



EUROPE & RUSSIA, ISRAEL, ITALY, MIDDLE EAST, PALESTINE, REVIEW - EVENTS & ARTICLES, REVIEWS

Palestine is everywhere at the Venice Biennale this year

Besides the controversy around the closed Israeli Pavilion, we looked at three shows representing different facets of Palestine at the 2024 Venice Biennale

 [1 Comment](#) [April 26, 2024 at 2:32 pm](#)



The "South West Bank" show at Palazzo Mora [Naima Morelli]



by Naima Morelli  naimamorelli



A series of black and white illustrations on translucent paper are hanging in front of a big window in a central room of Palazzo Mora, in Venice. Each illustration represents angular, geometric, expressionist bodies curled on themselves in the narrow space of the page, almost trying to escape its edges, but not being able to. In the black background, bombed buildings, rubble, or a dark sky with a lonely moon.

This work is by Gaza artist Maisara Baroud in the exhibition “Foreigners in Their Homeland”, organised by the Palestinian Museum US. The artist quite literally tore pages from his sketchbook, to be reproduced on these translucent papers for the visitors of the Venice Biennale. The choice of this paper is, in itself, a strong metaphor: between the viewer in the room and the reality outside, there is a filter made of images of Gaza, that even the most cheerful Biennale visitor who just came for the aperitifs in the canals and the parties in the art foundations, must acknowledge.

“The artist has made 120 drawings in his A4 sketchbook, and some of these are only three weeks old,” says Faisal Saleh, Director of the Palestinian Museum US. “He did almost one every day, like a diary of what has been happening in Gaza.”

READ: Israeli artist shuts Venice show, calls for ceasefire


Since the genocide started, we have observed different attitudes of the art world towards it. In the beginning, while protestors marched in the streets, many institutions cancelled shows of Palestinian artists, like a retrospective of celebrated Palestinian artist, Samia Halaby, at Indiana University’s Eskenazi Museum.

As the months went by, more and more voices of protest were raised from the art world which, in turn, fuelled expectations for what would happen at the Venice Biennale, the chessboard par excellence of the politics of art.

Latest news [See all](#)

UK observers to visit... 

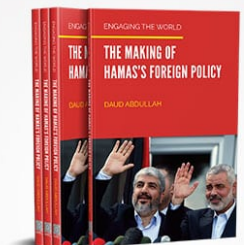
US State Department Arabic... 

Palestine is everywhere at the... 

Israeli politician: handcuff... 


What we are seeing in Gaza is... 

Subscribe to our newsletter

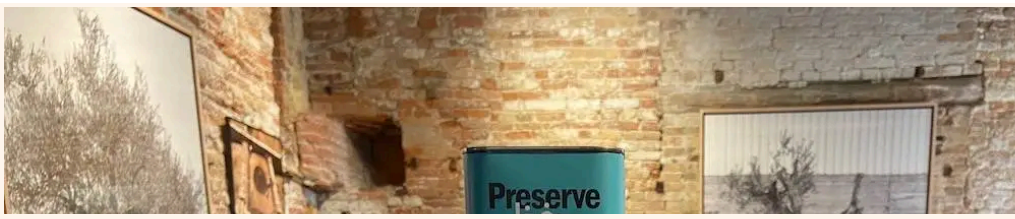


It is a must read for anyone engaged with the Palestine issue and interested in an honest introduction to this important Palestinian movement.
- Prof Ilan Pappé

[Order Now >](#)



[ORDER NOW](#)



The conversation started when the aforementioned show “Foreigners in Their Homeland” was rejected by the Venice Biennale as a collateral event, and Faisal Saleh started a petition to have it approved. In the meantime, another show documenting the destruction of olive trees in Palestine by Israelis – initially titled “Anchor in the Landscape” – was approved as a collateral event. The show initially featured the work of German photographer, Adam Broomberg, and was realised with the association Art + Allies Hebron.

Then, as the war raged on, a new petition was started to exclude the Israeli pavilion from Venice, and it was created by the Art Not Genocide Alliance (ANGA), gathering almost 24,000 signatories. The association has been very present on the ground in Venice, organising protests and performances all around the city.

As the Biennale opened for its preview days, last week the entire art world could not wait to see what would happen.

The Israeli Pavilion

What we found pasted on the glass walls of the Israeli Pavilion at Giardini, was a poster saying that the artist and the curators of the pavilion will not open until “a ceasefire and hostage release agreement is reached”.

The artist told the *New York Times* that the Israeli government had not been informed of the decision to close the exhibition. What looked like a rebellion of the artist against the Israeli government was initially saluted positively by part of the art community: “Some humanity at least,” wrote a curator who had previously been very vocal about the massacre in Gaza. But, of course, it was more complicated than that.

READ: [Over 8,000 artists and curators petition for Israel's exclusion from Venice Biennale](#)

The pavilion was closed, yes, but its transparent walls created even more curiosity about the show visible inside. Italian police closely guarded the pavilion, discouraging protesters from trying to come closer or write on the walls of the building.



The Israeli pavilion at Palazzo Mora [Naima Morelli]

In the meantime, some media called the act of closing off the pavilion “performative” and the attitude of artist, Ruth Patir, and curators Mira Lapidot and Tamar Margalit was opportunistic and cynical. Others highlighted that there was no clear mention of the genocide, but rather an emphasis on the hostage situation.

The Venice Biennale and Palestine

““

“I think it’s a media play,” says Faisal Saleh of the Palestinian Museum US, when asked to comment on the Israeli Pavillion. “They didn’t really want to shut down. They want to temporarily hold it until they get their hostages back.”

