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Culture and Politics in the Visual Arts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Olga González

What makes Palestinian art "Palestinian"? This became a central question in my attempt to understand the emphasis on national identity that Palestinian visual artists put on their artwork, particularly given that what I saw at art exhibits and the studios and homes of artists during my short visit in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem could be basically classified under the broad category of contemporary visual art. Whether realistic, figurative, abstract, or conceptual in their styles, the five artists I interviewed presented me with a varied assortment of images meant to highlight the "Palestinian-ness" in the contemporary art of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

These artists use the authoritative language of Western art, seeking to create a more forceful and distinctive art that is regarded as Palestinian. This is art that lives and plays within the confines of an established art convention, but not without a fair commitment to transgression for the creation of a "minor language" in the sense that was coined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1986). From this perspective, Palestinian art is not a reflection of the language of a minority *per se* but rather entails a minor mode of exercising the language of a majority.

The "minor" seems implicit in what art historian Gannit Ankori in her study of Palestinian art calls "Dis-Orientalism"[1]—a play on words on Edward Said's *Orientalism*—by which she means, "the dismantling of an exclusively Western perspective or 'scopic regime,' and the alternative, self-empowerment of oriental artists."[2] The term, she further explains, reflects the literal or physical "loss of the Orient," a loss asso-

ciated with the traumatic events of 1948 that brought about the *Nakba* (literally, catastrophe), which resulted in the loss of land, the destruction of hundreds of villages, and the displacement and uprooting of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian people.

For Palestinians, the *Nakba* is not a historical circumstance that resides in the past, only to be commemorated once a year with events that include art exhibits, among other things. The *Nakba* is experienced instead as the uninterrupted process of Israeli domination that was given continuity by the 1967 occupation, and that pervades every facet of Palestinian daily life. Several markers of the occupation that infringe upon Palestinian rights and freedom are the eight-meter-high wall that spans 403 miles across the Palestinian territory, the hundreds of checkpoints and roadblocks, and the illegal Israeli settlements and outposts. The occupation is thus an all-encompassing experience in Palestinian life from which artists are not exempted. In an interview with Sliman Mansour, one of the most prominent and influential Palestinian artists, he says:

> Palestinians are very much politicized. Most of the people are affiliated to some kind of political group…Everyone at a certain time of their life was involved, old or young, and if not directly everyone knows somebody or has had a child or grandchild who has been in prison. It's like half of the Palestinians in general were in prison for some time. I am sure most of them were beaten or insulted. The occupation makes people aware of politics.[3]

At first, Mansour does not share with me that he too had been imprisoned. It is only later in our conversation that I learn that he had been arrested for incitement, and was jailed several times for periods of about a month in 1980 and 1981. He then shows me two paintings associated with that experience, *Prisoner's Day* (Fig. 1) and *Colors of Hope* (Fig. 2),[4] and recalls the days when art was under siege, following the Israeli occupation in 1967. Mansour was twenty-seven when, in 1975, he joined a small group of Palestinian artists determined to establish an association to promote the creation of art and art exhibitions both in and outside the occupied territories. They sought permission from the Israeli government but the request was denied. The League of Palestinian Artists in the Occupied Territories was established all the same. Although based in Jerusalem, they did not have a permanent location. Art exhibits were held in schools and other public institutions, often

Fig. 1 Prisoner's Day, Sliman Mansour, 1980

Fig. 2 Colors of Hope, Sliman Mansour, 1980

becoming the target of raids by the Israeli army. The use of the colors of the Palestinian flag and other national icons like the *kufiyya*, the Palestinian checkered headdress, were prohibited. Thus, the confiscation of artwork and the arrest of artists became commonplace and, ironically, gave more visibility to art as a form of political resistance.[5]

When I ask Mansour about his incarceration, I sense a reluctance to say much about it. "It wasn't for long," he says. He does not seem to want to encourage the image of the heroic artist when he recalls that many of his fellowmen either continue to be in prison or have died as martyrs. Instead he pauses and tells me that he's old. I look at his gray hair and beard and while I dare not ask him his age, I estimate he is in his sixties. A more vigorous but nonetheless soft-spoken Mansour then adds, "I am an artist who loves the land; I am a peasant from Birzeit;[6] I am an artist of the land, and it happens that the land has political meaning." It's the *fellah* and the land that he wants to talk about.

