



## 'ASIM ABU SHAQRA: THE ARTIST'S EYE AND THE CACTUS TREE

KAMAL BOULLATA

*While focusing on the work of a Palestinian artist whose central image was the cactus, this essay traces the cactus theme in Palestinian and Jewish settler art. In so doing, it sheds light on the two peoples' differing world views, on the history of modern Palestinian painting and its links to the iconic tradition, and, more generally, on the nature of the settler enterprise and Palestinian dispossession and exile.*

EDWARD SAID HAS WRITTEN, on more than one occasion, on the difficulties of formulating a Palestinian narrative in a linear sense in any field of creative endeavor, such as painting. The multiple reasons he has cited include the people's dispersal, the recurring discontinuities and displacements in their lives, and the lack of a geographic and cultural center over a period of some fifty years. Said has also noted how, due to these factors, alternative means of expression were bound to be invented out of the kind of chaos set in motion by the experience of uprootedness and fragmentation, as no linear narrative entailing classical rules of form or structure can be true to that experience.<sup>1</sup>

Writing on the paintings of 'Asim Abu Shaqra, who died of cancer in 1990 at the age of twenty-eight, poses special difficulties: if not because he was young and both an Israeli and a Palestinian Arab, then because the leitmotif of his brief and brilliant career was the cactus plant—a subject loaded with polarized emotional associations ever since the birth of the Jewish state. On one side, Israeli Jews raised the indigenous plant to the status of a national symbol; on the other, Palestinians saw in it the very incarnation of their national dispossession. These polar views only ramify the basic difficulties: since he grew up within a beleaguered fragment of Palestinian society, this visual artist was both cut off from the history of contemporary painting within his own culture and absorbed by the oral imagery of his community, in which poetry has been the supreme form of self-expression.

To establish an alternative means by which we may fully receive 'Asim Abu Shaqra's painting and learn from looking in the direction from which it has come, we must explore regions beyond the realm of polar positions. By allowing ourselves to think in terms of interrelationships that are not linear, we can transgress the limitations set up by canonical views that endorse ex-

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clusive possession of an image or justify its cultural appropriation. In the process, we can find correlation between adversarial positions in ways that allow us to follow the links between collective memory and empirical experience, and we can proceed to recover the bond between verbal and visual imagery. In this way, we may have a better opportunity to see the work of this artist who himself chose to cross the border between his Palestinian identity and his Israeli status in order to give a unique body to his own cultural form of expression. After all, "cultural forms," as Said says, "are hybrid, mixed, impure," and "the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with their actuality."<sup>2</sup>

The alternative reading I propose to the polar views set forth by the Israeli and Palestinian sides regarding the artist's cactus springs from Said's application of counterpoint in his critical analysis. Said argues that we need "many voices," as in musical polyphony, to "produc[e] a history."<sup>3</sup> In the following pages, I project, as it were on a screen, numerous flashes from distant fields in an attempt to recapture the fragments of a single image. To look at Abu Shaqra's contribution in its proper perspective, I explore the theme of the cactus as it figured in the daily lives of both Israelis and Palestinians. By means of a "contrapuntal reading," I hope to demonstrate how, by his passionate response to a given Israeli aesthetic convention, Abu Shaqra's art moved the articulation of Palestinian dispossession to new grounds. While his work may one day cast its own shadow on Israeli art, its presence already lights our way to a better understanding of the history of Palestinian painting.

## IMAGE MAKING AND NATIONAL NARRATIVES

The earliest photographs of Palestine from the nineteenth and twentieth century show the omnipresence of cactus hedges dotting the landscapes.<sup>4</sup> The thorny and tenacious plant fulfilled a practical function as the peasant's most natural code for territorial borders throughout the countryside. In summer, the prickly pear fruits produced by the wild plant were a favorite delicacy the villagers brought in from the countryside to be enjoyed by city dwellers.

The role of the cactus in the lives of the Palestinian Arabs did not escape the gaze of the earliest Jewish settlers. Artists trained to see Austrian, Romanian, or Russian landscapes found in this indigenous plant an exotic component for their new art. The cactus thus emerged in the figurative images of a number of settler artists to serve different functions. At various times, the tree was a foreground lead, as in Ephraim Lilien's 1907 etching *The Jewish Plowman*; a solitary fragment among different background elements, as in Reuven Rubin's 1923 triptych *First Fruits*; part of an exotic backdrop to the central subject of traditional figures, as in Arie El-Hanani's two 1920 watercolors entitled *Couple on a Beach*; and a referential link between a modern European and the wilderness, as in Israel Paldi's undated oil portrait of Cecil Hyman. The cactus, which betokened at once the alienation of the

immigrant and the earthy kinship of the Palestinian natives with their environment, haunted the works of these early Jewish settlers. Another 1920 watercolor by Arieh El-Hanani, *Yeshiva Student and the Arab Woman Seller*, is a telling example. In it, we see the standing figure of a Jewish youth apparently startled by the sight of the central dark figure of a squatting Arab woman. Everything around her—the house's arch, the basket's curve, the background hills—echoes her rounded womb-like shape as she bends over a basket of prickly pears. Her breasts are exposed, and between her parted legs she holds a knife.

