

Nine Drawings

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Figure 1: An optimistic eye

¶ The well-known Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata, who died in August 2019, left behind a wealth of art and research, rooted in questions of identity, resistance and exile. In his 2002 essay “Art under the Siege” he asked:

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

These questions have long troubled Palestinian artists as they attempt to process and challenge a precarious and dehumanising reality shaped by military occupation, apartheid and siege. Here I make a humble effort to frame drawings that I created in my late teens and early twenties, situating them within a wider history of Palestinian cultural resistance.

Since the day I was born, in Jabalia Refugee Camp in the north of the Gaza Strip, the biggest and most densely populated refugee camp in Palestine, I have never known what life is like without occupation and siege, injustice and horror. Like the child depicted in Figure 1, growing up in a refugee camp was the window to understanding our reality under Israeli colonial occupation. Art has been the way I naturally sought since a very early age to describe what I felt was indescribable.



Figure 2: Displaced

¶ I was only nine years old when my parents noticed my drawing skills. At that time they were limited to black warplanes, pillars of smoke in the sky and crying eyes. This coincided with the eruption of the second intifada in September 2000, when I used to accompany my mother and aunt to the martyrs' funeral tents to offer our condolences. I used to hate the green colour, as it was associated in my memory with loss and mourning; the martyrs' funeral tents, which were disturbingly visible in the landscape of the Jabalia refugee camp, were mostly green. The first poem I ever learned by heart was one by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish entitled "And He Returned ... In A Coffin". As a nine-year old girl, I stood in front of many mourning families in those green tents, looked into their tearful eyes, and in a powerful but shaking voice I recited:

They are talking in our homeland
they speak in sorrow
about my comrade who passed
and returned in a coffin
Do you remember his name?
Don't mention his name!
Let him rest in our hearts.
Let's not let the word get lost
in the air like ash.

يحكون في بلادنا
يحكون في شجن
عن صاحبي الذي مضى
وعاد في كفن
كان اسمه
! لا تذكروا اسمه
خلوه في قلوبنا
لا تدعوا الكلمة
تضيع في الهواء كالرماد

It was moments like these, during the tumult of the second intifada, that fundamentally shaped my consciousness about the land and my place in it. Since childhood, the scenes of war, the faces of martyrs, the injured and political prisoners, the weeping of the martyrs' relatives over the loss of their beloved, have been haunting me with a desperate wish for this injustice to end. These scenes pushed me to seek art as a way to process those extraordinary surroundings, to reconcile with my wounds, to express my emotions, memories and experiences, much of which is collectively shared amongst the Palestinians.

Creativity in such a context is not only a necessary tool for survival in a taxing background of violence but, as Boullata contended in several articles, an expression of survival. For example, the "100 Shaheed—100 Lives" exhibition, by Ra'ed Issa and Muhammad Hawajri from Bureij Refugee Camp in central Gaza, commemorated the first one hundred victims of the al-Aqsa intifada. The exhibition grew out of the artists' intimate contact with the bereaved families and violence. Using a blend of abstract, metaphorical and representational language, their artwork expressed "the state of being a survivor of and eyewitness to daily death."



Figure 3: Reflections

Reflections

¶ Palestinian art, from the twentieth century up until now, has served as a visual reflection of the Palestinian struggle. It aimed to depict the reality of the Palestinian people, their hopes and aspirations, their suffering, and urge for mobilisation at an international level against injustice. It also acted as a tool to provide a self-representational counter narrative to the hegemonic Zionist one which demonised the Palestinian history and people to justify their colonial domination.

Among many other forms of cultural resistance, art for many Palestinians was seen as a way to participate in writing their own visual narrative, to critically and creatively engage with their socio-political surrounding matters, to express their identity, and to amplify the Palestinians' political demands. Against the humanitarian imagery that reduced Palestinian refugees to victims, or colonial representations that slammed them as terrorists, Palestinian art has sought to transform the image of the Palestinians into active agents of revolutionary change.

