

Jerusalem: City of Dreams

Tina Sherwell



Introduction

Sliman Mansour is one of the most prominent Palestinian artists working today who has created many memorable works that are part of the Palestinian collective memory and identity. His practice spans several decades in which he has distilled the experiences of Palestinians through the prism of his canvas, providing important reflection on the changing times of Palestinian history that he has lived through. Throughout his career he has created iconic images which have become a distinct part of Palestinian visual culture.

Sliman Mansour was born in 1947 in Birzeit, Palestine. The fourth son in a family of six, he lost his father at an early age and moved to study at the Evangelical

The Camel of Hardships, 1973, oil on canvas, 70 x 105 cm. Source: artist's collection.



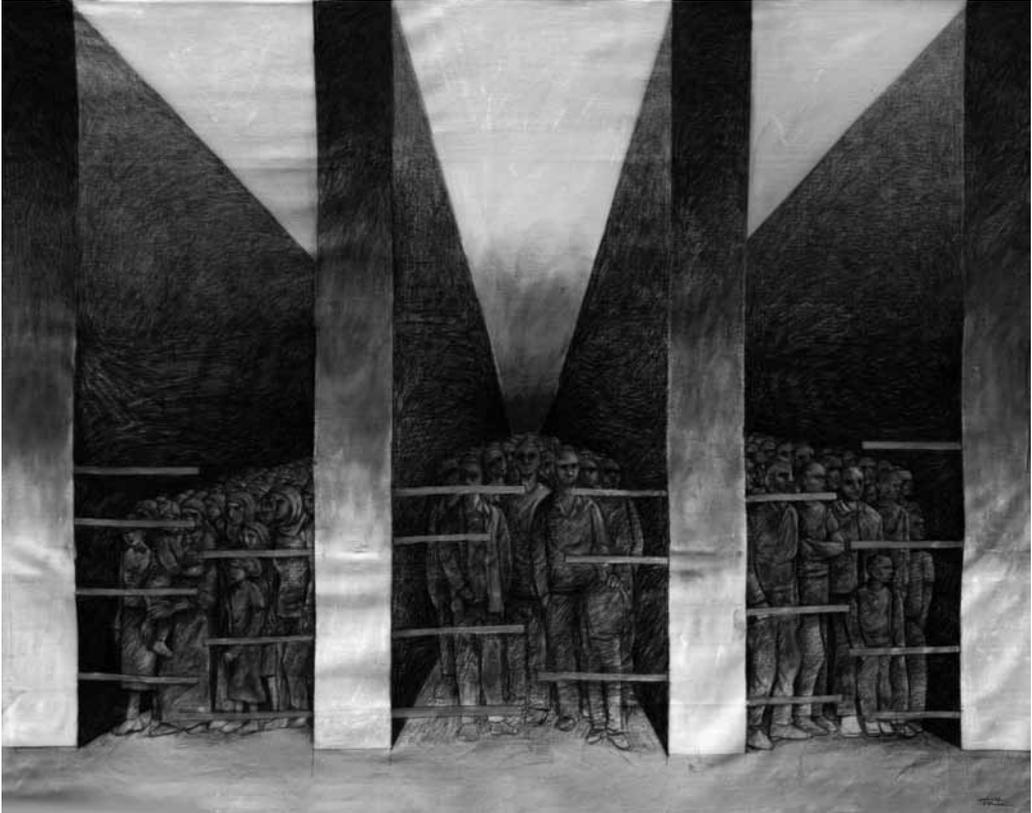
Portrait of my Grandfather, 1965, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm. Source: artist's collection.

