



ART UNDER THE SIEGE

KAMAL BOULLATA

While living under conditions of ghettoization and military assault, Palestinian artists continue to be driven to express themselves in paint, photography, and other visual media. This article examines the work of six of the ten finalists in the September 2002 biennial competition for the Ramallah-based A. M. Qattan Foundation's Young Artists of the Year Award. After briefly surveying the conditions that have marked post-1948 Palestinian art, the author finds the will to create under extreme conditions to be an illustration of Palestinian self-assertion and faith in life.

HOW DOES ONE CREATE ART under the threat of sudden death and the unpredictability of invasion and siege? More specifically, how do Palestinian artists articulate their awareness of space when their homeland's physical space is being diminished daily by barriers and electronic walls and when their own homes could at any moment be occupied by soldiers or even blown out of existence? In what way can an artist engage with the homeland's landscape when ancient orange and olive groves are being systematically destroyed? When the grief of bereaved families is reduced by the mass media to an abstraction transmitted at lightning speed to a TV screen, what language can a visual artist use to express such grief?

These are questions that come to mind when one ponders the ongoing artistic production in the occupied Palestinian territories and the art exhibits that continue to draw crowds in Ramallah even as tanks remain stationed at the entrances of the city and ring the ruined compound of the Palestinian Authority (PA).¹

This essay, however, will focus on one particular exhibition that was held in Ramallah in autumn 2002, just months after Israel's ironically named "Operation Defensive Shield" had laid siege to towns and refugee camps and wreaked almost unimaginable destruction throughout the West Bank. The end of the operation did not signal a lifting of the siege: Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued to encircle Ramallah as well as all other West Bank towns, and the most stringent closures remained in force throughout the territory. Less than a week before the exhibition opened, the IDF carried out a full-fledged assault on the PA compound just blocks from the exhibition space, blowing up six buildings,

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Journal of Palestine Studies XXXIII, no. 4 (Summer 2004), pages 70–84.

ISSN: 0377-919X; online ISSN: 1533-8614.

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including the Interior Ministry and the Ramallah governorate building. Even after the Israeli forces withdrew to the edge of the town, the population remained under curfew.

It was in such conditions that the second biennial competition for the Young Artist of the Year Award, sponsored by the A. M. Qattan Foundation, opened on 28 September 2002. The inauguration of the exhibit, which showed the works of ten young Palestinian finalists in the competition, took place on a day when the curfew had been lifted to allow the inhabitants to reprovision themselves, and the awards ceremony was interrupted by IDF gunfire a few hundred meters away. Commenting later on the circumstances, one of the six-member jury that judged the competition, the Cuban critic and art curator Gerardo Mosquera, noted, "In situations like this, you need more art. . . . I have always believed that art is not a luxury which you create when you have everything else, but a necessary means of survival."² The fact that the exhibition took place at all, and that the artists had had to brave innumerable military checkpoints and roadblocks to get there, gives resonance to the statement.

VISUAL ARTS IN THE PALESTINIAN GHETTO

Before discussing the 2002 A. M. Qattan Foundation's Biennial Exhibition and the works of the young artists selected as finalists, it is useful to look briefly at the setting in which an earlier generation of Palestinian artists emerged from the cultural ghetto created by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The works of the young artists in the exhibit were all created in 2002—that is to say, under siege in a land segmented into ghettos by checkpoints and barriers—and it bears reminding that conditions of siege and ghettoization are not new to Palestinian art.³

With the destruction and dispersal of Palestinian Arab society in 1948, Palestinian art, which had thrived for over a century, lost its cultural center. Displaced artists had to restart their lives in the parts of the country that did not fall to Israel, in neighboring Arab countries or abroad.⁴ Those who remained in what became Israel were abruptly cut off from the Arab world and lived literally in a state of siege until military rule, applied to Arabs only, was lifted in 1966. The following year, with Israel's conquest of the remainder of historic Palestine, the Palestinians of the newly occupied lands were likewise cut off from the Arab hinterland. As with their brethren living within the Green Line, the cultural connections that once flowed between local intellectuals and their counterparts in neighboring countries were now severed, and they lost access to the publications that used to keep them abreast of Arab cultural currents. At the same time, strict military censorship was imposed on the press of the occupied Palestinian areas, and academic and cultural programs had to be approved by the occupying authorities. Within months, the West Bank and Gaza Strip were transformed into besieged ghettos virtually isolated from the outside world.

Living under siege gave rise not only to civil disobedience and armed resistance, but also to a new breed of Palestinian visual artist whose creative

sensibilities had been forged in the harsh realities of their lives in their ghetto. These emerging artists, who were mostly self-taught, joined hands with the few artists who had had some formal art training at home or abroad to form the League of Palestinian Artists in 1973. Through the league, Palestinian artists were able to obtain the occupation authorities' permission to mount group exhibitions. Since there were no appropriate professional institutions or gallery spaces available in the territories, the artists displayed their art—mostly pictorial works with a political message rendered in figurative language—in schools, town halls, union offices, and public libraries.