Over the course of the Palestinian struggle, the Palestinian people increasingly regarded artworks that expressed their living conditions under Israeli control as a means of resistance. The Palestinian art movement thrived in the 1970s despite many challenges, including the lack of any art infrastructure. Many Palestinian paintings displaying the "forbidden" colours of the Palestinian flag have been confiscated, and many artists, such as the renowned artist of the Intifada Sliman Mansour, faced detention due to their art that Israel perceived as "an act of incitement". Let us not forget the late Palestinian influential exiled artists Ghassan Kanafani and Naji Al-Ali, whose artistic and literary production led to their murder in Lebanon and London respectively.

Personally, observing the Palestinian children being born in a difficult reality that subjugates them to terror and trauma at very young age was the most painful. Most of my drawings are of Palestinian children whose innocent facial expressions I find most telling and urging for liberation and social justice.

Chains Shall Break

¶ Moreover, being a daughter of an ex-detainee means I have grown a unique attachment to the plight of the Palestinian political prisoners, not only from a political perspective but also from a personal one. As a 19-year-old boy, my father spent a total of fifteen years in Israeli jails, but he is only one amongst over a million Palestinians who experienced detention since 1948, including children, women and elderly people. The stories of resistance, resilience and repression that I grew up hearing about his stolen youth have made me develop a particular passion to this cause. Currently, over 5 thousand Palestinian detainees are in Israeli captivity with no access to their most basic rights allowed by the Israeli Prison Service, including fair trial, proper medical care and family visits.

The plight of Palestinian political prisoners and their families, however, is not given the deserved attention in the political arena, especially at an international level. They are not only marginalised, but also dehumanised in a media discourse that tends to reduce them to mere statistics or defines their resistance in terms of “terrorism”, similar to the way Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists in South Africa were represented. The drawings contained here were an attempt to challenge such reductive and hostile representation, humanise them, draw attention to their captive struggle inside Israeli jails and call for action.

Throughout my upbringing, I have witnessed their families’ immense pain as my family joined their weekly protests in front of the Red Cross in Gaza, calling for dismantling the Israeli prison system and freedom. As I developed more skills of expression, I coupled drawings with writings that recorded stories of Palestinian detainees and their families with whom I developed an intimate relation after years of weekly protests. Many expressed their pain as a form of imprisonment in time, another theme that inspired my drawings in my attempt to communicate the families’ longing for a reunion with their beloved ones without barriers in between. The ticking of clocks, the tears, the longing.

I tried to depict their determination to break their chains, which they expressed repeatedly in legendary hunger strikes. “Hunger strike until either martyrdom or freedom” is a motto that many prisoners adopted across the history of the Palestinian Prisoners Movement. The drawing in Figure 4 aimed to illustrate the defiant spirit of this motto.



Figure 4: Hunger until freedom – For Samer Issawi and all freedom fighters in Israeli jails



Figure 5: Traumatized childhood



Figure 6: Fear of the unknown

An ongoing Nakba

¶ My generation, the third-generation refugees, was already blueprinted with the traumatic events of the *Nakba*, which for Palestinians is not only a tragic historical event, only to be commemorated once a year with events such as art exhibits and national commemorations. “It was never one *Nakba*,” my grandmother Tamam used to say asserting that ethnic cleansing was never a one-off event that happened in 1948, when Palestinians became stateless refugees. The *Nakba* is experienced as ongoing; an uninterrupted process of Israeli settler-colonialism and domination that was given continuity by the 1967 occupation, the violent invasion of Beirut and the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, the two intifadas of 1987 and 2000, and the siege of Gaza and the constant bombardments and demolitions across the shrinking occupied Palestinian territories.

Growing up hearing our grandmothers recount the life that they had before, the dispossessed lands that most would never see again, has formed the collective memory of the Palestinian people. My grandmother described a peaceful life in green fields of citrus groves and olive trees in our original village, Beit-Jirja, one of 531 villages that were violently emptied of their inhabitants and razed to the ground in 1948. The landscapes, the tastes of their fresh harvests, the sounds of peasants’ dances, the joy of family gatherings and traditional weddings, all burdened her traumatic memory in a sudden rupture that turned our existence into non-existence. She found consolation in storytelling that cultivated inside her children and grandchildren a burning longing for return and a life of dignity.

