

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

# Traces of the Nakba

Review by Penny Johnson  
and Raja Shehadeh

“Whirlwind,” Gaston Zvi Ickowitz, in  
“Scene of Events,” Herzliya Museum of  
Contemporary Art, 22 December 2018–  
27 April 2019

“1948,” Haifa City Museum, 4  
December 2018–28 April 2019.

“Properties,” Manofim, the Jerusalem  
Contemporary Art Festival, 4 October  
2018–12 December 2018.

“Spellbound,” Samah Shihadi, Tel Aviv  
Museum of Art, 23 June–2 November  
2019.

## “Whirlwind”: Herzliya

The room in the Herzliya Museum hosting Gaston Zvi Ickowicz’s 2019 exhibit “Whirlwind” is darkened; his black and white photos in their stark black frames are grainy, blurred, eerie; the color prints faded, almost archival. What are we seeing? Ickowicz explains that his photos emerged from fire: after incendiary kites and balloons launched over the “border” between Gaza and southern Israel during Gaza’s massive Great Marches of Return burned away vegetation, the ruins of three Palestinian villages – Simsim, Najd, and al-Mansura – suddenly became visible. The Palestinian inhabitants of these villages were forced to flee in 1948; most became refugees in Gaza and a substantial number of their descendants still live in Gaza’s Jabaliya refugee camp, one of the most densely populated places on earth. It is more than likely that some of the young men and women who participate in the March of Return are third- or fourth-generation refugees from these villages that are so close that the kites land there, so far that none of their inhabitants can return.

Simsim is noted in both Crusader (as Semsem) and early Ottoman records and contained traces of a Roman cemetery as well as Byzantine remains. Its Palestinian inhabitants – numbering around 1,400 – were driven out by the Negev Brigade in two days in May 1948. Some tried to return but Israeli soldiers also returned throughout May and June to blow up granaries and crops and houses, killing about twenty people. Photographer James Morris, in his book *Time and Remains of Palestine*, includes an evocative image of Simsim, taken several years before Ickowicz began his project.<sup>1</sup> All that can



Figure 1. Untitled (Simsim), archival pigment print, 134 x 90.5 cm, Gaston Zvi Ichowitz, 2018. Photo by authors, 2019.

be seen is a scattering of rocks rippling through a green field; the uneven ground undulates as if pregnant with remnants of a life buried underneath. These small markers of habitation, Morris notes, are at the center of an Israeli nature reserve, Kurkar Gevar'am, not an uncommon fate for Palestinian villages destroyed in the Nakba.

Ickowicz's lens, as he photographs these sites between March and October 2018, captures both the materiality and ghostliness of the now exposed ruins: stones on scorched earth, traces of the Nakba. The past, his images tell us, is both present and hidden. Ickowicz abandoned high-tech equipment to use an old camera and expired filmstock from the 1960s to produce the grainy blur through which we strive to see the past. "What happens," he says, when we look at the past from today's photographs?"

One thing that happens is that we must pause and reflect to interpret what we see. A white whirlwind of dust blows through the rubble of homes and habitats. "The wind cannot be controlled," Ickowicz tells us, "and I also don't want to control everything." In his video "Kites," he uses a small drone that is at the mercy of the wind as it flies over the three villages. The Nakba is both exposed and concealed, the past is in the path of a whirlwind.

And, Ickowicz tells us, some viewers of the exhibit do not want to know more. He has had many conversations and says, "Young people don't even know there was a Nakba." And others don't want to know: one woman told him, "I don't want to speak of history. I came to see the pictures."

It is telling as well that this is the first exhibit in the museum where titles were in

Arabic as well as Hebrew and English – another long absence, one that speaks of the normality of exclusion. But it is also striking that in this year when commemorations of the Nakba have been banned by the Israeli government, a nation-state bill that allots the state to the Jewish people has been passed, and a cultural loyalty bill is being debated, Ickowicz's exhibit is not the only one addressing the Nakba, or at the very least what one reporter called "the wound of 1948." Are artists – and the broader cultural field – bringing back banned histories? Can they offer some hope for countering today's politics of exclusion, which forbid, it seems, even memory? Is there, in other words, a return of the repressed through the work of artists?

We have no claim to close familiarity with the Israeli art scene. Leaving our city of Ramallah, through all-too-visible checkpoints and with the multiple hidden boundaries that increasingly separate Israelis and Palestinians, is at best a hassle and at worst a nightmare. That our friend and very experienced taxi driver Hani had trouble finding the Herzliya Museum is as indicative as the absent Arabic titles. Yet something seemed to be happening in culture across the Green Line in this most dismal of times for the future not only of occupied Palestine but perhaps of Israel as well. Visiting three other exhibits, in Haifa, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv, we came in a way as newcomers, but with a will to look with both hope and skepticism as carefully as we could.