Of all the country's indigenous plants, the cactus assumed a unique place in the history of image making in the national narratives of both Israelis and Palestinians. During the 1920s, when the thorny tree was the main element most Jewish settlers introduced in paintings inspired by their new environment, the peeled fruit was the subject matter that launched the contemporary history of Palestinian painting as pioneering artists captured them in their newly acquired language. Thus, at the same time as the Jewish settlers sought to naturalize the language they brought with them from the latest European schools of painting, the Palestinian painters were struggling to free their local artistic tradition from the rigid confines of the Byzantine icon.

For two consecutive centuries, icon painting had been the occupational means of pictorial expression among generations of Christian Arabs who passed on the craft from father to son. A major icon painter, Nicola Sayigh (d. 1930) from Jerusalem, was to become the leading pioneer of studio painting around the turn of the twentieth century, venturing into the new art of secular painting. To free himself from the rules of iconography, he found in the voluptuous sight of the peeled prickly pear his most inviting subject. By highlighting the exposed insides of the half-naked fruit, Sayigh sought to capture one of the most common pleasures and bring the outside indoors.

Sayigh's cactus paintings set the stage for the birth of a national art,<sup>5</sup> which was first publicly recognized three years after his death. In 1933, a solo exhibition of oil paintings by his student Zulfa al-Sa'di (1905–88) was shown in the Palestine Pavilion in the First Pan-Arab Fair in the halls of the Islamic Supreme Council in Jerusalem. The young Muslim artist exhibited a series of lustrous portraits representing national and historical heroes: Saladin, who liberated Jerusalem from the Crusaders; 'Umar al-Mukhtar, the Libyan fighter who had been executed by the Fascists two years earlier after leading a twenty-year guerrilla war against the Italian occupation; and Sharif Hussein of Mecca and Amir Faisal, who led the Arab revolt against the Ottomans during World War I. Next to these portraits, which had the solemn look of the holy figures in the icons of her teacher, Sa'di hung a still life of prickly pears. The juxtaposition carried its own subversive message to the people living under the British Mandate, for the cactus was already established as the peasant's everyday metaphor for defiance. Villagers improvising new words to a dance song in the widespread protest against the 1917 Balfour Declaration found in the obstinate nature of the cactus tree their natural in-

spiration. The refrain called for national vigilance with the phrase *Ya 'ayn kuni subbara*—"O eye, be a cactus tree!"<sup>6</sup>

With the fall of Palestine in 1948 and the subsequent fragmentation in Palestinian life, the cactus tree and its prickly pears seemed to disappear from the general repertoire of Palestinian creative expression. For the uprooted Palestinians, it was not the wild tree that epitomized the sense of their homeland's loss, but the Jaffa orange groves that they left behind. The title of Ghassan Kanafani's novel—*The Land of Sad Oranges*—summed up an image that flowed throughout the poetry and paintings that first emerged from the refugee camps.<sup>7</sup> By 1967, when the West Bank and Gaza Strip fell under Israeli military occupation, a whole new generation of Palestinians was growing up in a cultural ghetto, cut off from the rest of the Arab world. To them, the ancient olive tree was the recurrent metaphor by which they expressed their deeply rooted relation with the ancestral land.

The only domain in which the cactus continued to survive was the popular imagery of colloquial speech. The word *sabr*, which means not only "cactus" but "patience," and "perseverance," never ceased to have its special resonance. In the aftermath of the Palestinian dispersal, that word still stood, as in 1917, for the peasant's renewed determination. At the same time, following the birth of Israel in 1948, the image of the indigenous cactus gained a special status in the Israeli national narrative. What was part of a native background was brought forward and transformed into an emblem signifying the identity of the Jewish citizen born in the new state.

### CODING THE LANDSCAPE

It was only natural, then, that when the subject of the cactus—this time the wild tree rather than the harvested fruit—reappeared in Palestinian art, its finest expression was assumed by two visual artists who grew up in an Arab village in Israel. The monochromatic engravings and etchings of Walid Abu Shaqra (b. 1946) and the drawings and paintings of his younger cousin 'Asim Abu Shaqra (1961–90) reveal through their depiction of the cactus tree what may be termed two "strategies of duplication with a difference."<sup>8</sup> While the cactus in the works of the elder artist appeared simply as a recurring component of the familiar home scenery, it was to become the leitmotif that haunted the younger artist, especially as he became aware of his approaching death. In the meantime, their family relation, shared profession, and the common codes they elaborated in their art recalled the course that once maintained Palestine's icon painting tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Walid Abu Shaqra's landscapes were never conceived in the Western tradition of landscape aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> Despite their masterly rendering in a conventional method of visual representation, his landscapes accord equal importance to all the scenery's elements. Foreground and background seem interchangeable. Every detail is known, individual. Giving an Arabic place-name to a print portraying a certain group of trees, a clearing, or a heap of

