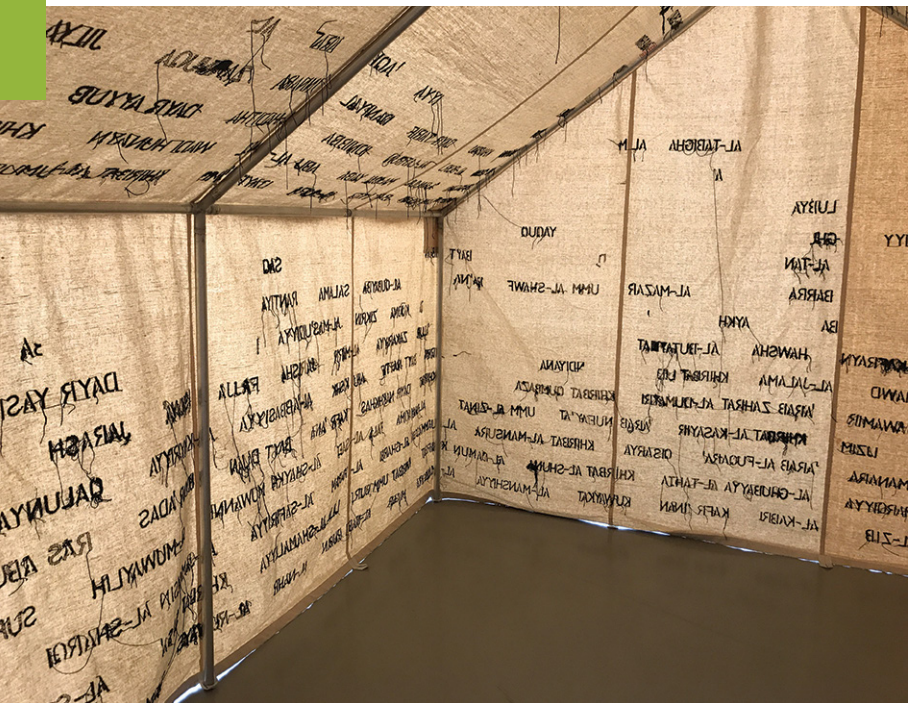
We can view the wide landscape of arts in Palestine from different angles. The Palestinian art scene is rich and vibrant, and could provide material for numerous articles. Reflections could revolve around the artistic and stylistic practices of different eras, linking them to the history and geography within which they took place. Prevalent Palestinian art practices today are characterized by the dispersion of Palestinians around the world and influenced by the various places where Palestinians have found refuge; they are governed by the circumstances



Palestinians have experienced since the Nakba and address both the tragedies of the past and the ongoing confrontations of the present.



*Artwork by Mona Hatoum.*



*Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages (2001), by Emily Jacir. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

One can reflect on three types of art that distinguish three successive (and to some extent overlapping) phases that have left their mark on art in Palestine: First, there is the pre-Nakba (1948) era, and the question of how we should view the art of that phase may arise. We should read it not only in hindsight, trying to interpret it in terms of the events that unfolded later, but must view this art from its contemporary perspective, consider its artistic value and the contexts under which it was produced. To better understand and appreciate the nature and quality of these works of art, we should compare them to the art works of their time, both in their immediate surrounding and in the world. We should reflect on the impact this art had on contemporary viewers and on what it tells us today.

Arts in Palestine carry many special features that reflect Palestine's geography, human experience, interaction with other entities in the

region and the world – and the religious and spiritual significance this place carries. Many fine artists have emerged since the beginning of the twentieth century, some of whom were self-taught; others studied arts, financed by scholarships, in European cities and throughout historic Palestine, both with foreign and local mentors. Among the best-known artists of the pre-Nakba era were Nicola Sayegh, Tawfeeq Jawhariyyeh, and Daoud Zalatimo (who later became the mentor of Ismail Shammout). They are considered among first pioneers of fine art in Palestine, art that is connected to life through aesthetic and functional dimensions. Among the artists of the early twentieth century who joined European schools were Hanna Musmar (born in Nazareth in 1898), Jamal Badran, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Fudoul Odeh, Zalfa As Sa'adi, and Sofia Halabi.

The second phase, is characterized by art created in reaction to confrontation

and encompasses works that depict tragedy, revolution, steadfastness – and the rejection of the status quo. Palestinian art of this period is resistance art, associated with defending a just cause and epitomizing one of the most significant cultural upheavals of its time. Post-Nakba art captured the tragedy of war, displacement, and loss of land. The early works of Ismail Shammout and Tamam Al Akhal are great examples of such art.

