

## **Palestinian Art and Possibility: *Made in Palestine*, an Examination.<sup>1</sup>**

By Kathy Zarur

Palestine is a place burdened with the weight of representation.<sup>2</sup> The majority of images projected by western media outlets are one-sided, showing Israeli defense against so-called Palestinian militants and terrorists. This carefully crafted narrative has been firmly fitted in the western imagination, and excludes knowledge of the historical circumstances of the situation. Considering American and European economic interests in the region and the use of the media to shape public opinion, it is difficult to foresee a shift in the understanding of the situation, one that can be described in simple terms as the resistance to an illegal and inhumane occupation. Misunderstanding of the situation in Palestine serves to aggrandize mainstream support of Israel and its activities. Herein lies the importance of the contemporary art exhibition *Made in Palestine*, for art has the potential to communicate vastly under represented perspectives with a language that requires engagement beyond the level of the straightforward presented in the media.

*Made in Palestine* also offers a generous slice of modern and contemporary Palestinian art history, one that is virtually unknown to Western audiences. Artworks by long-established artists, such as Samia Halaby, Suleiman Mansour, and Rula Halawani were presented alongside those of emerging artists. Over half of the artists have since emigrated from their homeland, but many still live in the Middle East, reflecting diaspora and the experience of occupation as defining aspects of Palestinian reality. Artists manipulate colors, shapes and forms to visually draw audiences into their subjective, often personal perspectives, resulting in an engagement with art on intuitive, visceral levels. Another important contribution of the show concerns artistic and cultural legacy. The production of fine art is associated with the existence of a long-standing civilization and higher learning. By exposing US audiences to the work of both well-established and

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of an earlier article. See Kathy Zarur, "Looking at the Levant," *Art in America* 94, no. 8 (September 2006) p 154-7.

<sup>2</sup> By "Palestine," I refer to the West Bank, Gaza and what is known as Palestine 48, the land occupied in 1948 now known as Israel.

young contemporary Palestinian artists, *Made in Palestine* states clearly that yes, there exists an active, healthy and vibrant community working in the realms of art and culture.

*Made in Palestine* opened in 2003 at the Station Museum in Houston, Texas and was the first museum exhibition of Palestinian art in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The show was the brainchild of James Harithas, a museum director and curator known for his politically engaged and socially critical projects such as *Frontera 450+*, which focused on the ongoing disappearance and killings of women in Juarez, Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Given its dedication to critical contemporary art practices that focus on political, cultural, and social issues, Harithas and his team approached Palestinian artist and art historian Samia Halaby with the idea of producing an exhibition of Palestinian art. Along with co-curators Gabriel Delgado and Tex Kerschen, Harithas traveled with Halaby throughout Jordan, Syria and Palestine to visit the studios of Palestinian artists, courting the most accomplished of them for the show. The trip spawned an impressive exhibit of art high in aesthetic and conceptual quality.

Harithas planned on touring the show throughout the US, but despite the pedigree of the artists and the many notable works chosen for the exhibit, finding venues was not an easy task. He received 90 rejections from various museums and art centers. Friends in the museum world revealed that institutions feared losing funding for exhibiting Palestinian art. Finally in 2005, two small art centers — SomArts Cultural Center in San Francisco, California and T.W. Wood Gallery and Arts Center in Montpelier, Vermont agreed to host the show. When it came to finding a New York venue, Halaby intervened early on, engaging the efforts of Al Jisser (“the bridge” in Arabic), a New York arts organization founded in 2001 to bring Arab artists to international attention. It amounted to a nearly three-year grassroots fundraising campaign, for she too found no museum or galley that would host the show. With the support of the Station Museum, Al Jisser

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<sup>3</sup> Samia Halaby very generously gave me access to her unpublished article, from which I drew information about the inception and research of, and issues related to the exhibit of *Made in Palestine*.

