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Crossing Gaza's borders

The innovative Artist Pension Trust puts culture over conflict



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(Reuters)

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Testing the boundaries of art and conflict

How an art organization founded by an Israeli entrepreneur, an Israeli economist and a Jewish American museum director is helping to support Palestinian artists

• YARDENA SCHWARTZ

Until just a few months ago, curator Yasmin Sharabi had never been to the country she considers her homeland. Growing up with her father's stories of Palestine, Sharabi felt a connection that stretched beyond boundaries.

Born in Greece and raised in Bahrain by an American mother from South Dakota and a Palestinian father from Jaffa, Sharabi visited Ramallah in January. It was her first time on Palestinian soil, and the conditions that brought her there were serendipitous.

The Artist Pension Trust, an organization that offers long-term financial security and international exposure to select contemporary artists around the world, had asked the Bahrain-based Sharabi to curate a unique exhibit of art from Gaza.

Sharabi spent the next half a year devising a theme, and choosing the artists



YASMIN SHARABI, the curator of 'Traces.' (Yardena Schwartz)



FAWDA (CHAOS) by Rasha Abu Zayed, 27, is the manifestation of the artists' emotions in the face of hardship.

and pieces of art that would be on display. Her preparation culminated in “Traces,” an unprecedented exhibition held in Ramallah last week.

With her father's memories of Palestine in mind, and her perception that Palestinian culture is insufficiently documented, Sharabi's idea was for the artists to explore the personal significance of memory, remains, evidence and reminders, and “consider the importance of documentation and its impact on the present cultural condition in Palestine.”

On a literal level, the concept seems as political as art can get. But the artists spoke their own language, a language that defied expectations.

Of the 40 artists showcased at the exhibition, only a handful chose blatant political interpretations, such as a painting of what artist Ashraf Sahwi called “freedom fighters.” This type of art was undoubtedly in the minority, as the vast majority of exhibition works depicted more universal images, with messages that could speak to people of any nationality.

“I don't like to make political art because when people hear that an artist is from Gaza, people already have an idea in their mind of what they will see: the intifada, violence, war, struggle. People think that if you're from this area you don't have culture.”

— Mohammed al-Hawajri



MOHAMMED AL-HAWAJRI painted the portrait of a Palestinian woman, Maryam, whom he remembered as tending her animals near his home in Wadi Gaza, a place he describes as once being a very green and fertile area, today a barren wasteland as a result of the conflict.

One of the more noticeable works upon entering the exhibition was an abstract painting of a cactus, a plant the artist Mohamed Abusal described as a symbol of strength, patience and determination. Another was a psychedelic recreation of a childhood toy, which the artist Dalia Abdulrahman used as a playful way to reminisce about “the simplicity and joy of her youth.”

Some artists sought to challenge the concept deliberately, as they perceived the politicization of Palestinian culture to be all too predictable.

“At first I didn't like the theme because I thought it was political,” said Mohammed al-Hawajri, who traveled to Ramallah from his home in Gaza. “I don't like to make political art because when people hear that an artist is from Gaza, people already have an idea in their mind of what they will see: the intifada, violence, war, struggle. People think that if you're from this area you don't have culture.”

Instead, Hawajri painted the glowing face of a beautiful woman surrounded by an azure field of cattle and orange groves. The



‘DOLL’ BY Dalia Abdulrahman
(Courtesy ATP)

title of the piece was *Maryam and the Rest of Memory*, and it symbolizes his mother's memory of Gaza's past.

While some artwork had a distinctly universal appeal, others appeared undeniably similar to Israeli art. One painting of a Palestinian woman in a traditional dress could have been mistaken for a Sephardi rabbi, Sharabi admitted. A painting of multicolored homes based on one artist's grandmother's memory of life in Palestine resembles Israeli depictions of old Jerusalem or Jaffa.

The similarities seem to say that the divisions between Israelis and Palestinians aren't so vast after all.

Sharabi, who called the process of organizing this exhibition one of her “most pivotal, life-changing experi- >>

ences," was not at all surprised that the art evoked such universal memories, or that many pieces shared similarities with Israeli art.

"I think that as humans in general we've had similar experiences, when we think about the past and the way we were raised," she said. "It's amazing to think about the commonalities between different cultures."

That sentiment was summed up in a speech at the exhibition by David Ross, co-founder of the Artist Pension Trust and director of the APT Institute, the nonprofit arm of the APT, whose mission is to support and advance the careers of contemporary artists through international exposure.

"Art is a world without borders, where all artists are brothers and sisters," Ross told the crowd of dozens of artists and art enthusiasts gathered on the balcony of the sophisticated high-rise building in Ramallah that hosted the exhibition. The rolling hills of Jerusalem could be seen in the distance, along with the security barrier separating Jerusalem from the city.