Lutheran School in Bethlehem. From an early age he showed a keen interest in art, for which he found support and encouragement from one of his first art teachers, Felix Theis, from whom he learned about Renaissance and European art generally as well as receiving technical instruction. Mansour continued to pursue his interest in art through his teenage years, gaining confidence in this field in which he began to undertake portrait commissions from photographs, a genre that he would return to throughout his career, capturing the characters of individuals on his canvas as well as reflecting on his own changing identity over the years. Mansour is one of the few Palestinian artists who have an oeuvre of portrait painting, a result of his early training. One of his earliest portraits is of Boulos Khoury, his maternal grandfather and a Greek Orthodox priest in Birzeit. The portrait shows a man bearing a burdened

gaze in which the weight of the cross hangs solemnly from his neck and dominates the portrait. (*Portrait of My Grandfather*, 1965). Mansour spent many of his formative years between Bethlehem and Birzeit, a time when he developed a strong relationship to the landscape, the representation of which would dominate his artistic practice across the ensuing decades of his career. He was particularly fond of spending time with his maternal grandmother Salma, a potter who made earthenware storage pots and jars and did building work on the family home using traditional construction methods using mud and straw – techniques which the artist would later use in his extensive body of work in mud, transforming these methods into an artistic visual language and in so doing elevating these indigenous crafts to the level of fine art.¹

Mansour's academic education was initially to take place at The Chicago Art Institute to which he had gained admission. He was preparing to leave to undertake his studies there when the events of 1967 drastically changed his plans and he decided to remain in Jerusalem for fear that he would not be able to return if he left the city. He was accepted to study at the famous Bezalel Art Academy in Jerusalem. At Bezalel Mansour advanced his education in painting and his knowledge of the theories of European art, accompanied by exposure to the work of early Israeli artists and of his tutors.

Through his years of study between 1967 and 1970, he experienced the contradictions of residing in occupied East Jerusalem where his family lived while



Homeland, 2010, charcoal and acrylic on canvas, 233 x 188 cm. Source: artist's collection.

studying in the western part of the city that was conquered in 1948 and became part of the Israeli state. The question of estrangement and alienation notably influenced the choice for themes in his early paintings as seen in one of his most famous works, *The Camel of Hardships* (1973). Such themes had already begun to be articulated by a generation of Palestinian artists in exile such as Ismail Shammout, whose work Mansour had had the opportunity of seeing on a visit to Damascus in 1966. The imagery in Ismail Shammout's work was to become a central influence of the imagery representing the Palestinian experience of loss, exile and estrangement after 1948, focusing as it did on an expressive quality in his painting with depictions of the pain and hardship of his subjects including images of father figures, children and trails of lost people exiled from their homeland.

Dreamscapes

Mansour's *Camel of Hardships* has become one of the most iconic images of the Palestinian dream for a homeland. The reproduction of the painting on posters, postcards and T-shirts, highlights the extent to which the painting has entered the popular vernacular and the collective imagination. As distinct from the work of Shammout, the image of

exile in Mansour's context is created from within, by an artist living under occupation, as highlighted in the words of anthropologist Glenn Bowman:

The fact that these people technically still live on the land that was Palestine in no way refutes their assertions that they are exiled from their homeland... A domain where Palestinian identity is denied cannot be considered the Palestinian homeland, even if it were the very same ground on which they imagine the future nation to be built.²

The work reflects the experience of estrangement that must have affected Mansour during his formative years of study in the divided city. The image is of a porter turned perpetual wanderer who carries the vision of Jerusalem on his back, burdened by its weight, at the same time permanently raising it above his head in a gesture of loyalty and devotion. Aside from the central focus on the image of Jerusalem, we are drawn also to the worn feet and the ragged clothes of this walker and the strength of his arms. The work portrays the condition of estrangement and exile from a position in the interior but combining the experience of both those in the interior and those in exile, as Edward Said explained,

The people of the interior are cherished as Palestinians 'already there', so to speak Palestinians who live on the edge, under the gun, inside the barriers and kasbahs, entitling them to a kind of grace denied the rest of us.³

Of course the painting created in the 1970s and Said's words written in 1986 need to be considered in light of their context prior to the Oslo Accords and the presence of the Palestinian Authority, which I would suggest has altered this perception. In this painting, the landscape of exile is imaged as a void, a non-place, with no distinguishable features and stretching out as an endless terrain. The landscape beyond the homeland is an empty homogenous space. Its qualities are brought out by the contrasting image of place and home which the porter carries in his load; Jerusalem is imaged as a golden city full of homes and sites of worship, making a marked distinction between the image of home, community and a distinct place and its opposite: exile and featureless place. Jerusalem, in contrast, is an unblemished city presented in a utopian light, with perfect architectural proportions. Such imagery served to create a vision of homeland in the Palestinian collective imagination and presented an idealized vision of the city. This vision is articulated from the spaces of memory, as the image of the solitary wanderer carries his memory in which place is fetishized and idealized in response to the alienation of daily experience and loss, and the void in which he wanders. This burden of memory is well articulated by Rema Hammami, in discussing her memories of Jaffa:

My feeling is of being burdened by Jaffa, this place only exists in the world of lost paradises, and is no different from that of any other child of a Jaffaite.

