

Ahmad Nawash, Painting in Exile

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It is important for historians of art to look clearly at all that is accomplished in any one period and document for their society its creative accomplishment. The value of the arts is established over time by the many voices of those who study, write, collect, and enjoy art. As a writer and painter of long experience, I am writing about Ahmad Nawash, because I consider his work to be of high quality and thus add my voice to the many who admire his paintings. The significance of such a process lies in the need for a society to provide a view which guides new generations, be it in art or in science.

I visited and interviewed the painter Ahmad Nawash at his home in Amman twice, once in 2007 and again in 2011. He narrated a few details of his life, and later guided me to a large room where I photographed some of his works and took notes while he explained a few of them to me. Throughout both interviews, the great and ongoing tragedy of Palestine was an omnipresent theme in his discourse.

Nawash's early beginnings and mature practice as an artist took place during the years when the Palestinian liberation movement was growing in strength in politics and in art. Forward-looking artists of the time were active organizing unions, exhibitions, galleries, publications, and a museum. Together, their visual output forms a unique chapter in both the history of Palestinian art and that of twentieth-century revolutionary art – including movements such as Impressionism, Constructivism, and the Mexican Mural movement. While Nawash remained distant from the organizing activities of the Liberation artists, he nevertheless was one of them in the form and content of his work. Briefly, the form of their work was most often related to the Mexican Mural

movement, wherein space is divided in a mildly Cubist manner and the sections filled with symbolic images meaningful to the population.

Ahmad Nawash was born in the village of ‘Ayn Karim in the governorate of Jerusalem, Palestine, in 1934. Nawash died on 18 May 2017 at age eighty-three, one year after the death of his wife, Jihad Ibrahim al-Zarqa‘a. He experienced the tragedy of the expulsion from Palestine, the Nakba, at the age of fourteen – old enough to be conscious of his surroundings. The boy Ahmad, in his formative years between childhood dependence and the ambitions of adulthood, experienced this loss as an indelible stamp on his life. After the expulsion, the family traveled first to Jericho where they stayed for a month, then took a bus to Jordan where they wandered from place to place before eventually settling in Amman. During our discussions,¹ Ahmad Nawash remembered his father as a man of great dignity who protected the family and who worked with his hands all his life as a stone cutter.

When he turned to speaking about his painting, Nawash said, “I began to draw when I was in Palestine,” then added that during the first years in Jordan, “I did not study art formally but taught myself and I did not take any short courses that are typical here. I used to go to museums and often examined art books but not many because they were expensive.”

After family life became stable in Amman, Ahmad began to study art informally with an Italian painter named Armando. His admiration for his teacher instilled in him the idea of studying art in Rome. At the age of seventeen, he combined his savings and a modest gift from his father and set out for Italy. It was a memorable adventure of youth and at the time of our interview, at age seventy-nine, Ahmad retained a visual memory of his family’s farewell. In his mind’s eye, he could still see a tear slowly sliding down his father’s cheek as he gave him his blessings, advising him to “Rely on God.”²

Ahmad Nawash arrived in Rome without previously having been admitted to any school. He immediately took the entry exam for the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma, succeeded, began five years of study, and graduated in 1964 with honors. He described his studies as a gift from the Italian government because it was the government workers who were dedicated to Arab-Italian relations who provided the needed support.³ He said that his first experience exhibiting his work was in the streets of Rome, in Via Margutta, where many students and professionals sat with their works receiving the general public’s reactions. He also exhibited his work in a cafe near Piazza del Popolo.⁴

Ahmad returned to Amman after graduation and was immediately engaged to Jihad and a year later, in 1965, they were married. Jihad was a teacher and school principal during her life and Ahmad’s number one supporter.⁵ The Palestinian liberation movement was growing stronger in Amman and because of this, Palestine was at the forefront of both his thoughts and his paintings even more so than before. On the subject, Nawash commented:

I paint about the traitors and the resulting pressure spiritually and bodily on the human being. Even when I was in Rome I painted about Palestine

but the thought deepened in 1967. Our traitorous leaders sold us out for a very cheap price.⁶

Nawash's hunger for learning was extensive, and over the following two decades, he received three more diplomas in etching, lithography, ceramics and restoration from the School of Fine Arts in Bordeaux, the National School of Fine Arts in Paris, and a short course in Florence. His stay in Paris lasted for five years from 1970 to 1975, and by the end he spoke both Italian and French fluently.

