

# Self Portrait

## Palestinian Women's Art

Curator: Tal Ben Zvi

Iman Abu Hamid

Faten Fawzy Nastas

Manar Zu'abi

Ahlam Shibli

Suheir Isma'il Farraj

Jumana Emil 'Abboud

Hanan Abu Hussein

Manal Murqus

A'ida Nasrallah

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Tal Ben Zvi

The exhibit "Self Portrait" deals with the modes of representation of women artists in a multi-faceted and changing Palestinian reality. It is an attempt to examine—in relation to the concept "self portrait"—the intimate spheres of women artists' lives, the ways they define their identities, and the cultural and artistic arenas in which they operate.

"Self Portrait" was supposed to open at Al-Wasati Arts Center, East Jerusalem in October 2000, at Ami Steinitz Gallery, Tel Aviv in December 2000, and at the International Center, Bethlehem in February 2001. These exhibits have been postponed indefinitely due to the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Holding such an exhibit is impossible when Palestinians are forbidden from reaching the galleries, when some of the artists are besieged in their homes, when movement is made impossible and interaction rendered a privilege.

Even during the curatorial process it was clear that this project is neither one of "normalization," nor does it attest to reciprocity. In the framework of a cultural exchange program sponsored by the European Commission—whom we wish to thank here—a double opportunity arose: to amass a body of work by Palestinian women artists for a Palestinian audience, and to bring this collection, in all its complexity, to the attention of the Israeli spectator.

Thus, this self portrait is viewable from multiple perspectives: Palestinian spectators/Arabic readers, Jewish-Israeli spectators/Hebrew readers, and foreign spectators/English readers. It must be acknowledged here that all spectatorship, regardless of perspective, is mediated through the exhibit's Jewish-Israeli curator—a reminder that such mediations always contain the problematics of gaze, interpretation, and the potential

for appropriation.

Recent events have charged the works with yet another dimension: what does spectatorship mean when everyone, Palestinian, Israeli, foreign, can only experience the exhibit through its catalog, an exhibit that cannot be presented in reality?

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The exhibit "Self Portrait" constitutes a conversation between women artists. It is part of a larger, internal Palestinian discussion on identity, culture, and Palestinian art. "Self Portrait" represents each artist's commitment to move from the personal sphere into the public sphere in terms of her modes of representation and the ways her work will be experienced, viewed, and criticized. The outing of the personal and the subjective is a conscious choice. It is a political act, an authorial position, an assertion of self-definition.

Broadly speaking, in contemporary art the concept "self portrait" refers to the artist's work, but also to the artist's inner world, life circumstances, and the larger society wherein she produces. The multiplicity of portraits, identities, psychological states, and political positions, not to mention shifting conceptions of self found in this collection, subvert the assumption that a self portrait is a means for identifying and classifying a maker's singular, immanent identity.

The plurality of self portraits in this exhibit reveals a territory of intermediacy, one that evades a unifying image of "woman." The woman represented is not an object that can be usurped or understood. She is a multi-layered subject who deceives the viewer by switching identities, thereby calling into question the very possibility of classification.

In the absence of a clear, singular female image, the attention shifts from the woman as the object of the viewer's gaze to the point of view of the viewer who assigns a fixed definition to her. Thus, by redirecting the gaze, the exhibit focuses on the surrounding social and cultural assumptions, stigmas, and expectations, which the male-patriarchal gaze (even if held by a woman) brings to the female image. The self portrait transpires, so to speak, at the very point where the viewers' gaze meets the provoking, shifting, and misleading female image. Its manifestation depends on the gaze, the identity of the viewer, and the political, social, and cultural circumstances of exhibition.

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In the tradition of realist painting, the self portrait was produced with the help of a mirror. Thus, the artist created a triangle consisting of his/her real physical body, its reflection in the mirror, and its representation on canvas.

The reflection of the self in the mirror created a closed space limited by the artist's field of vision. The reflection in the mirror served to erase the difference between the self and its other. The movement was toward cohesion. The self and its reflection are separate, of course, but the act of reflection was a taking possession of sorts, an erasure of the difference between the subject and the reflected object.

The artists in this exhibit stare straight into the mirror, but see the other reflected back at them alongside their selves. In contrast with the blurring in realist painting, here we have a consciousness of multiplicity, both of the subject and of the reflected object.

The artists in this exhibit move daily between different cultures, societies, and territories, and their identities are shaped by a spectrum of othernesses, some containing outright contradictions. This creates constant tension between the different aspects of their identities so that at no point is identity experienced as something natural or whole.<sup>1</sup>

The sexual, gendered, cultural, ethnic, and national other is not fixed, rather it fluctuates and includes: Palestinianess under Palestinian Authority; Palestinianess

under Israeli occupation; Palestinianess in Israel; Palestinianess in the Arab world; Palestinianess in the West; Palestinian refugee, exile, and migration; Arab identity in the Arab world; Arab identity as seen through Western eyes; Arab identity as seen through Israeli eyes; Palestinianess accompanied by Israeli citizenship in the eyes of other Palestinians; secular identity; religious identity be it Muslim or Christian; life in a traditional patriarchal society; life in the framework of an extended family; life in a secular urban culture; the possibility of being a single, married, or divorced woman; a woman dependent on her spouse and/or family; an independent woman responsible for her own fate; a woman managing and controlling her own life; a woman negotiating the tension between independence and social arrangements that do not enable the expression of independence; a woman who embodies the "honor" of her entire family.

