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# The Art of Exile: A Narrative for Social Justice in a Modern World

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# The Art of Exile: A Narrative for Social Justice in a Modern World

## **Abstract**

In this paper I will illustrate what exile art is, how it is influenced on a global platform, and the change it engenders. My research reveals a central theme of globalization in the exchange, mix, and clash of cultures and political views that accompany it as well as the spread of art and ideas. In my research I illustrate how political circumstance, and sense of responsibility to share a political narrative, propelled exile art from a personal to a political narrative. My research illustrates how, as displaced people stripped of a homeland, exiled artists have surfaced as a voice of awareness, social justice, and political change, giving a voice to those who have none. I emphasize how artists in exile communicate the internal struggle of being caught between two cultures. I discuss how the artists' symbolic rendering of the imagined third spaces of exile illustrates the intimate and personal experience of exile. Further, my research seeks to understand the significance of how this artform is received on a global market.

## **Keywords**

Art, Exile, Social Justice, Middle Eastern Art

## **Disciplines**

Art Practice | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

## **Comments**

Globalization Studies Senior Honors Thesis

# The Art of Exile

A narrative for social justice in a modern world.

GS 440: Globalization Studies Capstone

## Abstract:

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Chicago Manual Format for Citations

**Introduction:**

Individuals living in exile have been forced from their homes, suspended between two states of being. Artists in exile navigate celebrating their culture and history while rejecting their country's oppression and the political turmoil that has led to their exile. This an experience almost impossible to comprehend. However, exiled artists have brought us a new medium which we can understand the experience. Through their art, exiled artists visually communicate the internal struggle of being caught between two cultures. While art is a form of personal expression, exile art represents a shared wider political and cultural experience of a community. The experience of exile itself is a form of globalization, as people are forced to leave their nations and immerse themselves in a foreign culture. Without a homeland to return to, those in exile have become global citizens, navigating different cultures and nations. Further, factors operating on a global level in no small part have created exile. The art of exiled artists is exhibited and sold on global markets, shaping global understanding of conflict, culture, social justice, and exile.

As a cultural tool, exile art has the ability to provoke global understanding of cultures and conflict. While media conglomerates and politicians dominate the global narrative of political turmoil, art surfaces as a first-person voice living within the experience- voices untainted by the alternative motives of politicians and media sources. Further, artists have created works of art to promote an understanding of the conflict within their nations, deconstructing stigmas and stereotypes perpetuated by the media. For example, Shirin Neshat created the film "Women without Men" to specifically speak to the West about Iranian history. Exiled Syrian artist Diana Al-Hadid suggests that "art is one of the few reliable loudspeakers that can help one understand what exactly has taken place in a region where memory is constantly interrupted and distorted by

chronic violence”.<sup>1</sup> Exile art also communicates the suffering of a people that needs to be understood to increase both tolerance and promote a better social understanding. Further, exile art is unique from other forms of resistance in how it converges and analyzes the past and the future in the now, so the present can be transformed.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly specific to Palestinian artists, many of whom share this belief.

As exile art provokes global understanding and awareness of social injustice, it also acts as a cultural tool for political resistance. The art of exiles has historically become a weapon in political struggles for liberation. For example, in South Africa local art became heavily influenced by the exile suffered by many native South Africans. The African National Congress (ANC) declared that art should be used as a ‘weapon’ in the political struggle for liberation, showing a recognition of the social responsibility of artistic production for the exiled.<sup>3</sup> Exile art illustrates how culture operates as a form of resistance. Shirin Neshat, an exiled Iranian artist, shared her belief in the necessity for exile art to promote social change. She illustrates how artists are central to the social, political, and cultural discourse in Iran. As a cultural form of resistance, artists hope to their people, acting as the communicators to the outside world.<sup>4</sup> Further, Syrian exiled artists have played a role in Syria’s future. For example, when the Syrian crisis broke out, artists took a role in painting street walls and filming themselves. Their

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<sup>1</sup>Amaya-Akkermans, Arie, “Impossible Possibilities,” *Reorient*, October 31, 2012, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.reorientmag.com/2013/05/hani-zurob-resilience-and-light/>.

<sup>2</sup> Abdeljawad, Abdellatif, “The Aesthetics of Exile,” *Reorient*, July 14, 2014, accessed March 13, 2016, <http://www.reorientmag.com/2014/07/palestinian-art/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>4</sup> “*Art in Exile*,” *TED Talk*, TED, aired May, 2011, transcript, <http://www.euronews.com/2014/06/05/syrian-artists-in-exile-preserve-the-human-spirit/>.

expression of chaos became a critical part of the uprising as an opportunity to speak out against the violence.

In addition to being a cultural weapon, as well as a tool to increase global understanding, exile art has the ability to preserve humanity amongst communities immersed in violent conflict. Artists have illustrated the transformative ability of violence that deconstructs humanity. Artist Wasem Marziky spoke to how violence creates a barbarism that unleashes the worst in humanity, one that can be broken, and transcended, by art.<sup>5</sup> Another exiled Syrian artist, Mahmood Al Daoud, illustrated how art preserves the human spirit amongst all the chaos, violence, and trauma so as to help build a civil society again.<sup>6</sup>

In my research I ask how works of artists in exile have been shaped on a global level and seek to explain why this art form is important, illustrating its impact on social change and what the art communicates about the experience of exile. I have found that exile art cannot escape a political context in that it represents the political, and global forces that have shaped exiled artists' experience. Furthermore, as global citizens without a nation, artists' symbolic depiction of the space of exile reveals the isolating, yet hopeful, experience exile engenders. In addition, when navigating global cultural and political conflict, exiled artists use their work to confront issues head on, engaging their works as cultural tools of resistance. However, exile art does not solely represent global conflict, clash of cultures, or a resistance to factors of globalization. Exile art also has the ability to illustrate the positive, multicultural influences globalization encourages, but only when the cultural and political climate between nations allows it. The global platform

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<sup>5</sup> “*Syrian artists in exile ‘preserve the human spirit’*,” *Le Mag*, EuroNews, aired May 15th, 2014, Transcript, <http://www.euronews.com/2014/06/05/syrian-artists-in-exile-preserve-the-human-spirit/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*,

on which this artform is shared increases global understanding of suffering and conflict.

However, if the work's context is not understood or acknowledged, it risks becoming a form of 'entertainment' appropriated by the West.

My paper is divided into two main sections: 'How art begins with the personal, and becomes political', and 'How art is shaped on a global level.'. Throughout the paper I present artists and artworks from different contexts of exile as examples to help communicate and strengthen my points. The images of exile art are shown at the end of each subsection. I begin my paper with a discussion of the factors operating on a global level that have influenced artist's political narrative: political circumstance and social responsibility. I then assess the global factors that have shaped exile art. These factors include the artist's' experiences without a nation, travel, cultural and political conflict, multiculturalism, and the global market in which exile art is shared.

