



# REVIEWS

## Palestinian Art on the Web

Vera Tamari and  
Tina Sherwell introduce  
the new Virtual Gallery  
at Birzeit University

Helen Zughuib, "Prayer Rug for America",  
2001, as featured in In/Visible Tour at the Virtual  
Gallery (physically shown at the Arab-American  
National Museum, Dearborn, Michigan, May  
2005).

Have you ever visited the Dome of the Rock? Who is Sliman Mansour? What gallery shows have recently graced Palestine? What do you know about Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre? Which residencies or art grants are currently available? Where is the Mona Lisa housed? These simple art-related questions, when posed to university students in Palestine, are too often met by a blank stare. This, despite Palestine's active art milieu, the regular emergence of new artists, and significant achievements made by Palestinian artists on the international scene.

Many factors lie behind the paucity of information about art and culture in Palestine. For one, the Palestinian school system has for decades put the teaching of art at the bottom of its list of priorities - art was, and still is, considered a luxury. This situation has been intensified by the unstable political environment and the ongoing imposed isolation of Palestinian towns and villages most recently enforced by Israel's placing of kilometers of concrete wall,

barbed wire fencing, patrol roads and guard towers around Palestinian communities. As a result, the usual ebb and flow of culture and information-sharing is interrupted by the more pressing concerns of daily life. In addition, people living outside Palestine have little opportunity to familiarize themselves with the Palestinian art arena, its new exhibitions, gallery openings or the work of Palestinian artists. There are few regular publications, journals or art critics to systematically convey information about the visual arts. Within this prohibitive environment, a specialized website for Palestinian art and culture seemed to be one of the most effective tools available for disseminating information and creating bridges among Palestinians and abroad.

The Paltel Virtual Gallery at Birzeit University sought to fill this gap. As a leading academic institution in the West Bank, Birzeit University has hosted numerous exhibitions, conducted specialized workshops and also acquired several important ethnographic and art collections, which are now being housed in the newly-established Ethnographic and Art Museum on campus.

### **“Growing” a Gallery**

Work began on the Virtual Gallery by determining the site’s various emphases and the needs of its various audiences at home and abroad. From the original idea of establishing a Virtual Gallery for viewing Palestinian art, the project grew to encompass education resources, course information and coverage of exhibitions and visual arts projects.

Research for the project was undertaken by examining a range of different art websites: virtual galleries, museum and gallery sites as well as visual arts information resources. This initiative was immediately supported by the university as it fell within its developmental and academic guidelines to use the internet as an e-learning device. We finally settled on a site simple in access, using forward-looking technologies. For example, the *Virtual Art Space* was conceived to provide 3-D virtual tours to the audience in the future, despite that the technology and design needed for such a project was greater than first conceived. The Computing Centre and BIT at Birzeit University assisted designer Dan Dewolff and technician Raed Hindalieh in developing systems that could archive art work and the information required. Birzeit University has also allocated a physical space for the running of the Virtual Gallery, where classes and seminars will be regularly held.

The Palestine Telecommunications Company (Paltel) embraced this new venture and is funding it during its first three years. Considerable discussion has been generated around Paltel’s sponsorship of the project and the noticeable advertising in the project’s title. From another perspective, however, it is an interesting sign



that Palestinian companies are beginning to support innovative community projects, assisting efforts towards self-financing rather than reliance on foreign donor support. The nature of the arts is usually not income-generating and thus inevitably requires funding from the government, NGOs and commercial ventures, as is prominent in many places around the world.

## What's Showing at the Virtual Gallery

The site <http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu> is online in both English and Arabic and consists of four main areas: “Exhibitions”, “Education”, “Community” and the “BZU Ethnographic and Art Museum”. The site also features an updated “News and Events” section, where announcements and news about local, regional, and international art are regularly posted.

