



Kamal Boullata (1942–2019): Squaring the Circle

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ON 6 AUGUST 2019, Kamal Boullata passed away in Berlin, Germany, leaving a formidable legacy of art and scholarship for generations to come. He was certainly a significant figure in the development of my early career as an artist, helping to shape my understanding of my own historical and cultural context. Therefore, in writing this, it came as something of a shock to realize that I had actually met him only once.

We met in the late 1980s, when I was a studio assistant to Abed Abdi, and Boullata, who was conducting research for an international curatorial project on Palestinian art, came by Abdi's Haifa studio. For me, as a very young, aspiring artist from a small village, Boullata was an impressive figure—living as he was in the United States with an established international reputation for both his writing and his painting. Speaking about the international art scene, and particularly the state of diasporic Palestinian art, he came across as vastly knowledgeable, and I gathered that contemporary Palestinian art reached far beyond the borders of the homeland. In retrospect, I think it was partly this encounter with Boullata that helped in my decision to join the Palestinian diaspora. I had been aware of the importance of influences beyond Palestine in the work of artists such as Abdi and Sliman Mansour, and Abdi had encouraged me to seek education abroad, as both he and Mansour had done. But meeting Boullata gave life to the idea of an active international network of Palestinian artists, which I could aspire to join.

Shortly afterward, I left home to go and study painting in the United Kingdom. There, I began wrestling with Western modernism and postmodernity, as well as the cultural and political legacies of being Palestinian. In so doing, I found Boullata deeply inspiring; when I later conducted an in-depth study of Palestinian art for my PhD, his work and research were key, particularly his articulation of the disparate strands of Palestinian art history. Throughout his long career as an artist, and as an art historian and theorist, Boullata wove these strands together in a sustained and focused investigation of new forms of artistic expression. He did so as an émigré in the context of an emerging globalized art world, playing an important part in putting Palestinian art on the map both with his own work as an artist and also as a curator and promoter of Palestinian art in the United States, Europe, and the Arab world.

It is as a result of Boullata's work that the trajectory of Palestinian art grew to be understood as more than simply the emergence of nationalist liberation art after the rupture of 1948. His groundbreaking research into the Jerusalem school of iconography provided an invaluable

perspective on the roots of Palestinian painting, in addition to being a vital influence on his own work, as he acknowledged. Crucially, Boullata revised Ismail Shammout's historical account of Palestinian iconography, tracing it back to an earlier period than that of Nicola Saig's work. Boullata also extended Shammout's commentary on Daoud Zalatimo, arguing that Zalatimo had produced a visual equivalent to the popular nationalist poetry of Ibrahim Tuqan and 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmud. Despite the many records and works of art lost or destroyed during the Nakba, which Boullata highlighted, his subsequent, meticulous reconstruction of the 1850–1948 period remains one of the most important and detailed histories of nineteenth-century Palestinian culture—in addition to being an invaluable intellectual gift to the Palestinian nation.

Boullata also laid the groundwork for a historical and theoretical understanding of twentieth-century Palestinian painting. In his contribution to *The Palestinian Encyclopedia*¹ covering the 1935–85 period, he divided the various roots of artistic style and expression into four useful categories: (1) the *illustrative*, which included romanticized images of the Palestinian struggle exemplified by the works of Shammout and Tamam al-Akhal; (2) the *narrative*, which provided a more folk-art oriented representation of Palestinian life, exemplified by artists such as Ibrahim Ghannam; (3) *surrealist* or *fantastic art* in the work of artists such as Mustafa al-Halaj and Ibrahim Saba, both of whom were inspired by the Egyptian surrealist movement; and (4) the *lyrical*, represented by the poetic work of artists such as Ibrahim Hazimeh.