stones and thistle echoes the villager's intimate relation with the simple elements that constitute the ancestral homeland. This intimacy with the specificity of place is the more intense because human beings are nowhere to be seen.<sup>11</sup> Here is an uprooted olive tree lying in the sun; a freshly plowed field in the moonlight; an almond tree next to a stubborn wall of ancient stones holding raggedly together; bushes, thorns, and wildflowers growing in the cracks of scattered stones that once belonged to buildings. Seeing human traces, but not those who left them, is the villager's clue that one is looking not at some anonymous landscape but at a very specific place. Abu Shaqra's opening to his place is often through a cactus hedge. Today, after hundreds of villages have been depopulated and destroyed, their names wiped off Israeli maps, the unyielding cacti planted by the ancestors to identify village borders continue to grow where the villages once stood. Through Walid Abu Shaqra's repeated images of cactus hedges, the viewer may retrace the steps of a people's dispossession.

Always printed in black, an Abu Shaqra landscape, carrying an obscure place-name only a native villager could recognize, seems to act as an extension

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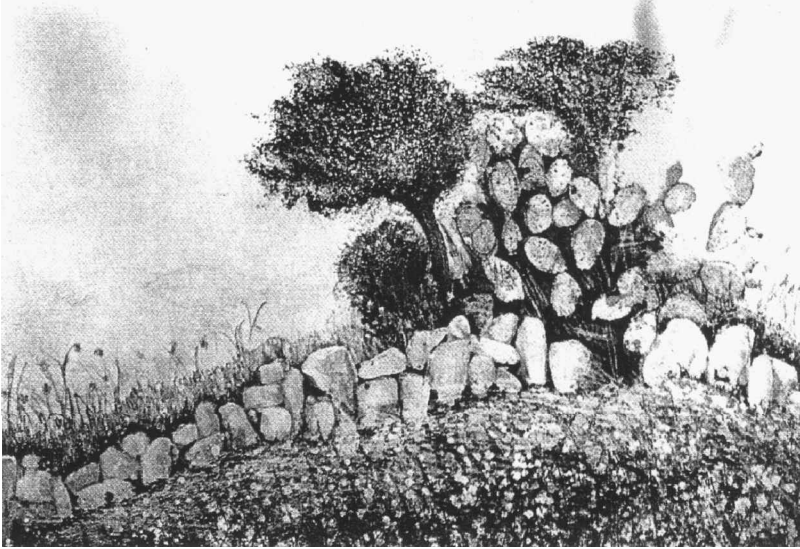
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of a secret script. Perhaps that is why it is not so strange that some of his prints do not exceed the size of an identity card. Through such an intimate image, the land's traces could be carried in a pocket, just as pilgrims carry amulets and personal icons. In identifying the name of each of these places that are nowhere to be found on Israeli maps, each landscape of Walid Abu Shaqra, with or without cactus, continues

to preserve visual codes that echo the call once flung out in the peasant's dance song, "O eye, be a cactus tree!"

The eyes of 'Asim Abu Shaqra devoured the codes embedded in his elder cousin's scenes. He was determined to work out his "strategy of duplication with a difference." Thanks to his instructors at the Tel Aviv School of Art, who led him to find his own voice and language, 'Asim was to go all the way to the root of the codes in Walid's landscape: the cactus tree.<sup>12</sup> In his obsessive quest to personalize the cactus, the dying younger artist brought himself face to face with the exact significance the wild tree had attained among disinherited Palestinian villagers such as his cousin and himself.

The sharing of common iconic codes is the key to the commonalties of the two cousin artists; to discern the difference between their strategies, we have to recognize the distinct historical context in which the language of each was molded. Walid's pictorial language showed its first signs of originality, with its emphasis on the unique value of every single Palestinian place, around the mid-1970s. This was a time of rising Israeli Arab protests against the state's continuing land expropriations in Galilee, culminating in the point-blank killing of six protesters and the injury of some seventy others in the village of Sakhnin on what came to be known as the first Land Day.



**Walid Abu Shaqra, *View from My Village*, etching 35 × 50 cm.  
(Abu Shaqra family collection)**

As for the younger 'Asim, the maturation of his art coincided with the decade that opened with perhaps the worst defeat Palestinians had suffered since 1948: the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. From that grim death of Palestinians at the beginning of the 1980s, a new hope was born with the outburst of the children's intifada before the decade's end. 'Asim moved to Tel Aviv to study art the same year Israel invaded Lebanon. By the time the young villager from Umm al-Fahm began to learn how to free himself from reference to his hometown's scenes, missile-bearing warplanes flying north were rending the skies of Galilee. His paintings of the period showed warplanes assaulting cattle, plants, and spotted animals that roar back against them. A 1986 painting entitled *Cactus Hedge and a Plane* shows cacti standing up to a diving bomber.

