

reviews



“From Palestine with Art”: Dreams of Sovereignty and Acts of Resistance at the 2022 Venice Biennale

exhibition review by Rachel Winter

For the 59th Venice Biennale, curator Nancy Nesvet and the Palestine Museum US in Woodbridge, Connecticut, organized the Collateral Event “From Palestine with Art” at the Palazzo Mora (European Cultural Center). “From Palestine with Art” presents the work of nineteen contemporary Palestinian artists who invite audiences to imagine a new landscape and way of life in a liberated Palestine. The exhibition interweaves moments of joy with themes of struggle, resistance, and injustice. The artists and curators turn away from gratuitous images of suffering and violence to embrace creative forms of fighting and solidarity where happiness and presence is a radical act of resistance. As Israel continues to occupy Palestinian land and execute unprovoked military actions against unarmed civilians, the exhibition shows that Palestinians are still here. Their presence, even if far from the Biennale’s main events, is a visual argument for liberation, while its physical distance is indicative of the ways that many aim to neglect the current situation.

“From Palestine with Art” is both spatially and cognitively separate from the Venice Biennale’s main sites and attractions. At 2.7 kilometers from the Giardini, and 1.8 kilometers from the Arsenale, the event is distinctly removed from the primary landscape. To reach the exhibition, one not only traverses the labyrinthian Venetian streets, but also passes by many other small, independent exhibitions operating outside the Biennale’s confines. “From Palestine with Art” is the only Biennale event at the European Cultural Center, which does not offer any financial or ideological support. The

Venice Biennale’s only assistance is to recognize the exhibition as a Collateral Event, meaning it is included in the official program, and that the event may utilize the lion logo. Collateral Events, however, also come at the hefty price of a 25,000-euro participation fee.



Figure. 1. Installation shot, “From Palestine with Art,” featuring work by Nabil Anani. Photograph by the author, courtesy of the author, Faisal Saleh, and the Palestine Museum, US.

“From Palestine with Art” is designed to unpack the particularities of Palestinian landscapes, geographies, cultures, and people. Upon entering the exhibition, the sounds of an *oud* transport you away from Venice. The first view presents the lush olive trees and verdant rolling hills of Palestine (fig. 1). Directly below the exhibition title is Nabil Anani’s *In Pursuit of Utopia #7* (2020), a painting which expresses a longing for a thriving Palestinian nation on a bountiful land abundant with viable produce. Such a geography is shaped by people who live freely and thrive on their territory. As the title suggests, Anani’s work proposes a potential future for Palestine—if it were given the right to exist.¹

¹ In 1917, the Balfour Declaration announced British support for Jewish populations to have a home in Palestine, and soon after, Palestine became a British mandate. In 1948, Israel proclaimed itself a state,

To so vividly evoke Palestine's sovereignty at the Venice Biennale is to question the idea of the nation-state that organizes and defines the event and the ways we think about exhibiting nationalism on a global stage. Since 1895, the Biennale's main site has been the Giardini, which is comprised of a large, central building that features an international group exhibition, and twenty-nine national pavilions belonging to mostly European countries.¹ The other key site is the Arsenale, a former production center transformed into a venue for the Architecture Biennale in 1980. Many non-Western countries have pavilions here, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of Kosovo, Lebanon, Indonesia, Ireland, Malta, and most recently, the Sultanate of Oman. This allocation points to a hierarchical world order tenuously constructed along the lines of the Global North and Global South. Countries without national pavilions, such as the Syrian Arab Republic or Nepal, must lease space in Biennale-approved venues throughout the city in a process similar to those planning Collateral Events. Because Palestine is not recognized as a nation by the Italian government, it cannot have a national pavilion at the Giardini or Arsenale.

Notably, Collateral Events offer an alternative opportunity for representation and participation for those who want to engage the Biennale's vast audiences, but who also wish to, or are forced to, remain on the event's peripheries. These audiences are what drew the Palestine Museum US to participate. As the museum's director Faisal Saleh explained to me, he applied for an exhibit at the Venice Biennale because it is the apex of the art world, and it has many visitors. Saleh did not think the proposal would be accepted because Palestine is a "radioactive" term in Europe and a controversial subject for many American museums. However, "From Palestine with Art" was invited to participate after a lengthy review process. Saleh is excited that the Biennale and its curators wanted to "give people a voice who did not have a voice."²

and the United States was quick to recognize its authority. The events of 1948, which were prefaced by years of violence, strife, and colonial encounters, are referred to by Palestinians and historians as the *nakba*, meaning catastrophe, referring to the destruction of Palestine and displacement of Palestinians in an effort to build an Israeli state that excluded Arab populations. Much of mandatory Palestine became present-day Israel. Since then, the Israeli government and army have perpetuated targeted violence against Palestinians and continued to forcibly displace, erase, and eradicate Palestinians to bolster an Israeli state in a process known as genocide. Remaining Palestinian territories are now occupied, and many Palestinians live under brutal, neocolonial conditions while facing ongoing genocide. On this history, also see: Adila Laïdi-Hanieh, "Contemporary Palestinian Cultural Paradoxes," in *Palestine c/o Venice*, ed. Salwa Mikdadi (Beirut: Mind the Gap, 2009), 22-24.

