

Azza El Hassan, Ram'aala
Dina Ghazal, Ram'aala
Faten Fawzy Nastas, Bethlehem
Jumana Emil Abboud, Shefaram
Nidaa Khoury, Fasota
Noel Jabbour, Nazareth
Rana Bishara, Tarshiha
Suheir Ismail, Deheishe

Palestine(a)

Women's Art from Palestine

Nazareth, Ram'aala, Bethlehem, Fasota, Shefaram, Tarshiha, Daheishe, settlements from both sides of the Green Line, in the geographical – cultural – political region called Palestine. Eight women artists, Palestinian women, full stop. Not Israeli Arabs, nor Arabs with Israeli identification cards, nor refugees, or immigrants, or exiles, or minorities, or the Arabs of '48, or the returning Arabs of the Oslo agreements, nor residents of area A or B.

They present Palestinian works of art in Al-Wasiti Art Center: installations, sculpture, poetry, documentary cinema, photography, texts in the Arabic language. This is first and foremost an inner discussion among women artists, part of a wider inner-Palestinian discussion about identity, culture and Palestinian art. A discussion of Arabic culture in the Arabic language, a discussion that is created deep inside and seethes at a boiling point of a distress situation that is both personal and political.

From my point of view, the presentation space is by definition a Palestinian space. A Palestinian territory for a limited time, a temporary enclave for several weeks, protected by the unwritten laws of visual art. Laws that enable the thing itself to exist by its very exposure to light, by its very perspective, by the very desire to see.

Both for me and for the artists, this was an introduction to Palestinian women artists. Some of them meet for the first time through this exhibition. Lacking a common space in which they can give representation and expression to those things common and different in their creations, the Palestinian culture underlining the personal creation of each and every one of them is experienced separately.

The Israeli occupation, both cultural and actual, on both sides of the Green Line, tries to erase, to clean, to take out any possible indication of a Palestinian visual culture in the public space in which they create. A practice of severance, preventing contact, entrance and exit permits, barriers, lack of physical accessibility – all these make it difficult for them to form a cultural space in which they can meet. This is a given situation that does not enable them an inner discussion, a creation of discourse, or a network of contexts. There are several exhibition spaces within the Palestinian authority, but these women artists present their work mainly abroad. They meet in alternative enclaves in which they can hold an inner Palestinian discussion, disconnected from its geographic limitations.

Although this exhibition was presented in Tel Aviv & will be presented in East Jerusalem, this fact does not constitute a testimony to normalization or reciprocity. This is not a project of cooperation.

The Palestinian artists disassociate themselves from any semantics that enable the Israeli political system to appropriate cultural events in order to show that the peace process still exists, contradictory to the political deadlock that actually exists and to the actual difficult personal-political conditions.

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The name of the exhibition: "Palestine(a)", describes a cultural-geographical space that receives a grammatical female - feminine conjugation, both in Arabic and Hebrew grammar. It is a feminine viewpoint, a feminine language, closed off in brackets.

The feminine "a" appears at the end of the word. The content has already been defined, indicated, and predetermined. The conjugation creates a retrospective wonder, a backwards reading of the formula X(a). An attempt to redefine the concept while reading backwards, and to give it another meaning that holds within it the female subjective and the female voice.

Semantics have a central role in the reality of the Israeli occupation, see entries: Arab sector, Green Line, shaking, moderate physical pressure, a ticking bomb, safety engine, normalization, hermetic closure, inner closure, preventive closures, administrative detainees, the spirit of the agreement, occupied territories, cooperation, etc.

The name of the exhibition: Palestine(a), indicates a possibility/desire to view the field of language not only as a place of occupation but as a place of deconstruction and reconstruction. Instead of total helplessness in the ability to change the daily reality, language enables the establishment of a different reality, which enables us to carry on.

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This is a collection of works of women artists, and in most of them there is an absence of the pleasuring, sexual feminine body. In the few works in which it is present, it is there in the sense of present-absent, it is there by the very viewpoint that points at its absence: It is hidden in peeping boxes (Jumana Emil Abboud), sketched in poetry (Nidda Khoury).

The viewpoint is from the body outwards, to the private and public space in which the female body has a role. The body, as an area of political action, carries with it the marks of the struggle for freedom, and it turns into a symbol representing the Palestinian identity and the homeland.

The public space, whether urban view, Palestinian village or Jewish settlement, is at the center of the works. In an overt or implied manner, it is characterized time and time again as Palestinian. The documentary camera documents and appropriates it, it gives "screen time" to those claiming to own it.

The appropriation of the space and its characterization as Palestinian swings between an objective position that sees it as a place of deconstruction and reconstruction (Noel

Jabbour in the photography work of the wall of blocks with graffiti that she built in her room), a surrealistic-dreamlike position that sees it as a place for yearning and for memory (view drawings of Sheik tombs, Jumana Emil Abboud), or a traditional position that sees it as a folkloristic picturesque rural-Palestinian space (Dina Ghazel in the ceramics work of a Palestinian village).

An additional subject that appears in the works is the historical story, the collective memory of the Palestinian people.

In the documentary films (Azza El Hassan, Souhir Ismail), the glass book (Rana Bishara) and the barrier dairy (Faten Fuwzy Nastas) there is an attempt to confiscate the historical narrator position. To extricate history from its traditional spokesmen, the men. To deconstruct the male national narrative in order to enable the female perspective, the female subjective, to exist, to be included within it. And all this – parallel to the construction of the framework story, the historical story, the collective memory of the Palestinian people.

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The female body, the public space, the historical story and the collective memory are all defined/marked in the works time and time again as Palestinian. An act of self-definition that beyond the politic, it has the personal seeking for a resting point, a home.

The works bring up the tension between a set of questions at the center of the feminine-feminist discussion (questions of gender, sexuality, the issue of the body, the status of women, the liberation of women, female language, female creation) and one key question: The question of the Palestinian nationality.

Can a woman find the time and attention for herself, her body, her sexuality, in a condition of spiritual-cultural-physical occupation.

In what manner can she establish herself as a feminine subject within a system that appropriates her to a bigger struggle, the struggle for freedom.

Tal Ben Zvi, Tel-Aviv

1998 Ami Steinitz - Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv
1999 Al-Wasiti art Center, East Jerusalem