Collusion and stagnation in ‘48 Palestinian visual arts

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Beginnings

In the narrow space that exists between expressing and analyzing works of visual art in words I find myself continually reverting back to the starting point, to close the gap that is entirely unpopulated with the knowledge of consciousness. Is there, in fact, a starting point for Palestinian visual art? Some people trace it back to the late 19th century, when there was a wave of Western influences that were translated into a series of artworks within the context of artistic photography. Some date its beginnings to the arrival of realist-romantic or historical painting. In either case, the Palestinian visual arts did not spring from an ideology or from deep contemplation, nor did they develop as an art form in search of roots or an identity. This early character still finds a place in some contemporary Palestinian creative works, which regard the realist narrative style and portrait photography as sanctified. However, a shift (i.e., a paradigm shift from the beginnings of Palestinian art) occurred in parallel with the Nakba and the 1948 war, which resulted in the division of the land and the people, in their dispersion and efforts at survival, life and death, anger and resignation, refuge and disappearance, fear and defeat, yearning and forgetting, key and house, and grandparent and grandchild. All of these forms and terms were suddenly transformed into visual elements that were embraced by Palestinian art, particularly in the wake of the severing of all Palestinian cultural landmarks from their natural geography, and the arrival of Western civilization that supplanted them.

From here, conversely, began the enfolding of all that is Palestinian within the framework of the Zionist visual arts, which did not only depict the land, home and the history as written down in holy and secular books, but actually began to envelop the human history of the place, including that of the Palestinian human. Anyone who traces the artistic thought founded in Palestine by Jews will inevitably find a clear ideology of penetration of all that lies in the depths of history, including its Palestinian cultural layers. It adapts them to a historical Jewish approach that treats Palestine as if it were a mold cut from clay that lay
frozen in time for two thousand years awaiting the Jewish God, who came to disseminate a spirit that has been absent since creation. Palestinian history and the Palestinian human were thereby transformed into a mere idea that passed through this place without leaving a trace.

This forcible injection of the Jewish into the Palestinian has had a clear place within the Zionist visual arts movement since its inception. Everything was turned into part of the artificial Jewish inheritance, which transformed all aspects of the Palestinian environment—houses and faces, clothing and customs, light and sea, shepherd and olive, hills and cacti—into a part of the Zionist legacy, in a conscious and concerted intellectual effort. This is the legacy that the student of the arts imbibes from the Israeli academies. Naturally, Arab Palestinian artists must contend with this school of thought. In most cases it forms a distorted and incomplete picture of Palestinian culture, which has been completely absent from their studies. Thus the Palestinian artist in Israel is caught in a quandary of Zionist thought. Even if we suppose that artists are conscious of all this, they nonetheless remain in this place where they must create, as if on a front line, and defend themselves and their history, their work remaining a reaction to Zionist argument and thought. This dilemma is greater than the first, one from which they can scarcely escape, since Palestinian artists begin searching for the self by employing the skills, techniques and methods they acquire and develop in their studies, and thereafter in their work. Despite the artist’s sense and conviction that he should embark on creative work with independence, defiance and autonomy, since he is steeped in the sensations that seethe within his chest, the result is usually a distorted one that is not at in allegiance to his national, cultural, and historical character.

**Gender and the Palestinian visual arts**

Gender identity plays a major role in much of the visual art, particularly among female artists who through their work are searching for a female—feminist—and gendered statement that bears the hallmark of rebellion, and for a means of self-expression within a frame that is predominantly influenced by developments in Western visual arts. We rarely encounter a work of art that has qualities of intimacy or is even connected to the artist’s environment, which could allow her to work in freedom and with a self-expression consistent with everyday reality. Rather, this artistic expression follows developments in the global art movement, in particular in art colleges in the United States, which offer opportunities to art students from “Third World” countries. There is no doubt that admittance to these institutes requires students to probe pain within themselves and to search for a lost and marginalized cultural identity, in order to reconcile it with the prevailing political “wisdom”: the United States is the ultimate location for self-expression by the artist, in a place of freedom and democracy. This educational approach is also dominant in Israel, as a “democratic” entity that allows Palestinian artists to search for themselves, for
their identities and personalities. In most cases, what befalls the Palestinian artist in Israel is what befalls him or her in the United States, since visual expression necessarily requires a negative view of the student’s background. He must therefore confront the past with courage and present this negative image in its entirety; if he does not, then he is not being “true to himself.” We find signs and expressions of this shattered identity at the level of gender in much contemporary Palestinian visual art inside of ’48.

The return to nature and the human

Nature takes form on the canvases of Palestinian art; it is an aesthetic that imparts feeling to viewers that are at odds with reality. The tranquil village, waiting for the moon to appear above it with sweet romance, sighs at the dance of cosmic light that graces the olive trees, rooted deeply in history. Do our Palestinian villages really look like this today? Or is it a fantasy conjured by the artist from various experiences, from a past that has expired, which “nicely” reflects the Betzaleli—Zionist—Canaanite artistic movement, an enterprise that embraced romanticism as part of the artistic settlement movement that helped colonize Palestine.

And yet, perhaps the Palestinian artist does aspire to create a new project with his work. And if he really is drawing from some of the wells of the Zionist movement it does not negate his attempts to recast a Palestinian dream that has perished on the ground. However, we often find that the artistic discourse does not divulge the real core of Palestinian existence and history. The artwork remains devoid of an autonomy of Palestinian creativity, confining creative work to the realm of reaction, just as is the case with Palestinian political history since the Nakba to the present day.

What concerns the viewer is the attempt to create innovative Palestinian art that engages in a dialogue with the Other, but then recoils and contracts to become a mere reaction to what is happening to that Other, the Other as occupier and colonizer, as well as to the artist, the decision-maker, the teacher, the researcher of the history of Palestinian art, and the narrator of the “true” Palestinian historical narrative.

The question for every creative person in Palestine to answer remains: What role can each artist play in this problematic scene, which seems hopeless at first glance? And is it really hopeless, whereby the Palestinian artist will inevitably lose because he chooses to collude with the Israeli establishment in order to gain status as an artist in this place that he still calls the homeland?

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