This is the conflict of all conflicts, after all, and not even art is immune to the power of politics.

Here, even art has borders.

While the works of 40 Gazan artists were on display at the exhibition, just 13 of the artists themselves were able to attend the event and stand beside their art.

For some, it was a simple case of scheduling conflicts, as one artist was doing a residency in Paris and another was home caring for her newborn baby. But others who did wish to accompany their artwork were not given permission by the Israeli government. Those who were granted permits were notified less than 72 hours before the exhibit, and had to leave Gaza immediately to begin their complicated journey through checkpoint after checkpoint.

Thus, three days before the event, or-

ganizers were operating under the probability that they might have an exhibition of 40 artists' work, but no artists.

"We all actually thought that none of them would come," said Sharabi. "We were just so thrilled."

Lidia Fabian, an APT spokeswoman, said that even if artists couldn't attend, the mere display of their art was no less important.

"It's Gaza. We all know what we usually talk about," said Fabian. "We think it's important to show that there are artists there. We can build a bridge between them and the rest of the world. Offering a different perspective of the region is also important; these artists don't have much opportunity to get exposure in the world."

For artists in Gaza, the simple idea of traveling to another Palestinian territory is a rare opportunity. According to the UN Development Program's Program of Assistance to the Palestinian People, which helped coordinate the event, this may have been the first large-scale exhibit of Gazan art in which the artists were physically there to showcase their work.

It had been 14 years since the last time Bassel Aklouk was in Ramallah. When he got the news that he would be allowed to attend the exhibition, he was overwhelmed with excitement.

"This is very, very good news for me," he said. "We are under siege in Gaza, so I didn't expect to get a permit."

Among the notable speakers at the event was UNDP special representative Frode Mauring. He seemed a bit less excited than Aklouk.

"The fact that they were able to secure a permit is terrific, but it would be much more terrific if every Gazan had the freedom of movement to travel," he said.

"But of course we know that there are legitimate security concerns that create this situation," he conceded.

Still, Mauring added, "the real problem



MAHA AL-DAYA poses with her painting, 'Khlidah,' which emphasizes the importance of embroidery in Palestinian culture, being passed down through generations of women.

in Gaza is the inability to sell their products outside of Gaza, and art is one of those products. You can't send a quality painting via the Internet. Nothing substitutes seeing a piece of art in front of you."

According to Abusal, the artist who painted the cactus, the situation in Gaza and the travel restrictions that come with it have severely stifled his career. He has been fortunate enough to exhibit his work abroad, including in France and the US, but not nearly as much as he would like to. Often when people attend exhibitions, they want to meet the artist

of art. Each pool is overseen by a team of eclectic, international curators who select talented, promising, up-and-coming artists to join APT.

Artists who wish to take part in the trust must agree to donate 20 works of art over the course of a 20-year period. For the first five years, the artist gives APT two works a year. Over the next five years, they donate one piece a year, and one every other year for the remaining 10 years.

In turn, the trust agrees to take care of those works for the artists by storing

It's art, mixed with a cup of capitalism, and a healthy sprinkling of socialism.

before purchasing his or her work.

"I have lost a lot of opportunities to be an art resident, or to participate in many exhibitions," said Abusal. "It's not easy to take my art out of Gaza. There is no insurance company to help me pack it and get it to galleries outside Gaza. Sometimes foreigners here help us, but we have to make small things that people can take out of Gaza with them."

The downside to this – aside from not being able to accompany his art – is that he's lost art over the years by sending it with other people, or shipping to galleries without insurance. In some cases, his work never made it to the gallery, or the gallery kept the piece and never returned it.

Like many artists, not just in Gaza, Abusal finds it hard to make a living as an artist. He hopes that his participation in this exhibition with the APT will help make his life as an artist a little easier.

Neither Abusal nor any of the artists whose work was on display at the APT exhibit in Ramallah are actually a part of the APT – at least not yet.

them, conserving them, and lending them to exhibitions, galleries and museums, a practice that can serve to increase the work's value. The trust also arranges for the sale of individual artwork, but only when the trust considers it to be a good time for a piece to return to the market, which could be anywhere from five to 25 years down the road.

Each of the nine trusts has the capacity to host between 250 and 628 artists, and every artist benefits from the success of others in the pool. For each piece of art APT sells, 40 percent of the net proceeds go directly into the account of the artist who created that piece of art, while 32% is channeled into the collective retirement fund of all of the artists in that specific trust.