Standing at the aforementioned “Foreigners in Their Homeland” – one of the three shows dedicated to Palestine in Venice this year – the genocide is addressed straightforwardly. You can find this, both in the curated section which are Occupation, Apartheid, and Genocide, and in specific pieces like Samia Halaby’s recent piece “Massacre of Innocents”, a big abstract canvas, three meters wide which was just finished before the exhibit.

““

To Saleh, the biggest issue is not just the Israeli pavilion, but the pavilions of the 11 countries that are enabling Israel by providing them with assistance and weapons: “Those pavilions need to be shut down, too. Artists and curators in those pavilions need to think about the role of art and if they want to be the right side of history.”

It must first be said that ostracism has been always the attitude by which the Venice Biennale has welcomed a Palestinian presence. In 2002, curator Francesco Bonami endeavoured to establish a Palestinian Pavilion, but his efforts faced accusations of anti-Semitism in the Italian media. Aside from a previous 2022 exhibition by the Palestine Museum US, the other dedicated showcase for Palestinian artists was the 2009 collateral event titled “Palestine c/o Venice.”

South West Bank

A second show dedicated to Palestine, the only official collateral event, takes a different approach to the issue.

"SOUTH WEST BANK – Landworks, Collective Action and Sound" is the final form of what originally entered the selection in Venice with the title *"Anchor in the Landscape"*, the Artists + Allies x Hebron photography show.

With no overt mention of the current situation in Gaza, the show rather focused on daily life, despite the hurdles of occupation and the joys of coming together in spite of the struggles. While some of Broomberg's olive tree works still appeared, most of the works presented were produced by artists – some of them of Palestinian origins, others resident, in the space Dar Jacir, which focuses on artist exchange.

It was a small show, but incredibly attended. "All the work presented here focuses on what should ordinarily be objects, movements, and sounds of abundance, joy and collectivity," writes Broomberg in the press release. "In this context, however, they all acquire a new sense of urgency."

READ: 'In the art world the name Palestine is radioactive right now,' says director of Palestine Museum US

At the show, Adam Broomberg prefers to let Palestinian, Emily Jacir, speak. Besides being the founder of Dar Jacir, Emily has also a history of trying to bring Palestine to Venice. She was the one who created for the 2009 Palestine c/o Venice the project for a Vaporetto show on Palestine – which consisted of having the stops of the boat carrying tourists and Biennale visitors from one stop to another.

The organisation prevented the project from happening last minute, testifying the aversion of the Biennale towards Palestine.

Jacir explains that, before the war on Gaza started, the initial idea for the exhibition was a show on the destruction of Olive Trees, based on Broomberg's research at Dar Jacir. "But I have to confess when the genocide started, I told him: we can't take part in the Biennale," she says. "Because we were devastated. We are devastated. We are not functioning; it just seems we can't do this."

She says that Broomberg's determination was the only factor that had the exhibition happening. Jacir is glad to see Palestine very present in various manifestations and the support of a few pavilions, like the Irish and the Iceland Pavilion to Palestine.

"It feels really important. Solidarity is crucial," she notes. "And then, on top of that, there are various collateral events and non-official events that all have to do with our sense of Palestine is everywhere in Venice. And it's important that people are coming all over the world and that they see this."

The role of art

A third show dedicated to Palestine is just a few blocks away from the "South West Bank" show. It is by Palestinian artist and painter, Malak Mattar, and it is called "The Horse Fell off the Poem" – a title based on a poem by Mahmoud Darwish. The show, held at Ferruzzi Gallery, features one large-scale painting and seven smaller drawings, depicting the ongoing horrors and destruction in Gaza.

The artist witnessed the previous conflict in Gaza from 2008 to 2022 and, last October, she left for London on the 5th to start her master's program at Central Saint Martins. Paralyzed by what was happening to her country and her family still in Gaza, she eventually found the strength to devote herself to one big painting of five meters: "I wanted to represent all aspects of genocide, and how we are seeing a loss of human lives, animals, architecture, religion, churches, mosques," says Mattar.



"I was with my family on the phone when they evacuated; sometimes it was almost impossible to connect with them," recounts the artist. "I know how hard it was for them to get food and electricity. I could hear the bombardments in the background, of the ambulances coming to carry the dead bodies. I have been experiencing the war through my family's eyes."

For the painting she made use of photos her friends sent her: "Sometimes, I feel guilty to be able to practice, while so many artists – so many of my age – are still under the rubble," says the 24-years old artist. "But I do also feel responsible to resist through my work. And to document

everything, because Israel wants to erase its crimes, brutality and barbarism of its acts.”

READ: Artists nominate Palestinian refugee camp for UNESCO world heritage status

The centrepiece of the show, her big black and white painting, is reminiscent of Picasso’s Guernica. However, the artist detaches herself from the comparison: “What I’m trying to do is to really be a voice coming from Palestine, without influence from the West. I’m actually reckoning the West’s complicity in its funding for the genocide.”

Showing up for Palestine

In the theatre of the geopolitics of art which is the Venice Biennale, these three exhibitions dedicated to Palestine show us three different attitudes of the art world towards the relationship between art and society.

While the Palestinian Museum US has a straightforward militant position and puts the spotlight on the current war, the South West Bank show decided to represent other facets of Palestine life that still exist amidst the destruction and need to be acknowledged, if only to cultivate hope for the future. Finally, Malak Mattar’s show reminds us of the responsibility, not just for artists, but for everyone, to be vocal, combative in whatever way we are able to contribute and speak up.

“Each one of us is responsible for acting,” says Mattar. “In a few decades, we will ask ourselves a question, what was my role during the most barbaric genocide in our modern history? Was I just a passive observer, or did I call for a ceasefire, for action?”

“Art plays a role of documenting and engraving scenes in the memory of my generation and the future generations,” she concludes. “So that we won’t ever forget.”

READ: Art is the highest form of hope

1 COMMENT



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

Trending

Today