### **How Art begins with the personal, and becomes political:**

An artist's works is personal by nature. Their artwork is is reflective of their own experiences, as well as an intimate expression of their inner psyche. However, exile art is unique as it also speaks to a collective experience of a wider political narrative. In exile art, artists navigate representing their personal experience of exile, while simultaneously addressing a shared, wider experience within the political climate. In my study of exile art, it is apparent that when these artists began working, their pieces were only representative of personal subjects. This led me to question what directly propelled exiled artists to bring their narratives from a personal into a political context, addressing a collective shared experience. Ultimately, I found that factors

operating on a global level have shaped the artist's narrative journey. Political circumstance and a feeling of social responsibility have forced artists to imbue their work with a political context.

### **A: Propelled by political circumstance**

To answer the question of how and why this transition occurs, one must first understand the political and global forces that lead to exile. Exiled artists are separated from their homes by force of political circumstance, which is in no small part shaped by the global environment and global issues. For example, in many cases artists flee their countries due to globalized conflicts such as war, economic crisis, and political violence. Artists are also forced by circumstances such as a fear of execution and internal political turmoil. Artists travel to other nations where their freedoms or safety can be assured. This is true of both artists who have chosen to leave and artists who have been forcibly exiled.

#### **i. When personal experience is political turmoil**

This reality of the factors that create exile has led me to believe in the inevitability of exile art to be political. Because an artist's work reflects their personal experience, when their lives becomes defined by the shared, political turmoil, their artwork does as well. I believe that by living in exile, forced from your nation, an artist's work is political by definition. Thus, in illustrating their own experiences as 'artists in exile', politics cannot be separated from the artists' personal rhetoric.

Two Syrian artists, Rabee Kiwan and Alice Al-Khatib, show how, as exiled artists, their work cannot be separated from a political context as political turmoil has shaped their experience and therefore their artistic narrative.



Rabee Kiwan is an artist born in Sweida, near Daraa, where protests against the regime broke out in 2011. In his story, we see how the politics within his homeland directly propelled his work in a political direction. Now living in Beirut, Kiwan illustrated the reasons for the significant shift of his painting style. In an interview with *Le Mag* he spoke to how, before the conflict, his works were about his own psychological issues or more general societal problems. However, he noted how the outbreak of political violence and protests directly and profoundly changed his painting style. In the interview he said, “Now [my art] is more specific, sometimes relating to the events themselves and sometimes to the consequences of the events on me, people, our surroundings and the whole situation we are living in.”<sup>7</sup> His negotiation between external influences and their personal impact on human life speak to the political context exile artists engender in their experience.

Alice Al-Khatib, also a Syrian artist, was born in Damascus. Like Kiwan, political turmoil within Syria propelled her work from a personal narrative to political subject matter. In an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique* she said that before the war her work was abstract. She painted nature, fish, and other aquatic animals. But after the revolution her work transitioned into representing darker, symbolic images of death, turmoil, and repression. She said, “[my work] showed all the bad effects we have deep inside us, and the mental problems we have accumulated over the years.”<sup>8</sup> Her work *The Last Supper* focuses on death, a subject which defines the harsh political reality of the struggle within Syria. (Figure 1) The artwork is a bronze table shaped like a coffin, depicting children's' hands pushing from under. The suggested life

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<sup>7</sup> “Syrian artists in exile.”

<sup>8</sup> Robson, Angela, “Syria’s exiled artists,” *Le Monde Diplomatique: English Edition*, August 8, 2014, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://mondediplo.com/2014/08/04syria>.

behind the coffin lid implies an active resistance as the object's weight presses heavily on the hands. In describing the work Al-Khatib said, "It's a rejection of death — the hands are pushing the tomb away."<sup>9</sup>

While Al-Khatib and Kiwan are both Syrian exiled artists, the political narrative that pervades their subject matter is rendered in very different ways. I believe it is important to note their use of the collective 'we' and 'us' when speaking to their transition into political artwork. While they are depicting their own intimate experiences, their use of the collective pronouns reflects the universality of shared political experience inherent to exile art. Thus, the movement from the personal to the political is also paralleled by a transition from the personal to the collective. Therefore, as exile art is inherently political it also speaks to the shared collective experience of a group of people.

Hani Zurob is a widely known contemporary exile artist in Palestine. His experience as a Palestinian man has led him to produce art that, as he described, "disintegrates the boundaries between 'political matters and private stories'."<sup>10</sup> He too addresses how exile art cannot be separated from its political context. Zurob emphasizes how the personal and political is one and the same within exile art, as a shared political situation speaks for the individual, as well as collective, experiences of Palestinians.

M. Al Shammarey and Shirin Neshat are two additional Middle Eastern artists whose artwork became imbued with political significance when their lives were shaped by political circumstances. Shirin Neshat admitted that her art did not begin with political images. Like many

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>10</sup> Davis, Michelle, "Resilience and Light," *Reorient*, May 13, 2013, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.reorientmag.com/2013/05/hani-zurob-resilience-and-light/>.

exiled artists, she notes that, “in facing my own personal dilemmas and questions, I become immersed in the study of the Islamic Revolution”<sup>11</sup> M. Al Shammarey is an exiled Iraqi artist. In addressing his involvement in the exhibition “Iraqi Artists in Exile”, he says, “it would be impossible to call yourself an artist if there is no reference to the war in your work. The war is the time you are living in.”<sup>12</sup> In this quote he emphasizes the role artists play in illustrating their reality. In this way, he argues that by not imbuing your work with the political reality of your experience, you are not accurately representing exile.

## **ii. inherent political subjectivity**

In addition to the understanding that art becomes political when personal experience is defined by political turmoil, various exhibitions, historians, and online publications argue that there is an inherent political subjectivity to exile art. Their arguments reside in the idea that art develops alongside the historical transformations and conflicts of a nation. For example, *Reorient*, a Middle Eastern arts and culture magazine, addressed the inevitability for exile art to be political, arguing:

“In exploring the connection between Palestinian art and its politics, one wonders whether it is possible to ‘escape’ the language of politics. In doing so, it is important to look at the historical and cultural transformations endured by the Palestinians to date, particularly the state of exile created as a result of the Nakba in 1948.”<sup>13</sup>

This excerpt spoke specifically to exiled artists in Palestine. The article emphasizes how the political turmoil arising from Nakba created a significant exiled population that continues to affect a portion of the Palestinian people. The article highlights how art has developed alongside

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<sup>11</sup> “Art in Exile.”

<sup>12</sup> “Iraqi Artists in Exile,” Stanton Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed March 1, 2016, transcript, <http://stationmuseum.com/index.php/exhibitions/166-iraqi-artists-in-exile>.

<sup>13</sup> Abdeljawad, “The Aesthetics of Exile.”

the Palestinian population's commemoration of the expulsion of thousands of its people, their suffering, and political struggle for liberation. Therefore, as art has evolved amidst a history of political frustration, exile art and politics have become synonymous with each other.