For there are no 'former' Jaffaites – they never really left in 1948 but still carry it around with them everywhere and always.⁴

The construction of the image of the landscape of the homeland, then, is conditioned through the dialectical processes of the experience of estrangement and exile, memories and loss. What we witness in Mansour's oeuvre over the decades are these recurring themes that have contoured his depiction of Jerusalem and the Palestinian landscape in particular; themes that are continually embedded in his paintings and later in the mud works, as is the pervasive sense of loss and melancholy.

It is significant to note that Jerusalem rather than any other city is chosen in the visual repertoire of Palestinian identity as the city of the nation and is repeatedly imaged in a utopian idiom in the work of Palestinian artists throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As the cultural geographer Stephen Daniels has suggested, national identities choose and utilize particular landscapes from within the nation as symbolizing the terrain and location of the homeland,

Landscapes whether focusing on single monuments or framing stretches of scenery provide visual shape; they picture the nation. As exemplars of the moral order and aesthetic harmony, particular landscapes achieve the status of national icons.⁵

Jerusalem continues to play a pivotal role in national iconography, and dominates political rhetoric within this frame of reference. However, as a result of its elevation to a national symbol, the details of the reality of the city are forgotten and the dominant and recurring image is that of the old city. While life in what are today its isolated enclaves is forgotten, the image of the city remains predominantly that of a religious Jerusalem, with its iconic sites given central prominence thereby effacing the details of everyday life from the image of the cityscape.

Mansour continued to create utopian images of the city imbued with a sense of longing and loss. In works from the 1970s such as *Children of Jerusalem* (1978) the question of estrangement recurs. Three children sit on the wall and look out to the other side of the city where children of different nationalities are waving flags and enjoying the games of the fun fair. The Palestinian children can only sit and watch, hiding the flag behind their back, unable to join the other children in their celebration. The painting was later reproduced on a highly popular postcard. While prominently speaking of the rights of children to freedom and nationhood, the work also draws attention to the space of estrangement, and in particular the denial of experiences that has been the condition of the Palestinian under occupation, a situation in which the mere practice of everyday life and the attempt to live a semblance of normality constantly encounters serious challenges and difficulties. In later works in the 1970s, the utopian image of the city is dominated by a monumental solitary female figure, embodying the longing for the city and the experience of melancholy – as seen in *Song of Jerusalem* (1974) and *Woman*



Children of Jerusalem, 1978, oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm. Source: artist's collection.

Carrying Jerusalem (1979). Increasingly, Mansour draws on the female figure to articulate ideas of loss in his works of this period and later in his landscape paintings. This figuration can be understood as closely related to literary discourse of the time in which Palestine was imaged as the motherland or the virgin bride. In *Woman Carrying Jerusalem* (1979), Jerusalem is cradled in the woman's arms like a child and fills the comparative abdominal space of the womb. Analogies can be