The position of other is reproduced within the Palestinian, Israeli, and international art scenes. The artist, whose existence is reduced to a national context, is represented accordingly as a Palestinian-Arab woman and as "Eastern" in a supposedly "Western" field. Furthermore, as Palestinian cultural producers, some of the artists also attest to being othered by Palestinian society, which, at times, perceives of them as agents of a foreign cultural mode of expression.

"Self Portrait" expresses an existential state of otherness within conceptually binary, dichotomous, and restrictive systems. It is not necessarily the otherness of exile or migration; rather, it is a simultaneous existence, a daily passage through different territories, societies, and cultures. The work of art becomes a means to assume a critical position; it is not a reflection of reality but a deconstruction of the various points of view that compose it.

The creation of a self portrait is not just an artistic act. It is a daily act, a female practice that repeats itself every time a woman steps out of her house and into the public sphere. It is the moment at which she faces the mirror and approves her own visibility. She is conscious of how the world sees her, experiences her, and appropriates her.

It is a moment of consciousness, of defining one's identity, and of decision: should she be herself, or should

she play the game and pay the price. It is a practice wherein identity is role play, an act—and the world its stage. The female identity switches positions in a world of power relations based on adaptation, and the acceptance of the point of view of those who possess the power to condone her visibility.

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The artists participating in this exhibit move between Deheisheh, Ramallah, Beit Jala, Bethlehem, Shibli, Haifa, Umm al-Fahm, 'Isawiyye, Acre, Jerusalem, Shafa 'Amr, Kufr Yasif, and Nazareth: the places they live, create, and speak of, and to, in their work. They produce a Palestinian art, in other words, art that addresses Palestine as a fractured, yet ultimately whole, geographic, cultural, and political space.<sup>2</sup>

Art that is associated with a nation-state—or aspirations for one—must draw its legitimacy first and foremost from the national project. By funding its creation and providing material support for its exhibition, the national project appropriates the work of art, effectively turning it into a national asset. The work of art, for its part, attains a context, a place, a “home” in and from which it can act. It does so because in the international art scene, national affiliation is still the main tag that identifies a work of art and enables it to function in the field.

The works in this exhibit do not deal directly with Palestinian identity, rather it is implicit. The artists are, by self-definition, Palestinian, and accordingly, the art they produce is understood as Palestinian art. These artists produce within the Palestinian paradigm, but also try to form a wider context that diverges from the national question—a discourse through which questions of feminism, gender, and the body find expression as well.

The gender issues that arise in the works relate, among other things, to Arab-Muslim culture, which impacts the status of all women living in the Arab world. Likewise, religious motifs such as the Virgin Mary and the church altar found in a number of works correspond with Christian culture in Arab and Western contexts alike.

The issue of Palestinian identity finds expression in this exhibit mostly through the representation of the

Palestinian home as a territory with clear boundaries where women both conduct and define themselves. The Palestinian home is a private and public space in one. The establishment of the Palestinian home is often a metaphor for national independence. This metaphor is appropriated by the artists to express the independence and autonomy desired by the women who inhabit and maintain these homes. The Palestinian home expresses the desire for Palestinian national liberation. It may include restrictive social codes and values about morality and honor—in relation to women's place—but at the same time it expresses a female territory that contends with such restrictions.

The work of **Iman Abu Hamid** deals with the concept of home. Abu Hamid is a native of Acre where her family still resides.

On a large canvas a number of prints repeat themselves: the map of Palestine before 1948 upon which the city of Acre has been emphasized; a portrait of Abu Hamid's grandfather; and a portrait of Abu Hamid herself. In front of the canvas hangs a clothesline with pinned up postcards of riverbed pebbles bearing memories worn with the mark of time. The pebbles have been photographed upon a matte imprinted with mosque minarets. These serve to locate memory in a concrete geographic setting. By hanging the postcards from clothespins, Abu Hamid unsettles the status of the stones and the memories contained within them.

Abu Hamid takes a similar approach when she presents a “blueprint” of a house, living room, and bedroom impressed upon the inner panel of a shoebox. In the background stands a delicate sketch of laundry blowing in the wind. It is a house, but it is also just a piece of cardboard. Similar blueprints are imprinted on pillowcases hung up on a clothesline. The reduction of the house to a minimalist sketch enables its transportability and reproduction. The work raises questions about belonging to a house and a distinctly Palestinian place in relation to processes of migration and displacement.