## **“1948”: Haifa**

On Ben Gurion Street in Haifa's Germany Colony, banners flutter in the wind. Emblazoned on them is simply a date: 1948. The Haifa City Museum – an official municipal museum – was showing a major exhibit that offered us both hope and contradiction. The exhibit ran for over six months in the museum, located in two old houses, one a late nineteenth century German Templar building and the other a former school.

The first floor assembled works from the generation of 1948, including cartoons from Hebrew newspapers, sketches and portraits of heroic (and sometimes humorous) soldiers of the Haganah and of the mourning of Jewish families who lost loved ones even amid triumph. The only Arab artist on the first floor was Abed Abdi, who was born in 1942 in Haifa but was forced out with his family to Lebanon in 1948, returning when he was ten years old under a limited family reunification scheme. His oil painting on exhibit, *Refugees* (1957), is a poignant, indeed chilling, portrait of Palestinian women and children looking at two men and a child lying dead in the foreground. Much of Abdi's work accompanied articles in *al-Ittihad*, the Arabic-language Israeli Communist newspaper of that era, and were pioneering in depicting the Nakba and its multiple tragedies. In his essay in the exhibit's catalogue, Dr. Housni Alkhateeb Shehada notes that many of Abdi's works accompanied a series of newspaper articles by Salman Natur. The title of the series was, tellingly, "We Have Not Forgotten."

However, the Haifa City Museum's curators did not, or could not, look to where most of the work of Palestinian artists of Abed Abdi's generation was produced: in the refugee camps and cities of exile in the Arab world. The Palestinian artists emerging



Figure 2. *Olive Grove*, digital print, Jafra Abu Zoulouf, 2015. Photo by authors, 2019.

from the refugee camps in the 1950s have instead been described by figures like artist-scholar Kamal Boullata. For example, Ibrahim Ghannam, confined to a wheelchair by polio in Tal al-Za‘tar refugee camp after his village of Yajur was destroyed and he was forced into exile at the age of seventeen, painted “a splendid narrative of life in Yajur.” Boullata continues:

Living on a rationed subsistence of canned foods, in a cubicle overlooking open sewers, Ghannam painted golden fields of harvest, thriving orange groves, and jubilant peasants at work. Painted with the meticulous precision of an Islamic miniaturist, all details within his frame claimed equal attention. Through his naive vision, Ghannam laboriously preserved for a generation born in the camp the legends of one of the villages demolished after the Palestinian exodus.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3. *Tayara Haramiyi*, hologram print, Ashraf Fawakhry, 2015. Photo by authors, 2019.

When we walked up to the second floor – where the work of Israeli and Palestinian artists of the second and mainly post-1948 generation is displayed – the golden fields were long gone. In *We Are All Tourists: Digital Prints*, Jafra Abu Zoulouf (born in 1987, Daliyat al-Karmil) offers intriguing images of dislocation in her digital prints of miniaturized olive trees, their roots exposed. The artist purchased the trees from Ikea: a critique of commercialization accompanies the sense of alienation. Samah Shehadi (born in Shi‘b village in 1987) entitled her haunting charcoal- and pencil-on-paper drawing of a refugee couple (her parents), squatting in empty

space, waiting and gazing into a distant horizon: *Nowhere*. In Ashraf Fawakhry's (born in al-Mazra'a village, 1974) *Tayara Haramiyi*, brightly colored shapes of fighter and bomber airplanes surround a donkey. A circle in graphite and ink on plywood – bristling with barbed wire – by Israeli artist Amir Tomashov (born in Afula, 1978) is titled *Exposed Landscape No. 28*. Other works by Israeli artists were more anodyne, however, such as Ido Back's (born in Haifa, 1988) bustling city scene of Haifa and its cheerful Arab and Jewish inhabitants.

The uneasy contradictions we felt in the exhibit were not only in its visual presentation, but also reflected in the statements by the co-curators of the exhibit. Maged Khamra expressed his doubts:

From a higher perspective, as co-curator of the exhibition “1948,” I would like to discuss the dilemma facing us in our attempt to present, in one museum space, conflicts and confrontations between identities and memories using historical materials and artworks. This approach may create a false sense of reconciliation between the poles presented in the show, resulting from a curatorial gesture that seeks to balance – consciously or not – between the winning and losing side. The exhibition creates an illusory space.