Gregory Buchakjian, author of *War and Other Impossible Possibilities*, is a Lebanese artist and art historian. Within his work, Buchakjian argues that the evolution of contemporary art in the Arab World has been shaped by its political history. While examining histories implications for the production and discourse of art in the Arab world, the publication looks to understand the changes in Arab societies through a historical analysis of its artworks.<sup>14</sup> In his interview with Reorient Buchakjian notes, "The number of Arab conflicts today largely surpass the number of Arab countries"<sup>15</sup> That being said, he argues that one cannot remove politics, or its violent history, from the discussion of contemporary Arab art that has influenced and inspired its very production. I believe his discussion speaks to the art of exile. Like the Middle East, art has developed alongside the experiences of exile. Furthermore, as both the Middle East and experience of exile are shaped by global influences and political factors, from Buchakjian's analysis we see how, like the Middle East, the art of exile embodies the political contexts that have shaped it.

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<sup>14</sup> "Gregory Buchakjian," accessed March 20, 2016, <http://www.buchakjian.net/publication/war-other-impossible-possibilities/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Amaya-Akkermans, "Impossible Possibilities."



Figure 1: Alice Al-Khatib, *The Last Supper*, 2014, Bronze, Samer Kozah Gallery, Beirut.

## **B: The Social Responsibility to have a political narrative**

In addition to the understanding that political context is inherent to exile art, other artists emphasized a social responsibility they feel to imbue their work with a political narrative. I found this understanding of responsibility comes from a belief in art's ability to influence global understanding on the multinational platform on which artwork is shared and displayed today.

Doris Salcedo is a Colombian sculptor who, in an interview with Reorient Magazine, spoke to her feelings of the importance of articulating politics and history in her art, saying,

“Man has the need to draw from the past criteria to act in the present. When man does not understand the past, his own history, he is deprived of reference points, and finds himself suspended between a past that is perceived as an accumulation of incomprehensible events, and a future that he cannot process. Therefore it seems like an abyss in front of him. The past is the only place where we can find both our origins and destiny”<sup>16</sup>

In her work, Salcedo spent her career imbuing her art with the political violence of Colombia.

Her statement not only speaks to the importance of Colombians understanding their own history, but the way her artwork encourages global consciousness regarding the experience of Colombians. In her work *A Flor de Piel*, Salcedo's work focuses on the fragility of human life, commemorating those who have been affected by violence. (Figure 2).

Shirin Neshat, an Iranian female artists living in exile, believes that art is a cultural weapon that can act as a form of resistance and a necessary journalistic tool to call individuals into action. She emphasizes how social responsibility motivated her personal narrative to address the collective repression of women in Iran. In a Ted Talk about producing artwork in exile she says, “Politics doesn't seem to escape people like me. Every Iranian artist, in one form or

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid,.

another, is political”.<sup>17</sup> She continues by describing how this is in part because politics has defined Iranian artists’ lives as they are surrounded by censorship.

Further, Rotorient magazine addressed how Palestinian artists are engaging politics within their work as a form of liberation. An article titled, “The Aesthetics of Exile” states, “The condition of exile-- to put it-- broadly is one of the particular political factors that has influenced Palestinian artists over the years, as well as their choice of subject matter. In this context, art has become perhaps, the perfect medium for the idea of liberation”<sup>18</sup> Thus, art is not only political, but shares in the responsibility of artists to harness their art as a diplomatic, liberating tool of resistance. Further, the article continues by drawing on Palestinian artists who are working under severe socio political circumstances. The work highlights how they are making significant contributions in imbuing their art with political meaning, by giving it a ‘political function’.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Art in Exile.”

<sup>18</sup> Abdeljawad, “The Aesthetics of Exile.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,



Figure 2: Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel*, 1958, Rose Petals and Thread, 372.9 x 233.8 cm., Guggenheim Museum, New York.

### **How exile art is shaped on a Global Level:**

In his “Reflections on Exile”, Edward Said, a Palestinian literary theoretician, wrote, “[Exile] is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.”<sup>20</sup> Exile art is unique from other art forms because of how it is global in nature, arising from forced travel among cultures and nations. Within this global interaction, those in exile are forced to constantly navigate two spaces of nationality and culture: their homeland and the place of exile. This experience is also accompanied by the division of self, identity, and family, an experience Said described as ‘the unhealable rift’.

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, reviewed by Mona N. Mikhail (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 175



Within exile, one is no longer defined by one nation, but forced onto a global platform, interacting and being affected by different territories. One is no longer a citizen of one's homeland, but a global citizen. The artwork of exile visually illustrates the outcomes of this painful global experience. In artists' literal and symbolic representations of nations, cultures, boundaries, and space, artists communicate both the emotional, intimate experience of exile, as well as its global influences.

**A: Understanding the “Space of Exile” in art:**

In exile art, it is important to consider the location at which the artwork is being produced, in addition to the culture and homeland from where the artist is drawing their narrative. I found many exiled artists have attempted to create the space of exile in their work. As exile eliminates the possibility of a shared space between you and your homeland, artists have painted, built, or photographed the space of exile in a new, imagined space in which they reside. How this space is depicted allows us to better understand the intimate experience of exile.

Some artists have illustrated exile as a place of non-existence or a suspended state of being, while others use their art to create imagined harmony between their two worlds. In these artworks we see how exile has been depicted as both an experience of isolation and loss, as well as hope. The diverse illustrations of the space of exile speak to the complicated nature of the experience.

Hani Zurob paints his existence in exile as living among constant boundaries and a division of spaces. However, his depiction of the space of exile also engages an underlying narrative of hope. Zurob is currently living in France after being exiled from Jerusalem where his

family still resides. He is one of Palestine's most well known and respected contemporary artists as his art has been consumed on a global level, exhibited both abroad and at home.

His series *Flying Lessons / Waiting* was inspired by a simple, yet heavily weighted, question posed by his son: "daddy, why can't you come home with us to Jerusalem?"<sup>21</sup> (Figure 3) As illustrated by Reorient magazine, "the series looks at the inability for his son to grasp the politics behind his father's absence from their home in Jerusalem, and the innocent rationality employed in his quest to remedy the absence."<sup>22</sup> This work demonstrates that while exile creates global modes of travel, it simultaneously eliminates the possibility of the shared spaces.

Central to Zurob's rendition of his space of exile is his focus on the idea of transportation. In his comments on the exhibit, Zurob speaks to his son's fixation on transportation toys, presenting them as locomotive solutions to their division. For example, in *Flying Lesson #06* we see his son sitting a tricycle, while in *Flying Lesson #12* he rides on a playground pony. (Figure 4, and 5) Both paintings show his son looking as though he is attempting to surmount their division, symbolically depicted by a wall.

