

Int'l artists unite for Palestine in 'A Carving in Stone'

Zionists confiscate Palestinian culture, traditions



IRAN DAILY: Please give us an overview of the 'A Carving in Stone' exhibition.

VAHIDZADEH: This exhibition showcases works by Iranian, Palestinian, Arab, and non-Arab artists on the theme of Palestine. The artworks were created using various techniques and styles, some of which are new, while others date back to the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s and are usually part of a valuable collection at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Plus, valuable pieces from the collections of Saba Cultural and Artistic Institute, Ravayat-e Fath Cultural Foundation, Art Bureau, and private collections are also on display.

We have also exhibited works by Palestinian artists who have been martyred following the events of October 7 and over the past eight months. It is noteworthy that most of the works of these martyred artists have been destroyed in Zionist attacks, and we could only retrieve some of their artworks from the internet. There are also works by contemporary avant-garde and modern artists like Banksy, Samia Halaby, Ai Weiwei, Mike Parr, and Maisara Baroud, who have created pieces in solidarity with the Palestinian people and in reaction to Zionist crimes. Their stance has had repercussions for them as well.

Could you elaborate on the themes of the works on display and the artistic styles employed?

The artworks on display in 'A Carving in Stone' are either related to the Palestinian cause or are by artists whose artistic role is considered a form of struggle. A wide range of styles and techniques are represented. You will even find abstract works among the exhibits, although artists who focus on militant themes in their work tend to steer clear of abstraction. For instance, Samia Halaby is an abstract artist, and her abstract pieces are included in this exhibition.

The exhibition also features works in symbolic, expressionist, realist, and caricature styles, employing techniques such as oil painting, lithography, collage, and even graphic design. One hall is dedicated to posters created by Palestinian artists over the years for various purposes, such as promoting a conference, supporting the Intifada, or honoring a national hero.

Can you explain the reason behind choosing the title 'A Carving in Stone' for this exhibition?

The title 'A Carving in Stone' refers to the artistic and pictorial works presented in this exhibition. On another level, stone is a significant and meaningful symbol in Palestinian culture,

representing the spirit of struggle and resistance. Stone is a tool of choice for Palestinians in their fight, readily available from the land, and thus a tangible extension of their homeland. In addition, the phrase 'A Carving in Stone' contrasts with the idea of 'a drawing on water,' which implies transience and futility. With this title, we want to emphasize that the Palestinian cause will not be erased; it is a lasting and enduring ideal, preserved like a carving in stone.

Explain the process of selecting and collecting the foreign artworks.

To ensure the exhibition's quality, we gathered a large number of artworks from various sources and meticulously curated the selection, adding and removing pieces as needed. Ultimately, we assembled over 100 artworks from diverse artists. The majority of the pieces are by Palestinian and Iranian artists, but we also have works from other parts of the world, including Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and beyond. We even have two pieces from France. The exhibition features a report on the works of Banksy, the English artist. There are also pieces by Mike Parr, the Australian artist, and Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist. Samia Halaby, a Palestinian-American artist who has been living and teaching at universities in the US for many years, is also represented in this collection.

As I mentioned, a significant portion of the exhibited works is by Palestinian and Arab artists. We have pieces by renowned artists such as Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Mona Saudi, and Mustafa al-Hallaj, to name a few. We were fortunate to have access to their original artworks, and it was an honor to showcase them. After the exhibition, Mr. Sliman Mansour sent us a video message from the West Bank, expressing his gratitude to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art for organizing this meaningful event.

Can you explain the repercussions faced by international artists who have spoken out on the issue of Palestine?

Mike Parr's reaction to the Gaza situation led to his collaboration with the Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne being cut short after 36 years; they essentially sidelined him. Ai Weiwei's exhibition in London was canceled due to a tweet he posted in support of the people of Gaza, which he later protested in interviews. Samia Halaby, a Palestinian-American artist, faced a similar fate when her exhibition was canceled due to her online criticism of Zionist crimes. This occurred despite her three years of efforts to organize the show at Indiana University, and just as

it was about to open. In response, she criticized the restrictions on freedom of expression in the West during her post-cancellation media interviews.

Please elaborate on the works of Palestinian artists included in the exhibition, and how their unique circumstances under occupation influence their art?

Life in Gaza and Palestine, in general, is far from ordinary, and every action becomes a form of resistance. You won't find anywhere else in the world where displaying a watermelon is forbidden, but in the occupied territories, not only is carrying the Palestinian flag considered a crime, but even colors resembling their flag are prohibited, including the depiction of a watermelon. The people of Palestine are fighting with every aspect of their lives. For instance, cooking a traditional Palestinian dish like Maqluba is banned because it represents their culture, and anything related to their history and traditions is either erased or appropriated by the Zionists. Even typically feminine activities like cooking Palestinian cuisine become a form of resistance against Israelis, who oppose any signs of Palestinian life and existence. They even appropriate Palestinian produce, like the Jaffa orange, which is originally a Palestinian bitter orange fruit but is now marketed as an 'Israeli orange' and exported worldwide. There are countless other examples, and essentially, Zionists counter any indication of Palestinian life in the occupied territories, where every reaction becomes a form of struggle.

Having children and starting a family in Gaza carries a different weight compared to other parts of the world. I want to emphasize that, currently, any artistic endeavor undertaken by Palestinians, any creative work done in the name of their nation, is a form of full-fledged cultural resistance. Thus, many of the artworks created in the occupied territories and some of which are displayed in the 'A Carving in Stone' exhibition might not convey explicit messages about Palestinian issues. This is because Palestinians live under harsh occupation, and every sign and symbol carries a special meaning. They are using everything at their disposal to preserve their culture, identity, and history. This is one of the reasons why some images might seem ambiguous to those unfamiliar with the context of occupied Palestine. In addition, ongoing resistance within any culture tends to lead to the use of symbols, as people want to convey shared concerns and aspirations, and this requires a common language, which is then expressed through these symbolic representations.

By Sadeq Dehqan & Hamideh Hosseini
Staff writers

These days, a visual arts exhibition titled 'A Carving in Stone' is being held at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, featuring works by international artists on the topic of Palestine. The exhibition, which opened on July 9 and will run until September 8, has gathered over 100 art pieces from prominent Iranian, Palestinian, and international artists. The works are on loan from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art's collection, as well as the Saba Cultural and Artistic Institute, Art Bureau, Ravayat-e Fath Cultural Foundation, and private collections. In the 'A Carving in Stone' exhibition, symbols and signs take center stage; from objects and shapes like clenched fists, keffiyehs (a traditional Arab headdress), and olive branches that have become important symbols of resistance over the years of the Palestinian people's resistance, to symbols like watermelons, keys, and oranges that may seem strange and largely incomprehensible to an average viewer unaware of the culture of resistance and daily events in occupied Palestine. Iran Daily conductor conducted an exclusive interview with Mohammad Reza Vahidzadeh, the curator of the 'A Carving in Stone' exhibition and an art critic and researcher, to learn more about the exhibition.