<sup>4</sup>These systematic killings are thought to be connected to the presence of US and Mexican-supported transnational corporations in the border region around El Paso, Texas and Juarez. For an account of the relationship between gender, representation and the killings on the borderlands, see Rosa Linda Fregoso, *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands*, University of California Press, 2003.

raised approximately \$100,000, rented and fixed up a raw loft space in the Manhattan neighborhood of Chelsea and called it The Bridge. *Made in Palestine* opened in New York on March 14, 2006. It was such a success, the show ran an extra month and brought in over 5000 visitors. The New York manifestation of *Made in Palestine* was slightly different than the original at the Station Museum. Certain works like Emily Jacir's *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Which Were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948*, an embroidered refugee tent, were too expensive to bring. However, even in its abbreviated version, the show revealed innovative and visually engaging responses to a political situation fraught with turmoil.

Samia Halaby was born in Jerusalem in 1936 and currently lives in New York City. Her contribution to the exhibition, the 12-foot-long *Palestine, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River* (2003), is a composition of acrylic painted pieces of canvas and paper. Various organic shapes are joined with glue and thread into strips. Each instance of Halaby's installation of *Palestine*, a process that involves sewing and gluing together the organically shaped pieces, yields a different version of the work. This not only reflects her interest in improvisational jazz and rhythmic musical compositions, but the flexibility and fluidity required of her as a person in diaspora. She evokes the Palestinian topography with a palette that ranges from sunny yellows and oranges to forest greens and midnight blues. Halaby's work breathes beauty and poetry into a landscape predominantly pictured as war-torn. Her title refers to Palestine as it was before the brutal creation of Israel in 1948, reminding viewers that the current map of the region, pocked with settlements and ripped with bypass roads and the apartheid wall is only temporary.

Nida Sinnokrot was born in the United States in 1971, raised in Algeria and is based in New York City. His piece, *Rubber Coated Rocks* (2002, see Figures 5 & 6) is a site-dependent installation of smooth stones half coated in rubber—a reference to the often fatal rubber-coated bullets used by the Israeli army against Palestinians wielding rocks.<sup>5</sup> Sinnokrot's blend of natural and synthetic materials creates a multi-tiered

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<sup>5</sup> Rubber coated bullets are 1 to 2 mm metal bullets coated in rubber that, when used are “impossible to avoid severe injuries to vulnerable body regions such as the head, neck

commentary on Palestinian life. Though simple in appearance, the production process was a complex one that required exact timing and temperatures. At the Bridge Gallery, hundreds of the rubber-coated rocks were lined up on the floor along one wall of the large loft space. Installed single-file, the work suggests people waiting in line, a constant circumstance forced upon Palestinians when they attempt to cross through checkpoints set up to regulate and control travel within and out of Gaza and the West Bank. *Rubber Coated Rocks* have yet to be tested in the field.<sup>6</sup>

John Halaka was born in Egypt in 1957 and presently resides in San Diego. His contribution to *Made in Palestine* was an impressive 22 foot-long black, gray and white canvas titled *Stripped of Their Identity and Driven From Their Land* (2003, see Figure 7). Because of the artist's formal technique, the walking figures appear to emerge from the depths of the canvas space. Halaka created the bodies in the painting by stamping the words "forgotten" and "survivors," producing a pulsating effect of anonymous bodies that recede into space and blur in and out of the background. Halaka purposefully excluded marks of identity, underscoring the universality of displacement and exile. In addition, the life-size scale of the figures implicate the viewer, prompting self-questioning: am I a victim, a perpetrator, or both? The artist's pared down palette is a representational play in recollection of black and white photography. Photography is assumed to represent a real scene, one "that has been." Roland Barthes came up with this idea in his ruminations on the medium, where he explained that photography always refers to a past that can never be recovered.<sup>7</sup> In evoking the supposedly objective medium of photography through a hand-crafted and therefore subjective process of image making, Halaka blurs the lines between real and fiction, between past, present and future. Halaka's formal and conceptual strategies yield no answers, and instead generate more.