Mansour's claim surprises me. He does not resemble the peasant villagers with sunburned faces who wear traditional robes and headdresses and sell their produce in the markets of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Nor does his experience of growing up in the countryside seem sufficient to qualify him as a *fellah*. What, then, can the strong attachment to and apparent romanticism about rural life signify for a middle-class and educated artist, like Mansour, producing artwork within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Scenes of peasant life can be found throughout Mansour's artistic production. Female figures in traditional embroidered dresses against rural backgrounds, as well as peasants with notoriously strong hands harvesting olives or oranges, are some of the elements that stand out in Mansour's earlier figurative oil paintings (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4), as described by Ankori (2006) and Nastas (2008). Mansour uses these images to give visual expression to the cultural concept of *sumud*, which he describes as "steadfastness, to be patient, to stay in your land and fight." In giving emphasis to rural life and the bond between the peasantry and the land, he conveys Palestinians' rootedness to the land.

Mansour is not alone in giving prominence to images associated with the *fellah* and the rural landscape.[7] It can be found in the work of a diversity of visual artists regardless of their popularity, professional recognition and trajectory, artistic style, age, gender, or religious background. At art exhibits in the West Bank it is impossible to miss the pervasiveness of the iconic *fellah*. At the exhibit held at the Palestinian National Theatre in Jerusalem for the commemoration of the

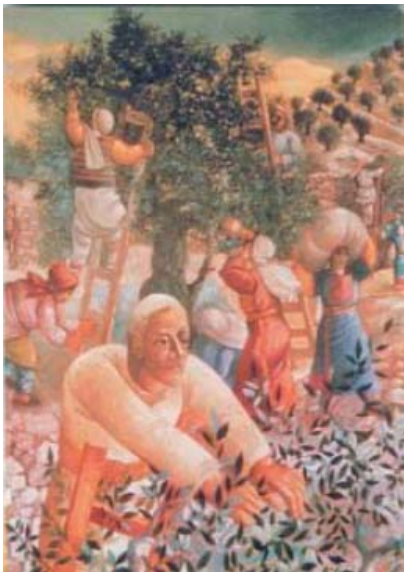

Fig. 3 Olive Season,
Sliman Mansour, 1986

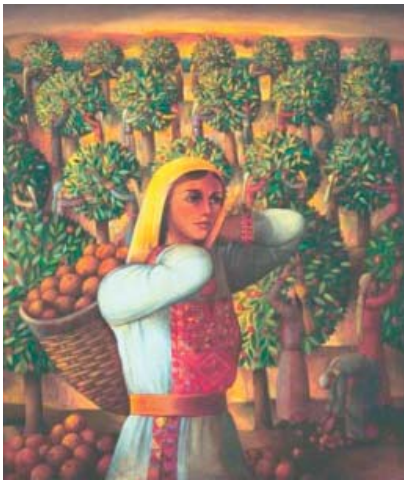

Fig. 4 Picking Oranges,
Sliman Mansour, 1979

sixty years of the *Nakba*, Hussein Abu Dayeeb, one of the 25 Palestinian artists in the show, remarks that the peasant woman[8] harvesting wheat in his painting (Fig. 5) represents "the homeland and the life we [Palestinians] want to return to…This is what we hope for," he says, before adding a categorical, "we should not forget."[9] Abu Dayeeb, now in his mid-forties, has spent a significant part of his life in exile. Born in Jordan and then living in Saudi Arabia before finally moving to Jerusalem, his nostalgic appeal for a peasant way of life and the subsequent sense of attachment to the land sprouts from experiences of loss and displacement.