Initially, the military authorities monitoring Palestinian cultural events did not assign any importance to what they regarded as marginal activities. The

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Palestinian public, on the other hand, suffering from both repression and defeat, regarded each artistic work that came to light under the grim Israeli presence as a source of national pride and self-reassurance. Gradually, exhibitions became rallying events that the occupation authorities soon came to see as emblematic of a collective national identity and crucibles of defiant resistance to occupation. Strict censorship of all art exhibitions followed, and even those that received permits from the military authorities were prone to have their openings

raided by soldiers, the exhibition space closed down, and the crowd dispersed. Sometimes, paintings displaying the forbidden colors of the Palestinian flag would be confiscated; other times artists were taken away for interrogation or even sentenced to prison. The artists themselves, however, took it as a badge of honor to be treated as harshly as writers and considered it a sign of visual expression's new importance in a society where the oral arts, especially poetry, were traditionally valued over visual arts. Within two decades, exhibitions of art produced under occupation began to be mounted abroad under the sponsorship of Arab and international organizations supporting the Palestinian cause, which conferred additional legitimacy.

The 1990s ushered in a new era in the visual arts. With peace talks that seemed to hold out new promise for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, the cultural scene was infused with a new energy. For the first time since 1967, proper exhibition space was provided by new institutions devoted to the promotion of the visual arts. Two such institutions were established in East Jerusalem in 1992. The al-Wasiti Art Center was founded by Palestinian artists who two decades earlier had been founding members of the League of Palestinian Artists. Headed by artist Sliman Mansur, the center sponsored solo and group exhibitions by local artists. It also offered art courses to young people and began to develop a photographic archive documenting locally produced art. The Anadiel Gallery opened the same year. Founded by independent art curator Jack Persekian, the gallery exhibited local artists but was especially important for opening a window on the outside world through its program hosting Palestinian artists living abroad, some of whom, like the

internationally renowned Mona Hatoum, had never been to their country of origin before. Several years later, in 1997, Persekian went on to found another institution in the Old City, al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, which sought to expand the international scope first introduced by Anadiel Gallery and became a major promoter of greater appreciation of experimentation in art. Though its exhibition space was limited, the foundation came to act as a cultural bridge between local artists and the outside world through its exhibitions of international as well as local artists, its art residency program, and its bilingual (Arabic and English) periodical publications.

Meanwhile, Ramallah had begun to grow as a cultural center after the PA, established in 1994, moved its West Bank headquarters there. At the same time, with foreign donors wanting to contribute to "state building" projects, subsidies and funding for cultural projects became available from NGO sources and international foundations. Two years after the PA's arrival in Ramallah, the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center was established in a restored local mansion and soon became the leading cultural institution in the fast-growing town. Directed by Adila Laidi, the center began to sponsor a wide range of innovative and rigorous cultural programs in various fields, including the visual arts; some of these were "exported" during these years to cultural centers opening in other towns of the Palestinian territories. The center also regularly hosts art exhibits, concerts, literary events, film screenings, and lectures.

A number of other cultural institutions opened in Ramallah during those years, but the most important by far was the A. M. Qattan Foundation, established in Ramallah in 1998. Entirely funded by a family endowment, this truly national institution makes its impact felt through its financial support for other cultural institutions and programs throughout Palestine as well as its own wide-ranging programs in the cultural, scientific, and educational sectors; the visual arts is only one of its areas of interest. In addition to its institutional grants, it also offers generous awards and grants to individuals to promote excellence in various fields.⁵ The Young Artist of the Year Award, which gave rise to the Biennial Exhibition that is the main focus of this article, is just one of these grants.

THE NEW GENERATION OF PALESTINIAN ARTISTS

Probably no venue could offer a better vantage point for surveying the emergence of new talents among Palestinian artists and the range of artwork being produced than the Qattan Foundation's Biennial Exhibition. There, assembled under one roof, one finds the works of ten or twelve artists selected as finalists for the Young Artist of the Year Award from a pool of some fifty contestants by a panel of jurors from Palestine and abroad.⁶ The first Biennial Exhibition was held in Ramallah in August 2000, shortly before the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada. The second was mounted there in September 2002 within a stone's throw of invading Israeli forces, and the third is planned for the fall of 2004.⁷

Open to young artists in their twenties “regardless of faith, political allegiance, or sex,” the contest aimed to foster “the development of the Palestinians’ skills and knowledge and the creation of opportunities for artistic self-expression.” The three main criteria for selection were “quality, innovation, and originality.”⁸ Competing artists must have at least one Palestinian parent, and there are no restrictions on where they are from. Of the ten finalists in 2002, four were from Gaza, four from inside the Green Line, one from Jerusalem, and one from the diaspora. A measure of the kind of opportunity the competition offers is the fact that a number of the finalists of the 2000 and 2002 biennials

