

An Anthropology of Kinship, a Methodology of Defiance

Reem Farah

'Made Present: Biographies of Artworks Defying the Ongoing Nakba', Alserkal Arts Foundation, Dubai, 17 November – 8 December 2024

From 17 November to 8 December 2024 'Made Present: Biographies of Artworks Defying the Ongoing Nakba', curated by Faris Shomali and Zaina Zarour, inhabited Alserkal Arts Foundation in Dubai. As the genocide on Gaza raged on into its fourteenth month, it reminded us how a systematic and historical ethnic cleansing targets art and artefact not exceptionally or collaterally but totally. Yet, 'Made Present' represented Palestinian art as evidence of resistance, not of suffering. The exhibited works were unearthed from beneath rubble, retrieved in life-risking missions, and inherited and collected despite generational demolitions and displacement.

There is a tangible reciprocity between the artist and the art, whereby the artist assures the artwork's survival and the art commemorates the artist it outlives. They are not alone. An ecosystem of family, friends, peers, neighbours and collectors preserve the legacy of the beloved by caring for the art over time. To 'make the artist the protagonist', or to view colonised peoples as agents of resistance, as the exhibition intends, is to humanise the artwork not only through the artist, but through multiple intricate, sometimes subtle even, human relations that brush with the art.

A narrative thread wove through the exhibit walls, with archival material, geographic placements and field notes that approximate Palestinians made disparate under occupation and apartheid. The exhibit spanned four generations of Palestinian artists over a century.¹ Their journeys were portrayed in seventeen works – from the fissures of British Mandate deception, the Nakba, the Naksa, the Intifadas, and the onslaughts on Gaza, culminating to our present. It took us from the Galilee to Gaza, to Damascus to Beirut, and other temporary

¹ The oldest artist in the exhibition was Nicola Saig, born in the 1860s, and the youngest, Hazem Harb, was born in 1980.

places of exile near and far. Ultimately, the exhibition represented a persistence against erasure by drawing historical and geographic fragments together for a more whole picture of Palestine.

At the outset, four Palestinian female artists born before the Nakba confronted exhibition incomers. Zulfa Al Sa'di and Sophie Halaby, on one wall, faced Marika Gaitanopoulou Thorogood and Jeanette Sarraf-Farah on the parallel wall, as if meeting in an art salon of the curators' dreams. Shomali and Zarour's unrelenting archival research pieces together their dismembered stories. The significance of the exhibit is not only in rewriting them into art history, but in bringing them back to life in Palestinian history.



Marika Gaitanopoulou Thorogood, *Untitled (Self portrait)*, ca 1940s, photo courtesy of the curators

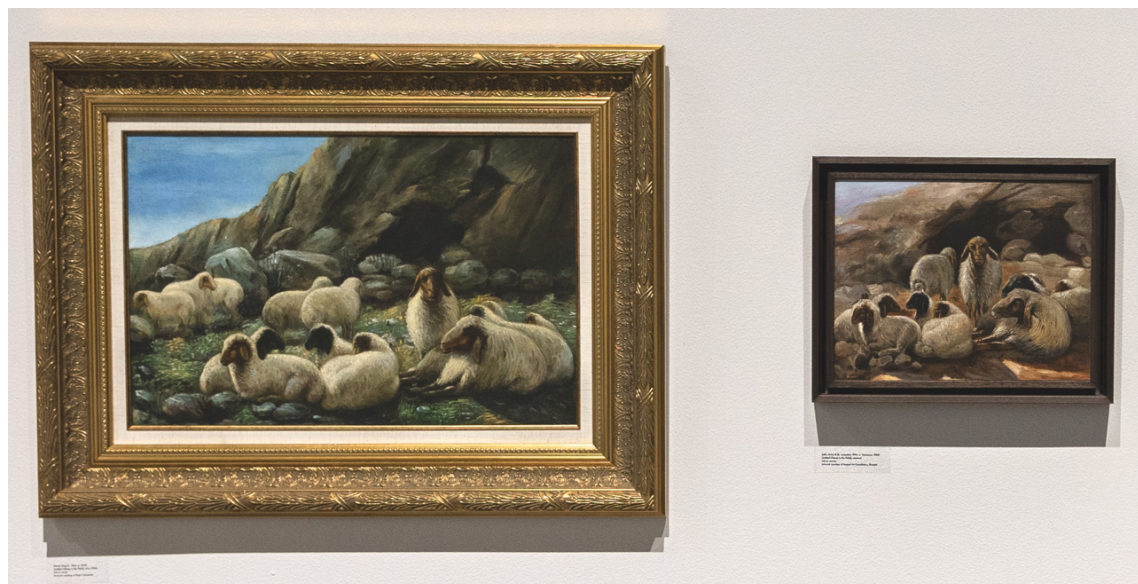
A self-portrait of the Jerusalemite painter Marika Gaitanopoulou Thorogood marked the first time the artist has had her work exhibited, at least as a Palestinian, since her 1945 show in Jerusalem. The painting, from the 1940s, has the artist looking into a mirror, which produces the reflection of her face as well as that of the back of her head. The double reflection can be viewed as a metaphor for her ambiguous identity, her Greek origin and the adoption of a British surname through marriage – but unpronounced in her name is her Palestinian upbringing. Her son, and the keeper of her works, lost his ability to speak in his old age but in one of his last utterances managed to reclaim:

'I am from Jerusalem'. These words were placed in vinyl cuttings on the exhibition wall as a declaration understood to have been nurtured by his Jerusalemite mother.

Born in 1905, Zulfa Al Sa'di was a pioneering Palestinian artist having been a major participant in Jerusalem's monumental Arab Exhibition of 1933 and 1934. After being forced from her home in 1948, she fled to Damascus and was gradually forgotten. It was only when the eminent Ismail Shammout was presented with her work in the 1990s that her memory was revived and her work celebrated. The discovery of Zulfa was enhanced by the rediscovery of the Arab Exhibition, and hence the cultural scene of the 1930s. Catalogues from the exhibition were looted by the Zionists and later uncovered by the historian Nadi Abusaada in the archives of the National Library of Israel, who detailed the history of the

event in exhibitions and in the recently published book *Resurgent Nahda*.² In a tour of ‘Made Present’, Abusaada also noted that of the hundreds of exhibitors from the Arab Exhibition of 1933, there are still around twenty about whom little to nothing is known. Shomali and Zarour, along with Abusaada, are among those trying to unearth their work from auction houses and to piece together their life stories.

Al Sa’di’s work titled *Untitled (Sheep in the Field)* was displayed alongside the work of the painter Nicola Saig with whom she studied, and whose own work of the same title was saved by Farah Zacharia, a neighbouring collector and souvenir shop owner who preserved Saig’s work for his lifetime. After Zacharia was martyred in his own home by the Israelis, surrounded by Saig’s paintings, his son inherited the works and only learnt of their significance when the Palestinian collector George Al Ama identified them as Saig’s.³ This constellation on the wall underscored the ‘ongoing’ nature of the Nakba: the displacement of Zulfā in 1948 was one rupture, but the loss is compounded by the continued violence on Jerusalem, and the looting of its Palestinian history and culture.