Anthropologist Ted Swedenburg argues that, "the overwhelming cultural presence of the *fellah* flows from the endangered status of the Palestinian nation"[10] and "is not motivated by naïve romanticism or the desire to restore a pure origin."[11] This does not mean that the image of the peasant has not acquired a mythical dimension and standing that needs to be understood within the context of the power structure with Israel. In a reality marked by the threat of effacement, the peasant is a unifying symbol that allows Palestinians to imagine themselves as a nation and to defend their Arab identity.

Fig. 5 Harvesting Wheat, Hussein Abu Dayeeb, 2008

"I am a peasant," is a political statement for Mansour. It is one that becomes more meaningful given the changes introduced to his work with the first Intifada in 1987.[12] The Intifada included the boycotting of Israeli products, which for Palestinian artists meant to stop buying basic items such as paint. Mansour's response was to create art out of earth, the same earth that is the source of livelihood for the peasant. In molding the soil with his hands the artist reaffirms the importance of the *fellah* and expresses his more visceral and intimate relationship with the land. The innovation in his artistic endeavor reaffirms the significance of Palestinian land, national identity, and cultural heritage. Yet inside these earthworks (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7) pieces of embroidered fabrics, fragments of pottery from archeological sites, and rusty old keys that appear as somewhat buried under the mud or slightly uncov-

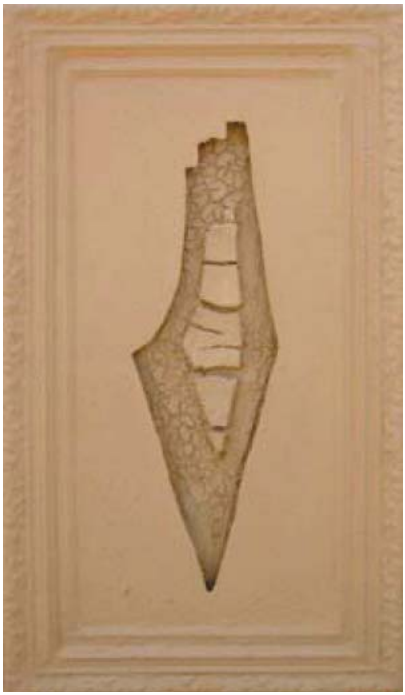

Fig. 6 Archeological Site,
Sliman Mansour, 1995

Fig. 7 Untitled, Sliman Mansour, 1994

Fig. 8 Shrinking Object, Sliman Mansour, 1996

ered and seemingly dislocated, evoke the experience of lost homes and the loss of the homeland.[13] A more recent symbol of steadfastness, the key also stands for the Palestinian demand of the right to return to their land. This is particularly important since Mansour also confronts the viewer with the unsettling reality of a land that continues to shrink and lose its fertility for Palestinians (Fig. 8). Rather than offering an idealistic image of Palestine, Mansour challenges traditional and romantic representations, including his own, by molding a fragmented and cracked land that is also drying up. The sense of melancholy seems ever-present in Mansour's earthworks.

Concern with Palestinian feelings of rupture and fragmentation can also be seen in the installation piece, titled "Olive Project," of Faten Nastas.[14] Piecing together 250 handmade postcard-size sheets of paper from olive tree leaves, the installation resembles a quilt. The patiently crafted paper made by the artist herself is a subtext that evokes the peasantry who use their hands to harvest olives, till the land, and make bread. The piece has two distinctive faces, one with insertions of flow-

Fig. 9 Olive Project, Faten Nastas, 2006

ers and leaves (Fig. 9) and the other with shreds of the Israeli permits (Fig. 10) that Palestinians are required to obtain if they wish to travel to Jerusalem or Israel proper.[15] In her portfolio, Nastas writes:

> This work represents the two sides of the Holy Land; on one side, it is the beautiful colorful and assorted land, while on the other side, it is the military, naked land. Our land is pieces that are divided and separated by checkpoints and segregation wall, but we are trying to sew it together by our traditions, identity, nature, etc.[16]

Nastas portrays a reality of sharp contrasts in which the homeland has to be idealized, probably as a way of coping with trauma and compensating for the disruptions caused by the occupation. In the act of sewing, the artist alludes to Palestinians' commitment to a project of nation building that can remove the "unnatural" boundaries keeping them

Fig. 10 Olive Project, Faten Nastas, 2006

apart. Palestinian identity is introduced with subtlety in "Olive Project." Nastas's stitches bring a feminine touch that she says is associated with the embroidered dresses worn by peasant women.