His son, Dirar Nawash, remembered his father as a man focused on his art and who seemed more high-strung than relaxed.⁷ His absorption with his work extended to late hours at the studio and continuous contemplation at home of paintings he was then working on. Dirar further remarked that his father lacked the diplomacy with which his wife was greatly endowed, and were it not for her management, Nawash might have been a solitary and isolated artist.

During the mid-1990s, tired of life in Amman, he went to Paris and began serious efforts to move his family to France. But sadly, his son Mousa's sudden death led him immediately to return home to Amman where he remained for the rest of his days.⁸

Political and arts activism were on the minds of most Palestinian artists, however Nawash remained distant from both and devoted himself to family life and to making paintings. Nonetheless, he remained the typical Palestinian refugee intimately attached to daily news of his nation's ongoing tragedies. His visual expression sprang from the depth of pain he experienced in reaction to the cruelty of Israeli oppression. The suffering he observed in Palestinian children and their reaction to events were primary subject matter. He considered that the Nakba was not a single event that ended in 1948, but rather an ongoing daily event that began in 1948. Nawash recognized that the pain he felt was shared by all Palestinians, and his tears flowed unabashedly when talking about particular events. As we sat together reminiscing, it seemed to me that his gentleness converted us to brother and sister. We agreed that Palestinians share the pain of continuous tragedy, and regardless of where or when we meet, it always makes us seem familiar to each other. Nawash was very tender towards the people around him. But as he described personalities in his paintings, it was clear that he was not indiscriminate. He applied affectionate understanding to the innocent and anger to those he saw as doing "evil."⁹

All that Ahmad Nawash knew and felt strongly about was poured into his pictures: love of his wife and family, the solid dignity of his father, and the daily tragedies Palestinians experienced. On first sight, his paintings seem childlike and the careless viewer may easily pass them by as simplistic. However, they remain in one's consciousness and compel the hasty viewer to return no matter how cursory the first look. As you contemplate his paintings, your glance moves from surprise to surprise – from the sharpness of an arm turned into a Kalashnikov, to the unexpected twists of bodies combined into simple shapes, to the compelling simplicity of facial expression, to the crisp symbols of Palestinian national life. This is how he made visible the pressure of oppression "spiritually and bodily on the human being."¹⁰

The development of Nawash's painting from his earliest student years to full maturity of an artist in his seventies was uninterrupted. One can see in his first student paintings of the early 1960s the influence of Cubism and abstraction then current in Europe. Having visited the continent so many times, Nawash had ample opportunities to see European abstraction such as that of the Jeune École de Paris¹¹ and perhaps the CoBrA Group.¹² Nawash himself never mentioned CoBrA paintings, but the formal relationship between their work and his is apparent albeit their difference in content. The CoBrA artists were looking for something to liberate them from the morass of artistic ambiance in which they lived, and thus were inspired by the drawing of children and the 'insane.' Nawash, on the other hand, was painting the tragedies of Palestinian life that he observed all around him.

The single European painter that appealed most to Nawash was Paul Klee. In an interview conducted by Nadia al-'Issa Nawash, he said about Paul Klee's artwork:

I am particularly fond of the transparency of his colors and am very much drawn to his ability to so eloquently summarize what he wishes to convey in his works.¹³

Nawash's earliest paintings are murky and brushy. It is as though he was searching for visual methods to render his subjects without illusionistic details or specific background. One might think that they see hints of Surrealism in Nawash's early paintings due to the distortions in his figures. But his later work shows that these were personifications that endure into his mature style and that he intended them as Palestinian archetypes. They are not mythical inventions. A good example of Nawash's early work is the painting *Human Rights Crucified* (figure 4), dating from 1967, representing an old man in a murky, hazy atmosphere. If one compares it to his paintings dating from the 1990s, the difference visually is clearly demonstrated.

Nawash's maturity as an artist paralleled that of the Palestine liberation movement and that of its artists. His paintings gained in formal power and clarity, as did his use of symbols. In his mature work, figures and the space in which they exist are rendered in flat color. Shapes are simplified, and often several parts are made to share one outline, as is typical of the paintings of Palestinian Liberation artists. Both the figures he represented and the symbols accompanying them were executed with great economy of means. This mature clarity is exemplified in his painting *Palestinian Situation* (1973; figure 5) and even more in his painting *Children of Sorrow* (1986; figure 6). both described below.