The APT itself receives the remaining 28%, which covers the operational costs of running the trusts: storing, conserving, insuring and transporting the artwork, and paying dividends to outside investors.

Mixing art with capitalism

When Ross co-founded APT with Israeli entrepreneur and art collector Moti Shniberg and Hebrew University professor Dan Galai, whom Ross calls "a finance and economic genius," the idea was to "find a way of encouraging artists to hold on to enough of their work



ARTISTS FROM Gaza pose with members of the Artist Pension Trust at the opening of their exhibition, 'Traces,' in Ramallah last week. (Yardena Schwartz)

so that at the end of the day, 20 years down the road, that work could then be brought to the market at its appreciated value," said Ross, former director of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art.

"It defies the quick money logic of today's art world and it does so for a very specific reason, which is to say 'how can artists participate in the appreciation of the value of their own work?'" said Ross. "There's no problem in collectors enjoying that value, and the market working the way it does using auctions and galleries, but the people being left out are the artists, ironically."

In essence, Ross, Galai and Shniberg created a retirement plan catered to a profession in which neither retirement nor retirement plans are part of the vocabulary.

It's art, mixed with a cup of capitalism and a healthy sprinkling of socialism.

"It's not about paying your rent next year or buying more supplies tomorrow," said Ross. "It's about encouraging artists to think about their financial future in a logical and grown-up way. And you know, most artists are happy to do that, but they've never had an instrument that allowed them to do that, because they don't get pensions. No one's putting money away in their 401(k). It just doesn't happen. So this is the best we can do."

While the 40 artists featured in the Ramallah exhibit are not yet affiliated with APT, two have since been nominated to join the Dubai trust, which includes artists from the Middle East, North Africa, Cyprus, Greece and Eastern Europe. If those nominees are chosen by the selection committee of 15 curators who oversee the Dubai trust, they will be the first Gazans to become APT artists, a distinction that will mean not only increased international exposure, but a serious investment in their financial future.

There is a chance that neither of the nominated artists from Gaza will make it through the strict selection process, which is why the APT did not divulge the artists' names.

"This is the system that ensures that we select the best artists and the best emerging artists, and that system is beneficial for the other artists in the trust," said APT spokeswoman Fabian, who noted that artists from Gaza face a steeper climb. "It's harder for them to meet the standards, which sounds unfair, but that's why we did the exhibition. We may not be able to invite them into the trust, but we can give them publicity and exposure."

Apart from Gaza, the organization already has Palestinians among its ranks of artists, along with Israelis.

A total of 39 Palestinian and Israeli artists are affiliated with APT, and the majority of them are grouped together in the Dubai trust, since most of them are based in the Middle East. While the APT system does not differentiate between them, and categorizes the region as Israel/Palestine,

the majority of the artists are Israeli Jews, according to Fabian.

When the New York-based Ross flew to Israel last week for the Ramallah exhibit, he visited the studios of some of APT's Israeli artists. One of them was Dafna Shalom, who is coming up on her first year with APT, and said that despite her early reservations, she is happy she joined.

"At the beginning, I hesitated because you're giving up 20 pieces of art for the next 20 years," Shalom said from her home studio in Tel Aviv.

"But it sounds like what you're gaining from it is going to be more valuable during your pension time."

Since becoming an APT artist, Shalom has had more studio visits, made new connections for international shows, and gained valuable advice from APT curators and Ross himself.

"It works on three different levels," noted Shalom. "One is the connections you gain from being part of a network, the other is the feeling you get from being part of a wider artist community, and the third level is the financial aspect."

