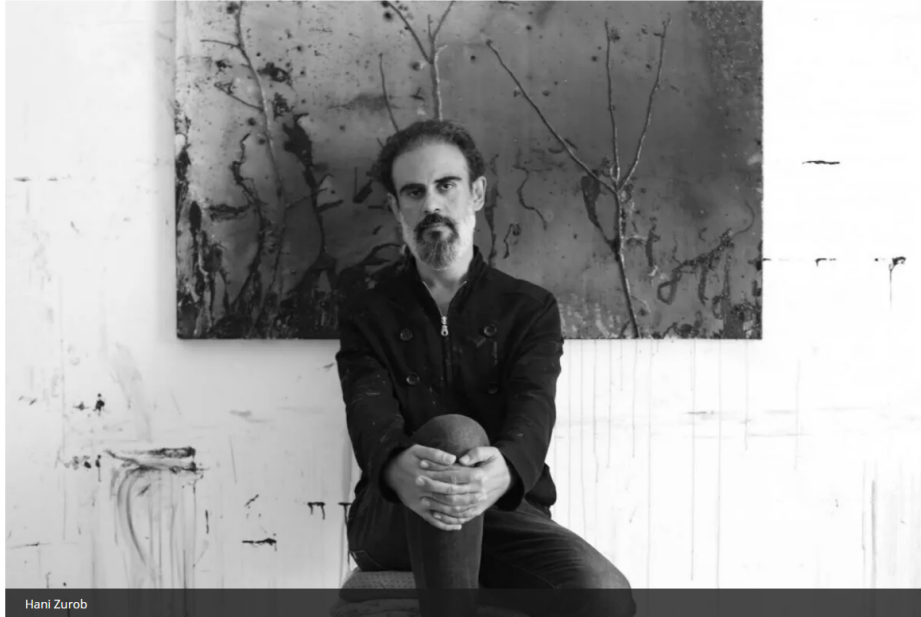


Floating in tar: interview with Palestinian artist Hani Zurob

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Hani Zurob

Naima Morelli [@naimamorelli](#)

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When we think of political art from Palestine or elsewhere, very rarely do abstract paintings come to mind. We would rather think of militant canvases in a realistic style, photographs depicting injustice, installations criticising power ever so subtly. Abstraction, on the other hand, is like music without words; it elicits emotions, but the framework is absent. We can read all sorts of messages into abstraction; it's something that opens up a dimension, but this is not specific. It can be a direct representation of the artist's inner state, regardless of the outer circumstances that give colour and shapes to such feelings.

But can the inner world of a Palestinian really be devoid of political connotation? For Gaza-born, now Paris-based artist Hani Zurob, this is a question worth exploring through the art itself. His vivid paintings are powerful expressions of the Palestinian collective experience, but can also be seen in the context of more universal themes of personal identity and the struggles of humanity.

For him, the artist is neither a historian nor a political analyst; and art is not a matter of talent but an adventure: "I feel that my work has nothing to do with politics but is a simple view of my private life, where occupation and its heavy repercussions go into all details of anyone's daily life in Palestine," he once wrote.

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Today, he still dwells on the meaning of the word "political": "I am continuously researching within the tangled spaces of the personal, the collective and the human," he tells me. "I'm persistently digging and reflecting on myself and my being an artist who is both Palestinian and human. I feel accountable and I seek the truth in my art; I seek to invite the viewer to delve into the ultimate space of humanity without capitalising on their emotions, without tastelessness."

The artist slowly transitioned to abstraction from figure-based painting, always maintaining strong attention to the hardships of the occupation. The majority of his paintings are created using tar, acrylic and mixed media. The choice of bitumen as a basic material comes from the psychological background of his childhood in the Rafah refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, marked by the First Intifada. The visual memories he retained from that time were all in black and grey. He still recalls how, after forty days under curfew, he and his family came out from their homes to discover a completely dark outdoor space, thoroughly brushed with bitumen. Those early reminiscences slowly resurfaced in his art.