The Nakba of 1948 constituted a turning point in Palestinian history and exerted a strong influence of the art not only of the time but for decades to come. Dispossession and displacement made the majority of Palestinians refugees who overcrowded near and far refugee camps, where they had to live under extremely harsh and difficult conditions that hampered the flow of normal life. This condition severed the processes of knowledge production (that is inherently important to Palestinians) and artistic development. The Nakba deeply shook the foundations of Palestinian society, life, and social relations; life became fragmented and continues such until this day, with Palestinians living in the refugee camps, villages, and cities of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Arab countries, and all over

the world –in addition to the few who were able to remain in their land of origin. These factors affected, and in many cases continue to affect Palestinian architecture, industries, dress, and traditions. Houses were replaced by tents; farms with olive and fruit groves were replaced by small pots of mint at the entrance of a tent; instead of traditional dress, they wore what clothing was handed to them by UNRWA; food grown as the fruit of their labor on their own fields was replaced with cans of food aid; their entire lives were undermined and turned upside down – let alone the arts and traditional handicrafts of Palestinian farmers and herders, rural communities, and urban residents.

Given these conditions, it was impossible for the experience of the pioneering artists to continue. The Nakba hampered the natural development of life and left its imprints on all artistic practices. The heavy weight of the ensuing repercussions furthermore strengthened the irrepressible national feelings of Palestinians and highlighted the political significance of art and other forms of expression in calling for national liberation and the right to self-determination. Art moved to the frontline of confrontations with the

*Ahlam Shibli exhibiting at documenta 14, Germany/Greece, 2017. Photo courtesy of the artist.*





*Lady of Jerusalem (2000) by Ismail Shammout. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

oppressor; individual artists and art institutions were left no other choice. Especially following the establishment of the PLO in 1964, art became a main tool to demand liberation, the right of return, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

It is natural that political reverberations overwhelm the realm of artistic expression. Art has long been known as an act of resistance. When a nation is faced by the threat of obliteration, its art charged with steadfastness and affirmations of identity. Despite the multiplicity of its voices, messages, and artistic mediums, art in the Palestinian context is frequently considered as militant art, in a state of confrontation, and viewed primarily within the framework of the conflict – even if an artist disregards the direct political format and focuses on purely internal or aesthetic aspects. There exist art experiences that respond to the history

of art and its aesthetic aspects, without direct political significance.

Finally, there is a third phase that partially overlaps with the second phase, namely artworks produced following the defeat of 1967. Among the prominent figures of this phase are Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Isam Bader, and Tayseer Barakat. Recent art practices include contemporary works of male and female artists who attempt to understand anew the power of art and its role, as it plays to the beats of ever-changing and explosive moments while simultaneously connecting to artistic traditions. It is a moment of confrontation, open to all possibilities, at a time when concepts are being overturned and conditions overturned dramatically. Indeed, our generation is witness to processes that are overtaking our world with a storm of changes. The question remains, amidst all this turmoil, what is the object of experimentation



*Sad Tunes (1977), by Sliman Mansour. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

among Palestinian artists? What is Palestinian art suggesting today? Does it search to discern the energy of art and its role in change? Should it follow in the footsteps of its predecessors or has its role changed completely in terms of form and substance?

There certainly exists a new language in art that reflects the changes that are taking place in other aspects of life; the language is novel in terms of techniques, but it tends to explore similar topics and stumble upon the same questions. I have in mind works of artist Emily Jacir that focus on displacement through the tent; I am also referring, inter alia, to the works of Ahlam Shibli regarding the transformation of spaces, as exhibited currently in documenta 14. The works of Manal Mahamid, Sharif Waked, Shuruq Harb, Wafa and Hasan Hourani, Khalil Rabah, and the prominent artists and academics Dr. Bashir Makhoul and Dr. Issa Dibi are evidence of the wide range and

richness of Palestinian art and a source of pride. From the first painters in Palestine to Ismail Shammout, Mona Hatoum, and beyond a common tune and a repeating statement can be found. Our aspiration is to hear more voices playing to harmonious tunes as we engage in such dialogue about culture and arts in Palestine.

Certainly, when art aims to touch people's hearts and to trigger sustainable change in thought and practice, we are invited to evaluate impact and meaning. However, can art alone change life? Can art heal what was corrupted by politics? Many questions remain pending, and I have no answers yet. However, I can safely say that art in Palestine is not defeated, for at least it is still capable of sarcasm.

\*Translation from Arabic by Areej Daibas

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