Another of Abu Hamid's works is a hollow black box with a panel of two superimposed slides. The first slide is a childhood picture of the artist. The girl has been

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photographed in the yard in front of the family home—the same house her grandfather was forced to leave. Here again, laundry hangs in the background, and marks the house as female territory where her future role has been predetermined. The second slide is of a pre-1948 map of Palestine. Within the box a candle flickers, shifting the light and casting shadows—unsettling the relationship between the girl, the future that awaits her as a woman, and the Palestinian collective past.

**Faten Fawzy Nastas** addresses the location of women in relation to domestic space in her work, while relating a sense of the siege and claustrophobia that characterize life in Palestinian territory under occupation.

The work consists of a plaster sculpture of a woman imprisoned between two metal windows. The woman, grasping the bars of the window in front of her, appears to be screaming. Beyond the bars in the window behind her hangs a reproduction of a Palestinian vista: the view of the homeland. The mood created in this piece is one of ambivalence. The woman stands between two wide windows, what would appear to be two exits—when in fact she is incarcerated in the narrow space between them. The space does not provide any cover, and the woman remains completely exposed by the windows closing in on her. She is in a domestic setting, but one that affords her no protection. The work blurs the boundaries between the domestic space and the public one. The woman is under surveillance both from the front and the back, and lacks all privacy. The spectators view her head on, from within the gallery. The symbolic vista in the rear window marks her vulnerability to the gaze of potential passersby.

It is not only the physical space that encloses her, but a metaphorical prison as well. Nastas articulates the boundaries of the body itself, of the place in which it exists—a personal and national claustrophobia in one.

Yet even as a prisoner, the woman is marked as a victor. The use of a red satin curtain draped over the window, and a blue satin shawl hanging over her shoulder and fastened with a golden pin of a horse, express, according to the artist, the symbolism of victory, evoking the Virgin Mary in Christian iconography.

The association of the woman with the icon of the Virgin points to a wider representation: this is not the case of an individual woman. The woman is a triumphant queen. However, the evocation of the Virgin also connotes ambivalence. On the one hand, it empowers her, as Mary can be a symbol of hope and change. On the other hand, the reduction of the woman to an icon fixes her in a passive position—with no concrete influence on the spheres in which she lives and within which she acts.

Another work by Nastas that deals with the female image, Christian iconography, and the Palestinian condition is **Birth and Death on the Checkpoint**. The painting was first presented at the Tel Aviv Museum exhibit “Family Romances.” In 1996, Israel imposed a hermetic closure on the Palestinian occupied territories. In an interview with her Israeli colleague Yigal Nizri, Nastas relayed,

At the beginning of the closure there was also a closure between the villages surrounding Bethlehem and the town itself. A woman from Husan village was pregnant and she went into labor. She and her husband wanted her to deliver in Bethlehem [where there is a hospital]. On the road to Bethlehem, they encountered the first checkpoint, just outside their village. That’s where the first baby was born. They ignored the hollering of the Israeli soldiers and continued on toward Bethlehem. At the second checkpoint, they got into an argument with the soldiers, and the second baby was born. He was born dead. By the time they reached the hospital the first baby died as well—of neglect.

This story of a woman whose name I don’t even know, gradually became my personal story, and that of every person who wants to cross the checkpoint. To arrive at the checkpoint in hope of crossing it is like “birth and death at the checkpoint.” I examine things from the place where I stand, and in this instance I felt like it was me giving birth, that the birth and the agony and the death were mine; the checkpoint that I miss, that I cannot approach, let alone cross. So I painted this woman giving birth at a checkpoint. Not her checkpoint—the one between Husan and Bethlehem—but on my checkpoint.<sup>3</sup>

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In the exhibit's catalog, curator Ellen Ginton observes that "a mythological dimension was later added to this real-life drama through the association with it of two interrelated motifs from the New Testament: the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and the Massacre of the Innocents (Matt, 2:16-18)."<sup>4</sup>

**Manar Zu'abi** delimitates space herself with the use of silk stockings. The stockings, fastened with metal hooks, stretch across the space to create a territory, to mark boundaries, to divide. Acts with "national" connotations are carried out with the use of characteristically "female" tools. In another work, she delimitates space with the use of black yarn, drawing lines on the walls, and creating a "hard" abstract modernist sketch with the use of "soft" materials usually associated with women's work.

The tension between the "female" material and its application as a marker, divider, and delimiter, testifies to a need for control—a position of power in relation to territory, and a desire to brand it as female.

**Ahlam Shibli** also draws a connection in her work between territory and female identity. Shibli sketches a game of hopscotch on the wall. In Palestinian Arabic, hopscotch is known as *hiza*. The word *hiza* also connotes a private space. In the game, you are not allowed to cross the lines, yet you are allowed limited territorial control within them. The game progresses by accumulating/occupying additional squares with the help of a stone tossed into each square respectively. It is a statement about relative freedom and power within a strict framework of rules and boundaries.