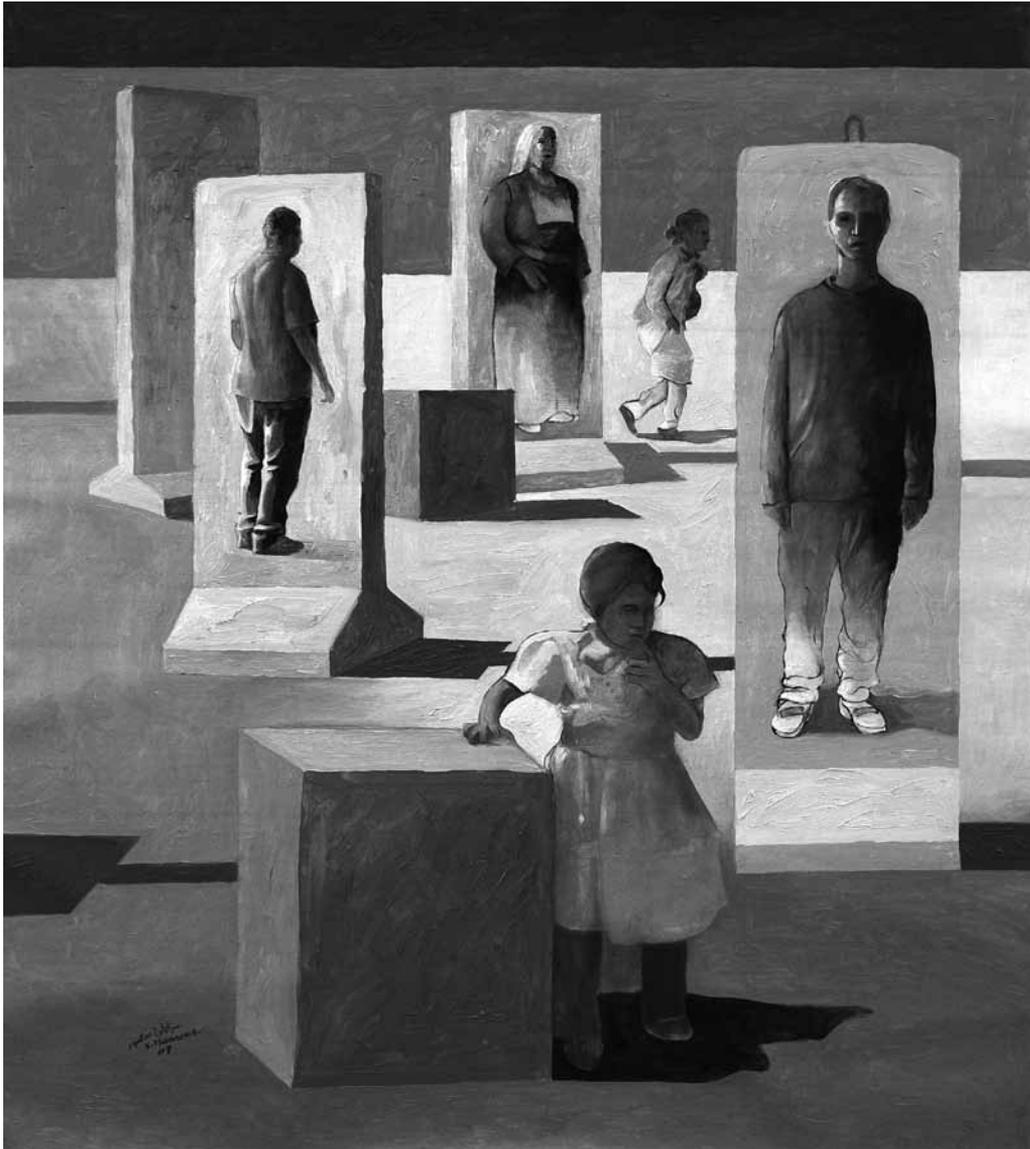
drawn to the mother/child relationship, and the role of the motherland as nurturer and carer, as in the words of the poet Fadwa Tuqan,

Enough for me to die on her earth, to be buried in her...Enough for me to remain in my country's embrace, to be in her close as a handful of dust, a sprig of grass, a flower.⁶

I will return to this theme when discussing his landscape works. Jerusalem, then, is depicted as dreamscape, a utopian vision, an idealized memory. This dominant perception even infuses the artist's later works in the 1980s, whether it is the painting of a doorway in the old city, or imaging its decorative heritage, or his detailed watercolors of the city's historic buildings and skyline.