In their own way, Walid Abu Shaqra's coded landscapes mirrored the footsteps the poets pressed among the relics of their people on their native soil. As for 'Asim, he wanted through his art to go beyond the mere retracing of a place. The younger artist was grasping for visual metaphors to match the power of the poet's voice.

### **APPROPRIATING NATURE**

Before probing 'Asim Abu Shaqra's central theme, the cactus tree, to explain how his metaphoric semblance relates to Palestinian poetry, it is important to see how the cactus hedge intrinsic to the villager's intimate environment was transformed into an ornamental plant in a flower pot, the image that consumed 'Asim's full concentration over the last two years of his

life. A couple of paintings belonging to the initial generation of Israeli art may give us a clue.

For some time, the Russian-born Pinhas Litvinovsky had been taken with painting the mustached native Arab in breezy pantaloons, a tilted red tarbush on his head, fondling a flower in one hand. During the same period, Reuven Ruben was turning out paintings of potted plants. In his 1923 "Jaffa Port," we see a horizontal row of four pots, each containing a different species of cactus, at the furthest end of a foreground showing a terrace's edge. Just as native peasants employed cactus hedges to define borders between their villages, so Ruben used the sturdy plant to mark the line separating his foreground from the rest of the landscape—the private space from the public domain. Beyond the line of cactus pots and the private space of the home terrace, the public domain, which occupies the greater part of the canvas, is vertically split by a sandy road where a camel perches next to its load. On one side of the road we see the huddled Arab homes of Jaffa, on the other the extended horizon of the sea, the direction from which the Romanian-born artist had arrived the previous year.

*Jaffa Port* was followed two years later by a painting in which the artist's private space was expanded to cover the major part of the painting, leaving only a narrow strip to portray the public domain. Once again, potted plants marked the axis of his theatrical setting. Probably executed on the same terrace, Ruben's *Self-Portrait in the Courtyard* shows the artist sitting next to his favorite goat in front of a vacant canvas and surrounded by more than half a dozen pots, each containing a different species of indigenous plant. Contrasted to this private paradise is the narrow strip of the background, a desolate sun-bleached seashore on which we can spot in the distance a black donkey standing next to a dark figure.

Examining Ruben's spatial codes, we cannot but conclude that these two paintings by one of Israel's most popular artists of the settler generation convey more than an outsider's fondness for potted plants. One is tempted to read the shifting territorial line expanding the stage setting of the terrace as a metaphorical translation of the expression coined by Weizman, "another goat and another acre." Through these two iconic paintings allegorically reflecting the ethos of the frontier mentality, one may thus infer that a potted plant was a symbolic embodiment of what has been called Zionism's "policy of detail."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, from the demarcation line formed by various species of cactus to the charmed circle of native plants, Ruben's artistic language seems to deploy the potted native plant to mark the disparity between the settler's exclusive world and the terrain of the native. The transplanting of a wild plant to a clay pot itself is symbolic: the plant is taken out of its natural context and its public domain to become a portable object to be privately claimed, a classified fetish for the amusement of its owner or for examination under some botanist's gaze. As a decorative element in an urban setting, a

potted plant becomes emblematic of the appropriation of nature and domestication of the wilderness.

This practice, congruent with the mission of all European settler societies, eventually promoted aesthetic conventions that would become characteristic of the Jewish Israeli cultural environment.<sup>14</sup> While the entire landscape, the vital source of all plants, had been conquered by military force and the campaign that expelled the great majority of the Arab natives was completed, the settlers elaborated their own aesthetic convention. This soon extended to divorce Palestinian Arab household utensils and farm implements from their original function. Today, these belongings still “regularly find their way into the decor of Jewish Israeli interiors,” along with pots containing different species of the cactus tree.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in Tel Aviv, the Arab villager from Umm al-Fahm saw a grandfather’s prayer rug turned into a wall hanging at a dusky tavern; a stone basin and storage bins from a mother’s kitchen or a village guest house reduced to ornaments of an alien place. The decontextualization of Arab products did not spare any Arab space that remained relatively intact, be it in Jaffa, in Safad, or in ‘Ayn Karim.

The one-time Arab village of ‘Ayn Hawd was transformed into an artists’ colony and renamed Ein Hod. The village mosque became a bar and restaurant, the olive press, turned on its head, assumed the appearance of a contemporary sculpture in the very room in which it was formerly used. While the predominant Israeli narrative never ceased to refer to the original site as an “abandoned Arab village,” ‘Asim knew—as did everyone else back in Umm al-Fahm—that the ‘Ayn Hawd villagers, forcibly evicted in 1948, continued to live as “internal refugees” two kilometers uphill on Mount Carmel.<sup>16</sup> The cactus hedges that continued to grow throughout the countryside had been nature’s own device to remind all villagers of the birthplace of their fellow villagers.