The sketch on the wall contains six squares, and each square contains three photographs. In the photographs, the artist returns to her childhood playgrounds around the village of Shibli, where she used to herd goats after school.

In the photographs there are two children, a girl and a boy of about ten. Shibli places them in the village's surroundings. In the photographs, the children do not look into the camera. They are visible from afar, or only partly visible, sketching the boundaries of childhood's terrain, emphasizing the evasive quality of memories.

There is a tension between nature as a site of freedom, a domain of sexuality, of unsupervised corporal presence that lacks the gaze which marks and limits—and nature as a site of danger.

Shibli draws a connection between the word *hiza* and the word *hawaza* drawn from the same etymological root. One of several definitions for *hawaza* reads: "walked gently, led the herd of camels kindly and delicately." Another definition reads: "the first night the camels are taken to drink water."

The works in this exhibit correspond with prevalent Feminist discourses that address gender and sexual identity in contemporary art. Gender expresses the socially constructed, hierarchical, and supposedly dichotomous, differences between men and women—a construct perceived to be "natural" and innate. Gender is a social category imposed on the body. Gender is essential to the self portrait: to what extent does being a woman determine one's fate, identity, and future? How is gender expressed in the creative process? Sex and gender are, naturally, of great importance to these artists.

In her film **Birth**, **Suheir Isma'il Farraj** tells the story of a Palestinian woman about to deliver. The film is inter-cut with two other films about birth: one from Iraq (director: 'Abbas Hashem) and the other from Syria (director: 'Abir Asbar). The three stories are interwoven in a series called "Arab Diaries."

The fate, identity, and social status of the three women depicted in the films are determined in relation to their fertility and birthing capability. The heroes are the Palestinian Fatme, desperate for a male child after delivering five girls; the Iraqi Umm Daoud, whose first born is a sickly boy; and the Syrian Rosa, who is childless.

It is a depressed, passive portrait of the female condition in which the woman has no rights—not even to her own body. One of the most difficult moments in Farraj's film is the moment when Fatme delivers her sixth girl, and inquires as to the sex of the baby. Upon hearing the answer from the midwife, Fatme promptly

pushes the newborn away from her body and looks to the side as she sighs in bitter agony.

**Jumana Emil 'Abboud's** works are collages. 'Abboud collects existing, ready-made images and reassembles them into new objects, which include sketches and paintings of her own. She presents three works of art, which together create a triptych, each composed of a number of objects centered around female images.<sup>5</sup>

In the first section there is a sketch of the Virgin Mary, drawn as she appears in popular iconographic posters and postcards as Mercy Mary. She is imaged with a heart surrounded by a crown of burning thorns. The Virgin, who wears her bleeding heart on her sleeve, so to speak, understands victimization, agony, and desire.

In the second section there is a sketch of a Pharaonic-Egyptian female, a woman who offers a red heart in sacrifice. The red heart resembles a strawberry, an ironic commentary on the importance and appreciation granted her sacrificial position.

At the center of the third section is the image of the Egyptian actress Nabila 'Ubeid. In the photograph the actress appears glowingly beautiful, sensual, sexy, and bejeweled. She looks directly into the camera, revealing a bare shoulder.

All three women hold a symbolic position, all three act as icons. Larger than life, together they comprise a symbol that suggests the various facets of female identity. Between the image of Nabila 'Abed—a strong, famous woman (a modern Madonna who can be both sexy and admirable)—and the image of the Virgin Mary, the second timeless and ageless woman makes a sacrifice.

The artist invites a re-reading of the image of the Virgin Mary. She deconstructs Mary's identity in a religious context as a virgin with no sexual personae and reconstructs her as a powerful female figure.

This reconstruction addresses Mary's role in Arab culture be it Muslim or Christian. 'Abboud emphasizes the chasm between the incredible admiration and idolization directed at the female image—in the form of Mary—and her oppression in reality. In this context, 'Abboud asserts that it is important to maintain Mary's

central position, but also to reinterpret the meanings attributed to her.

In another work, 'Abboud employs a sketch of a man's body. The sketch is taken from a colloquial Arabic textbook. Surrounding the man are the names of his various body parts transliterated from Arabic into Latin letters, and beside them their English translation. The man's body contains all its parts, save for his genitalia.

In the absence of a similar sketch of a woman, the man's body becomes a stand-in for the woman's body as well. 'Abboud fills in the blank, and sketches a similarly composed woman's body beside the man.

None of the woman's body parts are marked, save for her clitoris. A line is drawn from the place where the organ should be to the word *Lablubi* (clitoris in Palestinian colloquial Arabic) transliterated into Latin letters, and beside it its English translation.

The clitoris is the "functionless" part of a woman: it is not a reproductive organ but one that generates pleasure. 'Abboud claims that even if the clitoris is left intact, the organ is erased mentally and emotionally, invalidating the connection between a woman's body and pleasure as such. She points to the connection between policing the body, female genital mutilation, and the socio-cultural regime that regards a woman's body as a mere reproductive tool. The figures stand in a frontal position. They are lacking and crippled—testimony of the inability of culture and language to contain the sexual body in all its complexity.