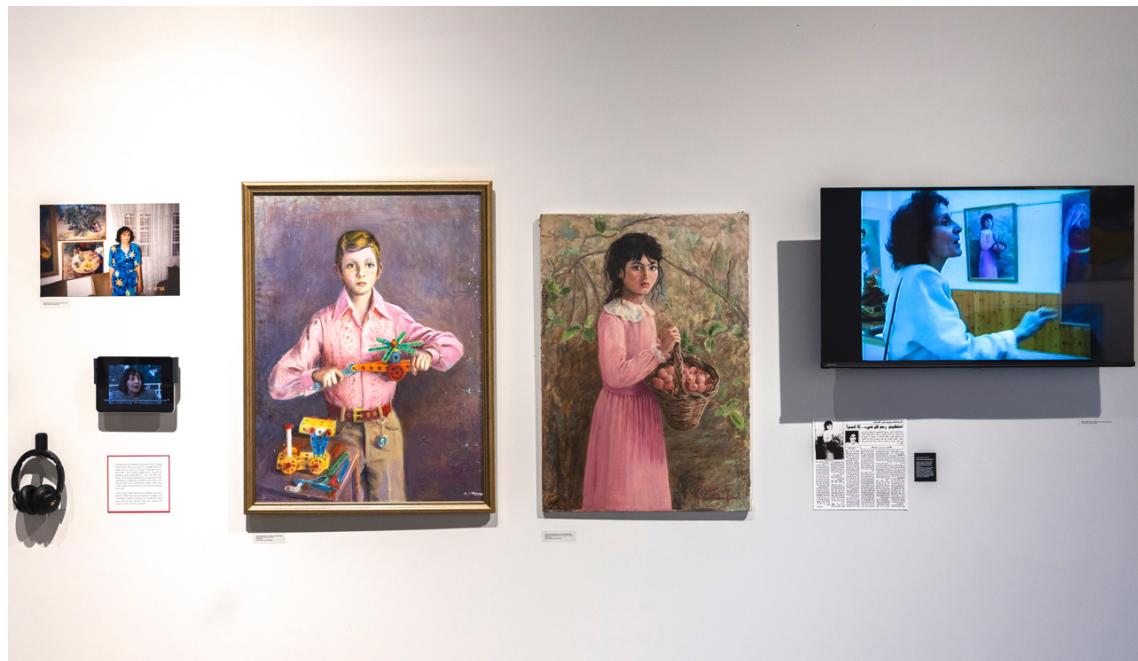
Left: Nicola Saig, *Untitled (Sheep in the Field)*, ca 1920s; right: Zulfā Al Sa’di, *Untitled (Sheep in the Field)*, undated, photo courtesy of Alserkal Arts Foundation

The fate of Jeanette Sarraf-Farah after the Nakba was not so dissimilar to other women of the time. Despite her skill in still life painting and portraiture, the themes of her work were seen as insufficiently political, as characterised by Palestine’s male-dominated art elite at the time. A newspaper clipping quotes her as saying: ‘I can paint anything but blood’. Upon her

² See *Resurgent Nahda: Arab Exhibitions in 1930s Jerusalem*, edited by Nadi Abusaada, with texts by Nisa Ari, Wesam Al Asali, Samira Badran, Nadine Nour el Din, Kirsten Scheid and Sary Zananiri, Kaph Books, 2024

³ See Anastasia Nysten’s interview with George Al Ama: ‘George Al-Ama for Modern Art and Artist Estates: Ways, Works, and Archives Issue’, *Selections*, 30 June 2022, www.selectionsarts.com/george-al-ama-for-modern-art-and-artist-estates-ways-works-and-archives-issue

exile from Gaza to Abu Dhabi, she too was overlooked in Palestine's art history records. Her hyphenated married name also led to confusion in a document of Palestinians who studied and practised fine arts from 1948–1989, where the curators note that her name comes up twice, each time recorded incorrectly. Sarraf-Farah's oil paintings *The Sycamore Figs Seller (The Mona Lisa of Gaza)*, undated, and *Untitled (Portrait of Samy Farah)*, 1979, are contextualised by a video of the 'Nissan Art Exhibition' at the YMCA in Gaza, where her works were hung in 1992. She returned to Gaza a decade later, during the height of the Second Intifada, to retrieve them and take them back to her refuge in Abu Dhabi, where they are still kept by her children.



Archival material surrounding Jeanette Sarraf-Farah's *The Sycamore Figs Seller (The Mona Lisa of Gaza)*, undated, and *Untitled (Portrait of Samy Farah)*, 1979, photo courtesy of Alserkal Arts Foundation

The role of familial inheritance as a measure of preservation is so often taken for granted, until it is not, as in the case of Sophie Halaby (1906–1997). Her works were hung on the exhibition wall delineated by a newspaper headline from the year 1933 that read: 'A young Arab woman excels in Fine Arts'. The headline ran through her portrait, and her works were dispersed on each side of it to enact a pre- and post-Nakba timeline. These are among works that were abandoned in the garbage after Halaby was deceived by a lawyer who stole her home in Jerusalem. With no male relatives to advocate for her and no children to uncover her losses, it was only through a stroke of luck that the works were found by a Jerusalem souvenir shop owner who claims to have stumbled upon the artworks and kept them before they were purchased by collectors.

The narrative written by the co-curators that accompanies these life-stories is necessarily intonated with the language of speculation. In regards to the souvenir seller's version of history, Shomali reacts: 'It is worth noting that this is a claim... there is no way of verifying it.'