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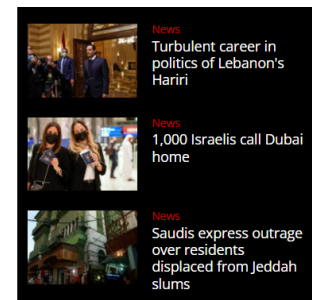
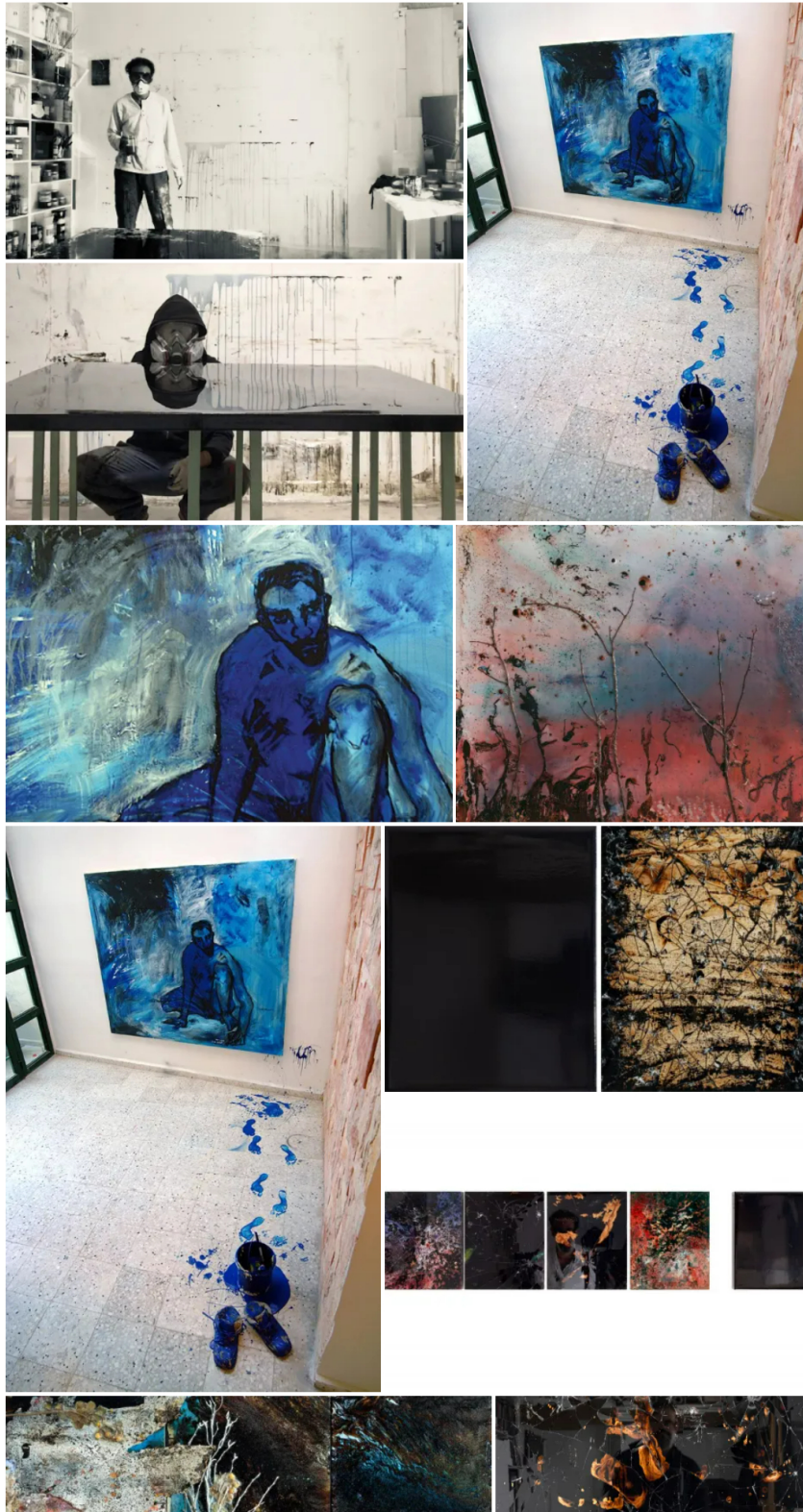
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He went to study art in Nablus, and later moved to Ramallah in pursuit of a more active cultural scene; he ended up living there from 1999 to 2006. This was a difficult political period which included the Second Intifada. "At the time the art scene was very limited. There were very few exhibitions for foreign artists, who only came by invitation from Palestinian institutions in Ramallah."





As a Palestinian from Gaza living in Ramallah – whose status was illegal according to the Israelis — the threat of deportation was always present; it ended up having a big impact on his life and art. "It urged me to maintain a constant search within myself to discover its true fields of strength. Painting and drawing became for me a way to expose and uncover the soul."