Mustafa Al Hallaj (b. 1938 in Haifa) created the most commanding piece in the show, *Self Portrait as God, the Devil, and Man* (2000, see Figures 3 & 4). Eight 37-foot

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and upper torso, leading to substantial mortality, morbidity and disability." See <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article527.shtml>.

<sup>6</sup> Nida Sinnokrot in a telephone conversation with the author on 27 July 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Richard Howard, trans. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

masonite-cut prints combine the ancient and the modern, creating a horizontally arranged narrative that casts the self as man, god and devil. Al Hallaj took a transhistorical approach to Palestine, integrating Canaanite legends, folk tales and Palestinian cultural icons up until the present. The massive work features imagery of human/animal hybrids that are reminiscent of the works of Hieronymus Bosch. Tragically, Al Hallaj died in his attempt to save the original print in a studio fire in 2002. The print hanging in the show was created by the his students in the Palestinian Artists Union.

Photography being the language of the media, its use in art practice can teeter on the side of journalism. Artists who choose to steer away from obvious representations must therefore approach photographic practice more conceptually. Rula Halawani's photographic series *Negative Incursion* (2002, see Figure 1) includes negative black-and-white prints showing the aftermath of a devastating Israeli incursion into the West Bank in 2002. Her use of the negative print technique prohibits a quick and superficial viewing, instead requiring an intense focus on the scenes she depicts, such as the displaced family sitting under a tent in front of their crumbled home. Noel Jabbour's 2000-01 series *Vacant Seats* consists of large-scale portraits of Palestinian families who lost members to warfare. Family members stand stiff, directly gazing at the camera with sad, stoic faces. The incomplete family portraits are made visually whole with the inclusion of a framed photograph of the often young martyr. Jabbour's combination of the formal portrait format and the snapshot quality offered by the use of natural light imbues the photograph with an unsettling air paralleled by the representation of the lost son as a photographic remnant. Her strategy echoes similar 19<sup>th</sup> century daguerreotypes, pointing to not only a lasting, but transcultural belief in the power of images. Vera Tamari's ongoing *Tale of a Tree*, begun in 1999, focuses on the Israeli army's destruction of olive trees owned and harvested by Palestinian farmers (see Figure 2). A black-and-white phototransfer on Plexiglas of an old olive tree was hung above a platform holding hundreds of 3-inch brightly colored ceramic olive trees. Tamari's use of black and white makes the iconic image of the olive tree is made even more so. The tree is a symbol of Palestinian cultural, economic, and spiritual heritage. As the large image looms over tiny hand made trees, the juxtaposition reminds us that the production of culture and heritage remains in the hands of individuals working collectively.

The significance of *Made in Palestine* touches on two fronts – the potential for art to impact people’s understanding of the social, cultural, and political, and the contribution it makes to the field of art history. In the case of Palestine, a place where the simple act of hoisting a national flag became legal only 15 years ago with the Oslo Peace Accords, the exhibit offers audiences a unique way to approach the place, the issues with which Palestinians struggle, and the art they make. Art can play a crucial role when viewers engage honestly with the questions it asks, the problems it poses and the demands it makes. Only in this way can we truly appreciate the unique perspectives of the multiple lives made in Palestine.

*“Made in Palestine” debuted at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, [May 3-Oct. 3, 2003]. It traveled to SomArts Cultural Center, San Francisco [Apr. 7-22, 2005]; T.W. Wood Gallery and Arts Center, Montpelier, Vt. [Oct. 18-Nov. 20, 2005]; and The Bridge Gallery, New York [Mar. 14-May 27, 2006].*



Figure 1. Rula Halawani



Figure 2. Vera Tamari





Figure 3. Mustafa Al Hallaj





Figure 4. Mustafa Al Hallaj (in detail)



Figures 5 & 6. Nida Sinnokrot



Figure 7. John Halaka