

The Visual Arts Forum nurtures Palestinian youth into the world of art

May 25, 2022 at 1:34 pm | Published in: Article, Israel, Middle East, Opinion, Palestine



Visual Arts Forum

Naima Morelli [@naimamorelli](#)

May 25, 2022 at 1:34 pm



It all started with a simple conversation among Palestinian artists some twenty years ago. It was right after the outbreak of the Second Intifada that some of the most recognised Palestinian artists on the scene, including Muhammad Saleh Khalil and Hani Zurob, started discussing how to use art as a tool to express the devastating political and social reality in which they were living.

"At the time of the Israeli invasion of the West Bank," recalls Rafat Asad, "we were all living in the same area, in Beitunia, a little town next to Ramallah." Born in Nablus in 1974, Asad is an artist who produces sound and light installations, videos and performances, although he describes himself as a painter first and foremost focusing on the Palestinian landscape. He has been with the Visual Arts Forum since its inception, and works there as an art teacher, while developing the Forum's gallery programme and supporting students setting up shows and travelling to art fairs.

Asad points out that in 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip, there were no art schools in the Ramallah area; most teachers were giving lessons in private houses. "Young people were hanging out in the streets doing nothing, and we were thinking how we could help them. We really wanted to help them overcome the trauma, and we decided to use what we know best: art."



TRENDING THIS WEEK

- 01** **News**
Sisi suggests Egyptians eat tree leaves as prices soar
- 02** **Article**
UN Resolution 181 must be repealed: The creation of...
- 03** **News**
Restrictions on Jordan's Prince Hamzah are 'truly bizarre', Queen...
- 04** **Article**
The Scottish government is silencing Palestinians
- 05** **News**
Student waves Palestinian flag, refuses to shake US Sec...

Stay Updated

Subscribe to receive our newsletters straight to your inbox.

Subscribe

LATEST NEWS

May 26, 2022 Israel again refuses to perform urgent surgery on Palestinian female prisoner with severe...

May 26, 2022 PA warns Israel's Flag March will ignite widescale escalation

May 25, 2022 Algerian Court acquits Bouteflika's brother of 'interfering in the work...

May 25, 2022 Man who flew on umbrella announces aim to become Turkiye's...

May 25, 2022 Egypt wants to shift focus to developing countries in climate...

May 25, 2022 Ayman Hadhoud's family presses Egypt authorities for CCTV footage of...

May 25, 2022 UAE sending crude to Europe for first time in 2...

May 25, 2022 Israel builds the largest new West Bank nature reserve on...

LATEST VIDEOS





Most of the artists involved in the Forum have all worked with local communities before, and they started by establishing art workshops in Palestinian villages and cities. This led to the founding of the Visual Arts Forum in 2002; today it is a leading Palestinian institution in the field of culture and visual arts.

The beginnings

"The Visual Arts Forum started in the streets with the idea that art is an important tool for transformation," explains Deema Ershaid, the Forum's Executive Director. "Palestinian artists felt a strong sense of responsibility during that phase, a feeling that they had to do something; they wanted a say in what was happening; they longed to be a part of people's lives." The artists travelled all over the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, with their art supplies and tools in their bags. "They walked through valleys and across the hills, passing through many Israeli checkpoints to reach the most marginalised communities."



Visual Arts Forum

According to Asad, it was really incredible to see some of his artist friends doing so well with young people. He started to teach classes mostly to adults, and in the beginning, his focus was more on technique and skills. As his initial involvement was part-time through planning, teaching classes and workshops, he managed to continue with his own art practice in parallel. "If you are an art teacher, you have to have developed your own art practice," he tells me, "otherwise you'd just give information without any lived experience. What we want to teach our students is not just art techniques, but most of all how to live as an artist."

A true labour of love, before becoming an institution the Visual Arts Forum was supported by the artists' own financial resources. At the end of 2002 it became a non-profit organisation and was officially licensed and registered by the Palestinian Interior

Ministry in Ramallah: "It was a very difficult process, because at the time there was much official paperwork to do with a lot of scepticism about art," Ershaid points out.

WATCH: Gaza resident keeps Palestine's heritage safe within his home

For the initial project application the artists exaggerated the resources that they had available to increase their chances of getting accepted. "In the application, they wrote that they had a space, computers and art supplies which they didn't actually have at that stage," she laughs. "However the application was approved and they were informed that the donors would visit them in three days. So group had to find and furnish a place quickly. With no money, Wisal Khalil Mohammad's wife sold her car, and the group managed to find and rent a place, buy two desks and chairs and a computer. And with the arrival of the donors, they were satisfied, and the Forum got the funding. It hasn't looked back."

Art for all

Most people who are involved with the Visual Arts Forum today have had a personal connection with the school. Deema Ershaid herself used to be a student there. "I have loved drawing and colouring since I was a little girl, and as my parents are both physicians, I wanted to make them proud through drawing human anatomy. So I joined the Forum, I took art classes and master classes and workshops and participated in many exhibitions, and became a member of the board. The forum opened up new horizons for me, but I studied accounting and finance, did my master's degree, and eventually found a non-art job at a well-known institution with a good salary. I've always yearned to be more involved in the art scene, though, so when the board asked me to consider managing the Forum, I had no doubt; I had to come back to what I loved most, namely art."



I'M 22 AND I LOST 22 MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY, GAZA ARTIST SAYS

A Palestinian who survived an Israeli attack on her family home which killed her mother and 21 members of...