He might have been selling them on behalf of the lawyer or had bought them from the lawyer.’ An excerpt from *Sophie Halaby in Jerusalem: An Artist's Life* by Laura Schor was included, recounting possible routes of internal displacement for Halaby and her works. It reads: ‘It is possible that she packed them in [her sister] Asia’s car and was driven with them into the Old City. It is more likely that Asia secured help from British officials to move the paintings. It is also possible that Russian clergy aided her in bringing out paintings and in storing them.’⁴ The use of speculative language to contextualise an ethnically cleansed history is no failure of certainty but precisely the point of the exhibit: not to bow down to an absolution of absence, but to historicise and curate with a defiance, a keen eye and an abundant curiosity.



Artwork and archival material from Sophie Halaby's life, photo courtesy of Alserkal Arts Foundation

Defiance was in the very exhibition title and can be viewed as the curators' methodology. A defiance to the 'Ongoing Nakba', verbalised in the exhibition title, is articulated by the story of each artist and each artwork whose fate has been defined by its ripples – none more urgently than contemporary accounts from Gaza.

The Nakba's urgent present is Gaza. Mohammad Hawajri and Dina Matar fled their home and studio in Al Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza after the start of the genocide in October 2023. In February 2024, they returned from their internal displacement camp to their home now in rubble, to pack remaining works before fleeing Gaza for Cairo, and eventually the UAE. A video played in the exhibition, showing Hawajri and his sons amidst

⁴ See Laura S Schor, *Sophie Halaby in Jerusalem: An Artist's Life*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York, 2019

the rubble of their building, removing staples that fix canvas to wooden stretchers so they can be rolled up and carried in exile. Above the screen, untitled works made earlier that year by Hawajri and Matar hung side-by-side in stylistic contrast but devoted companionship, invisibly dusted with the residue of the Gaza art scene and their life there.⁵



Top left: Mohammad Hawajri, *Untitled*, 2023; top right: Dina Matar, *Untitled*, 2023; below: photographs and video of the artists packing up their work in Gaza, photo courtesy of Alserkal Arts Foundation

The exhibition includes five other works that have been retrieved from Gaza. In fact, it could make up its own genre: works that were conceived and intended with the artist's original vision, then retouched, reframed and retitled 'collaterally' by the damage of Israel's incessant bombardment of the strip. It could be assumed that the works from Gaza across this exhibition were bruised and torn by, and only just narrowly escaped, this genocide, but Hazem Harb's *The Exchange* (2002) caught fire during the 2008 war on Gaza, and Raed Issa's *Window of Hope* (2014) was disfigured in 2014.

Raed Issa's *Window of Hope* has been punctured by what looks like bullets, its lower edges etched like a coastline by flames. It was exhibited alongside other damaged paintings in Gaza's Eltiqa Gallery, one of Gaza's many cultural institutions that now lie in rubble. Issa, shown here standing on piles of ruins from 2014 is, unlike this work, still in Gaza, and still

⁵ The video, filmed when Mohammed Hawajri and his family returned to their ruined home and studio in the Al Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza on 2 February 2024, is viewable on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=s99cSOA3hJ8



Raed Issa, *Window of Hope*, 2014, photo courtesy of Alserkal Arts Foundation



Hazem Harb, *The Exchange*, 2002, featuring the dedication, photographs and art case tailored by the artist's brother Fathi Harb, photo courtesy of Alserkal Arts Foundation

defying wreckage by making art, and running painting and drawing workshops with children in the tents of his internal displacement camp, helping to provide a sense of beauty or escape from daily suffering.

Hazem Harb's *The Exchange* was mounted along one side of the frame such that the back of the painting is seen first as the main subject. This is done to reveal a dedication evidencing a Gaza tradition whereby artists gift their works to one another in case one of them gains acclaim and their value appreciates, but also by the wartime logic that dispersing them serves to protect the artist's memory if any person or place is destroyed. The work is slightly burnt, and vinyl lettering on the wall read: 'The burn is part of the artwork.'