Through the use of oil, acrylic paint, and other mediums, the works in Zurob's series depict the space of exile as composed of three worlds. The first world is that of his exile, who appears in the paintings through his son. The second concerns Zurob's son Qoudsi, consisting of Qoudsi's emotions and desires in his interaction with the space of the painting. The third world represents the space of the homeland, illustrated through the thick walls and multilayered

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<sup>21</sup> "Flying Lesson & Waiting, series 2009-ongoing," accessed March 5, 2016. <http://www.hanizurob.com/flying-lesson-&-waiting.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, "Resilience and Light."

backgrounds which, as Zurob notes, are “traces of the complex life that does not enable Qoudsi and me to meet.”<sup>23</sup> These barriers are represented with harsh geometric lines of severe linearity.

However, I found his work to employ a narrative of hope by depicting a space where he, his son, and his homeland exist together in an imagined harmony. In Flying Lesson #06 the task of his son overcoming the boundary seems insurmountable as his tricycle appears frivolous in comparison to the threatening height of the wall. However, in Flying Lesson #12 the son is in the process of flying over the wall on his toy, looking back over his shoulder towards the viewer, as if to say goodbye. This stark contrast between insurmountable division and hopeful fantasy represents the characterising binary of Zurob’s series and his existence in exile. While his works illustrate division, his conceptual space of art creates harmony between the three worlds, communicating an underlying message of hope. Zurob says, “Yet, it is in my construction of a virtual world where a space for such a meeting occurs.”<sup>24</sup>

Like Zurob, Steve Sabella renders the space of exile as a place of violent division, but again, one that is not without hope. Born in Jerusalem and currently living in exile in Berlin, Sabella’s medium of expression is photography. He has been described as an “[artist] who [is] reclaiming imagination and creating against an occupation that has been physically brutal and corrosive, locally and globally, and hegemonic in discourse and images.”<sup>25</sup> In Steve Sabella’s series *In Exile* he constructed and imposed melancholy images of his existence in exile. Like Zurob’s paintings, Sabella’s images are imbued with rigidity, linearity, as well as images of boundaries. From a distance, the works appear to be only abstract shapes, but upon closer look

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<sup>23</sup> “Flying Lesson & Waiting, series 2009-ongoing,”

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>25</sup> Najat Rahman, *In the Wake of the Poetic: Palestinian Artists After Darwish* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015, 26.

you see they are repeated and proliferated images of housing, walls, and apartment buildings in dark, somber colors. This is clearly illustrated in *In Exile 1* and *In Exile 2*. (Figure 6, and 7). The layered images of this local landscape also consist of violent metal shapes and razors of barbed wire. There is no focal point in the images of the series, and in addition, his imagery is charged with symbolic details. In an interview for the *Independence* Exhibition Catalogue of the Meem Gallery in Dubai, Sabella described the works as representative of his internal physique and state of mind at the time.<sup>26</sup> I believe the fragmented nature of the images reflect the fragmented aspects of his emotions. Perhaps the geometric linearity and layered organization of the images symbolically represent his internal struggle to bring order to the chaos exile creates. As noted in the book, *In the Wake of the Poetic*, “Sabella once proclaimed, ‘I stitch my wounds with barbed wire.’ The “reconstitution” of self is paradoxically one of violent suturing that has not been able to rid reality of barbed wires, at home or in exile, but remains liberatory.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite the division and isolation of Sabella’s work, his representation of light creates a suggestion of hope within his depiction of his mind's existence in exile. From behind the thick walls, barbed wire, and windows, emanates a bright light, starkly contrasting with the dark hues of the images. They reflect how, despite the boundaries of exile, exists the resilience of individuals and breakthrough against limitations.

Two years after *In Exile*, Sabella created a more hopeful construction of the space of exile. His series *In Transition* captures blurred, euphoric images of trees from multiple perspectives. (Figure 8). In contrast to the fixed geometry of *In Exile*, Sabella’s *In Transition*

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<sup>26</sup> Meem Gallery, *Steve Sabella: Independance Exhibition* (Dubai: Publications Department of Meem with Art Advisory Associates Ltd., 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Rahman, *In the Wake of the Poetic*, 27.

conveys a dancing sense of motion, coupled with a vibrant use of light. The extended branches of the trees in motion reflect Sabella's hopeful reach beyond the limitations of exile. Together these works represent a progressive narrative of his experience, the earlier depicting isolation and division and the latter illustrating a natural defiance.

Unlike Zurob and Sabella, Mary Tuma did not use her art to illustrate dismal depictions of boundaries or the division exile induces. Instead she creates an alternative, imagined, and hopeful third space of exile. Mary Tuma is a Palestinian artist and professor who is now working in the United States. Her work *Homes for the Disembodied* is a suspended sculpture of 45 meters of black chiffon that create five connected dresses of a style similar to those worn by traditional Palestinian women. (Figure 9). The work was created for an exhibition in East Jerusalem. It is meant to be a memorial for exiled and displaced peoples from Jerusalem who did not have the opportunity to return to their homeland before dying. Addressing her work in an interview with the Institute for Middle East Understanding, she says, "I created these dress forms so that those who couldn't go back would have a place to dwell when they eventually returned."<sup>28</sup>

As we can see, the notion of transportation and returning are themes consistent throughout many exile works. Tuma's art binds people both within and outside Palestine, creating a place for them to break the divide of exile between themselves and their homeland. In her website Tuma addresses the importance of using old fabrics and found objects in her work to evoke a feeling of loss and memory. She writes,

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<sup>28</sup> "Mary Tuma: Artist and Professor," *Institute for Middle East Understanding*, November 1, 2013, accessed March, 2016, <http://imeu.org/article/mary-tuma-artist-and-professor>.

“I am interested in the sorting of images from the past, images that are like shadows or ghosts, something not quite whole and no longer real, but still of great influence and power.”<sup>29</sup>

Symbolically, the dresses are linked by one piece of fabric, mirroring the misfortune of the shared experiences of Palestinian people. Further, the dresses face one direction in a line as if they are waiting for something together.<sup>30</sup> I also found it significant that the dresses are sheer and transparent, not solid. This possibly references the idea that this space for them to return is but a dream and not real.

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<sup>29</sup> “Artist’s Statement,” Mary Tuma, accessed March, 2016, <http://marytuma.com/artiststatement.html>.