At the end of our interview, Nawash described a few paintings explaining his intentions and the visual story they contained. As we explored his studio, he clarified that his paintings are not about depression nor result from it; rather they are powerful weapons of Palestinian history that strengthen the determination to return and retrieve all that was criminally taken; to remove the pain and to un-erase the co-opted national history.

Following are his descriptions combined with my insights of the works we selected for the final focus of our interview:

Those to Whom Evil was Done (1966) is an early expressionist work done in painterly textures exhibiting both the form and content of later work. Though the brushy atmosphere is somewhat muddy, there are strong hints of what will become the hallmark of much of the art of the Liberation school of the 1970s and 1980s. Many shapes are fitted together, sharing one border composed of the convexities and concavities needed to clarify the identity of the subject represented. This is clearly the case in the two adjacent heads, one orange and one grey, which rise out of the central composition at the top of the painting. Careful scrutiny reveals many combined human parts, especially heads, extremities, and eyes as well as allusions to animal parts in some of the eyes and outlines. Ahmad Nawash described this painting as representing those who died, or were killed, or are still alive, who have suffered evil at the hands of others.

The painting *The Old Man and the Birds* (1967) has far clearer space than earlier paintings. Nawash distorted shapes in surprising ways for expressive purposes, using levels of light and color to differentiate areas, and using minimal shading mostly in background areas. Texture in these early paintings delineates flat areas, the outline of which carries the message. Ahmad described this as a picture of an old Palestinian man unable to move because the cares of the world are on his back: “The birds on his shoulder are worries that he cannot shoo away.”¹⁴



Figure 1. *Those to Whom Evil Was Done*, 1966, oil on canvas 100 x 83 cm.



Figure 2. *The Old Man and the Birds*, 1967, oil on canvas, 88 x 62 cm.

Palestine (1967) is one of the largest paintings executed by Ahmad Nawash. He considered it very important in his career. It possesses minimal details in his typical less-is-more manner, leaving viewers to plummet its depth based on their own knowledge and experience. The mother and child at the center can easily be read as the embodiment of Palestinian hope with the child's head looking something like a key – a symbol of the right of return. On the right is a child suckling a cow, which represents Palestine as a suckling child of the Arab world. The rat on the left represents Israel, while the two figures in the upper left corner above the rat are walking back to back, disagreeing. They represent the Palestinian cause with all of its contradictions. The horizon, Ahmad described, is the border that is dark and uncertain. The symbolist intent paralleled with the deliberate refusal to be explicit remains an attribute of Nawash's work throughout his career.



Figure 3. *Palestine*, 1967, oil on canvas, 100 x 120 cm.

Crucifixion (1967) is a recurrent theme in Palestinian painting of the Liberation school. This is a theme that deserves special treatment, as does the theme of the martyr. What is interesting is the theme of death by crucifixion as part of the history of Palestine, dramatized by the biblical narrative. It is an image that has permeated the human race as an archetype of suffering due to injustice. This theme is not limited to Christian or Muslim artists,

and is practiced with a naturalness that seems all but unaware of the biblical crucifixion. In this painting, *Human Rights Crucified*, Ahmad described the crucified figure as representing human rights. Above the main figure is a second head, which he described as perhaps a partner or an alternate consciousness. More importantly behind the crucified figure and to his left is another standing figure, the upper torso of which seems to peer through a large window into a red-hot atmosphere. Ahmad described this other figure as the fighter in all Palestinians: “This is the one who struggles and is still alive and whose body is half hidden behind a curtain of darkness. He is like all of us who were exiled and scattered.”¹⁵



Figure 4. *Human Rights Crucified*, 1967, oil on canvas, 88 x 62 cm.

Palestinian Situation (1973) reflects Ahmad Nawash's more mature style, though clarity of color and flatness of shape are not yet completely present. A dimly delineated background is a space without identity in which distributed figures exist in relation to one another, telling their story through gesture and symbol. The floating lady, looking somewhat like an overblown balloon in the upper left of the painting, represents Golda Meir. Ahmad pointed out that if you look closely at her features you will recognize her. He added that life wins against Golda's will, and that life is exemplified by the young girl on the extreme right. Even though the girl has no arms, which means she has no power, she has a strong will of defense. Some stand nearby, sad for the girl. The Palestinian flag stretched horizontally, he said, can be recognized as the “stretcher-of-death” for wounded victims and martyrs.