Co-curator Inbar Dror Lax, on the other hand, valorized the exhibit's balance: “The exhibition 1948 seeks to avoid reducing the 1948 war to one meta-narrative or the other, enabling the City Museum to be an entity that is multi-cultural and multi-generational, containing multiple narratives.” While it is hard to contest that “the dramatic change undergone by Haifa society in the 1948 war can still be felt in the city's urban spaces, its buildings, residents and cultural-historical climate,” Dror Lax falls back on the weary paradigm that the exhibit creates a “human mosaic that presents the various aspects of one fateful moment.” This sits oddly with the acknowledgement in the foreword that “by 21 April 1948 about half of [Haifa's] Arab residents had left. As the battles raged on, almost all of those remaining left as well.”

As we wandered through the exhibit for a second time, the artworks of third-generation Palestinian artists spoke to us most directly. In Nardeen Srouji's (born in Nazareth, 1980) *Buqjah 1* (Bundle 1), the protruding shapes of objects inside a pristine white ceramic bundle remind us of the few possessions Palestinian refugees took into exile in 1948. We stood for quite a while in front of Manal Mahamid's layered tower of concrete, entitled *The Year 1948*, guessing at what we could barely see – houses and perhaps their inhabitants buried under an inflexible medium central to Israel's relentless building over Palestinian ruins. Mahamid (born in Mu'awiya, 1976) told us that she has not exhibited in institutional Israeli spaces for a number of years: this work is on loan from a gallery in Umm al-Fahm.

In a disturbing self-portrait, Michael Halak (born in Fassuta, 1975) paints himself in a highly realistic style in the uniform and helmet of an Israeli army recruit. The world of these works is at a great distance from any social “mosaic”; instead, we

find alienation and exclusion or, in pieces less inflected with a sense of crisis and contradiction, recoveries of the Palestinian past, such as Fatma Shanan's (born in Julis, 1986) video *Carpets on a Roof*, where she enlisted friends and neighbors to lay out carpets – objects that are closely tied to home and family – in various patterns on a rooftop in her village.

Even in these exhibits that do address the “wound of 1948” in different ways, art is constrained by politics. In a thought-provoking work by actor Lamis Nammar, side-by-side videos show her wandering through Berlin's Holocaust memorial and Wadi Nisnas, the Arab neighborhood in Haifa that was most devastated by war and exile. She had wanted to call it *Nakba*, but was told she could not use the word for fear of legal action. Instead she called it *Untitled by Law*.

## “Properties”: Jerusalem

The map was in our hands. On it, six buildings in Jerusalem's Talbiyya neighborhood are marked. Talbiyya, a name for us that stands for all that is lost in the western part of Jerusalem. Home to the loveliest residences, aptly called villas, built largely in the British Mandate period by well-off Christian and Muslim Palestinians as families moved beyond the walls of the Old City into new areas of the city. Many of the buildings still stand, their original owners scattered around the globe.

“Properties,” a winter 2018 exhibit of the annual Jerusalem Contemporary Art Festival (Manofim) offered us this map to explore “abandoned” properties in 1948 and their transformations. “Abandoned”: a warning sign of a familiar bias, suggesting that Palestinian owners abandoned their homes, rather than being forced into exile. Still, there is an encouraging claim: the exhibition, the curators write, “seeks to confront the images, facts, and unfamiliar history which many have tried to conceal.” Admirable, we thought. “High time,” said another friend accompanying us. “Far too late,” said another. It was not an easy journey for any of us through these buildings – and the art installations gracing them – for we were accompanied by the ghosts of the past.

The Jerusalem Psychoanalytic Society is situated in a welcoming stone house with a peaceful garden, the residence of Dmitri Hanna before 1948. In his installation *Stone Tape*, Nadav Assor, an Israeli artist who lives and works in the United States, placed crisscrossed cables on the floor in the entrance hall; speakers that could only be heard with a signal device offered fragments of narrative in Arabic, almost impossible to understand. We tried to listen to a reading of a letter written by the granddaughter of Dmitri Hanna to the current owners of the house, but had to put down the strange listening device – similar to those used in wiretapping – in confusion. Perhaps this frustration was the artist's intention, but the effect of muffling the voices of Palestinians was all too familiar.

In a side room, Palestinian artist Hannan Abu Hussein, born in the village of Umm al-Fahm and living in Jerusalem, stacked mattresses and blankets that she collected from Palestinian homes and connected to spools on the floor, an evocation of the

Palestinian home before 1948. Fragments of narrative, spools of white thread holding together a memory of home.

