On Palestinian Art

Rebecca Gould

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Assembling the author's prior writings on Palestinian art into a single book, Boullata's *Palestinian Art* represents the most complete and comprehensive discussion of the history of Palestinian art available in English, its only competitor being Boullata's own Arabic-language volume *Istihdar al-makan: dirasa fi al-fann al-tashkili al-filastini al-mu'asir* (Conjuring Space: A Study of Contemporary Palestinian Plastic Arts, 2000). Divided into four parts, this magnum opus includes a brief but provocative preface by art theorist John Berger, intermixed with haunting sketches of Palestinians caged behind barbed wires by Berger's son Yves Berger.

*Palestinian Art* represents the culmination of more than three decades of the author's fieldwork, research, and practice of the art of painting itself. Boullata brings the eye of an artist as well as of a scholar to his subject matter. He begins, as any history of Palestinian art must, with “the national catastrophe that precipitated the deracination and dispersal of the Palestinian people” (27) and the looting of Palestine's artistic treasures that attended the birth of the state of Israel. But instead of moving chronologically forward from this point, Boullata moves backwards in time. Part 1 ("From Religious to Secular Painting"), discusses the birth and development of studio art in Palestine, with a particular focus on Ottoman Jerusalem. One of the book's unexpected surprises is the discussion of the role of Russian and Byzantine iconography in "illuminating the course of the local painting tradition" in Arab Orthodox churches, and, ultimately also in secular art (32).

Boullata’s chronicle of the birth of secular painting from religious art is followed by Part 2 ("Memory and Resistance"), which consists of four chapters set in the post 1948 era. This period of the most profound suffering for the Palestinian people also coincides with the appearance of abstraction in Palestinian art. Drawing on the work of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, Boullata traces in painstaking detail the multiple ways in which the emergence of abstraction in the field of aesthetics is linked to what Bhabha describes as the challenges of “a putting together of the disremembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (123).

Part 3 ("Art from the Ghetto") begins, as might be expected, with the 1967 Six-Day War (al-Naksa). But as with other sections of this book that begin with war and open onto new aesthetic horizons, Boullata discovers in
the Palestinian ghettos that were the result of this war forms of art
that the world outside its borders never knew to have existed. At this point in the book, noticeably, women come to populate Boullata’s narrative. Reviewing the careers of Zula al-Sa’di (1905-1988) to Sophie Halaby (1906-1998) to Juliana Seraphim (b. 1934) and Mona Hatoum (b. 1952), Boullata finds that “Arab women artists have been instrumental in shaping the history of contemporary Arab art” (181). He further notes that the recognition Arab women artists have been accorded in the Arab world often exceeds that attained by their Western counterparts.

Breaking with the cycle of beginning with war, Part 4 (“The Evocation of Place”) opens with the author’s childhood, and specifically with his memories of Jerusalem before the Israeli annexation. Boullata then recounts his “nomadic journey” (311) towards defining his own place within a marginal art. Like the book’s preceding three parts, if with greater intensity, these pages intersperse autobiographical apercus with Boullata’s gleanings from literature (Darwish, Apollinaire, Camus), literary theory (Deleuze and Guattari), art (Matisse, Klee), and Islamic and Christian mysticism (al-Junaid, St. John of Damascus). Tellingly, all the illustrations in Part 4 are taken directly from the author’s prodigious oeuvre. In concluding his narrative of Palestinian art in the modern era and situating his life story within this history, Boullata invokes Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile” to emphasize the duality of vision that is inflects Palestinian modernity. While “most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home,” writes Said, “exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimension” (331). At its most compelling, the multiple temporalities, cultures, and media that enter into Boullata’s ways of reading the pasts and presents of Palestinian art makes of the marginalized Palestinian refugee a universal condition. Palestinian Art is a book to be read not once, or even twice. It is a book to be engaged many times, by artists, scholars, and readers interested in Palestinian culture. Each encounter with the text is likely to generate new understandings of Palestinian visual culture. While the text renders well the acute tragedies that have befallen the Palestinian people and specifically on the challenges its artists continue to surmount, any reader brought into contact with the artistic ingenuity on display in the paintings of Isma’Il Shammout, Nabil Anani, Mubarak Sa’ed, Juliana Seraphim, Tamam al-Akhal, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (best known for his prose), Mustapha al-Hallah, Tayseer
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Barakat, Jumana al-Husseini, and the photography of Ahlam Shibli, and who touches with their eyes the crafted statuettes of Hanna al-Mismar, cannot but be filled with hope for Palestine's future. Where the imagination flourishes as it does in these visual creations, Boullata’s analyses suggest, there are always solid grounds for expecting change. It is to be hoped that the publication of this work acts as a stimulus to future scholarship on pre-1850 Palestinian art as well as to further comparative work on Palestinian art in the present.

As a work that has set a new standard for scholarship in the field, *Palestinian Art* is a basic text for any collection, ranging from the general art-historical, to research-level collections specializing in Islamic art. While it stands as a contribution to its field at the highest and most specialized level, Boullata’s magnum opus would not be out of place even in the most basic collections, in reading rooms, and public libraries. Citations are given in the margins of the text, and all images are fully credited in an appendix, which follows the helpful bibliography. Given the large number of full color illustrations that grace these pages, and the high-quality paper on which the text is printed, this book is affordably priced.