## FLOWERING OUT OF DEATH

As for the potted cactus that was to become the ultimate repository of all the pent-up emotions that the Arab villager experienced in Israel’s quintessential city, Tali Tamir informs us in her study of Abu Shaqra’s work that its source “was an actual potted plant, small and not particularly impressive, that stood on the ledge of one of the windows opposite his studio in the ‘Red House’ on Nahmani Street in Tel Aviv.”<sup>17</sup> ‘Asim was confined to a precarious state of existence, having been repeatedly denied housing in Tel Aviv’s residential neighborhoods because he was an Arab.<sup>18</sup> Nothing seemed to sum up the fusion between his personal predicament and his people’s uprootedness better than the sight of his neighbor’s cactus confined in a flower pot.

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Like him, the potted plant had been uprooted from the countryside, and



like his people's heritage, it had been made into a decorative object divorced from its natural setting. Its solitary being looked voicelessly back at its urban environment; its shadowless presence made no demands on anyone. The central code of Palestinian dispossession, now cribbed in a pot, quietly waited for its proprietor, and its very waiting spelled its colloquial Arabic name *sabr*: "patience."

Soon enough, the young man learned that he was dying. The sight of the cactus plant in a pot offered him the only promise of hope as he began waiting for his own death. Once he was asked why he kept on painting the cactus plant. The peasants' son replied simply, "because of its amazing ability to flower out of death."<sup>19</sup>

'Asim's response is consonant with one of the most common images popularized by Palestinian poets who, like him, had come from a rural background. His affinity with the poets' voices, however, did not, like those of others in his generation of artists, stop at verbal metaphors. It surged from the very course that Palestinian verse had followed since the mid-1930s.

This affinity was undoubtedly intensified both by 'Asim's sudden awareness of the brevity of his days and by the kindred talent he knew he possessed. The visual artist was fated to relive, through his own art, a moment that had become a watershed in the national poetry of his country. Like the poet 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmud (1913–48), likewise of rural origin, who a half century earlier had foreseen his own death in his poems and become the heroic subject of his own narrative, 'Asim began to identify more and more with the subject of his painting. Mahmud, who died on the battlefield defending the village of al-Shajara, which fell to Zionist forces on 5 May 1948, was the pioneer who heralded the trend in Palestinian poetry that explores the metaphor of the poet's body dissolving into the ancestral land. Likening his soul or creative gift to a hand grenade tossed at death that may live on for his friends and country, Mahmud's poetry remained alive in the memory of generations of Palestinians. The impact of his voice reverberated in the words of every poet that was to come from Galilee.<sup>20</sup>

The urge expressed by the poets was also reflected in the vigor with which 'Asim filled consecutive sketchbooks with hundreds of drawings extolling the cactus in a flower pot. If artists' sketchbooks may be viewed as intimate journals registering processes of visual thinking, 'Asim's absorption of his homeland's poetic imagery can be traced in those pages. In fact, because 'Asim worked simultaneously on drawing and painting so feverishly that execution methods often overlapped, the viewer cannot fully appreciate the artistic significance of his cactus paintings without considering a key set of sketches that charted the painting's direction.

The subject of Christ's Passion, which 'Asim explored in these drawings, had already been a recurrent source of inspiration to numerous Palestinian poets, in whose mother tongue the words *fadi*, meaning "redeemer," and *fida'i*, meaning "freedom fighter," share a common root. Regardless of their religious origins, whether they were Christian like Tawfiq Sayigh, Muslim

like Mahmud Darwish, or Druze like Samih al-Qasem, Palestinian poets had borrowed metaphors alluding to Christ's Passion to allegorize their own travails in the land that had once witnessed the persecution and crucifixion of a rebel from Galilee.

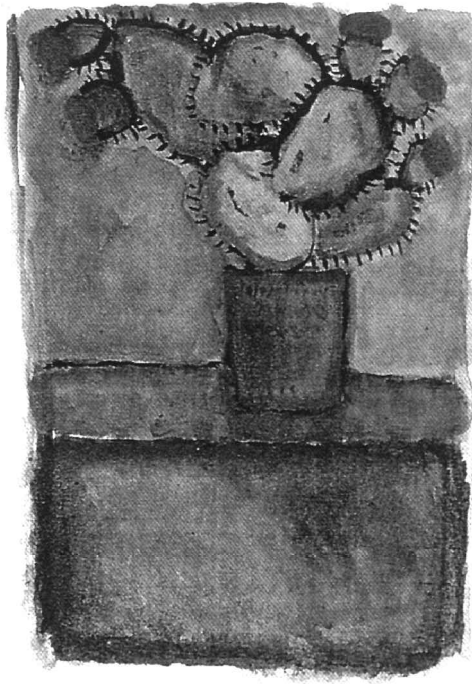
In a drawing of Christ's Passion, the Muslim 'Asim sketched in pen and ink the crucified man crying out to heaven. A raven stands vigil on the cross's arm. No crown of thorns surrounds Christ's twisted head, but clusters of cactus are outlined on both sides of his suspended figure. Images of Christ's Passion were called in to convey the significance of cactus to the Palestinian peasant in a way that cries out for a sort of sanctification of the indigenous plant whose "ability to flower out of death" answers in the peasant's mind the belief in death and resurrection.