The “Exhibitions” section of the Virtual Gallery provides bi-monthly coverage of four important exhibitions by Palestinian artists in Palestine and around the world, using high-resolution images, reviews and videos. For example coverage of the Seventh Sharjah Biennial in the UAE includes a review of the show by Judy Budlington, co-ordinator of Cultural and Historical Studies at the University of Sharjah, and a tour of the work of Palestinian, Arab and selected international participants, accompanied by artists’ statements about their work. Our intent was to bring home this major exhibition curated by Jack Persekian.



Emily Jacir, “Sexy Semite”, 2000-2002, as featured in In/Visible Tour at the Virtual Gallery (physically shown at the Arab-American National Museum, Dearborn, Michigan, May 2005).

The Virtual Gallery has to date featured displays such as *Colours of Life and Liberty*, shown at UNESCO in Paris; *The Subject of Palestine* in Chicago; *Cities in Crisis*, representing the experiences of inhabitants of Mediterranean cities, including Bethlehem; *Stateless Nation*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2003 and Birzeit University in 2004; and a variety of solo exhibitions of Palestinian artists both in Palestine and

abroad. These include *Hulagu* by Mohammad Fadeel and *Accumulation* by Emily Jacir.

For the months of September and October, the exhibitions online include *Kan Yama Kan* by Steve Sabella; art works from the participants in the Sakakini Cultural Centre Summer School; Shuruq Harb’s solo exhibition; *4 Walls* exhibitions of Palestinian art in Amman, Jordan; and *In/Visible* curated by Salwa Mikdadi that is currently showing at the Arab-American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan.

In the “Education” section of the website, one finds the online library of Palestinian art, and information about the Gallery’s courses. The Gallery will be launching an accredited course on Palestinian Art in 2005/2006 for Birzeit University students, and intends to develop other online courses on contemporary art within the Fine Arts Program. The Gallery is also involved in developing online courses for individuals in the Palestinian and international community who wish to learn more about contemporary art in general and Palestinian art in particular. It aims to establish links with art academies and universities so that students in the region will be able to take courses via e-learning mechanisms, thereby creating a forum for knowledge exchange despite the Palestinian context of separation from the region.

The “Online Library” of Palestinian art will soon contain an archive of a wide selection of art works and articles so that internet users and students enrolled in these art courses will be able to search and view contemporary Palestinian art. An additional educational resource is the “Talks and Seminars” section, which documents lectures and talks held in Palestine relating to the visual arts.

The “Community” section provides information and access to the various communities of our Gallery and the World Wide Web. It features the “Artist Residency” program where you can view the works in progress of our resident artists and engage them in dialogue. The aim of the residency is to host an artist in the creation of a new, pioneering art project that is incorporated on the internet format. The section also contains special features profiling the career of Palestinian artists in “Artist of the Month”. To date, the Gallery has featured the work of Sliman Mansour, Suha Shoman, Khalil Rabah and Tayseer Barakat Samia Halaby. Rula Halawani is featured for September, profiling her photographic work on Israeli incursions, checkpoints and the wall. You can also view the work of different “Community Projects” that have been undertaken by various artists and organizations.

The “BZU Museum” pages are dedicated to featuring the art and ethnographic collections of the university, giving worldwide access to these collections. Here one is given browsing access to rare collections of Palestinian amulets, traditional costumes and dress accessories, as well as the university’s art collection. Also available are updates of upcoming museum events and activities.

Since its launch last spring the *Virtual Gallery* has been visited by thousands of art and internet users. A special plan is being devised to announce the site in schools and academic and cultural institutions in Palestine, and also to market these specialized Palestinian art courses in the Arab world and internationally.

*Vera Tamari is Lecturer of Islamic Art and Architecture, Coordinator of the Fine Arts Program and Director of the Ethnographic and Art Museum and The Paltel Virtual Gallery at Birzeit University.*

*Tina Sherwell is Art Historian and Executive Director of the Paltel Virtual Gallery at Birzeit University.*

Queries, information about exhibitions or opportunities for artists and students about the *Virtual Gallery* can be directed to [virtual-gallery@birzeit.edu](mailto:virtual-gallery@birzeit.edu).  
Or visit <http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu>.