One of Boullata's most important insights was the recognition of the crucial part played by literary and poetic traditions in the development of twentieth-century Palestinian art. He argued that many of the ideas and images in figurative painting, as well the approaches to that genre, drew their inspiration from classical literature, oral traditions of storytelling, poetry, and music. That Boullata made these connections was unsurprising, as he had a deep knowledge of and abiding love for Arabic poetry. As he wrote in his introduction to the collected texts he commissioned for the Sharjah Biennial 7 catalog in 2005, "Poetry has continued to be treasured as *Diwan al-'Arab*, meaning the Arabs' chief register of their collective memory."² He stressed that the uses of poetic symbolism and metaphor were particularly important and continued to be central characteristics of later, more conceptually oriented contemporary art. At the same time, Boullata also emphasized the importance of traditional crafts and technologies in the development of uniquely Palestinian approaches to art, from the incorporation of the ancient skills of icon painting to those of ceramics and embroidery, as well as his own use of geometry and calligraphy.

For Boullata, painting was where all his wide-ranging interests converged, providing a form of spiritual home for the almost lifelong exile that he was. And Jerusalem was the place he turned to repeatedly, especially in his later work. No matter where he lived or what he did, Boullata was always a Jerusalemite and a painter, and these two things became increasingly indissociable. In his paintings of the 1980s and 1990s, he successfully combined his vast knowledge of and admiration for Western abstract art with classical Arabic traditions of geometry and calligraphy. The paintings from that period include some of the best examples of their kind, and certainly the most accomplished ones of his generation. His fascination with the square (a commonality he shared with his friend Abdulkader Arnaout, who created squared Kufic calligraphic designs) was a formal and spiritual anchor that Boullata traced back to his Jerusalem childhood. In discussing his own

particular abstractionism, Boullata described the square as the “root” of his “new language”³ and attributed his deconstruction of the square’s internal space to inspiration from ancient mathematics.

The square also underlaid his fascination with the eight-pointed star formed by two intersecting squares whose points describe a circle; and it was this mysterious ability of geometry to square the circle⁴ that more than anything else brought him home to *the navel of the world*, Jerusalem.⁵ He recognized the infinitely variable power of this geometric form not only in Islamic art but also in the mandorlas surrounding the figure of Christ in icons. As he wrote in an article titled “To Measure Jerusalem: Explorations of the Square,” a beautiful account of this convergence between his personal origins and the origins of his painting:

Once I saw the link between the central motif in the icons of my childhood and the octagonal star from which radiated those mesmerizing arabesques evolved in Islamic art, I realized why all three monuments I could see from our roof in Jerusalem shared a common building plan. By circumscribing the intersection of two squares within a circle, the earliest ground plan of the Basilica of the Resurrection, the Church of the Ascension and the Dome of the Rock all sought to mark the divide between heaven and earth.⁶

Boullata has now completed the circle of his life and returned to Jerusalem to be buried beside his ancestors. His life can be regarded as one spent squaring that circle and finding endlessly generative ways to accommodate apparent opposites in the same space. Boullata managed to synthesize the word with the image, the material with the spiritual, Western modernism with Arabic art, and the traditions of Islam with those of Christianity. He has undoubtedly provided Palestinian culture with an enduring legacy.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Kamal Boullata, *Al-fan al-tashkili al-filastini khelal nusf qarn, 1935–1985*, Palestinian Encyclopaedia, vol. 4, Studies in Civilization, Second section (Beirut: Encyclopaedia Palestina Corporation, 1990), pp. 784–888.
- 2 Kamal Boullata, ed., *Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture* (London: Saqi Books, 2005), p. 11.
- 3 Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (London: Saqi Books, 2009), p. 320. Boullata originally discussed this concept in an article titled “The View from No-Man’s Land” that appeared in the Fall 1992 issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*.
- 4 Boullata refers to the idea of squaring the circle directly in *Palestinian Art*, p. 320.
- 5 The “navel of the world” is a term for Jerusalem.
- 6 Kamal Boullata, “To Measure Jerusalem: Explorations of the Square,” *JPS* 28, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 83–91; see also Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 329.