Jumana Emil 'Abboud makes use of familiar imagery from popular culture: the Virgin Mary, an Egyptian actress, a Pharaonic woman in profile, and a naked woman's figure. Similarly, in other works, such as that of a goddess-witch, or that of a sketch of her own mother, 'Abboud employs repetitive representational forms in which the figures are like hostages; the images are fixed according to cultural conventions of imaging that have been preserved for centuries because they depict cultural and religious models. The artist's repetitive use of these forms points to a lack of representational modes wherein women can evade—if not altogether avoid—the patriarchal perspective that constructs them. The artist's critical stance vis-a-vis these modes of representation finds expression in their juxtaposition,

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and the creation of a spectrum which results in a multidimensional woman, who is not reducible to a single signifier, image, or cliché.

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At the center of several of the works in this exhibit stands the sexual body. The body is understood as a political battleground, a source of protest and self-reflection.

Manar Hassan, in her essay “The Politics of Honor: Patriarchy, the State, and the Murder of Women in the Name of Family Honor,” discusses the importance of the woman’s body and sexuality in Arab societies:

...The honor of men is determined by things like achievement, bravery, generosity, class, social status, and family background... Women’s honor, on the other hand, is determined by their sexual behavior, “modesty,” or “purity.”<sup>6</sup>

Hassan points out that one of the meanings of the term that refers specifically to women’s honor: *`ard* (to be distinguished from the general term for honor which is *sharaf*), also denotes “body.” Furthermore, she points out that sometimes *`ard* is used alongside the word *lahme*, meaning “meat.”

...Men’s honor is active, while women’s honor (or more precisely, men’s honor that is associated with women’s behavior), the *`ard*, is passive... This notion contains the entire concept of “family honor,” the core of which is the promotion of women’s passivity, not just for the sake of virtue, but as a virtue in and of itself. However, this passivity does not nullify the fact that the honor of the entire patrilineal extended family is tied up in the woman’s body, or, as Nawal al-Sa’adawi put it, in its “lower half.”

Such a situation, in which all the men in a woman’s kinship group may lose their honor as a result of her actions, emphasizes the absurdities the patriarchal society subjects itself to. The passive woman, who is considered inferior, contains in her body the public value of her male relatives, a value which she can depreciate suddenly and irreversibly, but has no means to appreciate.<sup>7</sup>

The woman’s body bears a heavy responsibility. It is not personal-intimate but rather public and social. Hassan illustrates how the female body is reduced to its sexual signifiers, and how women manage, control, and police their own sexuality.

In some of the works, the female body shrinks down to its outline, and often to a single organ: the breast, the labia, the clitoris, the pubic hair. These works are a declaration of ownership over a body which has been expropriated, a marking of the parts that lay at the center of public discussion. In some of the pieces the organs are reproduced over and over until they turn into a pattern. Reproduction expresses a desire to liberate the body from these signifiers; an attempt to empty them of their mythic content.

The work of **Hanan Abu Hussein** empowers the female body by reproducing and replicating it. Abu Hussein crafts a carpet of Paraffin breasts—a substance reminiscent of women’s discharge. The breasts appear in numerous shapes and sizes. The substance also raises associations of artificial breast enlargement, be it cosmetic or reconstructive following mastectomy. Abu Hussein marks the breast as a central object of women’s sexuality.

The carpet invokes walking—sensitive breasts underfoot. The association is aggressive, invasive, and painful. One can imagine the delicate breasts being crushed by heavy boots—a female body in distress. The variety of breasts suggests a totalizing femininity, a female condition beyond the personal and the biographical.

Above the carpet hang photographs of the artist’s kitchen. In the photographs one sees the Paraffin breasts decorating the kitchen cabinets and the ceramic tiles above the sink and counter. The artist marks the domestic space with sexual presence, hinting at the limits imposed on female sexuality by the surrounding culture.

**Manal Murqus’** ceramic work deals with ignorance, repression, and lack of awareness among women with regard to their bodies in general, and genitals in particular. Murqus presents a bureau

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Page 133 suggestive of a church altar, with pottery containing realistically rendered vaginas. Here too, the sexual organ is decorative, as labias adorn the ceramic pieces.

Page 136 Alongside the installation, hangs a white lace curtain

Page 134 with ceramic breasts slashed by razor blades.

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Murqus' choice of ceramic—a traditional Palestinian medium—expresses her desire to turn the genitals into an object of spectatorship and a subject of discussion within Palestinian art, by naming “it” and making “it” visible. The very act of exposure expresses a desire to re-possess the body, to control and to learn it anew. In the text that accompanies her work, Murqus writes:

The purpose of this piece is to rebel against social conventions through exposure; on the one hand to present the aesthetics of female genitalia, and on the other, to protest against social norms that oppress women, turn their bodies into something profane and hidden, and repress their sexuality. Moreover, it is a provocation in order to agitate and embarrass those who are likely to be shocked. It is a call to liberate sexual desire and to position femininity as the Holy of Holies of human kind.