¹ "La Biennale di Venezia: History 1895-2021," last modified date unknown, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history>. The exception to this is the Egyptian pavilion, which is located at the Giardini.

² Faisal Saleh, Conversation with the author, October 21, 2022. Palestine also had a Collateral Event in 2009 curated by Salwa Mikdadi, which was Palestine's very first Biennale participation. See: Salwa Mikdadi, ed., *Palestine c/o Venice* (Beirut: Mind the Gap, 2009).

“From Palestine with Art” illuminates a collective mosaic of those who identify as part of a nation without a free territory. The exhibition’s arc moves clockwise around the room from landscapes to the idea of lived experiences, beginning with two paintings by Ghassan Abu Laban and another by Suzan Bushnaq (fig. 2). In Abu Laban’s *Jidar* (2022), two faces peer out from behind a wall formed through blocks of color and paint drips. Abu Laban’s gestural, abstract approach renders a hard barrier into something soft and flexible. The act of navigating barriers, walls, and other obstacles is one well-known to those living in the Occupied Territories. Yet two faces appear from behind the wall in an act that commands their presence in the face of exclusion and erasure as an act of resistance and a demand for sovereignty, one that perhaps begins by demolishing these walls.

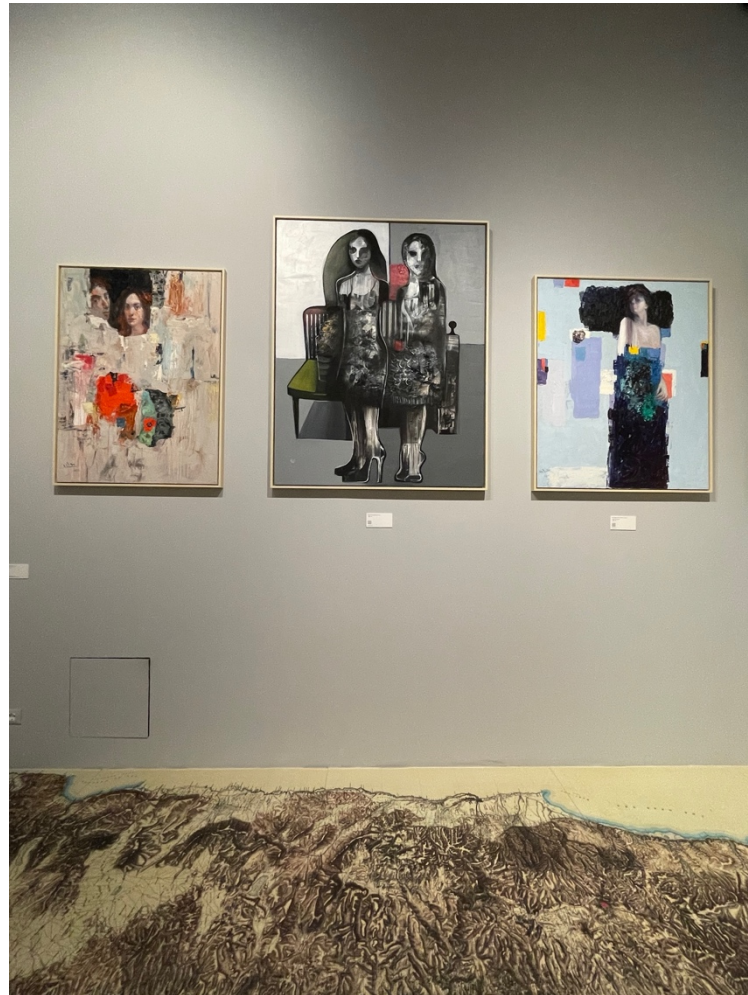


Figure. 2. Installation shot, “From Palestine with Art,” featuring work by Ghassan Abu Laban and Suzan Bushnaq. Photograph by the author, courtesy of the author, Faisal Saleh, and the Palestine Museum, US.