<sup>30</sup> “Mary Tuma: Homes for the Disembodied,” Artists Against Apartheid, accessed March, 2016, <http://www.artistsagainstapartheid.org/?p=1886>



Figure 3: Hani Zurob, *Flying Lesson #01 (diptych)*, 2009, Acrylic, Pigments, Tar and Oil on Canvas, 240x100cm.,

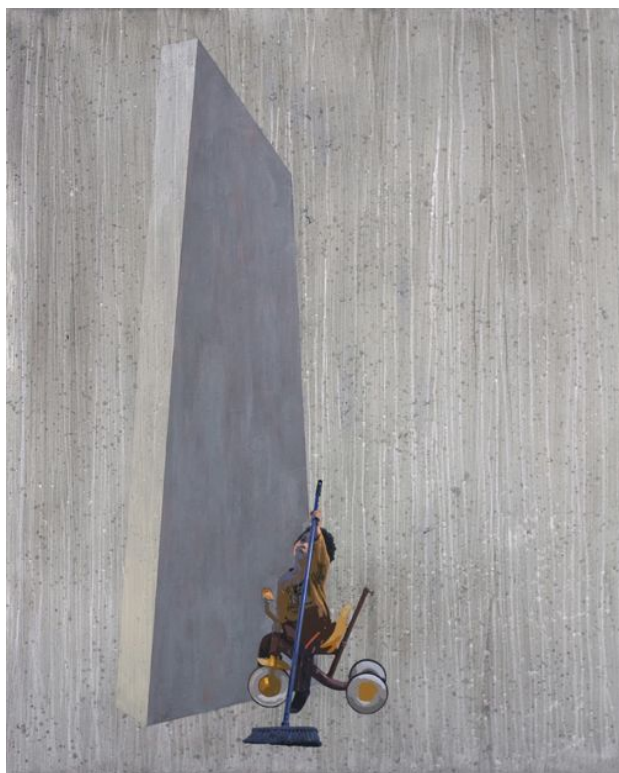


Figure 4: Hani Zurob, *Flying Lesson #06*, 2010, Acrylic and Pigments on Canvas, 200x160cm.,

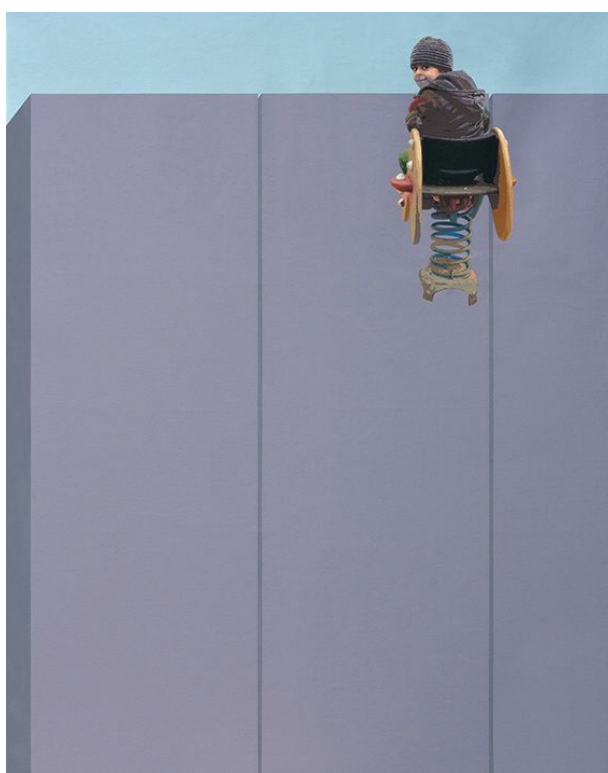


Figure 5: Hani Zurob, *Flying Lesson #12*, 2013, Acrylic and pigments on canvas, 200x160cm.,



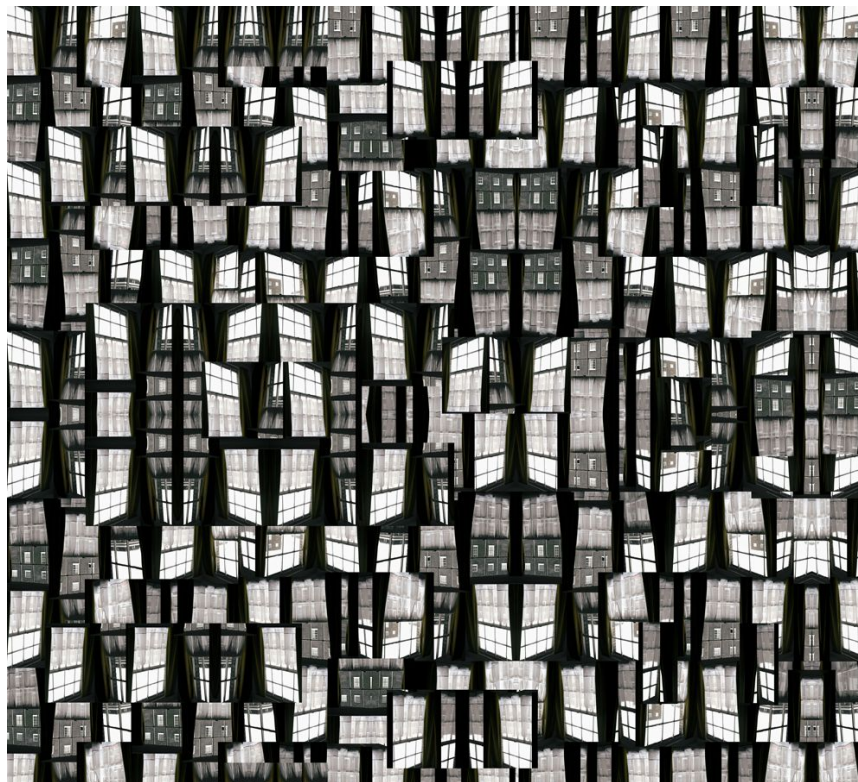


Figure 6: Steve Sabella, *In Exile 1*, 2008, Lambda prints on aluminum, 136x125 cm.,

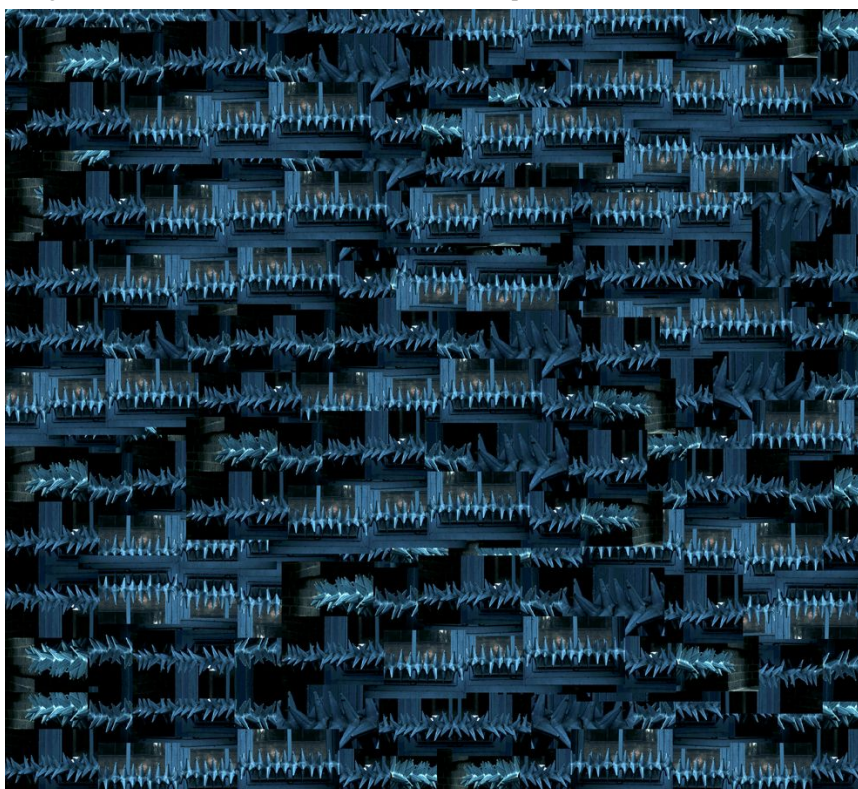


Figure 7: Steve Sabella, *In Exile 2*, 2008, Lambda prints on aluminum, 136x125 cm.,