Harb had visited Gaza over the summer of 2023 and left in September just before October 2023, taking with him this work and a few others in a newly tailored art case his brother Fathi had sewn for him. Harb captured a photograph of art tubes too large to carry before leaving them behind, which hangs on the wall in the exhibition so as not to forget what was lost as we memorialise what remains. Harb's brother Fathi, and his friend to whom he gifted the work, Basel Maqousi, are still in Gaza where Fathi tailors necessities such as winter blankets using alternative energy like a bicycle-powered sewing machine, and Maqousi, like Raed Issa, hosts creative workshops for children in his tent.

In front of a wall that served as a sort of cul-de-sac for the exhibition, Laila Shawa's painting of a cactus entitled *Gaza* (1965) is displayed as a sculpture.⁶ Shawa, who passed away in 2022 at the age of 82, was the daughter of Rashad Al Shawa, Gaza's mayor from 1971 to 1982, and had helped build Gaza's Rashad Shawa Cultural Centre, which was bombed several times even before it was complete. Born in Gaza, she studied in Cairo and Rome and Vienna, and had lived in exile in London since 1987. The canvas was showcased here as a forensic report, revealing the injuries and bruises it had braved over multiple Israeli attacks on the Shawa family home in Gaza. The cactus is, after all, a symbol of *sumud*, or resilience, in Palestinian art.



Exhibition wall featuring the Shawa family living room, with Laila Shawa's painting *Gaza*, 1965, with a vitrine that shows the back of the canvas where the work had been damaged and repaired, photo courtesy of the author

⁶ A replica of *Cactus* was created for the first week of the exhibit as the work was delayed in transit.

The gallery wall was covered with a full-bleed photo of the family's living room where the work had hung. A young man, seemingly Laila Shawa's nephew, sits on the couch under the work and his life-size presence at eye level fills the room as if saying: 'I too was there'. So often in post-war history, artefacts are made more valuable, but human life is not. As this genocide has turned the Gaza living room into a banal site of annihilation, it is not difficult to see the presence of young Shawa reaching for a pencil atop a pile of books as a reminder of Gaza's lost youth, and its many emerging, and future, artists and writers now buried and lost.

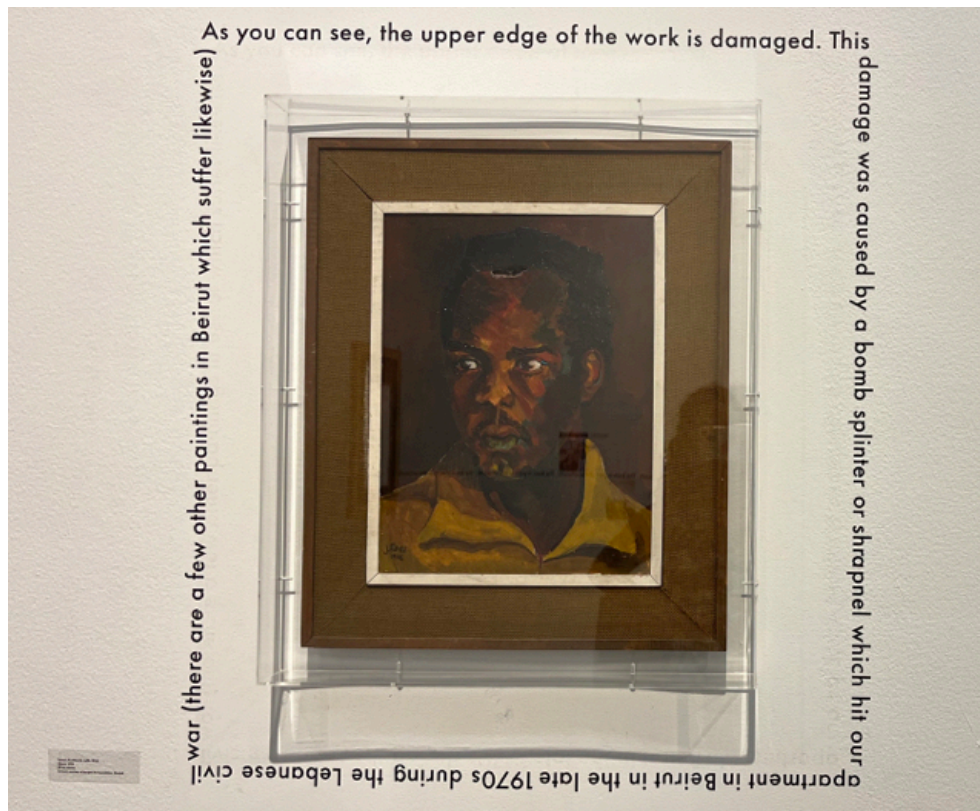
The narrative around the work includes a Facebook post by Laila Shawa on 19 March 2019 during the Art Dubai art fair when this work was sold. The post reads:

One of my oldest surviving paintings sold today at Art Dubai. The painting has been hanging at my Father's home in Gaza since it was painted in 1965. My home was bombed by the Israelis in 2009, and the painting was badly damaged. With the help of a friend, George Al Ama, and the Gaza Artist Ayman Issa, I managed to get it out of Gaza and it was restored with George's kind efforts. Happy to know it went to a very valued collector. Many thanks to my dear friend George for saving it, and to Ayman Issa for picking it up and taking it off its stretcher and sending it to George. What would one do without such good friends?

The artist's gratitude for the artist and collector carries with it an audible relief, that of sharing the burden of the work's survival and preservation. In this exhibition, the role of the collector was present beyond the customary courtesy mention in artwork captions; they are an integral part of the artwork's destiny. The Palestinian or Arab collector is more of an archaeologist, retaining history against its erasure. George Al Ama has stated: 'We need to do this because we were prohibited and prevented from keeping our own archives in Palestine. Even our private libraries at home were ransacked and taken by the Israelis between 1948 and 1967. Thus, we are trying to piece things together from abroad. We draw on a network of good relations to serve the larger cause of completing our knowledge of Palestinian art.'⁷

Framing Tamam Al Akhals' *Sliman* (1974) are the words of her son in his correspondence with Sultan Sooud Al-Qassebi, collector and founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, based in Sharjah. It reads: 'The upper edge of the work is damaged... caused by a bomb splinter or shrapnel which hit our apartment in Beirut in the late 1970s during the Lebanese civil war.' It also reads: 'My parents decided then to keep these damages as a remembrance of these dark days, unless the new owners of the works would like to have these damages repaired.' While the Palestinian artist defies erasure by painting against the orientalist grain, and the curator foregrounds the works of Palestine's overlooked artists, the collector of Palestinian art defies erasure by sustaining the retelling of Palestinian stories, and often that looks like retaining the work's damage too.

⁷ See Anastasia Nysten's interview with George Al Ama, op cit, www.selectionsarts.com/george-al-ama-for-modern-art-and-artist-estates-ways-works-and-archives-issue



Tamam Al Akhal, *Sliman*, 1974, photo courtesy of the author

Two walls of the exhibit met at a corner with two seemingly separate narratives interconnected in the story of Sliman Mansour's *Woman with a Dove* (1984). Each wall touches on the two lives of the painting. One wall, which featured the intricate artwork in a glass display, traces the roots of the *Woman with a Dove*'s embroidered *thobe*. A series of references from the *thobe* itself recalls cultural heritage as an example of the artist and the collectors' duty to preservation. The other wall showcased a print of an earlier, smaller work of Mansour's, a study of the *Woman with a Dove*, raising questions as to the study's whereabouts. A video interview with Mansour and the curators challenges his memory of his journey from the study to the final work. The story of the study is entangled with the history of Gallery 79, where it was once shown.⁸ Gallery 79, the first artist-run gallery to open in Ramallah in 1979, and the site of an Israeli crackdown ahead of the Palestinian Art Festival in 1980, is chronicled in newspaper clippings and an interview with yet another exiled female artist, Faten Toubasi. They tell the story of creative collective resistance under occupation, one which led to the infamous interrogations where Israeli soldiers informed artists that they were banned from depicting the colours of the Palestinian flag in art, leading to the subversive use of the image of a watermelon as a symbol of Palestinian resistance.⁹

⁸ A newspaper indicates that Sliman Mansour's study was part of the exhibition; however, Mansour is unable to confirm this from memory.