Imprints of the Everyday

Mansour has lived through the major transformation of the city of Jerusalem and its changing relationship with its suburbs and hinterlands. From the experiences in his early years as a student of moving through the segregated parts of the city, he – like so many residents – has witnessed and lived through the ghettoization of its immediate suburbs and its ever changing segregation in the form of checkpoints and the Partition Wall, which has served to sever the city from the West Bank and the Arab neighbourhoods within its borders. The spatial transformation of the landscape and its arteries into the adjoining landscape has effectively and steadily emptied the city of its commercial and institutional life. While Jerusalem may remain the symbolic icon, the major activities of the country's urban life have in fact moved to the nearby city of Ramallah, which plays host to the PA and the major Palestinian institutions for education, business and a growing economy. The experience of transformation, as suggested earlier, is often distilled in the work of Mansour via the space of the canvas. The challenge, of course, is how to represent the slow eradication that Israel has instituted systematically over the years and which has amounted to the transformation of the physical landscape of Jerusalem and its inhabitants' relations to it, to their lives and movement within it. Mansour approaches this through representing maps to highlight the transformation of the landscape and the way in which the Partition Wall has dissected it and affected his daily life, focusing in particular on ar-Ram where his studio is located and that in order to reach today he has to circumnavigate the Partition Wall, crossing back and forth through the Qalandia checkpoint. Mapping is an area of contestation in the Palestinian context; and issues such as mapping, and archeology, are deeply politicized activities. Palestinians have been unable to create their own aerial maps of Palestine as they have no right to flight over the skies, nor is there a Palestinian airport or airline in operation. Mapping has been dominated by those who have wanted to conquer the land, whether it be the extensive mapping carried out by the Palestinian Exploration Fund during the early British mandate years or by the state of Israel. While these works indicate



At the Wall, 2009, oil on canvas, 117 x 117 cm. Source: artist's collection.

the presence of human habitation through geometrical forms, *Uncertain Landscape: Abu Dis*, (2009), and *Uncertain Landscape: Al-Ram*, (2009) in his rusted works *Map II*, (2004) Mansour explores the human relation to the landscape, with the painter's family embedded there and suggesting the memory of the family's lost relatives now dispersed across the world. The place names do not indicate actual geographical reality but spatial relations, speaking of nearness and distance, of family ties and their implicit unravelling with distance and time – a sense enhanced by the rusted surface of the work that continually transforms with the passage of time as the work is eroded.

This question of time is a concern in Mansour's latest works, a series of paintings based on the experiences of Palestinians at Qalandia, the checkpoint that separates

Ramallah from Jerusalem on the main thoroughfare between the two cities. Many Palestinian artists have captured the checkpoints through their camera lens, or in video and audio works: Rula Halawani's *Intimate Distance*, Emily Jacir's *Crossing Surda* and Sharif Waked's *Chic Point* to name but a few. However, Mansour takes the approach of tackling this question of representing and distilling the experience of checkpoints through his canvas, in contrast to the still and moving camera which captures a fragment of the experience in time, extracting it from the movement of time. Mansour's works are more suggestive of cumulative experience, drawn from observations and experiences of waiting and watching, of both people and time going by at the checkpoint. In these works a strong sense of loss, of meaningless and of endless time pervade the work; people appear to drift in a no-man's land, not dissimilar to the void, the non-place, depicted over thirty years earlier in *The Camel of Hardships*.

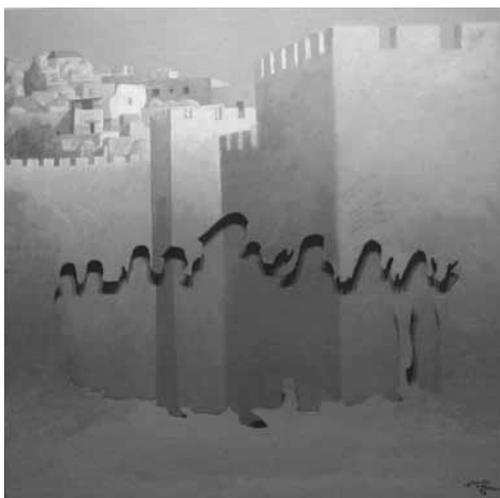
This question of waiting is addressed by anthropologist Rema Hammami,

For those operating the checkpoints, (and those giving them orders), time is not coeval. Palestinian time is 'cheap' and infinite, while Israeli time is a valuable finite resource.⁷