The continuity of our liberation struggle, from one generation to another, resembles hope for the Nakba generation and their descendants, another theme that several of my drawings attempted to express – see Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9. They were my response to several Zionist leaders who assumed that “the old will die and the young will forget.” The drawings come to assert that the old may die but the young will keep on holding the key, until our inalienable right to return is implemented. In 1948, most refugees fled in a haste and fear, taking whatever they could carry at a moment’s notice. They carried the keys of their homes in their exodus, and although many know that their homes no longer exist, they held onto their keys, passed them to their children, making the key become a symbol of the undying Palestinian hope that return is inevitable. The young generation is perceived as those who will carry the burden of the cause and continue the struggle of the previous generations until freedom, justice, equality and return to the Palestinian people. Thus, Palestinian children became the symbol through which “We nurse hope”, as Mahmoud Darwish said.



Figure 7: *The young will carry on the struggle*

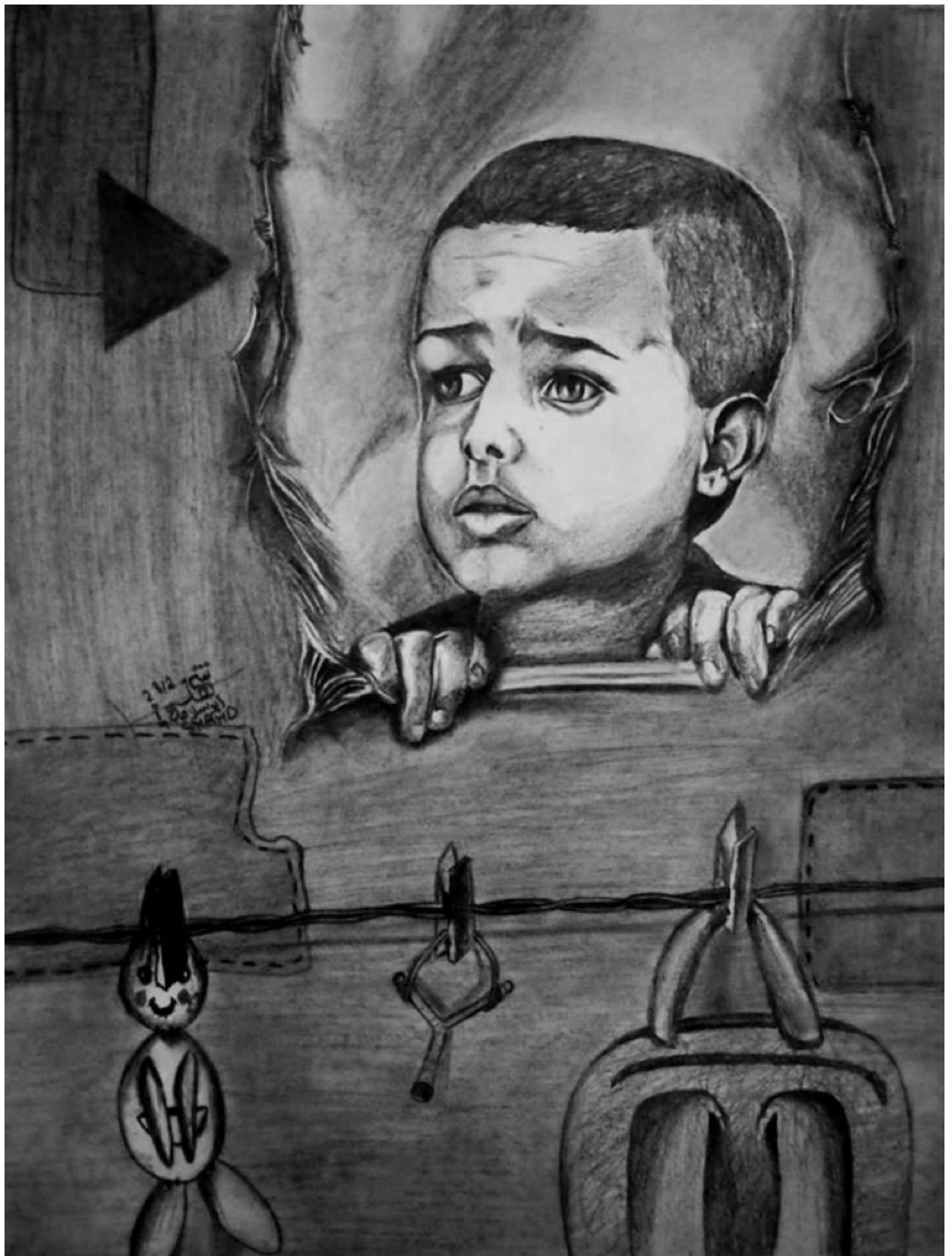


Figure 8: Breaking the State of Permanent Temporiness

Memories of War

¶ The majority of Palestinians have become politicised as a result of the complex and intense political reality that shapes every aspect of their lives. I am no exception. Art for me was an expressive tool in which I found empowerment for my voice. It served as a tactic to overcome the state of siege and occupation imposed on us, to escape the feeling of helplessness that can be easily felt in such suppressive and oppressive life conditions that the Palestinian people endure. It was also a tool that I used to engage politically and socially with the harsh surrounding. With internet becoming accessible, I resorted to online social networks to reach out to the international community, believing that the Palestinian people's struggle for liberation is a central global issue.

The turning point of my life was at the age of seventeen, after witnessing the 22-day massacre that the Israeli occupation forces committed against our people in Gaza in 2008-9. During that dismal period when we remained in darkness amidst the continuous bombing, destruction and mass killing of Palestinians in Gaza, I had a terrible sense of alienation from the rest of the world communities who were busy marking New Year Celebrations with fireworks.