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were invited soon after the competition to show their work abroad, including in New York, Houston, Montreal, Berlin, Barcelona, and Venice.⁹

One of the most striking aspects of the works on display in the 2002 exhibition, all of which were created against a background of extraordinary violence, destruction, and death, was the fact that these themes were evoked only obliquely, if at all. And because Palestinian society is under siege and engaged in a ferocious political and military struggle, the outsider could easily expect more overtly politicized works. Thus, the Cuban

jury member Mosquera expressed surprise at the absence of “pamphleteer art or nationalistic paintings. In general, the works used contemporary art’s potentials to express and discuss quite diverse issues in a complex manner.”¹⁰ The works exhibited by the young artists in the 2002 biennial included drawings, paintings, film, photography, mixed media works, video, and installations.

The works of six of the finalists are discussed in the following pages.¹¹

EYEWITNESSES FROM THE GAZA GHETTO

Ra’ed Issa and Muhammad Hawajri were both born and raised in Bureij refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Mainly self-taught, the two artist friends often sketched and painted in the same cramped space. Though their work is strikingly different, it often appears as if the art of one is the continuation of the other’s. Coming from an area subjected to almost daily shelling, Issa and Hawajri, who attended every funeral in town, both worked as field researchers in their community for the *100 Shabeed—100 Lives* exhibition¹² sponsored by the Sakakini Center in February 2001, which commemorated the first one hundred victims of the al-Aqsa intifada. The art they later contributed to the Qattan Foundation’s exhibition grew out of their common experience of intimate contact with the bereaved families, though they used different means to express the state of being a survivor of and eyewitness to daily death. Deeply rooted in an oral tradition and equally attracted to visual expression, Issa addressed the theme of martyr (*shabeed*) representationally, while Hawajri explored it more abstractly, in metaphoric and nonrepresentational language.¹³

Ra'ed Issa (b. 1975)

Issa, who received a Distinction Award at the contest, was represented in the exhibition by seven acrylic paintings and ninety-nine sketches in pencil, charcoal, pen and ink, and watercolor washes. All these works sought to capture the moment when he first saw the body of a man or child wrapped in blood-smearred sheets. With images of the dead and wounded plastered all over the local dailies and flashing nightly on TV screens, Issa saw the martyrs becoming an abstraction. In a statement for the exhibition, he explained, "what drew my attention most were the faces of martyrs, especially those whose skulls had been crushed . . . the exact details of [which] were too much to take in . . . at the same time, the shock of it would blunt the image of these heads into familiar objects, as if they were watermelons on a table."¹⁴

In his attempt to express the instantaneous quality of his encounters with each of the dead, Issa obsessively repeated images of the martyrs in a manner more common to the documentary photographer. Feverishly executed with violent graphic marks and flowing brush strokes, his portraits occupied a huge wall at the exhibition. The rows of bloodied busts and heads reveal the care with which the artist looked into the face of each one of those who had been killed on their streets or town squares or under the rubble of their homes. In each individual work, the viewer feels the immediacy of that moment.

The artist exhibited seven paintings and ninety-nine sketches of martyrs, numbers that suggest a mystical dimension to his series, creation and perpetuity. The number seven coincides with the number of days in which God is believed to have created the world. The number ninety-nine in Arabic and Islamic references conveys the multiplicity of attributes found in One; the most popular reference is the ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names of God, pointing to the comprehensive unity inherent in the all-embracing Creator. As an eyewitness to death on each of the seven days of the week, Issa created works to communicate how the grief of each person is no less than that of another, and how the life of each individual is as precious as that of a neighbor. Issa's homage to the Palestinian martyr can perhaps best be summed up in the thirteenth-century Arabic verse by Ibn 'Arabi, "faces are all but one, only by counting the mirrors they multiply."¹⁵

Muhammad Hawajri (b. 1976)

While Issa, working almost like a documentary photographer, sought to capture in a painterly and representational language what a photograph can never show, Hawajri, taking photography as his starting point, offered what seemed to be abstract paintings. At a time when the Israeli authorities were uprooting fruit trees that were the sole source of income to many Palestinians, Hawajri created a series of works entitled *Tales of a Tree*. All the works in this series—a dozen color photographs and acrylic paintings and over thirty pencil drawings—were based on Hawajri's close-up photographs of the trunk of a eucalyptus tree. Some of the images were photographs, others were photographs

overlaid with thick brush strokes of acrylic paint with which he delineated or obscured the photograph's shapes. The series of pencil sketches reveal the minute process whereby the object captured in a photographic close-up is transformed into what looked like an abstract painting.