Figure 5. *Palestinian Situation*, 1973, oil on canvas, 90 x 60 cm.

With *Children of Sorrow* (1986), painted more than twenty-five years into his career, Nawash has fully arrived at his powerful style. His color has grown richer, and his expressive shapes carry their message while interweaving with elegance and ease. A group of children in their various ages and sizes huddle with toys and pets and with worried facial expressions. Nawash told me that a great whale, perhaps a great burden, rests on the back of the tallest boy, its body curved downwards to share the shape of its head with that of a smaller boy hugged by, or hugging, the bigger one.



Figure 6. *Children of Sorrow*, 1986, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm.

Shapes interchange in meaning and are fitted together like pieces in a puzzle without the use of negative space between them. The only negative shape is the space of the background, which has grown light, yet contains expressive color delineation.

In *Challenge and Children* (1990), one boy seems to occupy one body with duplicate parts. He faces forward, having a recognizable recurrent face of a boy, one that lives in many Nawash paintings. To the side of his head, a three-quarter view of another boy's similar head emerges. A Kalashnikov replaces the right arm of this main figure of a boy facing the viewer. Another figure is nested under his other arm, a figure that Ahmad described as having "a powerful gaze of challenge looking at distant perspectives while the child that is facing forward leans and rests on him or her. It is about how Palestinian children have to deal with the challenge presented by Israeli oppression."¹⁶

Weapons Talk (1990) represents a young family with father, mother, and child. The young father is a fighter looking forward at the viewer; his arm pointing diagonally upwards is converted to a Kalashnikov. The wife's gestures exhibit the associated anguish. A small child is nested adjacent to her leg and sharing one straight boundary with her. This is a painting of simple, modest means and an economy of symbols, a clear and beautiful presentation holding a powerful message of hope and determination.



Figure 7. *Challenge and Children*, 1990, oil on canvas, 50 x 39 cm.



Figure 8. *Weapons Talk*, 1990, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm.

In conclusion, I wish that this were not such a modest narrative based on only two interviews. Ahmad Nawash has not been sufficiently studied or valued. With time, his importance will grow as the special qualities of his oeuvre have time to be noticed. Scholarship on Arab art in general – and Palestinian art in particular – is insufficient at present, but its growth will certainly place Ahmad Nawash in global art historical consciousness.

Jerusalemite Samia Halaby, an active painter for over four decades, continues to explore abstraction and its relationship to reality. She has exhibited throughout the U.S., Europe, Asia, and South America and her work can be found in private and public collections around the world, including the Guggenheim and the Institut du Monde Arabe. Also a writer and activist, Halaby has authored Liberation Art of Palestine (H.T.T.B. Publishers, 2001), Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre (Schilt Publishing, 2016), and Growing Shapes: Aesthetic Insights of an Abstract Painter (Palestine Books, 2016).

Endnotes

- 1 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 30 April 2007.
- 2 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 30 April 2007.
- 3 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 30 April 2007.
- 4 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 21 November 2011.
- 5 Dirar Nawash, personal interview, 28 June 2007. The interview was conducted through Suha Lallas, by telephone; Suha Lallas recorded and transcribed Dirar Nawash's Arabic responses to the author's questions, and sent them to the author who translated them into English.
- 6 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 30 April 2007.
- 7 Dirar Nawash, personal interview 28 June 2007, by phone with assistance from Suha Lallas.
- 8 Dirar Nawash, personal interview 28 June 2007 by phone, with assistance from Suha Lallas.
- 9 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 21 November 2011.
- 10 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 30 April 2007.
- 11 In the years before Abstract Expressionism, a school of painters known at the Jeune École de Paris (Young School of Paris) thrived in Europe. Pierre Soulages and Hans Hartung were two of the best known of the group.
- 12 The CoBrA artists created highly gestural paintings that were not abstract but were based on surrealist ideas and the naïve paintings of children and the insane. They were active for a short period from 1948 to 1951.
- 13 Ahmad Nawash, catalog of Darat al-Funun, Amman, 2008, 75.
- 14 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 21 November 2011.
- 15 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 21 November 2011.
- 16 Ahmad Nawash, personal interview, 21 November 2011.