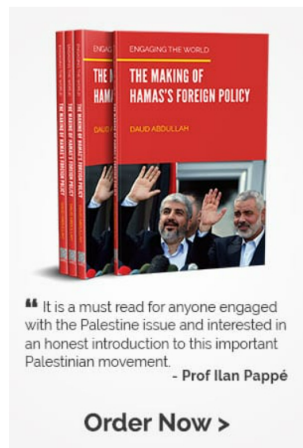
Israel an apartheid state: MEMO in conversation with Prof. Michael...



News
Woman of Lebanon descent appointed as France Culture Minister



News
Turkish Foreign Minister arrives in Palestine





She tells me that the basis of the school is that art is for all. "Anybody can join the school, in Palestine and worldwide; it's for anybody who wants to be involved in art, whether they want to become artists, or just art appreciators; if they are children or seniors who are retired and look for a creative outlet."

There are no preconditions for membership of the Forum, and there are no mandatory classes. "You come because you want to learn, and through time you give and receive trust and loyalty from students towards the idea of art as an important tool in one's life."

The Forum's new directions

Despite the Forum starting with a secondary focus on drama used in psychosocial support for traumatised children, right now the focus is solely on visual art. "This makes us different. We have a niche, a competitive advantage in that area, using visual arts in community awareness, psychosocial support and advocacy for human rights, and so on.

However, evolving in an everchanging world is something that is always at the forefront of the Visual Arts Forum's strategy. "For example, we know that technology is crucial in our world today, so we developed a programme called 'Economic Empowerment for Youth using Arts', which includes intensive courses in animation, illustration and graphic design, with the idea of having students entering the job market at the top level."

OPINION: Art can play a role in post-conflict recovery

After twenty years of accumulative effort, the Forum is at the stage where results efforts are palpable. Deema and Rafat show me a catalogue from 15 years ago which has pictures of young people and their art at the forum; many have become acknowledged artists and active participants in the Palestinian and international art scene.

In this sense, the Forum's gallery space — "For now it's just a wall we use to exhibit work," explains Asad, "but we are planning to develop the space into an actual gallery" — also functions as a learning tool. "It's a process for teaching our students how to present their work, allowing them to get familiar with the process and structure of creating an exhibition, from the physical location of the paintings to the lighting and the captions. It's one of the core topics in the advanced courses at the school. The entire process is a learning tool."



Visual Arts Forum

New projects are being developed. From 26 to 29 May the Visual Arts Forum is participating in the Stockholm Supermarket Art Fair. Moreover, in July it will have its first art residency, which will host for seven days Palestinian mid-career professional artists, graduate art college students and students from the Forum's school of arts as well as international artists with their students from Belgium.

The artist and the community

Rafat Asad says that the Forum started with the idea of introducing young Palestinians to the idea of producing art, and allowing them to access art systematically and continuously, especially for those who are based in the West Bank, including Jerusalem. However, in the past few years, it is expanding more and more towards focusing on the public. "Our vision with the Forum is to convey what it means to be working as an artist professionally. To be an artist you can't just lock yourself in a studio; I believe that you have to be connected with your community."

In conclusion, Deema tells me that everyone at the Forum wants Palestinians to feel that art is an important tool in their life. "If art could become as important as a topic as politics in Palestinian families, I'd say that our biggest dreams have become reality."

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Monitor.

Categories Article Israel Middle East Opinion Palestine

4 Comments



Unless otherwise stated in the article above, this work by Middle East Monitor is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. If the image(s) bear our credit, this license also applies to them. [What does that mean?](#) For other permissions, please [contact us](#).

Spotted an error on this page? Let us know



Related



Establishing a Palestinian presence at the 2022 Venice Biennale

April 28, 2022



Floating in tar: interview with Palestinian artist Hani Zurob

January 26, 2022



'I am Libya': 24-year-old artist Shefa Salem re-imagines Libyan history

November 23, 2021



Writing Palestine

Celebrating the tenth year of the Palestine Book Awards

Order Now

[SHOW COMMENTS](#)

Latest Opinion Pieces Read our blogs & in-depth articles



Africa

Your Majesty: Say sorry to mark your Platinum Jubilee and help end that poisonous history

May 26, 2022



Article
Jerusalem is not an internal Israel affair to be discussed b...

May 26, Dr Faysal Abu Shamaleh



Article
Erdogan's vowed military operation returns spotlight to...

May 25, Reuters



Article
The Visual Arts Forum nurtures Palestinian youth into the wo...

May 25, Naima Morelli



Article
Erdogan's vow to expand Syria operations raises stakes ...

May 24, Reuters



Article
The Scottish government is silencing Palestinians

May 24, Yvonne Ridley



Article
Iraq and the options for its political crisis

May 25, Iyad Al-Dulaimi



Article
Imran Khan could be up against spies, lies and black propaga...

May 25, Yvonne Ridley



Blog
Subtle shift in US rhetoric suggests new Iran approach

May 24, Reuters



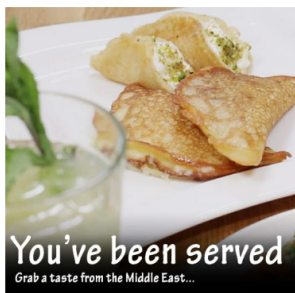
Blog
New Australian PM will probably retain support for Israeli c...

May 24, Ramona Wadi



Article
Lebanon's biggest challenge is real change, but it does...

May 23, Dr Amira Abo el-Fetouh



You've been served
Grab a taste from the Middle East...

ENGAGING THE WORLD

THE MAKING OF
HAMAS'S FOREIGN POLICY

DAUD ABDULLAH

Order Now >



Follow us



Download MEMO App



