

## OBITUARY

# A Death Foretold

## The Life and Art of Mohammad Joulani

Rana Anani

### Abstract

A tribute to artist Mohammad Joulani, who passed away at the age of 37 on October 2nd, 2020. Joulani was a young Jerusalemite artist, known for his irrepressible smile and compassionate spirit. He harbored a bewildered soul and persistently posed questions about the validity of art, drawing himself into his paintings to search for answers. He painted Jerusalem, the city that he belonged to physically and spiritually and attempted at bringing art and inspiration to the doorstep of the very people who form the fabric of the city, but exist at its margins.

### Keywords

Art; Palestine; Jerusalem; Mohammad Joulani; Palestinian Art; Contemporary Art; Painting.

What is death? It is not the absence of people. It means to wake up to find the dead body on strike. It is a sarcastic strike and an open unnegotiable individual civil disobedience . . . . The dead body is not afraid anymore of laws, diseases, pandemics, starvation, poverty or wealth. He is not afraid of armies, weapons or poisons. Even death itself cannot scare him anymore, simply because he died, and it is over. He defeated death by dying. Died as if he found an eternal solution for himself . . . . It is not possible for a sane person to leave eternal rest after having tasted its sweetness and return to life's repulsiveness, anxiety, and dread.<sup>1</sup>

Mohammed Ben Meloud, "The Death"

On Friday, 2 October 2020, the Palestinian artist Mohammad Joulani passed away at the age of thirty-seven. Eight months before he died, he shared a long text about death on his Facebook page. Little did he know at the time, how soon he would himself experience death.

Joulani was a dear colleague known for his irrepressible smile and his kind and compassionate spirit. As an artist, he spent time in search of his inner self. Behind his open childish face, his large warm smile, and his bright passionate eyes, he harbored a bewildered soul. He persistently attempted to understand his role as an artist, and often posed questions about the validity of art, drawing himself into his paintings to search for answers.



Figure 1. Untitled, Mohammad Joulani, 2017, oil on canvas.

In one of his artworks, the one most shared by his colleagues after his departure, Joulani captured himself leaving his studio door, shadowed by a ghostly reflection on the side. Describing it in 2017, he writes:

Here I am. I leave my artwork in order to write about it. I move away and look at my ghost turning his back on his daily workshop, and I get confused. Confused, I reach out to the painting to return myself back to it, without knowing what I want exactly; is it a description of doubt when it was an idea, or is it a description of doubt after it has consumed itself and taken a shape. Shall I attempt in this artwork to revive the balance between reality and fiction, or shall I try to kill and destroy them both.

Was Degas right when he said: ‘One sees what one wants to see. It is false, and that falsity is the foundation of art.’<sup>2</sup>

Joulani was born in Jerusalem in 1985. He received his BA in fine arts from Al Quds University in 2009, and was an MA student in contemporary arts at Bezalel Art Academy when he died. He also taught visual arts at Al Quds University and more recently at the Friends School in Ramallah (2016–18). He received second prize in the Ismail Shammout Fine Arts competition (2016), was awarded a six-month residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris (2018), and participated in the Insight of China program (2018), and the Mediterranea 18 Young Artists Biennale in Albania (2017).

Joulani was a Jerusalemite artist par excellence, belonging to the city physically and spiritually, and often painted his own perspective of it. In *Regular Day* exhibition (2016), he portrayed his beloved Jerusalem in a series of artworks depicting his experience of living a “normal day” in a city full of contradictions. The exhibition, accompanied by audio recordings of everyday city noise, focused on the daily rhythm of people’s lives rather than the city’s silent stones and landscapes: a rhythm of love, intimacy, security searches, checkpoints, daily arrests, and the endless sense of waiting for something to happen.



Figure 2. Mohammad Joulani in his studio, a photo by Ahed Izhiman, 2017.

Colorful Arabic decorative tiles and traditional coffee shop chairs were two symbols that Joulani used when painting the city in various works. While the first image emphasizes the beauty and history of Jerusalem, the second reflects a monotonous life, full of repetition, helplessness, and frustration. He observed this monotony (and replicated it in several paintings) in the daily practice at traditional coffee shops of stacking chairs at the end of the business day.

Joulani exhibited his art in the neighborhoods of Jerusalem through several projects. In *On the Roof*, part of an intervention from Al Hoash in the Qalandiya International 2019, Joulani – assisted by the community – cleaned and painted a number of rooftops in the Old City in bright vibrant colors, bringing art and inspiration to the doorstep of the very people who form the fabric of the city, but exist at its margins.

His last project depicted the isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, commissioned by the French Institute in Jerusalem for the exhibition *Epidemic Diary* in early summer 2020.<sup>3</sup> It consisted of three artworks that functioned as a diary during isolation. He put himself in the center of all three paintings, wearing a mask, revealing one eye and covering the other with heavy brush strokes. His eye, directed at the viewer, reveals worry, mixed with anxiety and confidence. In the second painting, he painted himself painting the first; and in the third painting, he is painting the second, allowing the series of paintings to function as a reflective mirror with endless images inside an image, in an infinite loop of time.

Joulani's projects constitute an intimate portrait stemming from his own life experience, and from the concerns, anxieties, and ambitions of his generation, in a city left alone to its fate under a brutal occupation. His *Still Standing* sculpture of a man upright with one leg and missing large chunks of his body might sum up how he felt and understood his life and the life of his generation. Yet the title suggests persistence and determination in a future journey.

Rest in Peace, Mohammad Joulani.

*Rana Anani is a researcher and writer on visual arts and culture. She has held several positions as an art professional, including head of communication at the Palestinian Museum, project manager of Qalandiya International, coordinator of the Palestinian Pavilion at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, and associate curator of the 2017 Sharjah Biennale 13 off-site project in Ramallah.*

#### Endnotes

- 1 Mohammed Ben Meloud, "Al-Mawt?" [The Death], 20 July 2019, online at (antolgy.com) [bit.ly/37SKINF](https://bit.ly/37SKINF) (accessed 23 October 2020).
- 2 Mohammad Joulani, 4 September 2017, online at (facebook.com) [bit.ly/37SKrVx](https://bit.ly/37SKrVx)

- (accessed 27 October 2020).
- 3 "Epidemic Diary," Institut Français, Jerusalem, online at [www.institutfrancais-jerusalem.org/blog/2020/06/20/epidemic-diary/](http://www.institutfrancais-jerusalem.org/blog/2020/06/20/epidemic-diary/) (accessed 27 October 2020).