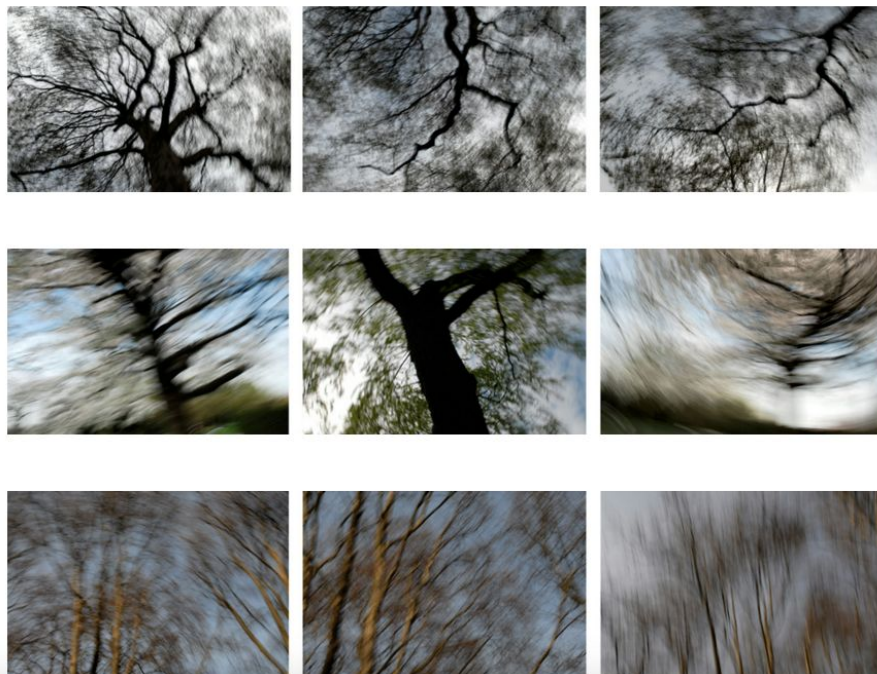


Figure 8: Steve Sabella, *In Transition*, 2010, Lambda prints on diasec 3.5cm aluminum box edge, 205x44 cm.,



Figure 9: Mary Tuma, *Homes for the Disembodied*, 2000, remade 2003, Fabric, fallen trees, thread, stones, wire, 10'x25'x7 (dimensions variable),.

## **B: Navigating two conflicting cultures**

As I have previously discussed, exile art is both political and global in nature. Through the travel exile engenders, cultures often come into conflict with one another. Living away from their countries, those in exile have experienced extreme hostility, xenophobia, and stigma against them. Many artists face marginalization and resistance from within their places of exile, discriminated against because of the conflict or the political turmoil from which they came. Within the frame of global conflict, I was curious to understand how the artwork of those in exile has been affected by stigma held against them in their place of exile.

I found this global, cultural, and political conflict particularly relevant to exiled Iraqi artists living in America. Their artistic narrative has been significantly affected by an immersion in American politics. The Iraqi artists I have researched represent the global reality that exile art is constantly being molded, and shifted by the different nations from which its' artists draw their experiences.

The United States, and Western countries in general, exist on a platform where their view of, and reaction to, 'Islamic Terrorism' is widely known. The majority of the discourse of the The War on Terror, radical groups, and Islam is dictated by white, western politicians and media sources. Furthermore, the United States 2016 election has shown that islamophobia is still on the rise. However, little is known about the Arab voice in reaction to the political turmoil and islamophobia, both abroad and in the West. The director of the Iraqi artists in exile exhibition in Houston, Texas wrote, "As a result of the U.S. war and occupation, the culture of Iraq has been severely damaged, if not virtually destroyed."<sup>31</sup> However, exile art has become a political tool for Iraqi artists to globally voice their frustration, both a form of resistance and cultural liberation.

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<sup>31</sup> "Iraqi Artists in Exile."

Exiled artists Abdel-Karim Khalil, Faisal Laibi Sahi, and Ayad Alkadhi have been labeled by the Station Museum of Contemporary Art as being some of the “few remaining bearers of Iraqi culture who have survived the American onslaught.”<sup>32</sup> Their artworks are emblematic of the way many exiled artists navigate conflicting cultures and address political issues.

The artwork of Abdel-Karim Khalil, and Faisal Laibi Sahi confronts the viewer with the violent reality of the political violence the Iraqi people experience under the US military. Specifically, their work focuses on the human suffering of Iraqi individuals due to the United States’ economic and political interference. Each artist exercises a political narrative of a specific conflict or human rights violation. For example, Khalil’s sculptures work to expose the Abu Ghraib torture scandal perpetuated by the US government that caused international outrage. In *We are Living in an American Democracy*, Khalil makes a visual attempt to personify the suffering of Iraqi people. (Figure 10). The name of the piece contrasts sharply with the sculpture of a hooded, naked, and bound man. The sculpture’s title, coupled with the work’s subject matter, stands as a criticism, effectively challenging the patriotic idea of American democracy as the international standard to which justice and democracy is held. Significantly, Khalil’s sculptures are not reminiscent of traditional Middle Eastern sculpture, but rendered in the Italian Renaissance style with his themes of torture depicted in terms of classical aesthetics. The marble, ‘David’-like portrayal illustrates the global nature of exile art in how it reflects multicultural influences. The work implicates the figure in the Western, artistic cultural frame, giving his narrative a tangible universality.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid,.

While Khalil's work focused on the Abu Ghraib torture, Faisal Laibi Sahi addresses the 1990 to 2003 UN embargo enforced by the US military blockade that significantly hurt Iraq's economy. His series *War*, and *The Face* focuses on the death, poverty, and starvation that resulted from the embargo. (Figures 11, and 12). The characters' faces are highly individualized with solemn or distorted expressions to communicate their suffering. The figures' temperament and character illustrate Sahi's profound understanding of humanity.<sup>33</sup> The figures are heart-wrenching, suggesting that the twisted, and distorted expressions are the only means of truly expressing the anguish of those victim to the embargo.

