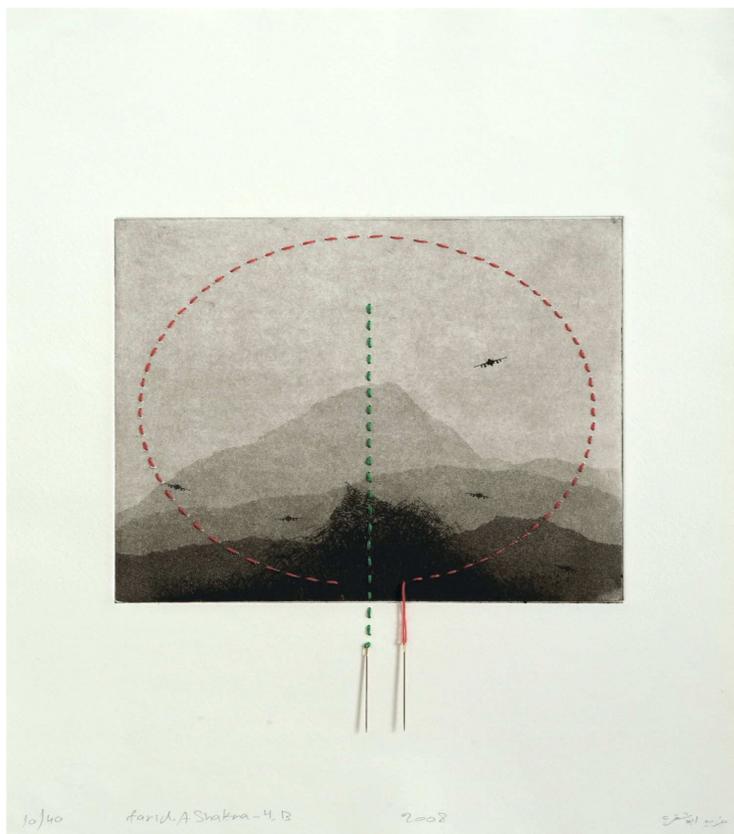


HAARETZ

Life & Culture. **Two Exhibits Herald the Future of Israel's First Palestinian Museum** A visit to the Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery. Shaul Setter Mar 23, 2017 1:55 PM

It's only a half-hour drive from Ein Harod in the Jezreel Valley to Umm al-Fahm in Galilee, but the two places are worlds apart: Mount Gilboa and Wadi Ara, the Jewish kibbutz and the Palestinian city; an art museum founded in 1948 and an art gallery that was established in 1996. One day, the Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery will be the first Palestinian museum in Israel. The land on which the museum will be built has already been allotted, the formal conditions for the establishment of a museum – an art collection, research and an archive – have been met; the money has been raised (only in part, but enough to allow initial construction) and almost all the permits have been issued. And though it may tarry, it shall come. Until then, the gallery's activity offers clues to the character of the future museum.

Two exhibitions are currently on view at the gallery: one by the photographer Ammar Younis and the other by the multidisciplinary artist Farid Abu Shakra, who co-founded the gallery with his older brother Said Abu Shakra, its current director. Farid Abu Shakra's exhibition encompasses the range of his artistic activity in diverse media and in terms of thematic richness. At its center are the paintings of cats that have become his trademark – large, expressive, thickly laid oils that follow the multiple forms the feline creature assumes: stretched or folded, standing or curled, isolated from the surroundings it eyes eagerly and in which it is reflected. Alongside these works are other series: collages of landscapes and postage stamps, prints and embroideries. There is also a section of joint works by Farid and his cousin Assam Abu Shakra, who died very young, from the period of their art studies in the 1980s.



Farid Abu Shakra, 'The Green Line,' 2008.

This multiplicity at times seems to overflow, although it is also very well arranged, even didactic. It is divided by one image that passes among the different series and appears persistently across the exhibition. This depicts a squadron of warplanes that seemingly hover in the sky above fields or amid hills. The planes are observed from afar, as small-scale entities that threaten to approach and attack. In many of these works, the planes are printed on perforated paper on which various ornaments in the form of flowers or basic shapes appear. What seem at first to be two polar opposites – the warplanes and the peacetime decorations, men's military operations and women's actions, the tools of the Israeli army and Islamic ornamentation, printing and embroidery – are revealed in their associative aspect. What the planes and the decorations have in common is serial multiplication, which transforms a single distinct object into a repetitive pattern, a figure into a model.

The seriality of the individual work is externalized in a series of works in which Abu Shakra, in different variations, sharpens the model, distilling the pattern. Other works, quite brilliant, posit new and surprising relations between content and image – saliently political – and a mode of artistic, even craftsmanlike work, which is ostensibly completely formal.