Man Ray's dictum that he photographs what he does not wish to paint and paints what he cannot photograph¹⁶ seems flat when one contemplates the obvious passion with which the young self-taught artist—for whom crossing borders between photography and painting seems second nature—expresses through his art the emotions the eucalyptus tree evokes in him. The problem to be solved by the young artist in his contemplative stance before his subject is how to give shape to what his eye perceives while not losing touch with the verbal metaphor in his mind. The answer is evolved through the pencil drawings that link his photographs to his paintings.

Examining the elements linking the three media used, the viewer begins to trace the tree trunk's transformation into what resembles the human groin and limbs. The smooth surface of the tree in the close-up photograph recalls human skin; in painting over the bark patterns, Hawajri's brush seems to suggest caressing the skin of a beloved. The tree, a feminine noun in Arabic, is thus experienced as a living body. Ancient graffiti carved on the trunk in some works reinforce the sense of times past where lovers like him may have stood before the tree. Its bark patterns in coffee browns and pale greens reflect the cycle of dying and rebirth.

Just as Issa wished through his repeated representational portraits to sanctify the martyr, his friend sought through abstraction to incarnate the tree. As different as the works of the two artists appear, verbal associations underlying their works help to maintain the link between them. Thus, the word "tales" in the title of Hawajri's series announces the link between visual expression and oral tradition in a similar way that the number of works comprising Issa's series conveys affinities with mysticism. By highlighting the tree's ability to narrate, Hawajri endows the tree with an anthropomorphism that is accentuated by the fact that all his works in this series assume the vertical shape traditionally associated with the portrait. In contrast, all works in Issa's series of disfigured portraits are horizontal, a form that has been pictorially associated with the landscape. Thus, while Hawajri personalizes the frontal particularities of a tree trunk, Issa shows in his horizontal works how the long sleep of a youth assumes the shape of a landscape. Interestingly, both friends were giving body to the same metaphorical image that has been popularized by Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish. In this image evoking associations with the martyr, the poet likened the native landscape to the body of his beloved, and the motherland as an extension of his own body.

JERUSALEM IN THE HEART

For most Palestinians, life in the Gaza refugee camps where the above two artists are from continues to be viewed as the nethermost abyss. In comparison,

Palestinians in the diaspora appear in another world altogether.¹⁷ The art of Rosalind Nashashibi, who was born abroad, demonstrates a binding engagement with her ancestral land that challenges this assumption. In contrast, the art of Steve Sabella, who continues to live in his birthplace, represents the experience of being an exile at home.

These two artists, each of whom received a Special Mention Award, never met before their work was shown together in the Ramallah exhibition. The ancestry of both artists, however, is rooted in the city of Jerusalem. Nashashibi comes from a notable urban family that has been involved in shaping the modern history of the city, while Sabella, as his Latin name suggests, belongs to a Jerusalem family whose origins go back to Crusader times.

Rosalind Nashashibi (b. 1973)

Born in London to a Palestinian father and an Irish mother, visual artist Rosalind Nashashibi went to Jerusalem in 2002 for a residency at al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art. Living among relatives in the city where her father grew up and where her family name continues to be recognized by everyone, Nashashibi got the idea for a short film that would bridge time and place. Her sixteen millimeter film, however, was not shot in Jerusalem itself but in a suburb that her grandfather had a hand in founding after the city of his birth was divided in 1948. The film, named for the neighborhood, *Dahiyet al-Bareed* (the Post Office District), documents how this place that once embodied the fulfillment of a communal dream ended up a no-man's-land. Reviewed, along with others Nashashibi made, this film was praised as "a lament for an inexplicable, messed-up world that somehow manages to be beautiful both because of and in spite of the things that happen to it."¹⁸

One can understand how a place that "others" call home can be seen by an outsider as an "inexplicable messed-up world." Seeing the film as an insider, however, provides a totally different aesthetic experience, at least insofar as the place portrayed would not be seen as being "beautiful both *because of and in spite of* the things that happen to it."

Dahiyet al-Bareed, or the "Post Office District," was developed north of Jerusalem by a cooperative initiated by employees of Jerusalem's post office. Most of its residents had lived, before the 1948 war, in the elegant modern neighborhoods in the western hills outside the Old City that grew up with the upwardly mobile urban residential expansion that began in the early years of the century and accelerated during the British Mandate.¹⁹ When the western part of Jerusalem fell to the Jewish forces in 1948, all those Arab villas nestled among pinewoods were seized, their residents never allowed to return. Many sought refuge with relatives in the increasingly crowded Old City. As soon as the salvaged half of Jerusalem was revived under Jordanian custody, those who could aspired to leave the Old City for more spacious quarters with more modern facilities.

