

Art imitates life in the burgeoning Palestinian art scene

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Ramallah artists are enjoying freedom to express themselves. Just one thing is out of bounds: working with Israelis

“At about five years old I started to feel that there was some kind of need for me to say something,” says Bisan Abu Eisheh. “I didn’t have a difficult childhood, as people did who grew up in refugee camps or in Gaza, but I was living in a difficult area during the first intifada. I was going to school every day with my mother in an ambulance because she used to work in the hospital. I used to see all the clashes in the streets, people shooting people, soldiers coming into my house who would take my father to clean the streets. I was a five-year-old kid, and all these things kept in my mind.”

After trying, and then giving up on, poetry, theatre, drama and even a stint studying IT and working for a money-changing company, Abu Eisheh became one of the earliest students to benefit from Palestine’s first accredited art degree course at the International Academy of Art Palestine. The academy, based in Ramallah, was founded in 2006 with seed funding from the Norwegian Government.

For Abu Eishah, who graduated in 2012, the course proved a springboard for an international career. Earlier this year he appeared at the Victoria and Albert Museum, when he invited visitors to invent a fictitious identity and make their own ID cards, a play on Palestinians' daily experience of checkpoints. He's now studying at Central St Martins and is one of six artists participating in the Points of Departure project, which opens this week at the ICA as part of London's Middle East art festival, Shubbak. The exhibition will be the culmination of eight-week residencies in each other's countries by three Palestinian and three UK artists exploring themes such as modern nationalism and identity, history and place.

International collaborations such as Points of Departure are becoming increasingly common, a sign that Palestine's art scene is developing rapidly and interest in the region's art is growing. In recent years Palestine's troubled and divided territories have played host to a number of exciting and innovative art projects.

Picasso has come to Palestine, thanks to the skilled manoeuvring and irrepressibility of the International Academy of Art Palestine's director, Khaled Hourani. Hourani devoted two years to negotiations and logistics and battling sceptics to hang *Buste de Femme*, a Picasso painting valued at £4.5 million, on the wall of his art school in June 2011. The artwork's journey across continents and through checkpoints became, in itself, a work of art.

Palestine now has its own biennale, which opened in 2012 and is hosted in Qalandiya, a town that shares its name with the infamous Israeli checkpoint separating East and West Jerusalem. Palestinians – spread across Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, neighbouring countries and indeed the entire globe – will soon also share their first national museum. Work on the £7.2 million Palestinian Museum, in Birzeit in the West Bank, is due to finish in 2014.

Unsurprisingly, much Palestinian art is a reaction to the Palestinian condition, an exploration of ideas such as marginalisation, identity and exclusion. Features of the Palestinian landscape, checkpoints, walls and refugee camps recur frequently in the works of diverse artists.

Artists operating in the Gaza strip have spoken out against restrictions imposed by Hamas on artistic practice but, in cosmopolitan Ramallah, few subjects are off bounds, with one big exception: “We won’t work with Israelis in a professional framework,” says Abu Eisheh. “We are not backwards people — we are open to discussions, we are open to speak to each other on a personal basis — but as long as you are Israeli, which means you are representing the state of Israel, which is a country that is occupying our country, these two can’t come together.”

His concern is that professional art collaborations will be used to bolster Israel’s public image. When it comes to individuals, art has, at times, brought Israel and Palestine together — Abu Eisheh cites the number of Israelis who entered the West Bank illegally to visit the Picasso exhibition, and in the world of classical music both Palestinian and Israeli musicians play in Daniel Barenboim’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra — but Israeli and Palestinian institutions generally remain divided.

A driving force behind Palestine’s art boom has been the involvement of charities, NGOs and individual philanthropists in Palestine’s art scene, usually motivated by the belief that art has a role to play in Palestine’s politics. At the grassroots, projects such as Freedom Bus offer art as a form of therapy or self-expression for frustrated youths, while higher-level projects — such as the Qalandiya biennale or the Palestinian Museum — aim to project a different picture of Palestine on the international scene.

Abu Eisheh, however, is wary of NGO involvement in Palestine’s art scene. He acknowledges that he partly owes his success to government and NGO arts funding. So when he says that “NGOs didn’t shape the art scene, they ruined it”, I’m surprised by the force of emotion in his voice.

“The art scene was there before the NGOs and, in my view, it was more important then, because it was a way of resistance,” he says. He worries now that artists are far more likely just to respond to what funders are looking for. “If the British Council is funding a play, it’s a play about Shakespeare, and if the Spanish are funding a play it’s about Lorca. So we’re losing our identity.”

In this part of the world, everything is political. What differs is simply the subtlety of the message, the ease or multiplicity of interpretations. The more sophisticated projects — often supported by the more sophisticated patrons — are a welcome departure from the black and white picture of the Palestinian struggle painted by politicians and pundits, and are all the more fascinating for it.

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