Indeed, it is not only the painting that is an act of resistance, but the exhibition itself by defying the silence around Palestine and Israel’s domination of art and news media, including at the Venice Biennale. Israel’s pavilion is located prominently next to that of its key ally: the United States. This year, the U.S. pavilion received a great deal of attention, and rightly so, for exhibiting the larger-than-life sculptures of Simone Leigh—the first Black woman to represent the U.S. at the Biennale. *Simone Leigh: Sovereignty* addresses the “construction of Black femme subjectivity” while adopting and adapting vernacular architectural forms. Her ruminations on these complex questions are rendered through “materials and processes associated with the artistic

traditions of Africa and the African diaspora.”³ These lines of inquiry become part of the pavilion’s architecture, which is outfitted with straw and thatch. Next door, Israel’s white Bauhaus-inspired modernist pavilion exhibits Ilit Azoulay’s *Queendom*, whose inkjet prints on lightboxes question themes of sovereignty.⁴ By exploring an interconnected Middle East through archives of Islamic art, Azoulay employs images and their transformational capacity to consider art’s sovereignty, hypothesizing what could happen if we think about art beyond national representation.⁵ The intimate proximity of the two pavilions is an architectural monument to the relationship between the U.S. and Israel and speaks to their political alignment against Palestinian statehood.⁶



(left) Figure 3. Intervention at the Israel Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, October 6, 2022. Photograph by the author. (right) Figure 4. Installation shot, “Queendom.” Photograph by the author.

³ “Sovereignty,” last modified 2022, <https://simoneleighvenice2022.org/sovereignty/>.

⁴ “Israel: Queendom,” last modified unknown, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/national-participations/israel>.

⁵ Notably, questions about national representation were also posed by Palestinian writers and thinkers at the 2009 Venice Biennale. See: Vittorio Urbani, “What if...? “Come sarebbe se...?”,” in *Palestine c/o Venice*, ed. Salwa Mikdadi (Beirut: Mind the Gap, 2009), 7.

⁶ While the US pavilion was erected in 1930, Israel’s pavilion was constructed in 1952. This architectural relationship was also mentioned in 2009. See: Mikdadi, *Palestine c/o Venice*, 9.

The irony of the U.S. and Israel's inquiry into sovereignty was not lost on attendees. During my visit on October 6, 2022, I witnessed a radical political intervention unfold outside Israel's pavilion. Four young women, who switched between Arabic and English, wrote phrases decrying Israel's violence on free exhibition trifolds explaining Azoulay's work (fig. 3). In a remarkable transformation of the ordinary, one of the girls used her lip gloss to write "Free Palestine." The four hung their posters on the pavilion's title, a prominent place that obscured the official text and caught the attention of audiences as they entered and exited (fig. 4). Soon after they placed their signs, the pavilion's attendant saw them, photographed their signs, and called security. The girls whispered *yalla* to each other repeatedly (meaning hurry, or let's go in Arabic) before scurrying off. The attendant removed the signs, and the *carabinieri* (military national guards) soon caught up with the girls. After an extensive conversation, it seems they were released, and some of them attended other Biennale events the next day.



Figure 5. Installation shot, "From Palestine with Art," featuring work by Jacqueline Béjani and Samia Halaby on the left, and Nameer Qassim, Mohamed Khalil, Mohammed Alhaj, and Karim Abu Shakra on the right. Photograph by the author, courtesy the author, Faisal Saleh, and the Palestine Museum, US.

Sovereignty is also central to "From Palestine with Art." On the third wall, there are nine portraits by Jacqueline Béjani titled *Palestinian Portraits* (2022), and Samia Halaby's new painting *Venetian Red* (2021) (fig. 5). If the figures in previous paintings were abstract representations, Béjani provides recognizable faces to the broader imaginary of a Palestinian population by depicting well-known figures, including poet Mahmoud Darwish, painter Samia Halaby, and actress Hiam Abbas, among others. Many of Béjani's subjects are vocal proponents of Palestine's sovereignty and use their creative platforms to call out Israel's violent occupation. Below Béjani and Halaby's works is Salman Abu Sitta's re-creation of an 1877 Map of Palestine (fig. 6). This juxtaposition of people and place metaphorically returns individuals to stolen land and calls attention to Palestine's erasure from cartographic records after Israel's founding.



Fig. 6. Installation shot, "From Palestine with Art," featuring work by Salman Abu Sitta. Photograph by the author, courtesy the author, Faisal Saleh, and the Palestine Museum, US.

Additional figural works to the right of Béjani and Halaby's paintings further reiterate calls against neocolonial injustices (fig. 5). In Nameer Qassim's *Enough* (2020), two hands unite in a gesture intended to represent a rejection of the violence that takes away life and dreams. Likewise, in Mohamed Khalil's *The Salt Worker* (2021), which

hangs over Mohammed Alhaj's *Immigration* (2021), and next to Karim Abu Shakra's *Cyclamen* (2021), the challenges women face related to low wages and immigration are placed against the context of the land women are supposed to nurture.