The residential project of the “District” represented an attempt to recreate the kind of Jerusalem neighborhood that was lost in 1948. Built of the same gray white stone used in the pre-1948 neighborhoods, the comfortable dwellings were graced with similar arched windows, balconies, multiple verandas, and even the same colorful floral patterned tiles, produced by the same family manufactory in the Old City, as the West Jerusalem villas.²⁰ Similarly, pines and cypresses were planted in the open spaces of the neighborhood. The prosperity of the “District,” however, came to an end after the June 1967 war, when Israel annexed the Old City and expanded Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries to encompass seventy square kilometers of additional West Bank land including the “District” and twenty-eight villages. To secure a Jewish majority in the newly defined city limits, Israel issued special ID cards that conferred the status of “resident” on the Palestinian inhabitants, Christian and Muslim, whose ancestors had lived in the city for hundreds of years. The cards were subject to renewal and could be revoked at any time. Indeed, as Jewish settlements built on Palestinian lands began to ring the Old City, growing numbers of Palestinian residents of the city lost their ID cards.

In the meantime, the Jerusalem municipality had stopped serving the “District.” Cut off from Jerusalem, which for two decades supplied its lifeline, the place began to die a slow death. Barbed wires and military checkpoints were soon set up at its gates. Having lost municipal sanitation services and garbage collection, the community procured its own garbage containers, but these were confiscated by the Israeli authorities. The only way left to dispose of garbage was to incinerate it in a public place within the “District.” The defining feature of the neighborhood soon became the suffocating odor of the smoke from the heaps of garbage burned daily in the open not far from the deteriorating villas.

Nashashibi’s film documents, with a detachment free of nostalgia or rhetoric, a typical afternoon in this forgotten place. At a distance, we see children playing football at the day’s end. A prayer call of a mosque in the horizon is scarcely heard. Closer by, some street guys hang out. The viewer waits for something to happen. Nothing does. The sudden roar of a passing truck fades soon after it is heard. By staring into the void where time barely moves, the unbearable state of waiting for something to happen makes the viewer uneasily aware of the kind of waiting refugees and exiles know so well. The recurring feature in this suspended world is the burning of a heap of garbage.

For six long minutes, which is the length of her film, Nashashibi puts us before a landscape that is undefined by beginning or end. Only after the lights are on when we feel as if we were waking up from a bad dream, we can begin to imagine the anguish of how an urban community of Palestinians was gradually choked off. Nashashibi’s testimonial work would have been a nightmare to her grandfather. He could not have imagined how cruelly the daily life of fellow Jerusalemites has once again been severed from their city of birth.

Steve Sabella (b. 1975)

Steve Sabella was born in Jerusalem eight years after Israel annexed it. Though he continues to live in Jerusalem's Old City, none of the photographs he submitted to the exhibition show any trace of it. One explanation for this may lie in the peculiar relationship that evolved over a century between the history of photography, Sabella's medium, and the significance of his hometown to the outside world.

Photography was barely four years old when Western photographers rushed to try to capture Jerusalem on film, one of the first cities that interested them outside Europe. While most Western photographers recording Jerusalem focused on biblical sites and historical monuments, with native figures appearing either as a means of indicating scale, in the staging of biblical scenes, or to document ethnic or folkloric customs, the artistic interests of the Arab photographers born in the city seemed to lie elsewhere. Khalil Ra'ad, the first native-born professional to establish his studio in the city, in 1890, is an illustrious example.²¹ Ra'ad's Jerusalem photographs, both in and outside the city, focused not on monuments but on the daily life of ordinary people at their various pursuits. At a time when Reinhold Niebuhr's slogan "land without a people for a people without a land" was being diffused throughout a world ruled by colonialism, Ra'ad was photographing dense street scenes, people basking in the sun, craftspeople before their wheels, factory workers stacking Nablus soap bars, villagers pruning their olive trees, and farmers cultivating their fields. As for the iconic images that represented the cultural appropriation of Jerusalem even before the birth of the Jewish state, it is interesting to note that the Zionist movement popularized the image of a sixteenth-century minaret presented as the "Tower of David."²² Since Israel's 1967 annexation of Jerusalem's Old City and its environs, photographic images of every stone and monument within the city walls has been reduced to some form of cliché to serve nationalist ends. Even images of the Dome of the Rock, the 1,300-year-old Islamic monument, has been appropriated for Israeli tourist posters.

As a visual artist growing up in Jerusalem, Sabella seems to have been intuitively aware of the pitfalls of photographing it. Sensing how photography has been used to contribute to the mythmaking around him, this internal exile goes out into the open, beyond the city walls, to find his freedom between the rocks and the sky.