The stitches in "Olive Project" also seem to represent the scars and fragmentation produced by the occupation. "Occupation! That is our existence," says Nastas after giving an account of how "olive trees are in danger because they [the Israeli government] continue building the [segregation] wall; they are taking farmers' fields where they grow olive trees."[17] The olive tree, distinguished for its longevity, has come to represent "steadfastness in the face of adversity, and the persistence of Palestinian memory."[18] Olive trees are supposed to have "seen it all." Thus, like Bardenstein (1999) accurately points out, in their role as witnesses they can testify to the tragedy of the Palestinian people. Hence, Nastas's condemnation of the uprooting of olive trees is also

a denunciation of what Palestinians believe to be Israel's attempt to uproot the Palestinian people.

The notion of cyclical time is important in Nastas's installation as the different shades of green in it imply. "Every piece of paper is a different pigmentation and this depends on what time of the year it is, how green or dry the leave is," says Nastas. This mode of temporality, defined by nature and the seasons of the year, is a way of alluding to the *fellah* and an idyllic past that can be regenerated. The past becomes the sole source of images of hope and growth and the possibility of a better future. "But green is not only the color of the fields, it is also the color of the military uniform," the artist adds, seemingly suggesting that cyclical time also entails the decay and destruction caused by Israel, or rather the recurring violence Palestinians have had to endure since the *Nakba* occurred.

The strong visibility Nastas gives to the relationship between unity and fragmentation has become characteristic in Palestinian contemporary art.[19] What stands out is the definite need to mend, recompose and (re)member a people, culture, and territory forced to split and live in dispersion. Nastas creates that effect with the material and artistic technique she uses in "Olive Project." The choice of small pieces of paper, all sewed by hand in such a way that the entire piece is easy to fold and pack, seems to be a reminder of the displaced and transient condition of Palestinians, and the continuing threat of further disarticulation due to the occupation. When Nastas describes "Olive Project" as "woven together but very fragile and still falling apart with every travel," she is reflecting on a vulnerable sense of belonging.

Hussein Abu Dayeeb also addresses the occupation with great frustration when I visit him at his house to view more of his artwork:

> It is difficult to live having somebody tell you how to live, how to eat, when to sleep, when to go back to your home. That is the occupation we live. Jerusalem is a big jail. There are no jobs for people, no money, there are problems in education and so on.[20]

Turning to the paintings and drawings dressing the walls of his dining room and living room, he adds, "So I use art to express my political ideas." "For example, I don't paint Jerusalem as a souvenir," he says while showing me one of his paintings of *Al-Qudz* (The Holy City, in Arabic) in which Jerusalem appears confined to an existence within what Palestinians call the "segregation wall" (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11 Al Qudz, Hussein Abu Dayeeb Samar Ghattas, 2002

Abu Dayeeb's Jerusalem is clearly invested with an Arab identity represented by the centrality given to the Dome of the Rock, which according to the artist does not stand only for Muslim people. The political message seems obvious, "Jerusalem is Palestinian" and will prevail as such despite the veil of darkness brought about by the occupation.[21] "We have hope, you see," is Abu Dayeeb's remark while pointing at the splendor of the golden dome and at a shaft of light discreetly marking its presence in its opposition to life in the shadows. This is the struggle for liberation, a thematic characteristic common in contemporary Palestinian art.