Those anxieties were encapsulated in his series "Siege", realised from 2004 to 2006. This was Zurob's first attempt to unblock the anxiety deriving from the threat of being imprisoned or deported. He considers this body of work to have laid the foundations in his consequent research, based on an inner journey.

His work "A Song: If I Say No, I Mean No", was created in response to the traumatic experience of being arrested by the Israelis, and detained for 52 days in the notorious Ofer Prison, west of Ramallah: "From that point on, it became apparent to me that danger is a reality, but more so, I understood that fear can only cripple you," he says. "When I was freed, I embarked, along with my artist friend Mohammad Saleh, on establishing the Young Artist Forum — now called the Visual Arts Forum — aimed at teaching art as a form of mental, emotional and psychological support for children suffering from the occupation."

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A turning point for him was when he travelled to Paris for an artistic residency in 2006, and was forbidden to go back home. "For a Palestinian who is in exile it is difficult to quantify or qualify one's losses; your struggles for your right to live become a constant. As for my gains, they lie in my art practice and art; my art is my heaven, it is the compass of my Self and Soul without which I am lost. When one is not deeply connected to one's Soul, life will be gruelling."

Living in France for many years now, he still feels deeply connected to his homeland, but his art has changed from an act of exteriorising pain, to an act of exorcising hatred. "I reached that point through my constant inner quest into the Self and the journey to purify the Soul," he explains. "This for me is my victory over any form of threat."

His latest, ongoing series is called ZeftTime. The word "zeft" is Arabic for tar, but it is also used to describe a state of mind of discouragement or of repulsion. For the series he uses abstraction to reflect on Palestine, as well as on the Covid-19 pandemic. The 2020 explosion which destroyed Beirut, with broken glass being the main cause of death, was also something that he wanted to comment on in the series.   

ZeftTime uses tar and broken glass to harrowing effect, as a metaphor for a shattered society. Looking at the work, the sensation is to be in a moment where time stands still. The works seem to suggest that amid tragedy there is no time to think and make up a narrative around what is happening; there is only the absolute presence of the emergency. "This is the law of time," Zurob points out. "Every passing moment is a new opportunity for a complete change."

The paintings were realised again with the use of fresh tar, this time squeezed between glass and wood boards. He then incorporated his reflections of the breathing challenges during the pandemic, by shattering the glass surface and allowing oxygen to penetrate in measured intakes, controlled through cracks. As the tar was drying, he allowed in more and more oxygen, creating arbitrary coloured forms.

In the abstraction of ZeftTime we can see a symbol for the many layers in which Palestine tries to live, as well as the struggle of the individual who wishes to be like water — to use a well-known metaphor — but often finds himself in darker and thicker substances.

"I sought all my life to learn how to swim and float in water, but I failed," concludes Hani Zurob. "Today, I manage to float in zeft and even walk on its surface."

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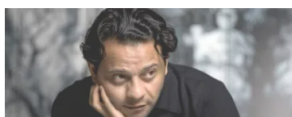
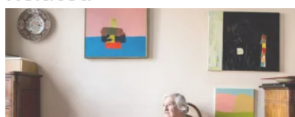


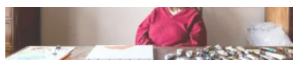
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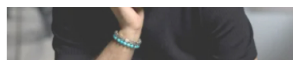


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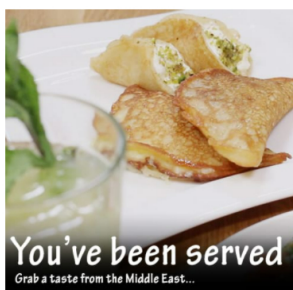
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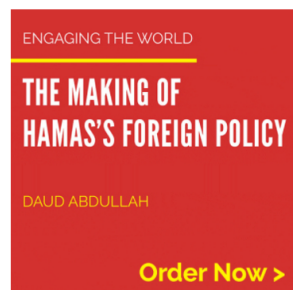
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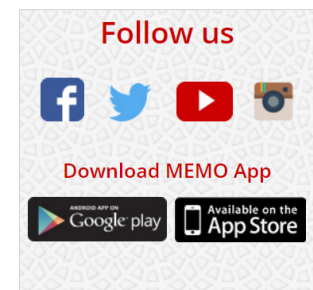
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