The final wall continues the theme of women's resilience (fig. 7). On the wall, Mohamed Alhaj's sculptures reference the way displaced bodies move through space by utilizing and layering abstract shapes that mimic human forms. Nadia Irshaid Gilbert's photograph, aptly titled "Woman Carries the Weight of our Past and Future," hangs between the sculptures, foregrounding the role women play as advocates for women's rights and supporters of the ongoing battle for self-determination. Below, four photographs by Hanan Awad, Rula Halawani, Rania Matar, and Lux Eterna, and sculptures on pedestals by Sana Farah Bishara, honor the way women find their identities and craft their own representations amidst these hardships.

Saleh explained that if people leave the exhibition and say "yes there are Palestinians and there is a Palestine," then they've accomplished their goal. During the exhibition's seven-month run, roughly 400-500 people visited each day, and generally responded positively. The Biennale's choice to accept "From Palestine with Art" is a hard-won achievement in a long and continuous fight for recognition. Epitomized by the actions of the four girls at the Israeli pavilion, the fight for liberation is one marked by past, present, and future acts of resistance.

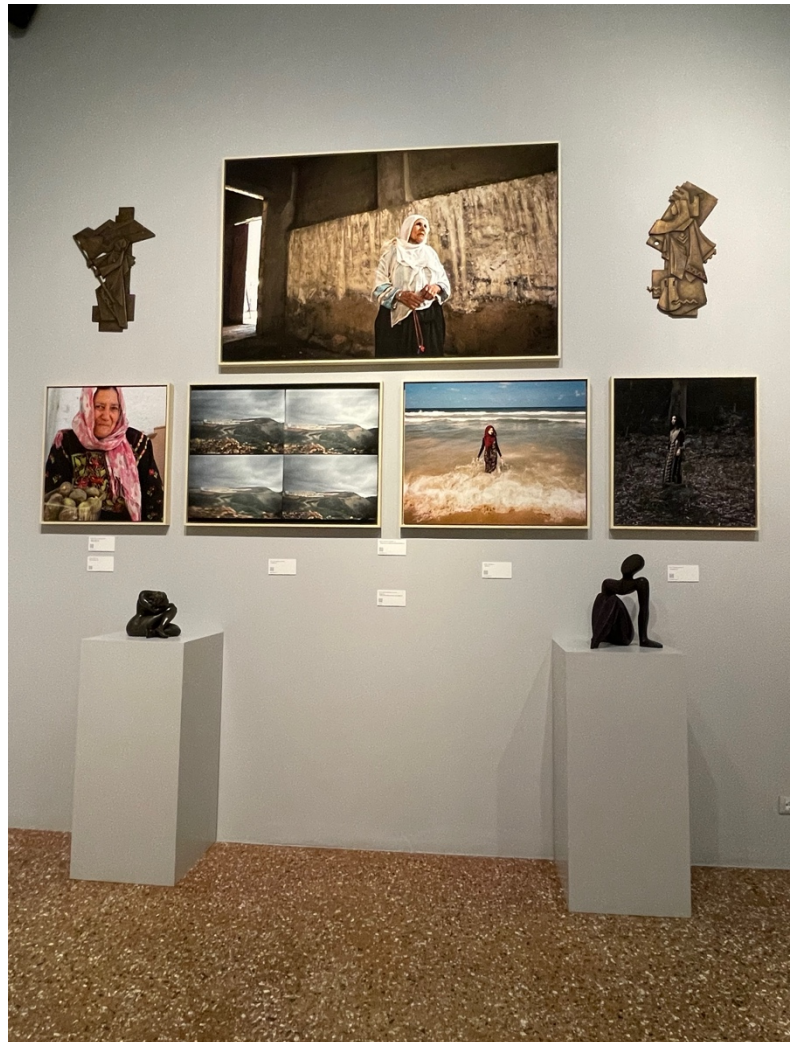


Fig. 7. Installation shot, "From Palestine with Art," featuring work by Mohamed Alhaj, Nadia Irshaid Gilbert, Hanan Awad, Rula Halawani, Rania Matar, Lux Eterna, and Sana Farah Bishara. Photograph by the author, courtesy the author, Faisal Saleh, and the Palestine Museum, U.S.

I asked Saleh about his future plans, and he said that “this is just the beginning.” This too represents a step toward a potential future in which museums and biennales position Palestine and Palestinian artists front and center.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the editorial team and the anonymous reviewers at react/review for their insightful feedback and support throughout the publication process. The author also wishes to thank Faisal Saleh at the Palestine Museum US for speaking with the author about developing the exhibition and participating at the Venice Biennale.

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