### CACTUS AS ICON

What is most remarkable in these sketches is that 'Asim was unaware that through his process of visual thinking, he was heading in a direction that brought him to the earliest pioneer of Palestinian painting. Thus, just as Nicola Sayigh's depiction of the cactus fruits at the turn of the twentieth century marked the Jerusalem iconographer's first step toward the secularization of his art, 'Asim's first step toward the sanctification of the cactus at the end of the century was hastened through his reconsideration of Christian iconography. Through the inviting sight of the prickly pears, the urban painter sought to bring the countryside into the homes of city dwellers. In contrast, through sanctification of the cactus, 'Asim sought to restore the iconic meaning of the indigenous plant in the natural setting of his home landscape.

This exploration of 'Asim's sketches of Christ's Passion does not simply help us trace the artist's intentions preceding his embrace of the potted cactus, it uncovers the originality of a young man who wrestled with a subject that Matisse was to treat only at the end of his career. Just as 'Asim had been cut off from Sayigh's art, with its evolution from the icon to the cactus theme, he was probably unaware of Matisse's marrying of Christ's Passion and the cactus tree. At the Dominican Nuns' Rosary Chapel at Vence in southern France, stained-glass windows depicting Matisse's Tree of Life—a cactus bearing paddle-like stems in bloom—tower above the altar upon which the Eucharist is consecrated. On the opposite wall, a ceramic mural in black and white reflects the progress of Christ's Passion through the fourteen Stations of the Cross.

Just as physical likeness to a saint's face was never the iconographer's intention, representation of the visual beauty of the cactus was not 'Asim's objective. In both cases it is the communal significance of the inherited image that is sought in the object of representation. That is why the same subject matter has been as emphatically repeated by 'Asim as in an icon: not to document different attempts at capturing the ephemeral quality of an apparition, but simply to produce a fundamental image of common faith. In this



**'Asim Abu Shaqra, page from a sketchbook, 1985–86. (Abu Shaqra family collection)**

way, 'Asim's consecutive paintings of the cactus, echoing the tradition in icon painting, were a form of prayer in which the collective memory of a nation was crystallized in a chosen image. Just as no signature is to be seen in a great number of icons, 'Asim's signature is seldom seen anywhere on the painted surface. In both cases, the subject of representation seems to evoke a kind of reverence that obliges the image maker to efface his own name.

His neighbor's potted cactus, we are told, was the major force that inspired the full series of potted plants with which 'Asim left us. The structural differences among his subjects, however, must have come as the result of years of looking at cactus. In the peasant's collective memory, the sight of the plant and the unyielding tenacity it represents have been one, just as its colloquial name and the Arabic word for "patience" are one. The series reveals that the memory of looking that 'Asim nurtured all his life was not divorced from contemplating either the intrinsic significance of the indigenous plant or the way this emblem of his national dispossession had been appropriated and reduced to a decorative element sitting in a pot among slabs of concrete. For a Palestinian Arab living in Israel, just as the presence of cactus in nature recalls the absence of a village, the presence of a cactus in a pot recalls its absence from nature. On the axis of memory, the native artist turns into a rare sort of eyewitness: the artist's stern vigilance invites the spectator to recover imagined space.

The dying painter who never ceased to marvel at the blossoms sprouting from the plant's lifeless thorns could finally imagine his own absence. The paintings he feverishly executed were like those cactus blossoms, the fruits of a memory that he knew would perpetuate his own life. The intensity of their presence today recalls the voice of the poet who foresaw his body's fusion with the ancestral land.

### THE WORLD OF THE INTERIOR

This fusion hallowed by 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmud, which brought Palestinian poetry to a turning point, may have been what the poet's contemporary Zulfa al-Sa'di falteringly attempted to articulate when she exhibited her iconic portraits of national liberation heroes right next to her cactus painting. But the fusion maintained in poetry through a dispersed people's memory had to wait more than half a century to take form in visual art. When it did, it could only have come from Galilee, the region that produced what Ghassan Kanafani called "the poetry of resistance," a region that Palestinians, wherever they are, refer to as *al-dakbil*, "the interior."<sup>21</sup>

As the interior of the country is the core of the impulse of resistance, so the interior of the built environment is the core of identity. The interior is not only refuge and home, but prison and tomb. Thus, all elements in 'Asim's work executed at its finest hour belong to the world of the interior. His potted plant is an indoor object whose contemplation, within the context of what it represents, invites both artist and spectator to journey toward their own interiors. 'Asim, who had painted the cactus majestically wild, its thorns blooming with flowers, showed us how, brought indoors as a decorative element, it looks dwarfed and deformed. Sometimes 'Asim's potted cactus looks like a rolled-up porcupine or a black fist of thorns bursting against a stormy sky. Other times it looks like a mere finger raised toward heaven. The visual artist who, to his last gasp of life, sought to ally his verbal heritage with the visual language he possessed, showed in one painting how the cactus in its pot turns into a screaming profile in which words bursting from the wide-open mouth take the shape of spikes and thorns.