In illustrating conflict with the United States, I have found several Iraqi artists incorporating their contemporary productions with elements of their traditional medium and culture. For example, Ayad Alkadhi's mixed media works on Arabic newspaper and canvas employ both Middle Eastern dress and language in his criticism towards imperial dominance, and the United State's war for oil. Like Khalil's sculptures, Alkadhi's work also addresses the Abu Ghraib torture. In his series *I am Baghdad*, Alkadhi combined a series of portraits with testimony from citizens of Baghdad expressing their feelings about the US occupation of Iraq. (Figure 13, and 14). His work illustrates exile art's ability to represent the stifled voices of the oppressed and marginalized. His work allows Iranians to share their own voices, literally marking his works with their words. In an interview addressing the calligraphy he said,

“The portraits are all tightly shot and so close-up that you have no choice but to listen to what they have to tell you. The faces are the same because they are united in nationality and live under the same umbrella of circumstances. Yet

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<sup>33</sup> “Iraqi Artists in Exile: Faisal Laibi Sahi,” Station Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed February 2016, <http://stationmuseum.com/index.php/exhibitions/19-exhibitions/172-iraqi-artists-in-exile-faisal-laibi-sahi>

each is representative of different constituents of Baghdad's social and political system..”<sup>34</sup>

In his exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad, Alkadhi carries these voices with him, giving viewers ‘no choice but to listen what they have to tell you.’

Abdel-Karim Khalil, Faisal Laibi Sahi, and Ayad Alkadhi serve as examples of the ways in which exiled artists navigate cultural conflict and political issues while living in exile in a nation at conflict with their own. As exemplified by these artists, I found that exiled artists directly engaged art with the political issues of their places of exile. The exiled artists' works address a narrative of global conflict by engaging their art as a cultural tool to increase global understanding. Exiled artists use their works to create a platform for voices of resistance and political discourse. Further, Khalil, Sahi, and Alkadhi's works illustrate how exile art is affected by the country in which it's being produced. Rather than shying away from conflict, exiled artists addressed the issues head on. I found that living in the United States encouraged Iraqi artists to charge their work with representations of voices of the victim of US politics. Iraqi artists' artistic survival, and thriving exhibitions in the United States art scene, demonstrate the power exile art has in engaging viewers in a global political discourse and awareness. By voicing their frustrations, Abdel-Karim Khalil, Faisal Laibi Sahi, and Ayad Alkadhi's not only brought awareness to the injustice exercised by the US military and the suffering of the Iraqi people but combat the stigma and xenophobia held against their culture.

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<sup>34</sup> “Iraqi Artists in Exile: Ayad Alkadhi.” Station Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed February 2016, <http://stationmuseum.com/index.php/exhibitions/19-exhibitions/172-iraqi-artists-in-exile-faisal-laibi-sahi>.



Figure 10: Abdel-Karim Khalil, *We are Living in an American Democracy*, 2004, Marble, 16" x 6" x 9", Staton Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston.





Figure 11: Faisel Laibi Sahi, (from the series) *War*, 1972-1999, Ink and graphite on paper, Dimensions vary, Staton Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston.

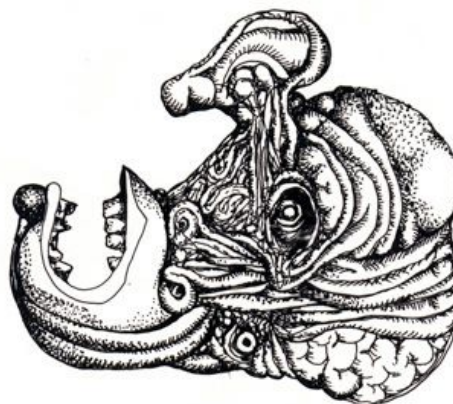


Figure 12: Faisel Laibi Sahi, (from the series) *The Face*, Ink and graphite on paper, Dimensions vary, Staton Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston.



Figure 13: Ayad Alkadhi, *I am Baghdad V*, 2008, acrylic, charcoal and marker pen on Arabic newspaper on canvas, 48”x48”, Staton Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston.



Figure 14: Ayad Alkadhi, *I am Baghdad I*, 2008, acrylic, charcoal and marker pen on Arabic newspaper on canvas, 48”x48”, Staton Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston.

### **C: The possibility for global shared space of two cultures**

The previous works of artists such as Sabella and Zurob can be characterized by representations of the exiled ‘space’ as an existence of isolation or a suspended state of being. Exiled Iraqi artists illustrated their exile in the United States as defined by political conflict, anger, and injustice. In my research I found that this anger and criticism of the United States, was a phenomenon among exiled artists from the Middle East living in the West. This made me question where there is room for multiculturalism. Can art create harmony between the two cultures while still maintaining a political narrative, or does exile art by definition represent cultures in conflict with one another? One cannot answer this question with simply a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. With regards to exiled Middle Eastern artists living in the United States, I could not find any largely consumed or publicized art that celebrates harmony between the two. This is because, as I previously illustrated, exile art is inherently political. Because the political relationship between the United States and the Middle East is, to a significant extent, characterized by conflict and war, exile art mirrors that relationship. That is not to say that there is no art that celebrates coexistence and harmony between the two cultures. I did find Middle Eastern artists that celebrated cultural harmony and multiculturalism with the west including Ali Hassoun, a Lebanese artist living in Italy. “Ali Hassoun’s works seem to act as a pole of attraction for various cultures, which merge to create a new, richer culture. (Figure 15). In opposition to the clash of civilizations, Hassoun wants to highlight the idea of “humanity”; a universal and spiritual feature that is common to all folks.”<sup>35</sup> His works seem to embody globalization, celebrating the multicultural interactions it encourages. However, Ali Hassoun,

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<sup>35</sup> “Ali Hassoun Biography,” Ali Hassoun, accessed February 2016, <http://stationmuseum.com/index.php/exhibitions/19-exhibitions/172-iraqi-artists-in-exile-faisel-l-ai-bi-sahi>.



and other artists who represented a symbiotic relationship between the west and the Middle East, did not define themselves as ‘exiled artists’ and their work did not come from a concrete political context.