It all erupted while we were attending the mid-term exams. It was a normal day until Israeli warplanes started shelling all over the Gaza Strip, announcing hundreds of victims from the first hour. The chaos that ensued at school and the living horrors that followed for 22 days of being struck by military machines from land, sea and air, left a lasting impact on everyone.

One of the most memorable moments is when one night, I was sitting in blackout, surrounded by my mother and siblings in one small room of our house under one blanket. No voice could be heard, just heartbeats and heavy, shaky breaths. The beating and breathing grew louder after every new explosion we felt crashing around, shaking our home and lighting up the sky. Then suddenly, the door of our house opened violently and somebody shouted, "Leave home now!" It was my dad rushing in to evacuate our house because of a bomb threat to a neighbour. I remember that my siblings and I grasped Mum and started running outside unconsciously, barefoot. For three days we stayed in a nearby house, powerless as we sat, waiting to be either killed, or wounded, or forced to watch our home destroyed.

This merciless and inhumane attack killed at least 1,417 men, women and children. I wasn't among them but what if I had been? Would I be buried like any one of them in a grave, nothing left of me but a blurry picture stuck on the wall and the memory of another teenage girl slain too young? Would I have been for the world just a number, a dead person? I refused to dwell on that thought. Many drawings of mine, such as those presented here, were inspired from memories attached to this traumatic event and similar experiences that proceeded. The trauma was relived whenever an attack was repeated. Most importantly, resorting to art was a necessary means that helped me preserve my sanity and overcome the harsh traumatic events that I experienced throughout my life in the suffocating blockade of the Gaza Strip.



Figure 9: We Shall Return

References:

Kamal Boullata, "Art under the Siege", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Summer 2004), pp. 70-84

Mahmoud Darwish, *And He Returned in a Coffin*, from the author's first collection *Olive Leaves* [أوراق الزيتون], published in 1964; reprinted 2014.

All drawings were done with 2B and 4B lead pencil on paper, 14 cm x17 cm