Here, from a hilltop we see a dirt road winding across a burned-out field leading into a ridge of rocks dissolving into darkness; there, from below a tree, we see a ladder leaning against bare branches and pointing into the sky. Elsewhere we see a heavy cloud hovering in midair over a rock-ribbed hill; at the end of an arid stretch of land, a mountain of pure limestone perches against the deep blue of the sky. From closer up, we see a mount of bare and craggy rocks aging as it were among wild bushes; above a slope, we see four identical cubical dwellings that dot the horizon sharply splitting sky from earth. The city that from time immemorial was considered a bridge between heaven and earth

may be absent in Sabella's photographs, but everything in them indicates how, in solitude, the native photographer rebuilt his own Jerusalem.

Just as Ra'ad's photographs could appear to an outsider to resemble those of ethnically oriented photographers of his time, Sabella's crisp works of sky and rocks could to an outsider appear to be the work of a professional photographer from anywhere in the world. And yet, it is in Sabella's conscious avoidance of photographing Jerusalem that he was able to recreate the universality of the place. Indeed, his search for his true self may be likened to those monks who, drawn to Jerusalem from distant lands, ended up living out the rest of their lives in those desolate landscapes. Only in such landscapes did Sabella find his own Jerusalem. From among the rocks of the Palestinian wilderness, the Jerusalem photographer defines his own identification with the pristine state of his ancestral land. Through the way he lets us see these ancient rocks, Sabella reminds us that it was around a rock that his own city of birth was once founded.

A VISION FROM WITHIN

Palestinians who continued to live in their homeland in what was declared as the State of Israel were referred to by their compatriots elsewhere as Palestinians of "the interior." Even while they were suffering under the military rule, they were often viewed with suspicion by other Arabs during the first two decades after Palestine's fall. Following the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, however, the perception changed: speaking both Hebrew and Arabic and surviving in the midst of their conquerors, the Palestinians of the "interior" came to be seen as a breed apart for their resiliency, endurance, and special skills. The price they paid for this was living in two worlds, in uneasy tension between two identities permanently in conflict that forced them to experience the self and the other in ways that may be incomprehensible to an outsider.

In metaphoric language, the two young artists from the "interior" who were among the finalists in the Qattan Foundation's exhibition attempted to give body to the dilemma lived by their community. Though the artists had never met before, and the mode of expression of one could hardly be more distant from that of the other, their common experience as Palestinians from Israel seems to have led them independently to explore the same legend, that of the brothers Cain and Abel.

Mikha'il Hallaq (b. 1975)

Born in the Galilean village of Fassoota, Hallaq exhibited four oil paintings admirably executed in the representational tradition of Palestinian church paintings popularized by Faddul 'Odeh, another Galilean, at the turn of the twentieth century. Though his narrative subject is coded with present-day references (contemporary architectural detail, the remains of a stone house, a checkered headdress), his handling of the medium and his general compositions derive

from a language invented centuries ago in Europe. In an homage to the young of his generation being killed by Israeli fire, his painting *Palestinian Martyr* borrows its iconography from the Pietà. In that, the narrative painter seems to act as a translator of popular convictions. In the mode of the popular elevation of the slain to the status of martyr, Hallaq, a Christian by birth, likened the Palestinian dead to the crucified Christ.

The more intriguing of his canvases, however, refers to the legend of the first event after the expulsion from Eden; namely, a man's killing his own brother. The painting depicts a naked man attacking another. The assailant's figure, arching forward, is twisting the trapped man's arm against his hip, and with his bare teeth savagely goes for the throat of his prey. The vanquished, in surrender, is bending backwards in agony and his squinting eyes implore a bloody sky above. The silhouette of two draped figures standing nearby in the dark observe the ongoing struggle, their solemn presence cloaked in mystery. Lest the viewer think the painting represents the actual biblical scene, a panorama of today's walled city of Jerusalem crowned by the Dome of the Rock looms in the background.

Manal Mahameed (b. 1976)

The young woman from the village of Mu'awiya finally received a permit from the Israeli authorities allowing her to travel to Ramallah for the biennial competition in which she was a finalist. With the succession of military check-points, the journey that in peaceful times takes less than an hour requires a whole day, and the Ramallah that is her destination is under siege. Yet the young woman, only a few months away from giving birth to her first child, was determined to build from local materials an installation that would sum up how she, a Palestinian from Israel, sees the war being waged against her own people by the army of the state of which she is a citizen. In her statement for the exhibition, she wrote, "an imaginary thread stretches between two worlds at odds. It pulls me and I pull it. A thread of light and darkness, of beauty and violence [leading] me into the earliest traces of memory." She explained how "the ancient image" which had been haunting her was of "that first man who killed his brother and buried him in the most beautiful spot on earth."²³

For her own interpretation of the legend cited in both the Bible and the Qur'an, Manal Mahameed, who received a Special Mention Award, created an installation with a theatrical setting of a boxing ring.²⁴ The four corners of the ring are marked by vertical blocks of varying heights, which she had built locally from unfinished concrete and metal bars from a nearby construction site. Contrasting with these rough materials were the highly polished formica sheets delineating the ring's floor, cordoned off on three sides by red, blue, and white ropes. Close by, a video playing in a loop shows a long shot of a rolling meadow in which two little boys chase each other playfully around their mother. This idyllic landscape is periodically blocked out by a full-screen close-up of two young men locked in bodily combat. The lingering breeze of the pastoral scene is contrasted with the labored breathing of the fighters.

