

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Self Portrait: Palestinian Women's Art.

Edited by Tal Ben Zvi and Yael Lerer.

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As I wrote this review, the Israeli troops were just pulling out of Jenin, leaving carnage and despair behind them. What an ironic moment to consider a bi-national project that examines Palestinian identity through visual art! Although cooperative projects will no doubt appear on an increasingly rare basis, given current events, I wish to commend Tal Ben Zvi's efforts. The ways in which Palestinians envision and depict their national and gendered identity is the basic theme of the trilingual (Arabic, Hebrew, English) book/catalogue, *Self Portrait: Palestinian Women's Art*, curated by Tal Ben Zvi and edited by Tal Ben Zvi and Yael Lerer.

The exhibit, *Self Portrait*, displaying the artwork of nine Palestinian, women artists from the West Bank and Israel, was scheduled to open in October, 2000 at Al Wasati Arts Center in East Jerusalem and proceed to the Ami Steinetz Gallery, in Tel Aviv and the International Center, in Bethlehem. Instead, the al-Aqsa Intifada began in the same month, and a decision was made to postpone these showings, since not all of the participating artists would have been able to attend. As the months go by, with the horrible suicide bombings killing Israelis and the Israeli Defense Force's devastating collective punishment of Palestinians and demolition of the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority, I can only wonder when, or if, the full exhibit will ever be mounted, and where.

Such exhibits are unusual and critically necessary. Previously, I had the mistaken impression that only the right in Israel refused to recognize, or were oblivious to a distinct, Palestinian, cultural identity that includes production of contemporary art forms. Since the Palestinians constitute a distinct percentage of the Israeli population and are residents of the West Bank and Gaza, one might have expected the moderates and those on the left to have adopted a more multicultural perspective than is currently apparent.

The modernity of Palestinian (and other Arab) women is similarly denied; they are the backwards "other". Thus, very few individuals are aware of these

women's participation in the arts or familiar with the work of specific artists. The political divide and the segregation of residential and other spaces in Israel, have intensified the cultural "othering" of Arabs. By this I am referring to the process of emphasizing the cultural distinctions between Arabs and Jews rather than the similarities and also the imbuing of the image of an ignorant, traditional, linguistically deficient population with negativity, hostility towards Israeli culture and violence.

National support for Israeli artists, theatrical schools and companies, and dance and musical endeavors are quite evident and commendable. Yet, such support has been far more difficult for Palestinians to attain. Exhibition and performance venues for contemporary visual art, or for theater have frequently been limited to schools, clubs or community exhibits. Permanent art centers for Palestinians in the Territories were only established in the early 1990s. This situation is not due to a lack of artists and it affects the study of art as well.

Some of the best-known artists, for example, Kamal Boullata, who presents an essay in this volume and Mona Hatoum, gained recognition in exile. Palestinian women are now enrolled in Israeli art schools, but there are no dedicated art programs conducted in Arabic. As Tal Ben Zvi points out, this has some serious repercussions for the development of artistic identity and the artists' own vocabulary.

I have also noticed that in the two largest museums in Israel, there is no mention of Palestinian artists nor are there any examples of their contemporary visual art. Indeed, Israel has defined itself as a cultural entity, inclusive of many artists from various geographical backgrounds, so long as they are Jewish. Since last August, I have read weekly reviews of notable Israeli artists and their exhibitions in the press, but only once in that same time period was there mention of Palestinian artists, specifically of two women (which appeared in *Ha'aretz*).

All of the above increases the value of curator Ben Zvi's efforts on behalf of this exhibit, and consciously informs the text she provides regarding the portrayal of self, nation and gender identity in the volume. Ben Zvi explains that her personal affiliation with the Israeli left did not address the invisibility of Palestinians or their separation from Israelis. She argues that the bi-national state requires the presence and acknowledgement of Palestinian art for it to be an integral facet of Israeli art.

In addition to those Israelis who oppose Palestinian representation in the arts (or in literature, given the example of Mahmud Darwish's poem which caused an uproar when included in the high school curriculum), those who support the Arab boycott against Israeli intellectuals or artists no doubt criticized Ben Zvi's presumption in curating this exhibit and organizing the volume with Palestinian participants. They are as misguided as Israelis who deny the presence or vitality of a Palestinian culture. Without cooperative ventures and the process of

"speaking directly to the other side" as Edward Said recent urged (Said, "Thinking Ahead. After Survival, What Happens?" *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 4 -10 April 2002), the right and extremists win. The policies of separation will succeed in crystallizing barriers between all of us as individuals and agents of intellectual or artistic production. As an additional reason for supporting such a catalogue, one may restate the general need for further publications on Palestinian arts and art scholarship.

