

REVOLUTIONARY PAINTING AND THE PALESTINIAN REVOLUTION

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The First Arab Biennial in Baghdad should have been a precious opportunity for Arab artists, intellectuals, and publics to get to know the painting of the Palestinian people, who for dozens of years have been fighting one of the most heroic battles in the history of humankind against imperialism, Zionism, and reactionism. Regrettably, however, it must be noted that our Palestinian brothers did not accord this exhibition the attention it deserved.

We believe that Palestinian painting has reached a higher level than that of the works shown at the Baghdad Biennial. Looking at the Palestinian exhibition, one feels oneself amidst a makeshift assembly [of artwork], made hastily for the purpose of putting in an appearance.

I find it inadmissible, especially for our Palestinian brothers, to deal bureaucratically with a challenge of this sort. Prioritizing political and military responsibilities needn't come at the expense of ideological ones, such as literature, painting, poetry, music, and popular and revolutionary song. We don't know to what degree Palestinian political officials were involved in this exhibition, but the fact is this: we are faced with a series of Palestinian works that are mostly inspired by folklore, in addition to some "abstract" and "realist" works.

Why this majority of "folkloric" work? To establish the parameters of popular patrimony? To assert the Palestinian character? To revive the traditions and morals of a Palestinian Palestine?

I think this, however necessary, is not the task of painting alone. The task of envisioning Palestinian patrimony in its entirety, *Palestinian Life*,¹ is incumbent upon multiple disciplines: cinema, graphic arts, audiovisual media, periodicals, books, etc. Painting as a technique, in my view, should work only in the service of strictly documentary goals, and should be presented as such. The fact that the Palestinian painter—like any other Palestinian creative—must forge concrete links to the heritage of his people brings us from the outset to a creative process based in the reality on the ground.

In this case, the painter shouldn't only concern himself with native authenticity, but with the reality of his people in all of its *cultural and political complexity, within its historical trajectory*. In doing so, he removes himself from a folkloric sentimentality toward Palestine. If the Palestinian painter approaches Palestine *as a tourist*, he will be far from seeing the true nature of its reality, even if this painter has directly experienced a certain Palestinian reality himself.

Two fairly exemplary painters are among those exhibiting at the Biennial: [Ismail] Shammout and [Mustafa] El Hallaj. In my opinion, these two represent opposing extremes of a tendency to represent “reality” in Palestinian painting.

Shammout's painting is figurative, committed to a general, conventional theme, which is to say the passive denunciation of Zionism's crimes: *Where To?* (1954), Palestinian life, women, orphans, the elderly . . . A 1974 canvas, *Green Fist*, seems to me to offer Shammout many possibilities for a painting that doesn't limit itself to tears and lamentations, nor to “official” themes, but that shows us the dignity of the Palestinian fighter.

El Hallaj's painting is also figurative, but its figuration is totally different from that of Shammout. Hallaj declares that he approves of abstraction as long as it does not render reality abstract, *but all of his painting is an abstraction of reality*. Despite the figures we can find in his canvases—women, men, animals, man-animals, tree-men—I personally did not detect a direct link between these paintings and Palestinian reality.

If a Palestinian fighter might perceive a certain ennoblement of his role in Shammout's *Green Fist*, I wonder what his reaction would be when faced with a painting by El Hallaj. At least Hallaj demonstrates a

1 All emphasis in original unless otherwise noted.

developed intellectual framework, informed by some mechanisms of modern thought: surrealist symbolism, biological space-erotic-fantastical-apocalyptic.

The connection with cultural heritage and character must be made on every level. If one assumes a Western, universalist mindset, one cannot purport to speak to “implicated” viewers, who for the moment have access only to their own pattern (or patterns) of thought, marred as they are by imperialism, Zionism, and reactionism.

Hallaj’s error is to pose the question in terms of figuration and abstraction. In fact, the basis of the problem of Palestinian painting—indeed, of Arab painting generally—is one of *language*.

To construct a new Palestinian and Arab culture, we must embark on the long, difficult path of exploring, inventorying, collecting, and developing the signs and symbols of a vocabulary for our painting to come.

Where must this work of inventory and exploration take place? In the realm of history, as much as in the popular cultural patrimony of the past as well as the present.

One must live among the people to see how they see. We reclaim a Palestinian painting that denounces the crimes of imperialism, Zionism, and reactionism.

That points a finger at the real enemies of the Palestinian people.

That sings the heroism of Palestinian freedom fighters and civilians.

That reflects the new ideas that guide the Palestinian people in their struggles.

That would be, finally, a rich and effective tool of Revolutionary propaganda among the masses and in solidarity with all oppressed peoples.

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TRANSLATED BY ALESSANDRA AMIN