With these opposite images in mind, the spectator entering the boxing ring and crossing the slick and slippery formica floor comes face-to-face with the full body of his or her own reflection in the slightly tilted, massive mirror at the opposite end of the ring. With nothing other than this reflection view, the spectator sees both the attacker and the apparent object of the attack on opposite sides within the fighting ring.

CONCLUSION

Soon after the Biennial Exhibition was dismantled, art critic and novelist John Berger was invited by the A. M. Qattan Foundation and Birzeit University to give a workshop with his photographer friend Jean Mohr for young writers and visual artists who were living under the siege. Berger had once written, "We live in a world of suffering in which evil is rampant, a world whose events do not confirm our Being, a world that has to be resisted. It is in this situation that the aesthetic moment offers hope."²⁵

To the young artists who participated in the 2002 Biennial Exhibition, the very act of creating a work of art defied the bleak reality of everyday life in the ghetto where indiscriminate violence was being mercilessly waged against the people they belong to. To the viewers living through the Israeli siege, the artists' works affirmed that they do not stand alone. Through the wide range of artworks created by the youngest generation of Palestinian artists, a whole new horizon seemed to loom beyond the walls being raised around them. Upon the encounter with each new work, the artist's and the viewer's "Being" were for the duration of the encounter reconfirmed. In it, both artist and viewer experienced a certain "aesthetic moment" that was enough to offer what national poet Mahmud Darwish defines as the Palestinian "incurable malady called hope."²⁶

NOTES

1. For a discussion of other art exhibitions held just before or immediately following Israel's spring 2002 "Operation Defensive Shield," see my article, "Border Crossing and the Making of Palestinian Art" in *What Remains to be Seen*, ed. Gordon Hon (London: Multi Exposure, 2004), pp. 22-27.

2. See Omar al-Qattan's "Diary of an Art Competition (Under Siege)" in *Hope and the Aesthetic Moment*, ed. Kamal Boullata (Ramallah: A. M. Qattan Foundation, 2003), pp. 21-27.

3. For the earliest discussion of Palestinian creativity within the context of a ghetto, see my article, "Palestinian Expression Inside a Cultural Ghetto," *Middle East Report*, no. 159 (July-August

1989), pp. 24-28. For a general history of Palestinian art, see my article, "Recouvrer la distance: une etude sur l'art palestinien: 1847-1997" in the exhibit catalog *Artistes palestiniens contemporains* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 1997), pp. 11-41, and my book *Istihdar al-makan: Dirasat fi al-fan al-tasbkili al-filastini al-mu'aser* (The recovery of place: A study of contemporary Palestinian art) (Tunis: ALECSO, 2000) (in Arabic).

4. See, for example, my article, "Artists Re-member Palestine in Beirut," *JPS* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2003), pp. 22-38.

5. Cultural institutions opening up in Ramallah during the 1990s include the Ishtar Theater, al-Kasaba Theater and Cinematheque, the National Conservatory

of Music, Baladna Cultural Center, Carmel Cultural Foundation, Popular Art Center, Manar Cultural Center, and the League of Palestinian Artists' Art Gallery, as well as cultural centers run by foreign missions. For further information, see al-Wasiti Art Center (<http://www.alwasiti.org>); the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center (<http://www.sakakini.org>); al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art (<http://www.almamalfoundation.org>); and the A. M. Qattan Foundation (<http://www.qattanfoundation.org>).

6. The jurors from Palestine were visual artists Nabil 'Anani and Khalil Rabah and anthropologist Rema Hammami, all living in the West Bank; those coming from abroad were the Cuban Gerardo Mosquera and myself.

7. For further information on the 2000 Young Artist of the Year Award, see *New Horizons in Palestinian Art*, edited by Mahmoud Abu Hashhash and Omar al-Qattan (Ramallah: A. M. Qattan Foundation, 2001). For a more comprehensive discussion of art by finalists participating at the A. M. Qattan Foundation's 2002 Biennial Exhibition, see *Hope and the Aesthetic Moment*, edited with an introduction by Kamal Boullata (Ramallah: A. M. Qattan Foundation, 2003).