The volume opens with artist/art-scholar Kamal Boullata's essay on Palestinian women artists of three different generations, Zulfā al-Sa'di (1905-1988), Juliana Seraphim (b. 1934) and Mona Hatoum (b. 1952). Boullata explains how al-Sa'di's portraits of important figures in the Arab world fit into the historical themes chosen by contemporaries Daoud Zalamtmo and Mubarak Sa'd. As a pioneering Arab woman artist, al-Sa'di remarkably created a distinctly historical narrative of Arab identity when she showed the portraits of Salah al-Din, Sharif al-Hussain, 'Umar al-Mukhtar, Ahmad Shawqi and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (not an Arab, himself, but a leading figure of the *salafi* (Islamic reform) movement) all of which appeared in a 1933 exhibit.

Seraphim, whose family fled from Jaffa to Lebanon, created very distinct, sensual and yet ethereal female fantasy figures. These were used to illustrate, for example, the writing of the path-breaking Layla Ba'lbaki. Boullata differentiates Seraphim's somewhat surrealist and uniquely erotic imagination from the neo-realist tradition of painter Isma'il Shammout, for example. A bridal figure, which often represents the city of Jaffa in Palestinian imagery, bears Seraphim's own features. Boullata then concentrates on the themes of the body and self-expression, linking Mona Hatoum's various works of sculpture, film and visual art. Hatoum is indisputably a leading figure and a pioneer in her use of various media and manipulations of space. The black and white reproductions of this segment of the catalogue make it difficult to imagine the originals - and Hatoum's work is well-photographed. However, the four-dimensional effect (including sound) should be experienced in an exhibit environment.

I found Boullata's essay an important contextualizing device for the book, since the actual exhibit works which follow, represent one artist of Hatoum's generation, while the others are younger. I do wish that the curator had included a sample of Boullata's own interesting work, perhaps as an illustration for Sherwell's chapter and an antidote to the very literal depictions of "motherland."

Tina Malhi Sherwell, also an art scholar, deals with the depiction of female figures in Palestinian art, tracing their origin to the years just preceding 1948. The archetypes of motherhood, including Nabil Aouni's Madonna in Palestinian dress (with a nod to Klimt) and Jawad al-Malhi's kerchiefed mother bearing a child's body and Suleiman Mansour's woman giving birth to a whole village, nicely illustrate this background of nationalist imagery. The examples she has

chosen, all by male artists, form a most interesting counterpoint to the actual exhibit, pieces of the nine artists that follow, in which complicated and ambiguous images of gender and nation appear. The actual exhibit catalogue begins with Ben Zvi's ideas on the function of self-portraiture - a demonstration of consciousness. Some of the artists express their national identity implicitly, although the concept of 'home' and femaleness provide comparative themes appearing in all of the artwork. Iman Abu Hamid who studied in Liverpool and works in Acre (Akka/Akko), deals with home and memory. The most striking of her contributions is "Acre," a collage of photographs of the artist and the artist's grandfather on canvas. Its unique features include the superimposition of imprinted postcards hanging in front of the canvas, the lighting and suggestive geographical shapes. Double imaging is also achieved in a piece displaying the artist as a child (Untitled, 2000), lit with an interior candle.

Faten Fawzy Nastas, of Beit Jala (about 2 km west of Bethlehem), who studied at Bir Zeit University and works in Bethlehem, is represented by two stylistically varied works one of which depicts a common sight nowadays, a roadblock. "Birth and Death at the Checkpoint" relates the true story of a woman from Husan who wanted to deliver her baby in Bethlehem. When delayed by the soldiers at two checkpoints, the first of her twins was born and then the second was born dead. With the continuing delay, by the time they reached the hospital, the first baby died as well. The artist has internalized and translated the story with the use of a naïve style, akin to Haitian folk paintings, with the soldier in his blue and white booth, a blue and white flag flying and dominating all, choosing death over life for the helpless Arab man in his white *dishdasha* and the baby emerging from the woman's body in the rear seat of the car.

Nastas also created a dramatic, three-dimensional piece, "Woman in the Window" (2000). A woman's bust of white plaster, draped toga-like, with a blue shawl, stands behind iron bars, her hands gripping them; her head is thrown back and her mouth is agape; one can imagine her calling out. Red curtains are drawn back on each side to reveal a 'Palestine-shaped' photograph of the countryside. Tal notes an allusion to the Virgin Mary in this figure.

Ahlam Shibli and Suhair Farraj's photographs depict unique narratives. Shibli, born in the village of Shibli in the Galilee, studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at Haifa University and now works in Haifa. She was employed as a social worker in the villages of the Galilee, the subject of her photographic work. Here she presents a geometrically arranged group of photographs that suggest a children's game of *hiza*, a kind of hopscotch. They portray a young girl and a boy and scenes from the village where the author once herded goats after school. Tal interprets the work as one of memory; the images are shot from a child's perspective.