The positioning of the ceramic pieces on a church altar, mark the woman and her organs as sacred, pure, and glorious.

‘Aida Nasrallah displays four paintings of women and four texts that describe four female types: the poetess; the dejected one; the naïve one; and “Fatima.” The women in the texts, together with the women in the paintings, create a spectrum of female conditions that range from liberation and independence to oppression and violence.

Page 140 **The poetess** can realize her desires through language. She aims for spiritual and physical expression in one. She talks of her “tiny star” (a term that intimates her genitalia), that pushes her toward self-expression. Yet, her rousing articulations substitute her corporal sexuality.

Page 140 **The dejected one** is identified as a millstone: a flat stone, rotated by a wooden pole, laid on another flat stone. Wheat is poured between the two stones and

ground to flour. The dejected one, like the wheat, is crushed in the ceaseless motion, prevented from reaching the phallic wooden pole in order to put an end to her grinding misery.

**The naïve** one is a passive figure. She is brainwashed. She possesses neither the strength nor the capacity to resist the power exercised over her. She marries, and is embittered. When she reaches her wit's end, she flees to the fields, the oats—to nature. Women's songs bemoan her fate: the naïve one was killed, because she mastered neither the art of protest, nor the art of dreaming.

**Fatima** is a real figure; a woman who was murdered on the premise of “family honor” during the last century in a Wadi `Ara village. Fatima's story is told by mother to daughter. It is a warning summed up in the sentence: “Don't end up like Fatima!” Fatima goes out to recluse in nature, but her brother, who suspects she is going to meet with a strange man, murders her. After her death it turns out that she was “innocent.” The story, which aims to deter women, is not one of sin but of suspicion, attesting to the intensity of inter-generational female supervision and self-policing.

In two paintings similarly formatted and colored, Nasrallah depicts two women at the moment of liberation. The first is a woman with bare, erect breasts, exhaling black smoke from her mouth. It is a moment of release from the pressure of an internal fire; the release of black bile, personal rage, and collective anger over the bitter fate of women. In the second painting, a woman dances. Wearing a black dress, she is footless, as though she was flying, attempting to escape the brown surface engulfing her. Her arms are raised, and one hand grasps a yellow mask that appears to be stuck to her face. She is trying to remove the mask, an armor of sorts, in a motion that threatens to take off her head as well—the same head that suddenly appears in another work, floating amid yellow surfaces.

Another painting depicts a number of women together. The women resemble prickly pear bushes. Some are old, others are veiled. Their bodies: breasts, abdomens, and heads look like the meaty flesh of the cactus. The prickly pear is a common motif in Palestinian art. It represents the remains of the Palestinian villages destroyed after 1948 and the territory associated with

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Palestinian collective memory. In Nasrallah's work, the cacti are planted firmly in the ground. They create a human fence, a barricade, a live barrier, protecting a territory that is no more.<sup>8</sup> The women's faces differ from each other, attesting to the fact that beyond their collective role, the women are subjects, with separate identities, consciousnesses, and memories. Their individualism complicates collective memory, and the national use to which their image is usually put. The women are in the public sphere, and their visibility is the first step toward their liberation.

Public visibility is one of this exhibit's foci. It finds expression in the works that comprise it, but its ultimate expression lies in the act of exhibition itself. The works, seemingly private in nature, are brought to, if not made for, the public. However, it is a distinct public. In their immediate spheres of family and community, such visibility, and such expressions of sexuality, are not always possible. The artists, largely young women, move through different, only partially overlapping public spheres, in which the sanctioned visibility—as either “Arab” or “Woman”—varies greatly.

As noted at the outset, “Self Portrait” is an internal conversation among women artists that corresponds with a larger Palestinian discussion simmering at the boiling point of private and public despair. Forging a common space, wherein these artists can express, represent, and realize their differences and commonalities, and create a discourse or at least a network, is limited, and practically impossible.

Palestinian art spans the terrains of the Palestinian Authority, of Israel and the territories it still occupies, and of the Palestinian diaspora. The Israeli occupation—be it physical or cultural—on both sides of the Green Line, attempts to eradicate and erase all traces of Palestinian visual culture from public spaces—the very spaces where these artists are trying to produce and exhibit. The occupation also enacts complex practices of separation by preventing communication; issuing (or not) permits for movement; manning checkpoints; denying access, etc.<sup>9</sup> These practices keep the artists from meeting, let alone creating a common cultural space.

And despite all this, there is a vibrant art scene teeming with cultural and artistic production—including Palestinian artists from inside Israel—who exhibit their work in a number of locations in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as well as in countless galleries, museums, and festivals abroad.

Over the last two decades, women's art has grown more visible within the international art scene, creating a broader context for discussing issues of race, class, sex, and gender. Palestinian art has undergone a similar process. For years, a nationalist-male discourse dominated Palestinian art. Leading Palestinian artists reflected the struggle for independence and the aspiration for national liberation in their work. Today, a new generation of young women artists constitute a rising force within Palestinian art.