8. Abu Hashhash and al-Qattan, *New Horizons in Palestinian Art*, p. 5.

9. For 2000, these finalists included Ahlam Shibli (House of Culture in Berlin and Ikon Gallery in Birmingham), Ashraf Fawakhri (Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston), and Ra'eda Sa'adeh (School of Visual Arts in New York, the Contemporary Cultural Center in Barcelona and the IFA Galleries in Bonn, Berlin, and Stuttgart). Among the finalists in the 2003 competition, Steve Sabella was invited to show at Artoteque Gallery in Montreal and Rosalind Nashashibi went on to win the Beck's Futures Award in London and her work was shown at the fiftieth Venice Biennial.

10. See my introduction in *Hope and the Aesthetic Moment*, p. 15.

11. The four finalists whose works are not discussed in this paper are Iman Abu Hmid from Acre (who received the Special Mention Award), Ashraf Fawakhri from Haifa, Hani Zu'rob from Rafah, and 'Abd al-Naser 'Amer from the Jabaliya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. For more information on these artists, see *Hope and*

the Aesthetic Moment, pp. 48–51; 64–75.

12. Exhibition catalog *100 Shabeed—100 Lives*, edited by Adila Laidi (Ramallah: K. Sakakini Cultural Center, n.d.). For a review of the exhibition, see Penny Johnson, "The Eloquence of Objects: The Hundred Martyrs Exhibit," *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, no. 11–12 (Winter–Spring 2001), pp. 90–92. After its inauguration, the exhibition traveled to other Palestinian towns as well as Jordan, Bahrain, and—more recently—Japan.

13. It is interesting to note that the Arabic verb *shabida* meaning "to see" or "to bear witness" belongs to the same root as the noun *shabaada*, meaning "martyrdom." Thus, in the artists' mother tongue, what separates "eyewitness" and "martyr" (*shabed* and *shabeed*) is a matter of vowel intonation.

14. Boullata, *Hope and the Aesthetic Moment*, p. 47.

15. Ra'ed Issa's decision to create a series of ninety-nine small-sized martyr's portraits seems to echo Syrian painter Marwan Qassab Bashi's ninety-nine prints of portraits created over two decades. During the 1999–2001 summers, Issa attended art workshops held at Darat al-Funun in Amman, where Bashi led the workshops and where his prints were on permanent exhibition.

16. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), p. 186.

17. This section was excerpted from *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, no. 20 (January 2004), pp. 73–77.

18. Adrian Searle, *Guardian*, 8 April 2003.

19. For a general view of the growth of Jerusalem during the British Mandate period, see "The Growth of the Western Communities: 1917–1948," in *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and Their Fate in the War*, ed. Salim Tamari (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies and Badil Resource Center, 1999), pp. 32–73.

20. The manufactory, established by the Qassisiyyeh family, was locally known as *al-Ma'mal*. When it closed, Jack Persekian borrowed the name for the foundation that offered Nashashibi an art residency in Jerusalem.

21. For photographs by Khalil Ra'ad (c. 1854–1957), see Walid Khalidi's *After Their Diaspora: A Photographic History*

of the Palestinians, 1876-1948

(Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1984) and Elias Sanbar, *Les Palestiniens: la photographie d'une terre et de son peuple de 1839 a nos jours* (Paris: Editions Hazan, 2004). For further information on the pioneering Jerusalem Arab photographer, see Badr al-Hajj, "Khalil Ra'ad: Jerusalem Photographer," *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, no. 11-12 (Winter-Spring 2001), pp. 34-39.

22. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the minaret, part of the mosque originally built by Sulaiman the Magnificent for the garrison of city guards at Jaffa Gate's citadel, was referred to in popular tourist books as the Tower of David. After Jerusalem was occupied, the Israelis turned the citadel along with the mosque into a museum where visitors may view Israel's version of the city's history. For a commentary see Meron Benvenisti, *City of Stone: The Hidden History of Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 8-9.

23. Boullata, *Hope and the Aesthetic Moment*, p. 59.

24. See Genesis 4:1-17 in the Bible and verses 5:27-31 of the Qur'an. Various versions of the Cain and Abel legend have also been perpetuated in Palestinian folktales. See J. E. Hanauer, *Folk-Lore of the Holy Land: Muslim, Christian and Jew* (London: Sheldon Press, 1935), pp. 240-41.

25. John Berger, *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Vantage Books, 1985), p. 8.

26. In a gathering held at the Sakakini Center, Mahmud Darwish used this expression in his address to the delegation of the International Parliament of Writers who traveled to Ramallah to express their solidarity with the Palestinian people. Arriving a week before Israel's massive invasion of March 2002 and headed by the 1987 Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and 1998 Nobel laureate Jose Saramago, the delegation included Russell Banks (USA), Bei Dao (China), Breyten Breytenbach (South Africa), Vincenzo Consolo (Italy), Juan Goytisolo (Spain), and Christian Salmon (France). See International Parliament of Writers, *Le voyage en Palestine* (Paris: Editions Climats, 2003).

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