The political is an essential component in the visual vocabulary of the Palestinian artists I interviewed in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata makes us aware that, "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."[22] Through art they engage in the struggle for liberation and Palestinian nation building. The political is embedded in what it means to be Palestinian; thus, their need to identify art in and about Palestine as "Palestinian" art. There is the implicit understanding that for art to be "Palestinian," it must address the stateless and oppressed condition of all Palestinians and therefore be of collective value. The artist's personal dramas become political and reflect the community's perspective. These two features, the political and the collective, in addition to the deterritorialization of language conceived in terms of "Dis-Orientalism," give Palestinian art its status of "minor art," following Deleuze and Guattari's characterization of what distinguishes a minority discourse.

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My interest in visuality as inclusive of both the visibility and invisibility of certain issues led me to ask about themes that were not given artistic representation. The artists I interviewed were intrigued with the question but did not always know what to answer, apparently unaware of their own self-censorship. Curious about collaboration—a widespread and well-documented phenomenon in the occupied territories on a par with betrayal—I question the artists about whether they had ever considered representing such a topic.[23] The answer—a blunt "NO!"—was sometimes followed by the comment, "it is ugly." According to Hussein Abu Dayeeb, this is a topic that "doesn't deserve to be painted because it's not the Palestinian mind, not the Palestinian conscience, not the Palestinian education, and it's not the Palestinian dream." In sum, the image of the collaborator does not reflect the Palestinian ethos. It certainly does not correspond to the heroic role given to the *fellah* in contemporary art and which has served as a unifying symbol in nationalist discourse. Instead, it is associated with a shameful reality, regardless of how much understanding some Palestinians might have about the reasons that have forced some of their own to become traitors.

To give visual representation to the divisive problem of collaboration would conflict with the idea of Palestinian art as "minor art" in terms of its political and collective value. Interestingly, the omission of the image has political and collective value. It represents the type

of necessary *active forgetting* that Nietzsche described as "a little tabula rasa of consciousness to make room for something new, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for ruling, predicting and predetermining."[24]

The concealment of this nettlesome issue is not exclusive to Palestinian art or to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My research on the memory and public secrecy of peasants affected by the war between the Peruvian government and the Maoist Shining Path guerrillas in the 1980s reveals the need to suppress visual depictions of memories associated with betrayal and fratricide in order to restore a sense of community and belonging.[25]

The fractures within Palestinian society are not limited to the phenomenon of collaboration. The disillusionment of Palestinians with the "peace process" that was initiated by the 1993 Oslo Accords, whereby Israel recognized the PLO and gave it limited autonomy in exchange for peace and an end to Palestinian claims on Israeli territory. It ultimately contributed to the surfacing of more internal contradictions. While Palestinian leaders who brokered the agreement were perceived as seriously compromised and the Palestinian Authority was being accused of corruption and nepotism, Hamas became the vehicle for the expression of growing discontent. In the visual arts, the crisis led to an initial process of the unveiling of internal conflicts affecting Palestinian society. Samar Ghattas and Taleb Dweik are among the artists whose work responds to this trend in social critique.

Samar Ghattas lives and works in Bethlehem. As I walk into her office at the University of Bethlehem, where she is a professor of fine arts, I notice many of the art pieces on her walls are about martyrs. Ghattas tells me the works belong to her students, some of whom had a loved one who died as a martyr. "It's important for them to remember those who die for us," she tells me. I am struck by the sadness on her face and how it stands in stark contrast with the anger she also conveys when talking about the Israeli occupation. She shows me some of her related watercolors. I am drawn to one painting (Fig. 12) in particular so she tells me about it:

> The title is "Illusion" and it is related to the [Israeli] invasion in 2002 when there was curfew and I felt that our leaders had betrayed us and that all the things they had been telling us were illusions, 'we are strong and we have our history,' but it was not true because in 2002 the tank is in front of my house. What is it doing there if there is an agreement