The infinite waiting experienced by those of us who wait at Qalandia, most distinctly characterized by the fact that one has no control over the loss of time, or one's movement, often finds one drifting into dreamspace. This overwhelming sense of disconnectedness, combined with the extreme confinement that one experiences in that situation, is captured in this series of paintings as Palestinians drift aimlessly in the grey non-descript space. Sometimes the figures become part of the Partition Wall, as though standing like frozen statues in the tomb-like space of each segment of the wall; other times they wander in all different directions *Qalandia Checkpoint*, (2009), *Road to Jerusalem*, (2009) and *At the Wall*, (2009). At the same time, Mansour captures the imprints of the everyday on his canvas: a woman on a mobile phone, probably reassuring her family where she has reached on her journey as so many of us do; or the kite seller who stands at the corner in the summer as seen in *Between the wall Pieces*, (2009) and *Dream Kites*, (2009). I have always wondered about the kite seller, selling kites which seem to capture the dream of flying and open spaces, the ability to run free on hilltops. It is as though he represents the fantasy of freedom of flight and movement, the exact opposite of the experience of waiting and queuing, which Hammami describes as follows:

For the economically and ethnically excluded, waiting in queues and being stopped by them (which includes being pulled out of moving queues) is a common feature of existence and their inequality.⁸

In Mansour's paintings, parts of the Wall also stand disconnected from one another. For those who witnessed the building of the Wall, they recall the piecemeal fashion



Palestinian Wedding, 1996, oil on wood, 100 x 101 cm. Courtesy of Shukri Farwaji, Jerusalem. Source: artist's collection.



Between the Wall Pieces, 2009, oil on canvas, 110 x 120 cm. Courtesy of Rami and Hanan Nimer, Lebanon. Source: artist's collection.

of its construction in which separate sections of it were built, and one and waited and watched for them all to be connected before the final section was added and the new terminal checkpoint opened. The building of the checkpoint and Partition Wall created a strong sense of foreboding as we could only watch and wait, not completely knowing what was to come, watching as towering segments of the Wall were erected in piecemeal fashion. The realities of Qalandia and the checkpoints in general are starkly portrayed in the work *Homeland* (2009), in which Mansour depicts the confinement and dehumanization experienced by Palestinians inside the checkpoint terminals, behind the electronic gates and turnstiles.

Returning, then, to the city of Jerusalem, the artist's *Palestinian Wedding* from 1996 is a haunting image of absence. The city walls once resplendent with reflections of golden sunlight in his previous work are seemingly now more like prison walls, recalling the solemnity and greyness of the Partition Wall that was to begin to be built around the city a few years later. In a Palestinian wedding, the wedding procession in particular is a central part of the wedding rituals. This particular scene is *zafiya* and celebrates the beginning of wedding festivities. Mansour's work refers not only to the symbolism of Jerusalem as the bride of Palestine but to the slow evacuation of its population, in which figures become mere shadows and ciphers of their former selves, literally extracted and unmoulded from the space, a mere imprint left on the city wall, testifying

through the visual field to the reality of the segregation and depopulation of the city. As Beshara Doumani suggests,

Palestinians are still incapable of stopping the continued and accelerating erasure of the two greatest archives of all: the physical landscape and the bonds of social and daily life that constitute an organic social formation.⁹

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Endnotes

- 1 Background on Sliman's Mansour life was obtained from interviews with the artist, and texts by Faten Anastas and Gannit Ankori.
- 2 G. Bowman, "A Country of Words: Conceiving the Palestinian Nation from the Position of Exile" in *The Making of Political Identities*, ed. E. Laclau, (London: Verso, 1994), p 139.
- 3 E. Said, *After The Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p 51.
- 4 R. Hammami, and S. Tamari "Virtual Return to Jaffa" in *The Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol XXVII no 27, Summer (1998), p 67.
- 5 S. Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape, Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p 5.
- 6 F. Tuqan, "Untitled" in *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, ed. S. K. Jayyusi, (New York: Columbia University press, 1992) p 314.
- 7 Hammami, R. "Waiting for Godot at Qalandia: Reflections on Queues and Inequality", *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Issue 13, Summer 2001, p 10.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 B. Doumani, . "Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians; The Patrimony of Ishan Nimr", *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Issue 36, Winter (2009), p 3.