In 'Asim's world of "the interior," the Arabic word for "patience" and "cactus," *sabr*—rhymed in the peasant's everyday proverbs with *qabr*, "tomb"—finally assumed a visual body. Within its interior setting, 'Asim's potted cactus lives in a sunless zone where the major source of light seems as obscure as in a partial eclipse. His twilight suspends two states of time; daybreak and nightfall become interchangeable. Their transitional convergence through a crack of light at the horizon seems to mirror the cycle that flows between the dead-looking cactus and its birth-giving promise.

Otherwise, the night reigns supreme in 'Asim's articulation of "the interior." In a painting that breathes forth the choking air of damp ashes, of loss and bereavement, all elements reiterate captivity within "the interior." Here, not only is the wild plant of the countryside buried in a pot, but its very sight

is made more inaccessible by consecutive frames that position the potted cactus at the image's farthest plane, as the rectangular blocks further reduce the plant's breathing space. In another painting, the villager from Umm al-Fahm ("mother of coal") spreads an impasto the color of tar and soot to describe the cityscape of Tel Aviv. Through the sweeping veil of black, the silhouette of his shackled plant is filtered through hints of green and night blues punctuated with dashing strokes of mud and flint. In another of his black paintings, 'Asim's vigorous brush strokes discharge an energy that transforms the visible outline of a cactus in the dark into a volcanic body that seems to look for a resting place in which to lodge its unceasing pangs. In another, the potted cactus simply dissolves into the funereal and sparkless grays of an unmarked peasant's grave. Where the golden backgrounds in Byzantine icons represent celestial space, 'Asim's muted background offers earthy shades of sand and clay before which the silhouette of a solitary cactus rises up from its pot to gasp for air.

Tender tones of color recalling the tremulous tones of a wheat field in summer are contrasted in another painting with solid areas in lilac and indigo blue to define the gravity of the pot and the hardness of stone. Elsewhere, thinner tones of the same cold colors are transformed into softening hues. Bathed in a nocturnal light, a blue cactus is crowned with smudges of poppy red, its evanescent blossoms. A shadow of the pot, rarely seen in other paintings, falls here on the window sill, reminding the viewer of the absence of the moon. In a blue-black painting that stands apart, all apparition is etched into 'Asim's pitch darkness, a delicate hairline graffito whose incision in the paint pigment emulates a form of personal writing. The short strokes outline the body of 'Asim's thorny plant in a continuous pattern that flows with the floral design surrounding the pot and covering its support. Instead of stars, the night sky bursts with blots of sanguine red, recalling the anemones that in the popular legends and poetry of 'Asim's homeland personified "the drops of Tammuz' blood."<sup>22</sup>

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When 'Asim's body finally found its resting place in the land he so loved, it was during the first days of that month, named in both Hebrew and Arabic "Nisan," which a poet once called "the cruelest" of the year. His compatriots remember that a week before his burial, as his final days were slipping away, Palestinians everywhere were coming together to commemorate another Land Day.

A black-and-white photograph of 'Asim, perhaps the very last taken before he died, appeared in the catalog of a posthumous exhibition of his work held at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Taken in a plain studio setting, the square photograph—half of which is vacant—shows, on its remaining portion, 'Asim in old jeans and sandals seated on a concrete block, his hands resting on his crossed legs. The extreme edge of his face, slightly turning away from us toward the void, is dipped in light as the rest of his body seems

solidly composed within his world of ash gray. The loose-fitting shirt, buttoned all the way up to the collar, is stamped with a floral pattern, recalling the pattern etched into one of his last paintings. Here, half dead, the painter, devoid of hair from the effects of radiation and chemotherapy, sits for us like the shadow of a cactus tree, as his paintings have been its fruits. He may have been exposed to humiliation in his life, but this portrait shows only the unblinking dignity of the peasant.

And yet, the most striking detail of the portrait remains the artist's eyes, which had apotheosized the cactus tree. 'Asim seems to look inward, as a monk shuts his eyes before an icon so that his inward journey may bring him closer to what he has just seen. Unlike the monk's icon, however, 'Asim's paintings call for the kind of vigilance that was first articulated in the peasants' refrain, "O eye, be a cactus tree!" Only by keeping both our eyes open may we fully see how through the artist's eyes and the cactus tree a new icon had been born.

## NOTES

1. See Edward W. Said's "Permission to Narrate," *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969–1994* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), pp. 247–68. The subject was more fully elaborated later in his *After the Last Sky* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), pp. 11–49.

2. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vantage Books, 1994), p. 14.

3. Edward W. Said, "The Pen and the Sword: Culture and Imperialism," *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with David Barsamian* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 1994), p. 71. For an exploration of Said's "contrapuntal criticism," see Jonathan Arac, "Criticism between Opposition and Counterpoint," *Boundary 2* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 55–69.

