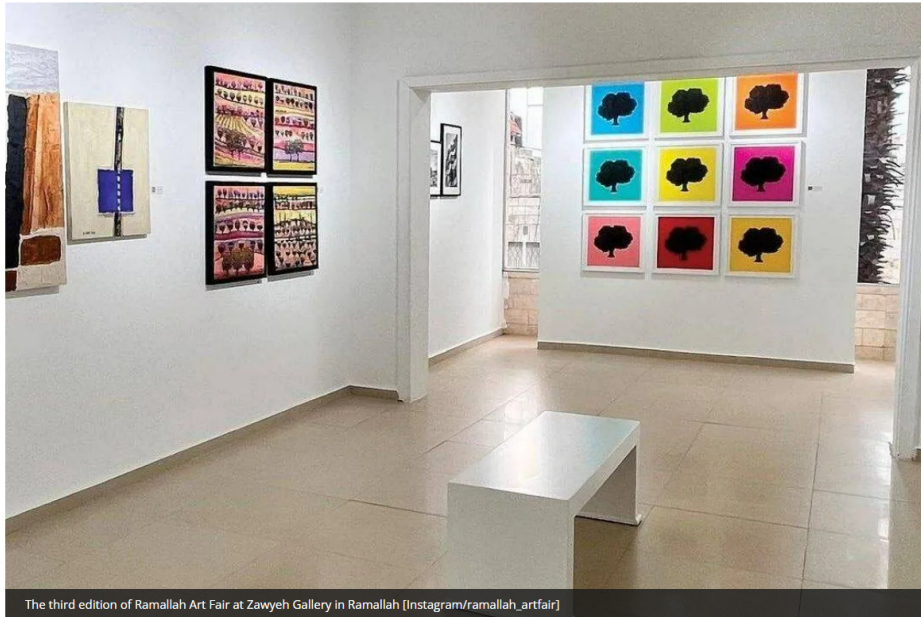


The 3rd Ramallah Art Fair supports the health of Palestinian art

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The third edition of Ramallah Art Fair at Zawyeh Gallery in Ramallah [Instagram/ramallah_artfair]

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For the next few weeks, the 3rd Ramallah Art Fair is creating a bridge between the local and the international art worlds to nourish Palestinian artists and their collector base. The fair is due to close on 23 February.

This is becoming the favourite time of the year for Palestinian art lovers, not least with the fair in place, which opened on 12 December. It is a huge collective show, which has expanded in a physical sense and online year by year.

The fair is being held at Ziad Anani's Zawyeh Gallery in Ramallah. Online, it has been designed to cross geographical boundaries and allow the public across Palestine and elsewhere to view the artwork on show.



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"Ramallah and Palestine are at the margins of the art world," the gallery's Yusef Hussein told me. He manages the ground operations of the fair. Such marginality, he said, is mostly due to the difficulties of getting people and goods into the country. Galleries, artists and visitors might have a hard time getting a visa. And the artworks have to go through Israel first, which often means delays, high taxes and sometimes even some being lost.

Aware of these limitations, the Ramallah Art Fair is intended to support young artists from Palestine and build their ties with the international art world. There has been an increase in Palestinian presence at international art events in Europe and the Middle East in the past few years. However, it is much rarer to see international artists exhibiting in Palestine.

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"We want local artists to have conversations with and see the work of international artists," explained Hussein. "It's a way to compare different ways of producing art, how other artists are approaching their own concepts, methods, techniques and their colour palette, and even the commercial aspects of their work. It's all very healthy for the art scene in Palestine."

That's why, unlike previous years, the fair is displaying a large group of Arab and international

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That's why, unlike previous years, the fair is displaying a large group of Arab and international artists exhibiting in Palestine for the first time; they come from Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Norway, Spain and Germany. This is in part due to the Zawyeh Gallery's network of connections, as well as direct, unsolicited applications from artists.

