

MADE IN PALESTINE

Excerpts from Exhibit Essays

Introduction by James Harithas, Curator

The exhibition *Made in Palestine* chronicles the modern history of the Palestinian people from *Al Nakba* (the Catastrophe of 1948) to the present day. It gives a voice to a people struggling to keep their identity in the face of terrible odds—a brutal occupation by Israel punctuated by daily violence and daily sorrow. The exhibition reveals with powerful clarity the Palestinian side of the story. What is at stake here is of tremendous importance. The lives as well as the traditions and culture of an entire indigenous population are in grave danger of being extinguished.

Ileana Marcoulesco

A celebrated modern artist and theoretician claimed that, for art, sincerity is not enough; truth is of the essence. I am persuaded that a lot of “sincere art” may not have any aesthetic value. Yet, if you take the step from “sincerity” to “authenticity,” matters sound altogether different. Without authenticity there can be no good art. Authenticity is closer to truth than sheer sincerity.

Made in Palestine struck me at first by its authenticity. Then, by the poignancy in relating events, expressing lived experiences, projecting screams, ire, tears, hopes and desires. Next, by the new artistry which has little to do with well recognizable Western schools even though this seemed to be an argument in “defending” the show.

The exhibition is steeped in present history, its making, its abhorrent realities. It also exemplifies the way real talents react to real events. It embodies civic virtues, and human foibles.

[...]

Let us hope that the turn initiated here, away from the exclusively negative definitions of Palestinian self-identity, and the dreary insistence on victimization, will continue in the direction of self-assertion of national identity, explicit nowhere better than in the stunning artistic creativity of this people.

Where the soul is alive, renaissance lurks around the corner.

The Stuff of Dreams...The Stuff of Nightmares by Santiago Nasar

It is said that dreams represent the mythology of the individual and that the mythology of a people in its different cultural forms, i.e., art, literature, and music represents the dream of the collective. This cannot be truer than in the case of *Made in Palestine*, a group show at the Station in Houston, Texas, comprised of Palestinian artists from across the world, currently the homeland of their Diaspora. True, but for an exception, and not a minor one at that. The exception being that the art presented in the show does by no means reflect the dream of the Palestinian collective. To the contrary, it reflects the nightmares of a people that have been disinherited and subjected to occupation and humiliation since 1948. 1948 is when the Palestinian people were uprooted from their land to make room for the European Jews to have a country of their own in the land and in the very homes of the Palestinians who had lived there from time immemorial.

The Palestinians call the events of 1948 *Al-Nakba*, the catastrophe. And can there be anything more catastrophic than waking up to find that you have no home, no country and no means for subsistence? From being a rich merchant, or a middle class teacher, or a self-sufficient farmer to becoming a number on a card handed by the UN to each refugee family. A card entitles the bearer to a few pounds of flour and sugar and some dried fish, courtesy of those who brought about that catastrophe in the first place. Days go by and these days turn into years and the dream of returning home still lingers. This dream is entwined with the nightmare of an occupation. An occupation that wants to make sure that, now that the land has been taken, the people and all that belongs to them, including their very way of life, cease to exist. In a chapter from the book of the obliteration of the American Indian: those who went after the buffalo in yesteryear are perhaps the ancestors or at least the mentors of the olive tree killers of today. Do not just kill the people; kill their way of life and that would kill them.

[...]

This show is dedicated to the Palestinian artist, Mustafa Al Hallaj, who died trying to save his work during a fire at his studio in Damascus. Hallaj, a veteran Palestinian artist, transcended his own personal tragedy and that of his people in his piece, *Self-Portrait as God, Man and the Devil*, by addressing universal issues and themes such as God, man and the devil, good, evil, and hope. He went through all the stages of self-expression in his career, and as he matured he was ready to embrace all humanity. Sophocles, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Blake and many other great poets, thinkers, and artists have tried to deal with those persistently human issues. Hallaj was one of them, having seen more than enough of the evil of this world and probably not enough of the good. Having seen man work in ways fit for the devil and having wondered where God stands in all of it, Hallaj was primed to speak of all of the players to audiences everywhere. Alas, his death deprived us of an artist of world-class stature.

Allan Antliff, Canada Research Chair at the University of Victoria, Canada

"Palestinian violence, the response of a desperate and horridly oppressed people, has been stripped of its context and the terrible suffering from which it arises: a failure to see that is a failure in humanity, and that context doesn't make it any less terrible but at least situates it in a real history and real geography."

—Edward Said, "Dignity, Solidarity and the Penal Colony," (25 September, 2003)

Edward Said's meditation on the tragedy of suicide bombers, penned in exile on the eve of his untimely death, encapsulates the politics of Made in Palestine. The exhibition is moving because it addresses the plight of a people who have been systematically dehumanized by a state that denies their legitimate claim to the land it occupies. History, in these terms, is as much a site of contestation as any other. And so too is art. The challenge, then, is to make this oppression palpable while asserting a more enduring truth.

***Palestinian Artists Working under Siege* by Salwa Mikdadi-Nashashibi**

What is unique about the Made in Palestine exhibition is that, for the first time, American curators took the initiative to visit Palestinian artists in their studios, select the artwork, invite the artists to speak, and ensure the integrity of the work. At a time of frequent and intense Israeli incursions into Palestinian territories, the curators risked their lives to meet the artists and learn about the conditions under which they work. This exhibition is not a comprehensive survey of Palestinian art but rather a selection of work by artists the curators were able to reach despite the dangers posed by the threat of American advances into Iraq and border closures by Israel. The art in this exhibition gives us insight into the humanity of the Palestinian culture and legitimizes the visitors' right to hear the Palestinian narrative. We can only hope that the curators' courage and respect for human rights becomes contagious. As long as the Palestinians continue to be dispossessed and dehumanized, Palestinian artists will continue to give a voice to their people. Peace may become a reality when both sides respect each other's culture, when Israeli children are allowed to read Mahmoud Darwish and visit exhibits such as Made in Palestine, and Palestinians are free to visit galleries in Jaffa and Tel Aviv.