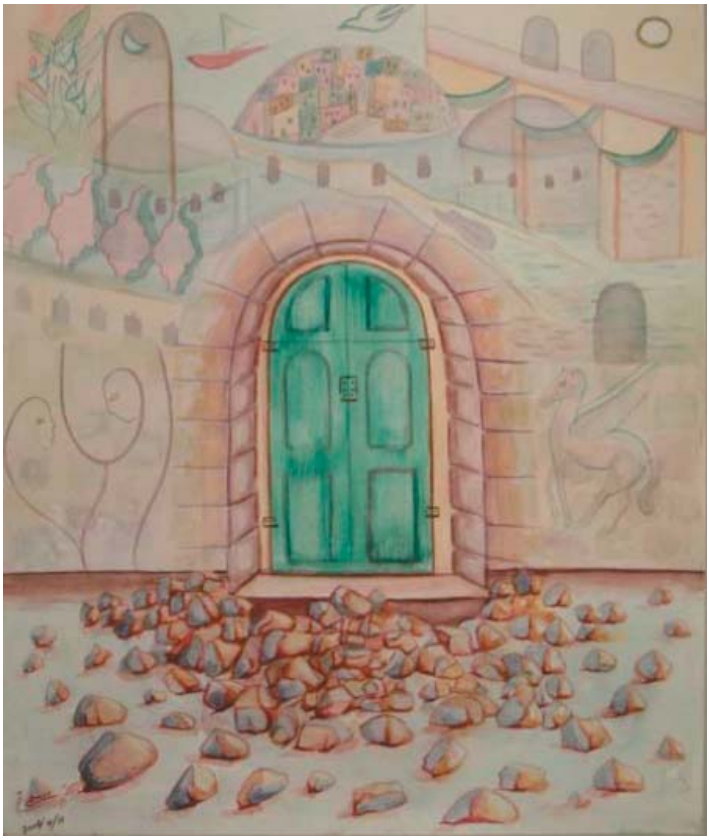

Fig. 12 Illusion, Samar Ghattas, 2002

> between Palestinians and Israelis! The Israeli army goes in and out any time they want. So where are my human rights and what did the leadership do for them? Nothing! They were lying. So I draw this door [pointing at the watercolor]; it is a closed door. I tried to make it old and with no place to put the key and that means there is no hope for a solution. Behind the door there should be a palace but there isn't one and everything in the back has disappeared: beauty, lakes, happiness, tradition, history, monuments, houses. Nothing was true, everything fell and when it falls we see everything because from this palace the leaders talked that we would have beautiful cities, our freedom. But it wasn't true. Everything falls and then we see the truth.[26]

Curious about the reaction of other Palestinians to this painting, I ask Ghattas for a comment. She says:

> I have explained this to many people, to students, and showed it at exhibits in Bethlehem and they like it and begin to discuss that Oslo is fake and that it was not true that there was peace, and that we didn't get anything, and that our leaders just signed.

I tell her about not having seen much art depicting social and political conflicts embedded in Palestinian society, to which she replies:

> I like my country and the people of Palestine; they are my nation and I am part of them. Even when I criticize them, I am one of them, but no one talks about these problems…We have social problems and we need to talk about them, if it's political, human or women issue. I do so because I want my society to be better.

In "Illusion" Ghattas apparently leaves no room for imagining more hopeful scenarios. Dreams have been crushed and appearances are deceiving. However, I am inclined to think that in exhorting her fellow men to see the naked truth and assume responsibility for the failure to achieve a more promising future, Ghattas "hopes" to find the key that can open the door to Palestinian liberation.

Taleb Dweik, a well-known Jerusalemite artist, also shares with me an image that he considers a social critique of the leaders of the Arab world. His description of the image (Fig. 13) is as follows:

> Their hands to their sides indicate that they are like statues. If you look at their eyes you see that they don't have pupils and this indicates their lack of vision. Neither do they have ears, which indicates they can't hear. Also, if you look at their mouths, you see that bubbles come out and turn into air. Also, some are sleeping as if in a coma. In the left section of the picture there are two people arguing, which shows the deep differences between Arab leaders. The color of the painting represents aging and shows these leaders have stuck or adhered to their chair for a long time.[27]

In his visual critique of Arab leaders, Dweik makes a mockery of the supposed power of Arab leaders. In his portrayal of them as zombie-like figures, the leaders are more likely to stir laughter than inspire fear. Dweik's imagery suggests unresponsive leaders caught in power struggles, who are more concerned with remaining in power, and unable to address the needs of their people. Like Ghattas he reveals fractures, in this case within the Arab world.