4. See, for example, the landscape photographs by Palestinian Khalil Ra'ad, whose Jerusalem studio was established in 1895, and those by Russian-born Avraham Soskin after his 1905 arrival in Palestine.

5. In a 26 November 1998 interview with Daoud Zalatimo (b. 1906), the pioneering Jerusalem painter and art teacher confirmed to me that seeing Nicola Sayigh's cactus paintings during his early teens was a "major motive that made me want to pursue a career in painting." For more comprehensive coverage of that formative period, see my *Istibdar al-*

*Makan: Dirasat fi-l-Fan al-Tashkili al-Filastini al-Mu'asir* (Recovery of place: A study of contemporary Palestinian painting) (Tunis: ALECSO, 2000).

6. See Khalil Sakakini's entry of 17 April 1919, in his journals, *Kadha Ana Ya Dunya* (World: That is who I am) (Jerusalem, 1955), p. 179.

7. *Ard al-Burtuqal al-Hazin* (Beirut, 1962).

8. The expression "strategies of duplication with a difference" was first used by Joel Fineman in his *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Susan Slyomovics borrowed the term to explain a characteristic trait in Palestinian poetry. Her conclusion about poetry applies equally to the visual arts. See her book *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 186.

9. The history of Palestinian painting reveals that studio art runs within families, as traditional crafts have for generations. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the tradition of icon painting was perpetuated by father and son, such as Jiryeh and Tawfiq Jawhariyyeh, and by brothers, such as Ishaq and Andoni Ni'meh, Mina and Andoni Abu Shaqra, and Ishaq and Wadi Sahhar.

10. For a critique of the Western tradition of landscape painting, see W. J. T.

Mitchell's "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 5–34. For Mitchell's analysis of the Palestine/Israel landscape, see his "Landscape and Idolatry: Territory and Terror," in *The Landscape of Palestine: Equivocal Poetry*, ed. Ibrahim Abu Lughod et al. (Birzeit: Birzeit University Publications, 1999), pp. 235–53.

11. The most important common element between the landscapes of Abu Shaqra and of the Jewish immigrant artists from the turn of the century is the absence of people. But in the work of the immigrant artists, the absence of inhabitants suggests a mythical place where humanity has not set foot since the prophets walked the land, constituting a clandestine call for the right to conquer this place devoid of traces of the living. For further elaboration, see my article "Israeli and Palestinian Artists: Facing the Forest," *Third Text*, no. 7 (Summer 1989), 77–95.

12. In her remarkable study of Abu Shaqra's work, Tali Tamir informs us that the art instructors at the Tel Aviv School of Art, Uri Stetner, Moshe Kupferman, and David Reeb, had a particular influence on 'Asim Abu Shaqra's development. See "Asim Abu-Shakra," Exhibition Catalog (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1994), pp. 86–89.

13. For a discussion of the "policy of detail," see Edward W. Said, "The Acre and the Goat," *Politics of Dispossession*, pp. 33–42.

14. For a comparative case with another European settler society, see David Bunn's "'Our Wattled Cot': Mercantile and Domestic Space in Thomas Pringle's African Landscapes" in Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, pp. 127–73. For a more comprehensive interpretation of images reflecting the appropriation of nature by a settler society see *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920*, ed. William H. Truettner

(Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

15. See Slyomovics, *Object of Memory*, p. 55. For an eyewitness account of the appropriation of Palestinian Arab utensils and household objects, see Ephraim Kleiman, "Khirbet Khiz'ah and Other Unpleasant Memories," in *Triumph and Catastrophe: The War of 1948, Israeli Independence, and the Refugee Problem*, ed. Ian S. Lustick (New York: Garland, 1994), pp. 130–39.

16. Susan Slyomovics' *Object of Memory* is the most comprehensive and resourceful work on 'Ayn Hawd to appear in English. In particular, see chapter 3, "The Palestinian Arab Village," pp. 82–136.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

18. Phone conversation with Tali Tamir on 25 May 2000.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

20. For the poetry of Mahmud, see *Rubi 'ala Rabati: Diwan 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmud* (My soul in my palm: Collected works by 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmud), ed. Hanna Abu Hanna (Nazareth, 1985).

21. Ghassan Kanafani, who was killed by Israeli agents in Beirut in 1972, coined the term "poetry of resistance" in his book *Adab al-Muqawamah fi Filastin al-Mubtallab, 1948–1966* (Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine, 1948–1966) (Beirut, 1966). For further reading on the Palestinian code of "the interior," see Said, *After the Last Sky*, chapter 2, "Interiors," pp. 51–84.

22. During my childhood in Jerusalem, we used to refer to the anemones that briefly blanketed the hills around the city at Easter as *dam il-Masih* ("Christ's blood"), a term that must have derived from references to the earlier pagan fertility gods Tammuz and Adonis. The Tammuz School, dominating Arabic verse for more than two decades, left a strong mark on Palestinian poetry where it concerns the themes of martyrdom and sacrifice, death and rebirth.