Following are stills from a 56-minute video, *Arab Diaries: Birth*, by Suhair Isma'il Farraj of the Deheisheh refugee camp (near Bethlehem). The actual video includes spliced sections from two other films about birth made by an Iraqi and a Syrian director. In the catalogue, there is a series of photos at Fatme's bedside; she is giving birth to an infant girl. Fatme already has five girls and is deeply disappointed with the appearance of this sixth girl-child, attesting the continuity of patriarchal values. The two following series of stills are apparently from the splices of two other films (this could be more clearly indicated) since they feature a woman who appears thrilled with her baby, as well as other "female" activities, i.e. washing of floors and handwashing.

Manar Zu'abi, of Nazareth, works in a completely different genre in sculpture and geometrically; in one particular piece she works with multiple strands of black wool. In another piece her medium is coal, used directly on the wall, as if sketching the wool shapes. In a third piece she uses women's nylon stockings of different hues stretched across a small square area in a striking geometric construction (Untitled, 2000).

Jumana Emil Abboud of Shefa' Ammar (in the Galilee), now working in Jerusalem, is represented by a three-part collage including disparate icons of popular culture: the Virgin Mary, a woman from Pharoanic Egypt, a photograph of the sexy Egyptian actress, Nabila 'Ubeid, lace, calligraphy, and other seemingly eclectic images (Untitled, 1999). This style is different from, yet related to, a wonderful piece which shows a woman's black eye and eyebrow encircled by a piece of lace. From the lace hangs a single white thread outlining a geographic shape. The string is attached to a blue stone, and is quite visible against a strong red and black background. Abboud also presents several sketches, two of which contrast the labeling of the body of a naked man; all of his body parts appear except his genitals. The names of his body parts are indicated as in medical diagrams, in English and transliterated Arabic. The woman's body is left completely unlabeled, except for one marker pointing to her clitoris. Here we see the glorified, precisely titled, body of the man with its many functions versus the sexualized body of the woman, limited to its supposedly "purposeless" or non-functional organ. Egyptian author Nawal Saadawi and others have pointed out/indicated the lack of information on female sexuality in Egypt's medical education system (and elsewhere in the Arab world). The artist suggests an awareness of this issue and the paradoxical nature of the sexualizing of women's bodies and the desexualizing of men's.

Some of the artists introduce other memorable and disturbing images of women's bodies. Hanan Abu Hussein of Umm al-Fahm (in Wadi 'Ara near the Galilee, inside the Green Line) who works in Jerusalem, also directly addresses women's bodies and sexuality in her creation of paraffin breasts which form a pattern across a paraffin carpet, surrounded by the traditional mattress seating of

a Palestinian village home (Untitled, 2000). These eerie, disembodied breasts also appear on the cabinets and tiles of a kitchen, that quintessentially female space (Kitchen, 2000).

Manal Marqus, of Kufr Yasif (a village in the Galilee) creates an intentionally provocative piece of extraterrestrial, yet ceremonial, ceramic shapes which include vulvas and labial shapes resting on a cloth-covered altar (Altar, 2000). Next to this altar is a white partition covered with a curtain decorated with breasts made of orange skins, pierced by razor blades (Sin, 2000).

A'ida Nasrallah, of Umm al-Fahm, has created a work about four women, each with its own fascinating poetic text, addressing their stories and their longing for fulfillment - "The Poetess," "The Dejected One," "The Naïve One" and "Fatima." Fatima, for instance, is seduced by a man and a flute and then she is killed with spikes; this suggests women's destruction through their sexuality. The artist's painting style is naïve, yet powerful, reminding one of the works of contemporary Egyptian artists, Muhammad Abla (particularly in the brilliant yellow "Untitled 2000") or Huda Lutfi.

As with Mona Hatoum's works, not all of these pieces can be properly experienced or displayed in book form, i.e. in photographs. This is generally true of conceptual art, sculpture and larger paintings. A part of their impact is lost in reproduction. Given this and the problems of mounting a cooperative exhibit in Israel today, the editors might consider a Web publication so that viewers can experience a sense of the fuller spatial impact of certain pieces, the installations in particular.

This book does not represent Palestinian women's art in its entirety, but rather three particular vistas - Boullata's, Sherwell's and Ben Zvi's. Nonetheless, the value of reviewing such interesting contemporary artists working in various media and styles is evident. Let us hope that someone will set about creating anthologies that will encompass the full panoply of Palestinian visual artists, expressive culture and gender and national identity. These could include a long list of artists, poets, sculptors, musicians, filmmakers, actors and other performers. They are, after all, a significant feature of contemporary life in the region, and deserve to be considered within the context of an artistic movement, rather than as exceptions highlighting the occasional news article.



Woman in the Window - By Faten Fawzy Nastas