However, exile art does not inherently represent cultures in conflict with one another. Artists who have not found significant conflict between their homeland, and place of exile have demonstrated the positive global influence their art experienced. The artwork of exiled artist Zhang Hongtu serves as an example of how exile can create a platform for multiculturalism. His work combines traditional Chinese landscape and calligraphy painting traditions with European Impressionist influences. He is said to be a role model among exiled Chinese artists as he chose to leave China during the cultural revolution as it limited his artistic production through control and censorship. When asked what information Hongtu wanted his viewers to take from his works, he responded, “I want to propose some questions related to the multicultural world we live in. For example, I want to pose the questions: What is traditional Chinese painting what is western painting? What are the boundaries between them?”<sup>36</sup> In *Anonymous (Song Dynasty)- van Gogh*, of his series *Recreating Shanshui Painting Project*, Hongtu combines the methods of Van Gogh and Cezanne in a reproduction of the *shanshui* paintings of ancient Chinese masters. (Figure 16). For example, he uses the brushstrokes and colors of Van Gogh to alter the lines and dots of traditional *shanshui*. Zhang Hongtu’s experience of exile in New York allowed for greater artistic expression and multicultural pursuits. When addressing the influence his place of exile, New York, Hongtu said, “Living in New York really gives me the advantage to get in

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<sup>36</sup> Wang Ying and Yan Sun, *Reinventing Tradition in a New World* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 2004), 34.

touch with different cultures. The diversity of the culture in New York is the result of globalization. My exposure to this will constantly stimulate my creation”.<sup>37</sup>



Figure 15: Hassoun, Ali, *The Rebirth of Venus*, 2008, Oil on canvas, 170x220cm,.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.,37.



Figure 16: Hassoun, Ali, *The Rebirth of Venus*, 2008, Oil on canvas, 170x220cm,.

**D: How do artists in exile, with blurred and suspended states of being, create art that has a universal appeal in its personal and political national experiences?**

In my research I found that exile art is a growing genre of artwork that is being exhibited all over the world. Not only is it increasingly widely consumed, but it is being shared and publicised on a global scale. While some exiled artists are banned from exhibiting their works at home, such as Zhang Hongtu, almost all of the artists from whose artworks and interviews I have drawn have exhibited works across the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. I believe this growth in exile art can, in part, be credited to the increasing awareness and media attention refugees and exiles have received. Consistent with this form of art are themes of loss, sadness, and hope, all inherent to the experience of exile. Exile art provokes emotional responses, now increasingly being felt all over the world as the genre grows. It is heart-wrenching and

fascinating. The Stanton Museum for Contemporary art that exhibited a show of Iraqi artists in exile said, “their survival in western consumption reveals the impactfulness and universality of their work.”<sup>38</sup>

However, I believe another reason why exile art has become so popular is that, dangerously, it also has become in part ‘entertaining’. I say dangerous with regards to ‘entertainment’ because of the weight and meaning behind an artwork's production and consumption that is lost when the art becomes a form of entertainment. In a Ted talk, Shirin Neshat illustrated the risks of this art as entertainment saying, “I envy the West for their freedom of expression. For the fact that they can distance themselves from the questions of politics. From the fact that they are only serving one audience, mainly the Western culture. But also, I worry about the West, because often in this country, in this Western world that we have, culture risks being a form of entertainment.”<sup>39</sup>

These artists have exhibited all over the world, sharing their stories, and surfacing a narrative that provokes discussion. As I noted, within the West in particular, part of the reason why exile art is becoming more important is the rise in media attention drawn to the exile and refugee crisis today. The news is saturated with images of crisis, torment, and war. It is important to understand that this art does not serve the same motivation of consumer consumption as does the media, such as shock value and entertainment. Therefore, I believe for the artistic integrity of the work to be maintained, consumers must understand the significance and context of what exile is. Exile art originates from the personal, and as the personal

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<sup>38</sup> “Iraqi Artists in Exile” Station Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed February 2016, <http://stationmuseum.com/index.php/exhibitions/166-iraqi-artists-in-exile>.

<sup>39</sup> “Art in Exile.”

experience becomes political, the art transcends into wider collective narrative and shared experience. The artform itself is distinctive as it is not meant for entertainment, but personal expression, vehicles for change, political narrative, etc.

However, within the international art world, exiled artists who emphasize the importance of increasing global understanding through their art illustrate their struggle in achieving universality. How can artists avoid the esoteric, and imbue their art with allegory, while maintaining universality? Furthermore, how can artists simultaneously avoid cliches and kitsch in a universal narrative? These questions represent an internal struggle among artists who believe in their social responsibility to communicate the messages and realities their art carries. Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, and Palestinian artist Steve Sabella, both illustrate this difficulty. In a short documentary, Steve Sabella, spoke to how many artists from Palestine tend to create their art with symbiotics, infusing the substance of their work with symbols from their region.<sup>40</sup> However, Sabella emphasizes that in doing so he believes they are creating a narrative that is only understood by people within that cultural context. Sabella said that he tries to use objects that have a universal understanding, but with that comes the difficulty of avoiding cliches and kitsch. He emphasized his frustration with the elements so common in Palestinian art that they have become their own cliches, such as the separation wall and barbed wire. However, he said that he could not avoid using them within his works because they are part of his experience. Not having these elements would not be truthful to his personal expression. However, he said that in his art he transforms their meaning in a space he has created. In addressing her film “Women Without

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<sup>40</sup> Nadia Johanne Kabalab, *In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella*, Short documentary, (2014; Berlin; Freie Universität Berlin, Institute for Art History, 2014.), online source, <https://vimeo.com/108255363>.

Men,” Shirin describes her struggle of how to “tell a political story but an allegorical story. How to move you with your emotions, but also make your mind work.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

While globalization in no small part contributes to exile through wars, economic crisis, and political turmoil, it also brings with it an art form that increases global understanding. As displaced people stripped of a homeland, exiled artists have surfaced as a voice for awareness, social justice, and political change. Without a homeland to return to, exiled artists are citizens of the world and their art is significantly shaped by global influences. When faced with cultural and political conflict, artists have engaged their work in directly confronting issues. In doing so exile art engenders change and inspires us into action. Because of exile art’s inherent political voice, artists’ expression of their personal experience also represents a shared collective narrative, effectively giving a voice to those who have none. Furthermore, many artists believe in their social responsibility to engage politics in their work. Thus, artists in exile struggle with creating art whose meaning can be universally understood as the works are exchanged on a global market. In addition, exile art demonstrates how globalization creates opportunities for positive artistic multiculturalism as well as cultural conflict.

Exile art has the ability to shift the global discourse on exile. Media conglomerates, politicians, NGOs, and other power sources dominate the global representation of exiles and their struggle. People living in exile have been castigated as economic burdens and terrorists or reduced to nameless eternal victims. However, exile art is unique in how it gives identity and

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<sup>41</sup> “Art in Exile.”

voice to those living in exile. It is not only a cultural tool for liberation, but creates a global platform for discourse and increased understanding. Artists' symbolic creation of the 'space' they inhabit illustrates the internal experience and emotional complexity of their forced travel, one that is both isolating and hopeful.

While exile art is a growing art form, it is new and has only recently emerged as a global art form. The majority of artworks I found of exiled artists were produced within the past ten years. Further, there is very little scholarly research done on exile artists working in contemporary art. The majority of the artwork and exhibitions I found and referenced were of exiled Middle Eastern artists. I was not surprised by this reality as the Middle East has historically been immersed in tumultuous politics and conflict. However, I believe that there is potential for more extensive research on other European or Asian artists working in exile.

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