

Remembering Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata: 'the most forward-thinking person I knew'

Artist Steve Sabella shares memories of his friend, the painter and historian who channelled the anguish of living in exile through his works. This account is part of our Remembering the Artist series



Kamal Boullata at his studio at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Berlin in 2013 during his fellowship. Steve Sabella

If there is one thing Kamal Boullata often said in his incredibly distinctive voice that continues to echo in my ears, it was “look forward”.

It was a metaphor for his life because he always looked ahead. Though the pain of him losing Palestine, his homeland, was so great, he channelled that anguish through his art and writing and ultimately, everything he produced was about light and transcendence.

I'm pretty sure that was a healing process he practised over the years; a process that led him to becoming an expert on the literature of the soul.

Kamal Boullata's 'Addolcendo 7' (2015). Courtesy of Meem Gallery

Kamal remembered Jerusalem as though the city stood right before his eyes, as if he had never been forced to leave in 1967, owing to the Israeli occupation. The detail with which he spoke about Palestine was astounding and I guess that stemmed from his love for life.

Because he looked to the particulars, he had a wider vantage point. After all, a magnified vision offers better views and those who are enlightened can see the bigger picture.

Kamal's paintings are wholly captivating and once a viewer is pulled in, a hypnotism ensues: his clairvoyant colours float in an endless rhythmic dance, but somehow create a dialogue with one's inner self.

Steve Sabella on Kamal Boullata

His attention to detail was ever-present: while I was visiting him and his wife, Lily, in 2011, at their home in Menton, in the South of France, I heard Kamal burst with laughter on the phone with the celebrated Syrian poet Adonis. They had missed a comma in a poetry book that they were editing, and the typo had altered the text's meaning altogether.

In that moment, I realised I ought to pay attention to the clarity of my own creations and in so doing, I would know when to add, delete or leave something as is.

Kamal Boullata's 'Allah Mahabba (God is Love)' from 1983. Courtesy Meem Gallery

That wasn't the only thing I learnt from Kamal. We met in 2002 during the AM Qattan Foundation's Young Artist of the Year Award (renamed Hassan Hourani Award) for which he was a jurist, and one who believed in the power of youth. His presence was so powerful, and it was easy for others to feel threatened by it.

"You speak of Jerusalem all the time, but I do not see it anywhere in your work," he said sternly of my submitted photographs from my *Identity* series. "Jerusalem is the capital of my imagination," I replied. He smiled. I knew then that I never needed to speak because Kamal understood me.

Steve Sabella talks to 'The National' about the late Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata in our series Remembering the Artist. Clementine Butler-Gallie

Two years later, he asked me to accompany him on a trip of a lifetime to photograph Christian icons, many of which were otherwise unseen and undocumented. For a little over a month, we drove across Palestine, visiting all its churches. It was sublime.

As we navigated our motherland, I saw how hard it was for people of his generation to have been forced into exile, and equally, forced to accept the atrocious reality of occupation. Still, Kamal was never hopeless or helpless. He kept Palestine alive by sharing stories and he did so through writing and painting. After all, does a painter need a brush to paint? Does a poet need a pen to write? That was Kamal, a master storyteller whose stories you never wanted to end.

Kamal Boullata at Rome's Trevi Fountain in 2010. Courtesy Steve Sabella

It would be fair to say that the icons project, which he had been passionately researching, was rooted in his childhood study under artist Khalil Halabi, who was recognised for his paintings of icons. Kamal, however, preferred to paint scenes from his surroundings in the Christian Quarter of the Old City, and as a boy, would sit in front of the Dome of the Rock and sketch endlessly, mesmerised by the architecture, geometric patterns and calligraphy.

This later came to inspire his research on Islamic art in Morocco in the 1990s. The truth is, Jerusalem was always

the seat of his heart and from where he encountered beauty and knowledge.

Kamal Boullata's 'Bilqis 5', 2014. Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

Using the money from the sale of his watercolours and exhibitions in Jerusalem and Amman, Kamal was able to study at Rome's Accademia di Belle Arti in 1961 and at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington a decade later. He was in symbiosis with the Hurufiyya movement through which Arab artists sought to blend Islamic calligraphy and modernity in the name of instilling a visual cultural identity.

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It is mystifying, and if Kamal was anything, he was a mystic because he lived a spiritual life full of creative production. He ventured towards light in his paintings, and once said that the light of Jerusalem is perhaps what he had been always attempting to capture.

However, Kamal's centre, whichever way he turned, was always Jerusalem. It was his light, his beacon, and his compass; it was also his agony and his ecstasy.

Palestine informed his practice, his spirit, and his self, and it was through it that he observed and understood things. The truth is, Palestine was much more than the country of

his birth and where he spent 18 years of his life; it was what inspired him to imagine.

Though he was forced to live in exile, Palestine never left him, and because it was always present in his mind, in his own way, Kamal felt liberated. Art for us was always about liberation, and he was the most liberated person I know. As always, I look forward, my friend.

Kamal Boullata died in 2019 in Berlin. Remembering the Artist is our series that features artists from the region

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