At the first annual artists' award ceremony sponsored by the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah in June 2000, half of the participating artists were women. The first place prize was awarded to Raeda Sa'ada of Umm al-Fahm. One of the second place winners was Nawal Jabbour of Nazareth. The jury included Vera Tamari, a veteran Palestinian artist; Mona Hatoum, the leading Palestinian artist on the international scene; and Suleiman Mansour, an artist and the director of Al-Wasati Art Center in Jerusalem. Mansour is a graduate of the Israeli Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, as are Sa'ada and Jabour.

Most of the Palestinians studying in Israeli art schools today are women. Aside from two artists who received their training in Britain, most of the artists participating in this exhibit studied in Israeli institutions. There are still no art academies under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority, nor are there any Arabic-language art schools in Israel. The Palestinian artist who studies in an Israeli or British academy does not undergo the same socialization that an Israeli or British student does. In Britain, the Palestinian artist is, generally, regarded as other: a stranger in a strange land, an “Oriental” in a would-be “Occidental” sphere (an experience that an Israeli student in Britain might be subject to as well). In Israel, the Palestinian artist is regarded as a stranger in

her own land, an indigenous enemy, a menace to the Israeli imagination: an unpleasant reminder that this land was neither empty then, nor enlightened now, and certainly never “Western” in any simple sense. The marginalization endured by the Palestinian woman artist who studies in an Israeli institution is exacerbated by the fact that Hebrew—the language of study through which she must develop her creative mode of expression—is also the language of her occupation and oppression.

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As an Israeli curator, I see these self portraits as a mirror in which the Jewish-Israeli spectator is reflected as well; a mirror positioned in front of the occupier, by the occupied. In a reality of occupation, any work of art positions such a mirror. In the case of this exhibit, the mirroring is a political act on the part of the artists, and myself as curator.

What is reflected in the mirror positioned in front of an Ashkenazi Jewish woman raised in the Zionist educational system? My Zionist/Ashkenazi history is one of denial and absence. I grew up in a small Jewish township in the northern “triangle” region, between Baqa al-Gharbiye and Kufr Qara’. But the narrative I memorized in my youth did not include the residents of these villages, and certainly not the residents of al-Kafrayn, Khubbayza, Qannir, Qisarya, al-Rihaniyya, Sabbarin, Khirbat al-Sarkas, al-Sindiyyana, al-Tantura (among others)—all villages depopulated by Israeli forces in 1948 and located within a 15 kilometer radius of Pardes Hana, where I grew up.

Like most of my Israeli friends and colleagues, I do not speak Arabic. Arabic culture in general, and Palestinian culture in particular, are not part of the acknowledged Israeli public sphere. My activism in the Israeli “Left” did not remedy this lack, and in some senses only exacerbated it. Palestinians remain conspicuously absent from the discourse of the so-called peace camp which, while considered “radical,” upholds the ideal of “separation”—a sentiment and a policy succinctly expressed by the Labor Party slogan “Us here, them there.”

Curating is for me first and foremost a learning

process, one guided by a clear, unequivocal opposition to “separation” as a value in a country which is home to two national collectives: Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. Thus, this exhibit includes works by Palestinian women artists from both sides of the Green Line and—through the essays of Palestinian art scholars Kamal Boullata and Tina Malhi Sherwell—works by Palestinian artists in the diaspora. Our bi-national existence also necessitates a disruption of the hegemonic conception of Israeli art as an exclusively Jewish-Zionist field and the presentation of Palestinian art as integral to the Israeli art scene. Such a presentation challenges the binary division between nations and cultures, and emphasizes the intermediate, the hybrid, and the syncretic. The bi-national existence is one of a dynamic drawing of self portraits that together create a hall of mirrors in which “the self portrait of us all” is reflected.

Through the clarity of the mirror we see our distorted reality of occupation and separation. However, we also see the Palestinian national struggle to end that occupation. It is this curator’s belief that only full unconditional Israeli withdrawal to the borders of 1967, the dismantling of the settlements, the establishment of a viable independent Palestinian state, and recognition of the Palestinian right of return will create the conditions necessary for a safe, secure, free, prosperous, and creative existence for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

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At the time of writing, the artists living in Deheisheh, Beit Jala, and al-Bireh are under siege, enduring incessant Israeli shooting and shelling. Likewise, in response to the political protest of the Palestinian national minority in Israel, Israeli authorities have used lethal, repressive force against protesters in Umm al-Fahm, Nazareth, Haifa, and Acre—where a number of the artists in this exhibit reside. These events, on both sides of the Green Line, have further complicated the already questionable affinity of the Palestinian artists who are citizens of Israel to the Israeli art scene. In essence, their Palestinianess—politically, culturally, and artistically—has been reinforced.