"Even if they are coming from different countries, all of these artists have some sort of connection with Palestine," Hussein pointed out. "They might have done workshops in the region, or are close to the Palestinian cause. Some artists have donated their entire percentage to the children of Gaza. Others might be from neighbouring countries, such as Iraq and Syria."

Compared with the 1st and 2nd Ramallah Art Fairs, this one is more diverse in terms of techniques and mediums, including paintings, photography and sculptures. "The first fair featured just 26 artists; last year there were 32; this year we have 40. This has obviously increased the number of artworks on show, which total more than 200."

He added that greater accessibility was the motivation behind taking the fair online. "For the virtual component, we incorporated

technology that was previously — and successfully — used for other shows at Zawyeh. The idea was to have an experience as close as possible to a personal visit."

Another of the Zawyeh Gallery's aims is to develop collections within Palestine. A particular issue for collecting work by Palestinian artists is that big museums and art collectors are usually overseas, so works that are bought tend to be taken outside the country. "That's why we tried to make art accessible to Palestinian buyers, not only international collectors."



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Accessibility also means having original artworks available at reasonable prices in order to target young art lovers and not just the big collectors who might be the usual Zawyeh Gallery clientele. At the same time, local collectors are educated about new trends. "It is comparatively rare for Palestinians to be exposed to international art, and those who travel are usually only interested in conceptual art or photography."

It's inevitable that a fair taking place in Palestine sees politics entering the picture in one way or another. Sometimes subtle political themes are present in the works on display. At other times artists address the occupation directly. However, most of the works seem to be political in a broader sense, using symbolism and allusions that might relate to Palestine, but are also applicable to other places, depending on the perceptions of the viewers.

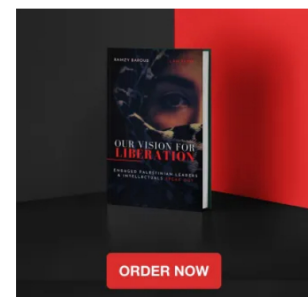
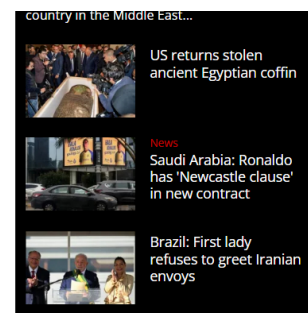
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"Spanish artist García de Marina, for example, has several pieces that are political, but they are not related directly to Palestinian politics," said Hussein. "He tackles the theme of control through the symbolism of chess pieces in his conceptual photographs."

German artist Ulrika Eller-Rueter, meanwhile, presents a series of works depicting enlarged drops of water that the artist has collected from many different countries. This evokes the concept of boundaries, as well as the differences and similarities between people through something as basic as water.

The artwork that has most drawn the visitors' attention, though, is called *Gaza in Beirut*, by Lebanese artist Dia Mrad. This photographic series connects the 2020 explosion in Beirut and the situation in Gaza, as Hussein noted: "In this artwork the artist connects the two countries. Palestinians really love Lebanese food and music, but despite the many connections between our two cultures, you seldom have collaborations between Lebanese and Palestinian artists. That's why visitors are excited to see a Lebanese artist participating with an artwork that tries to connect with us directly."

The 3rd Ramallah Art Fair is already having a positive ripple effect on the Palestinian art scene, encouraging other galleries in the area to start big exhibitions. "It's a whole vibe that is happening and that's great," concluded Hussein. "I think this will be an important platform for artists to evolve in the years to come. It's very health for Palestinian art."





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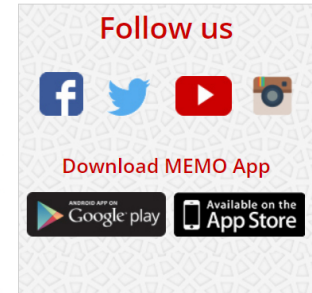


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