⁹ See Armani Syed, 'How the Watermelon Became a Symbol of Palestinian Solidarity', *Time*, 20 October 2023, <https://time.com/6326312/watermelon-palestinian-symbol-solidarity>



Sliman Mansour's *Woman with a Dove*, 1984, in a glass case surrounded by archival material, photo courtesy of Alserkal Arts Foundation



Mustafa Al Hallaj, *Untitled*, 2001, photo courtesy of the author

An untitled work from 2001 by the formidable Mustafa Al Hallaj depicts a silkscreen print of a cattle herd on linen. It was a lifetime of displacement from Yaffa to Cairo, to Beirut to Damascus, that forced Al Hallaj's hand from making sculpture to woodblock printing. Tragically, he lost his life in 2002 trying to save his work from a house fire in Damascus.

These layers of loss, from country to practice to home to work, are tied together in a quote that begins with 'I am free inside my art' and ends with 'When I die, the last orange tree in Salama dies too'.¹⁰ The quote circled the work on the exhibition wall as if the herd of cattle could run in any direction but never find refuge.

A final work situated on the wall perpendicular to the exhibition's entrance was intentionally placed so that it would be missed on the way in to the gallery space, but noticed on the way out. It is an old landscape work of *The Tomb of Rachel* (date unknown) in a classical frame by Aram Haschadour.¹¹ Shomali and Zarour came across the painting and swiftly purchased it at an auction sale merely a month before the exhibition opening. It was accompanied in the exhibition by an invitation to visitors to share any information they may have about the painting and the artist, thus highlighting the role of the public in sustaining art, based in our duty to retain our history. This show was, after all, a visual historiography of Palestinian people, of families, of kin.



Aram Haschadour, *The Tomb of Rachel*, date unknown, oil on wood, photo courtesy of the author

Stumbling upon Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi's post about this on Instagram, Talia Bishara, granddaughter of the Palestinian artist Nahil Bishara,¹² shared the contact of Haschadour's

¹⁰ Salama is a village in the Yaffa region of Palestine, where Mustafa Al Hallaj was from.

¹¹ Aram Haschadour is one of the artists named in the catalogue of the Second Arab Exhibition in Jerusalem.

¹² See Talia Bishara, 'Why I've dedicated my life to preserving my Palestinian grandmother's artistic legacy', *The National*, 7 October 2024, www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art-design/2024/10/07/nahil-bishara-palestine-artist

grandson with Shomali and Zarour. Pieces of the artist's world will come together slowly, and I relish imagining a future constellation for Haschadour on the wall of Shomali and Zarour's curation.

In the UAE, art travels more easily than the artist, and it is allowed to intonate politics louder than artists and non-artists alike could do in speech. Yet, it is worth noting that this is where the Barjeel Art Foundation lives, where Shawa's *Gaza* sold during Art Dubai, where Sarraf-Farah moved in the 1970s, where Harb relocated to in the 2010s, and where Hawajri and Matar finally reunited their family after much difficulty in 2024. One year ago and only steps away from this exhibition space, the Alserkal Foundation held the exhibition 'On This Land' in partnership with The Palestinian Museum and the Barjeel Art Foundation, which became one of the largest exhibitions of Palestinian art anywhere in the world and is now travelling, showing in Bahrain in October/November 2024. Having seen both exhibitions, 'Made Present' gives in depth what 'On This Land' gave in breadth, both spaces in service of communal grief and solidarity. Collectors such as George Al Ama and Al-Qassemi, and members of the Shawa and Farah families, as well as a great nephew of Gaitanopoulou Thorogood, attended the exhibit, their presence an intimacy underscored by the act of rewatching.

The act of witnessing and the duty it bears necessarily raises questions of sufficiency and positionality in solidarity. The exhibition space in a Gulf capital is a loaded place to bear witness, much less grieve. But arguably, isn't that the case even on our very iPhone screens? And then again, is there a more literal, or rather a more poetic way to bear witness than to breathe new life into Palestinian art as a living archive? This exhibition showed us that absolution is an impossible ideal; it is how we seek truth and then what we do with it that matters. So, the words 'Defiance' and 'Ongoing Nakba' in the exhibition title matter a great deal, especially here and now.

Reem Farah is a writer and researcher. She completed an undergraduate degree in International Relations at the University of Toronto, and a Master's in Migration, Mobility and Development Studies from SOAS, University of London. She has written for *Jerusalem Quarterly*, *Third Text* and *Migration and Society*, and publishes independently on the intersection of politics and culture.