Fig. 13 Arab Leaders, Taleb Dweik, n.d.

All in all, Palestinian art defines an "image world" in which both vision and representation (with its simultaneous material and social nature) are a means of intervening in the world.[28] As such, the images of Palestinian artists discussed in this essay are part of what anthropologist Deborah Poole (1997) calls "visual economy." Clearly, it is an economy that involves a negotiation between images that can and cannot be represented and/or stay in circulation. In the present context of war on Gaza, it is yet to be seen how Palestinian artists will define what are the images that should be given visibility and which are those best left to remain in the fringes, perhaps due to fear, or horror, or because of a need for unity. ◉

Notes

1. See Ankori (2003, 2006) in which she uses the concept of "Dis-orientalism" to analyze contemporary Palestinian artworks of different genres and time periods.

2. Ankori 2006, p. 22.

3. Interview in English with Sliman Mansour, held on June 3, 2008, in Jerusalem. All quotes belonging to Mansour in this essay come from the same audio-taped interview.

4. Mansour brought to the interview a CD with a Power Point of his artwork for me to keep.

5. See Yaquh (2008) for a thorough examination of the extent to which the Israeli occupation and the displacement of Palestinians affected the development, practice, and dissemination of Palestinian art. Also, see Boullata (2000) for a concise history of the development of Palestinian art since the end of the 19th century, which allows for an understanding of the transformations Palestinian art underwent within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its relevance as an expression of political resistance.

6. Birzeit is a village near Ramallah where Sliman Mansour was born and developed an intimate relationship with the rural landscape. See Ankori (2006) and Nastas (2008) for additional information on Mansour's rural experience.

7. In an examination of representations of landscape in the work of several Palestinian artists, among them Mansour, Sherwell (2004) argues that the relevance given to these images stems from the fact that the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is focused on the legitimacy of claims to the same territory.

8. According to Sherwell (2003), the Palestinian peasant woman was a dominant image in Palestinian art between the 1960s and 1990s, often used as a representation of the land and national identity.

9. Quotes from Hussein Abu Dayeeb, as recorded in my field notes at the Palestinian National Theatre in Jerusalem on May 29, 2008.

10. Swedenburg 1990, p.19.

11. Ibid., p. 21.

12. *Intifada* is an Arabic word that means "shaking off," but that in the political context stands for uprising or popular resistance against the Israeli occupation.

13. Ankori 2006.

14. Nastas, who was born in Bethlehem in 1975, is the director of the Arts and Crafts department at the Dar-al Kalima College in Bethlehem.

15. Palestinians who reside in Jerusalem do not require this type of permission because they all carry Israeli identification cards that allow them to cross boundaries.

16. Nastas, Portfolio, November 2006.

17. Audio-taped interview with Faten Nastas on June 8, 2008.

18. Bardenstein 1999, p. 154.

19. Ankori (2006) provides other examples of Palestinian artists whose works grapple with images of fragmentation.

20. Audio-taped interview in English with Hussein Abu Dayeeb at his house in Jerusalem on June 4, 2008. This quote and those that follow in the essay belong to the same interview.

21. See Ankori (1988) for an analysis of the significance of Jerusalem as cultural heritage and political message in the work of both Palestinian and Israeli artists.

22. Boullata 2004, p. 70.

23. See the special issue published by PASSIA (2001) for an interesting examination of the different types of collaboration and approaches that problematize the phenomenon of collaboration by contextualizing it as an expression of Israel's "defense" policies and Palestinians' conditions of oppression.

24. Nietzsche 1994, p. 28.

25. González-Castañeda 2006.

26. Audio-taped interview in English with Samar Ghattas on June 11, 2008. All quotes belonging to Ghattas in this essay come from the same interview.

27. E-mail communication with the author on August 31, 2008.

28. Poole 1997.

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