In the "Green Line" series, the landscape print and the warplanes are closed in by a circle of red embroidery thread segments at the bottom of which the needle dangles down from the print. The circle is crossed vertically by a green thread at the bottom of which a needle also dangles, parallel to the first and multiplying it. The structure of the work is form-driven: circle and line, the demarcation and centralization of the image counterpoised to the slicing effect. Thematically, the colors bear a clearly political character: the red and the green, together with the black of the print, are the colors of the Palestinian flag, and the green that splits the landscape is the Green Line that divides historic Palestine.

This is all done with such absolute stringency and cleanness of form that it could be seen as an example of aestheticization of the political. Thus, the planes remain abstractions, devoid of national affiliation and severed from any concrete sector, from Lebanon or Gaza; and the Green Line appears, in all its elegant beauty, as a fundamental component of the visual image. Yet in fact what we discover in this work is an entry into a different type of political creation. Instead of political art dealing with the identity qualms of a Palestinian artist who is a citizen of Israel and torn between different worlds – which is the prism through which the works of Abu Shakra and the other artists in his family are routinely viewed – this art is occupied with the idea that the visual positioning of the work of artistic creation itself is fraught with political meaning.

Thus, the embroidery perforates the print, wounds its base, such that the red thread delimits the arena of violence and concentrates the gaze on the bombers, and the green thread bifurcates the land, slicing and dividing it. The Green Line is first of all a line – not the demarcation of a historic border, the representation of a worldview or a concept from political discourse – but an act of craftsmanship and art, bespeaking a relationship between matter and image. The colorful embroidery, image-free, serial and repetitive, wounds the artistic image, the carrier of the content, which is printed in gray. To embed the colors of the Palestinian flag in these works – colors the Israeli army for many years prohibited Palestinians to use in their paintings – is to posit the arrayal of the visual work of art (color, and with it form and action) as an arena of political art. Abu Shakra's works show that occupation with the concrete exists that is not necessarily assimilated wholly into content and representation, and that we should not confuse beauty with aestheticization. In this place, the beautiful is made from the materials of the social.

Art of documentation

The exhibition of photographs by Ammar Younis is of a different order. The diverse series of photographic images – aged folk from Wadi Ara in revealing close-up portraits or in the rooms of their homes; of grindingly poor people in the village of Yata, living in clay huts or sifting through garbage; of Syrian refugees who arrived on the shores of Greece in a last act of rescue – constitute documentary photography, at times invasive and at times panoramic, that plays a community role.



Ammar Younis, 'Omar Mahmoud Al-Amur (1982)', 2013.

These photographs do not comprise only the body of work of a single artist but are part of the gallery's creative project. They are constructing the archive of Palestinian existence in Wadi Ara and are being presented to the community of its residents. That community, which endured a tremendous rupture in 1948, is fighting for its survival, trying to preserve the memory of its past, to reconstitute forgotten kinship relations, to testify about what has been and gone and to ready itself for what is in store. Younis' photographs – of women and men, youths and the elderly, people from this area as well as from other places that have ties to Wadi Ara – are part of an act of documentation and preservation. This should be seen not as an inferior, non-artistic endeavor, but as the way in which the artistic act is implanted in a certain place, arises from its needs and fulfills its missions.

As such, the curatorship of this exhibition seems a bit off track. It insists on appealing to imagined Jewish viewers, as though they are the ideal viewers of Younis' works. The title of the exhibition ("Sea of Fire") is taken from a well-known work by the Israeli poet Zilda; the catalogue begins with a quote from David Grossman's "The Yellow Wind." The exhibition itself opens with aerial photographs of Wadi Ara, which, we are informed, represent the space of Younis' life.

It's not clear why the photographer himself has to become an object of knowledge who must be located in his place of residence, which has to be presented as a foreign place that viewers are encountering for the first time. Is it conceivable that a photographic exhibition would open with aerial shots of the artist's area of residence in Tel Aviv, Bat Yam or Haifa, even if they were taken by the photographer himself? Moreover, why must the cultural contexts of the exhibition all be Jewish-Israeli and cliché-riddled?

These questions stand out against the background of the fact that Younis' work has for years been an integral part of the gallery's various creative documentary projects, all of which are aimed at the local Palestinian population, in order to strengthen and entrench the connection between their past, which is threatening to disappear, and their vulnerable future.

This visual work is not being done in order to be exhibited in a museum that is a mishkan omanut, a house or tabernacle of art (as in Ein Harod). It partakes of social research, community documentation, the creation of an archive containing interviews and documents – an archive of art works and craftsmanship where there are embroidered lines and portrait photography – all as part of the act of constructing a nation. This will be the character of the first Palestinian-Israeli museum.

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