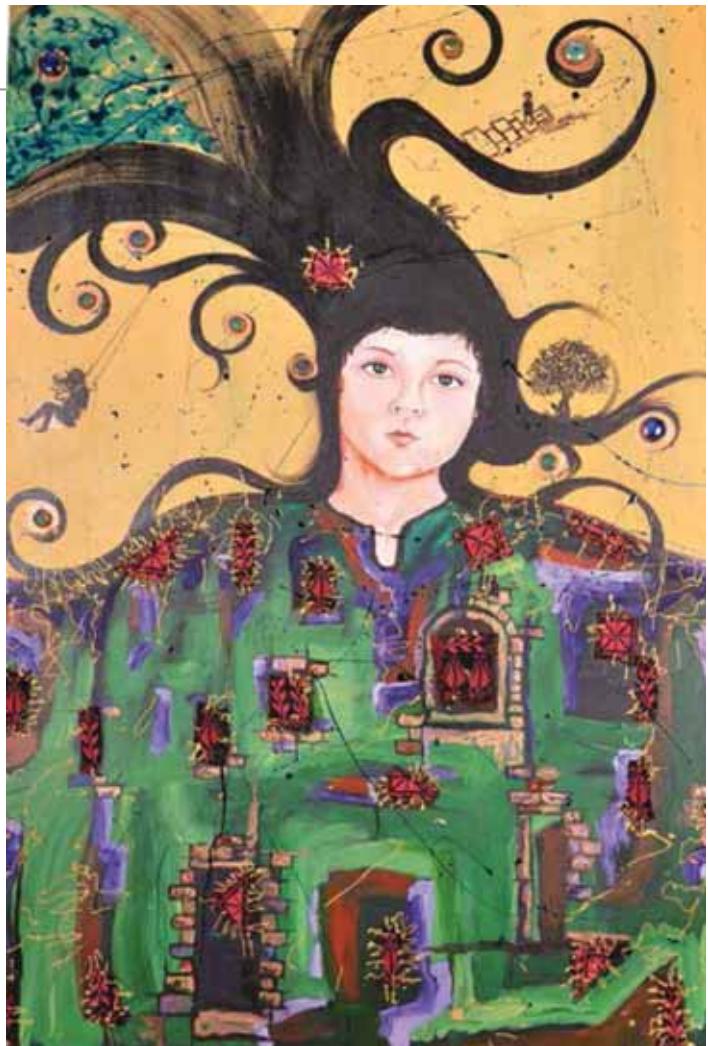
The Israel connection

Ten years since its inception, APT claims to hold the world's largest curated collection of contemporary art, with 10,000 artworks from 2,000 artists in 75 countries.

And yet the fact that the APT was co-founded by Israelis and supports the work of Israeli artists has not been the deterrent to Arab artists that some might expect. The organization works with many Arab artists, and operates in several Arab countries, including Turkey, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

Curator Sharabi said that the Israeli roots of the organization never made her think twice.

"If we're able to expose Palestinian art to the world, what could possibly be wrong with that?" she asked. "When you start boycotting art, what hope is there? You can't boycott creativity. I think that when you do that, you're heading down a slippery slope."



'PERTINENCE' BY Maysaa al-Bardaweal

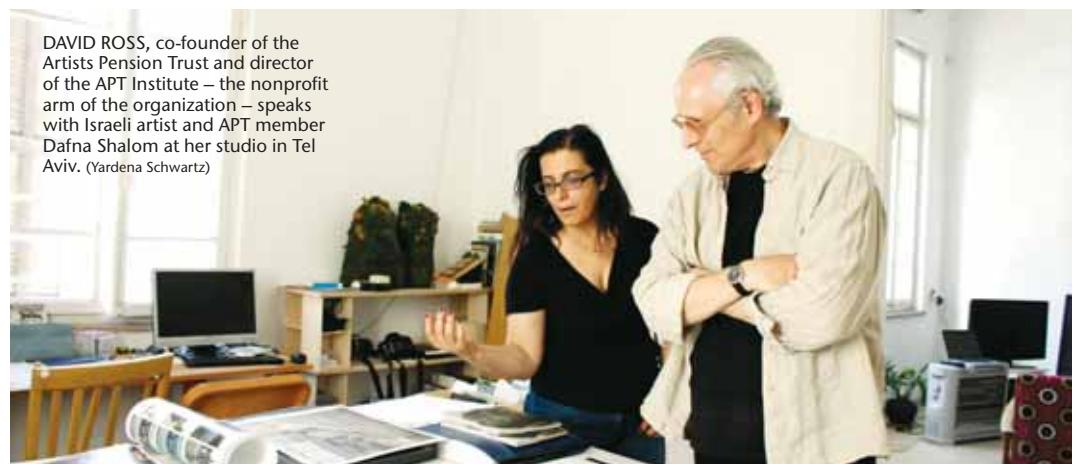
Abusal, who hopes to join APT, said that when he first heard about the organization, he did some research, because he had heard that it was Israeli. After doing his homework, he decided that as a Palestinian, the nationality of the APT founders didn't bother him at all.

"For artists, we sometimes don't think through politics and religion. We have our own language: It's art. And we don't put borders between our art."

"But," he added, "some artists do

think in political ways." Indeed, there was a dialogue about this issue among the artists in Gaza, who shared a variety of opinions, some of them less warm than Abusal's.

"But we must change minds," Abusal insisted. "We must get outside of the closed circle we're in. If I want to be an international artist, I need to exist with everyone. If I wanted to be the other way, I wouldn't be able to communicate my art to the rest of the world."



DAVID ROSS, co-founder of the Artists Pension Trust and director of the APT Institute – the nonprofit arm of the organization – speaks with Israeli artist and APT member Dafna Shalom at her studio in Tel Aviv. (Yardena Schwartz)