All of the participants in this project sought to avoid the possibility that the Israeli political establishment

appropriate this exhibit into the framework of the “peace process.” In total disregard for the political stagnation, continued occupation, and impossible conditions on the ground, “cultural events” such as these are often exploited by the Israeli establishment to create the illusion of reciprocity, cooperation, and exchange—a “peace” that can only be based on the values of justice and equality, so sorely missing from the current political paradigm. The al-Aqsa Intifada, and the inability to hold the exhibits as scheduled, only reinforces this principle.

The circumstances that prevented the exhibit from taking place not only called into question the possibility of holding such an exhibit, but also the logic of devoting an exhibit to the question of female identity and focusing on the personal and the subjective, as opposed to the public and the national. Such circumstances remind us of the tension between questions of gender, sexuality, the body, women’s status, women’s language, and women’s creativity, and national questions. Is it possible for a woman to attend to her self, her body, and her sexuality in a state of physical, spiritual, and cultural occupation? Can a woman establish herself as a female subject within a framework absorbed with questions of nation, territory, and liberation from occupation—and if so, to what extent? “Self Portrait” raises, if not answers, these questions.

## Notes

- 1 For fragmented female identity and Palestinian art see, Gannit Ankori, “Mended Fragments of Identity: The Art of Rana Bishara” [text written in conjunction with the artist’s exhibit in Casablanca, Morocco], 1997.
- 2 For mapping and geography in Palestinian art see, Gannit Ankori, “Beyond the Wall: On Several Tangential Points Between Palestinian Art and Israeli Painting of the Early Twentieth Century,” *Kav* (no. 10, July 1990, pp. 163-169).
- 3 Yigal Nizri, “Israeli Family” in Mitsad Sheni (8, March-April 1997, p.38).
- 4 Ellen Ginton, *Family Romances: a Theme Exhibition in the Framework of the Israeli Art Collection* (Tel Aviv Museum Almanac no. 6, 1996-1997, p. 16); For Christian symbolism in Nastas’ work see also, Itzhak Benyamini, “Faten Nastas & Jabra Mitwasi—Overloaded,” in Tal Ben Zvi (exhibit curator), *A New Middle East* (Tel Aviv, Heinrich Boll Foundation, 2000, pp. 99-97).
- 5 For female identity in Jumana Emil ‘Abboud’s work see, Tal Ben Zvi, “The Right of Return,” in *Plastica 2* (Summer, 1998).
- 6 Manar Hassan, “The Politics of Honor: Patriarchy, the State, and the Murder of Women in the Name of Family Honor” in *Sex, Gender, Politics* (Tel Aviv, HaKibbutz Hameuchad, 1999, p. 275).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 For more on the cactus in Palestinian art see, Kamal Boullata, “Israeli and Palestinian Artists: Facing the Forests” *Kav* (no. 10, July 1990, pp. 170-175).
- 9 A protracted closure was imposed on the opening day of the exhibit *Palestin(a): Women’s Art from Palestine*. The closure prevented the artists from participating in the opening in Tel Aviv. For further reading see, Tal Ben Zvi, “IDF Radio—Broadcasting from the Field,” *Studio* (no. 100, January-February, 1999, p. 26).

Born in Pardes-Hanna (1966), **Tal Ben Zvi** is an artist and curator presently living in Tel Aviv. She is a curator for the Heinrich Boll Foundation, Tel Aviv—where she has curated 25 exhibits to date—and a lecturer at the Camera Obscura School of Art, Tel Aviv. Currently, she is writing her MA thesis on Palestinian Art at the Yolanda and David Katz Faculty of the Arts Graduate School at Tel Aviv University. She is the founder of Hagar, an Israeli non-profit organization established in 1998 to promote intercultural exchange between Israelis and Palestinians and cultural pluralism within Israeli society. She published the catalog *A New Middle East* (2000). She has assembled several exhibits as a guest curator, some in Palestinian galleries, including:

*Palestin(a): Women’s Art from Palestine* (Ami Steinitz Gallery, Tel Aviv, 1998; Al Wasati Arts Center, Jerusalem, 1999)—‘Azza al Hassan, Dina Ghazal, Faten Fawzy Nastas, Jumana Emil ‘Abboud, Nidaa Khoury, Nawal Jabbour, Rana Bishara, Suheir Isma’il; *Rapunzelina*, Jumana Emil ‘Abboud (Heinrich Boll Foundation, Tel Aviv, 1998; Al-Wasati Art Center, Jerusalem, 1999); *Wadi Saleib in Nine Volumes*, Ahlam Shibli (Heinrich Boll Foundation, Tel Aviv, 1999; French Cultural Center, Ramallah, 1999); *Overloaded*, Faten Nastas & Jabra Mitwasi (Heinrich Boll Foundation, Tel Aviv, 1999; International Center, Bethlehem, 2000); *Unrecognized*, Ahlam Shibli (Heinrich Boll Foundation, Tel Aviv, 2000; Tel Aviv Cinematheque, Tel Aviv, 2000; al-Matall Gallery, Ramallah, 2000).