In 1926, businessman Antonio Katan built a house in Talbiyya, where he lived with his family until they were compelled to leave for Beirut in 1948. Entering the Katan house, we stand before a series of ten videos filmed over a decade by Elham Rokni, where her father, Bijan, exiled from Iran thirty years ago, cries as he listens to the song *If One Day* by the Iranian artist Faramarz Aslani. Rokni evokes cultural loss – as well as her aging father – in a work situated in a home (and a country) that a Palestinian family was forced to flee seventy years ago.

But the work that evoked the greatest response for us was lodged in a darkened basement in the Katana villa. We had seen Jumana Emil Abboud's twelve-minute video *A Sketch of Manners (Alfred Roch's Last Masquerade)* in an earlier exhibit; some of those dressed as sad clowns in the video were our friends. But to see it again here, in the deep recess of the basement, this last party – before three-quarters of a million Palestinians went into exile and a society lay shattered – was even more moving. The Nakba, we thought in the dark, is truly the unconscious of the present. It bubbles up in the imagination, but upon waking to the disasters of public life around us it is not acknowledged.

As we looked through the press coverage of “Properties” (and some of the advertisements for the project), we thought that the “willed ignorance” that the curators hoped to break was still present in framing the exhibit as simply investigating “layers of history” of a Jerusalem neighborhood. But the “ghosts of the past” – and particularly their descendants – are real people with a loss that could be repaired. Properties, in other words, can be returned; Palestinians could return to live in a land where at present many cannot come even as visitors. Art and the imagination that produces the works discussed here cannot replace the political will that might heal a broken city and a fragmented land, but it can recall memory and construct possibility. Maya Attoun's installation of a neon sign in the “Properties” exhibit remained with us: “ghost” it read, but the “g” was not lit, so we could read “host.” The words are conjoined: ghosts are our hosts to memories of the Nakba.

## “Spellbound”: Samah Shihadi

Nowhere is this more true than in the work of Samah Shihadi, whose portrait of her parents in the empty space, *Nowhere*, exhibited in Haifa, continued to haunt us. When we discovered that a solo exhibit of her work was showing at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, we hurried to see it before it closed. Here we find her parents again, in a large charcoal-on-paper work entitled *Our Home*. But there is no home, only a flat greyish-white surface, partly overgrown with grass, where her parents sit on white plastic chairs. In the distance a path winds through a few melancholy cypress trees. Her father features in another moving work, *Shades of the Past*. He sits, looking dazed, on stone ruins in the foreground, while in the background an Israeli family emerges from a car for a picnic in the surrounding forest.



Figure 4. *Family in Landscape*, charcoal on paper, Samah Shihadi, 2018. Photo by authors, 2019.

Shihadi won the 2018 Haim Shiff Prize for Figurative-Realist Art, and these meticulous, delicate but powerful drawings in charcoal and pencil, with layer upon layer of shading, are almost hyper-realist in their precise attention to detail. And yet, as “Spellbound” indicates, there is another dimension – the curator opines, there is a “veil of mystery” that surrounds the works, “making it seem that she is spellbound and enchanted by the threads of forgetfulness.” But it is the intertwined threads of memory and forgetfulness that held us spellbound. In *Family in the Landscape*, the ordinary event of a family outing has a striking eeriness. The family – her family – sits in a melancholy landscape, cactus indicating a destroyed village in the background. The poses of the parents recall Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, but it is anything but a festive occasion. Indeed, there is no evidence of a picnic meal, just a child placing one stone on top of another.

While we were Nakba-obsessed, Shihadi’s powerful other thread, exploring feminism and the tensions in self and society, was also intriguing. The first work in the exhibit, *Two Women in One (Self-Portrait with a Book)*, shows Shihadi dressed like a man (in homage to Frida Kahlo), holding a copy of a book by Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi. Another self-portrait has Shihadi lying flat – but suspended in air, while in a similar pose in another work she lies on a rectangular table (like those in a hospital), her canvas and paints in a corner.

One of the most powerful works in the exhibit, *Mother and Daughter*, brings together her attention to women and family and her exploration of the Nakba. In a large charcoal-on-paper drawing, a woman in Palestinian dress has reverently placed her hand on an extraordinary mulberry tree, its bare branches twisting and turning, almost filling the

canvas. The woman is Shihadi's mother and as Shihadi told a *Haaretz* reporter: "My grandmother planted the tree in the barrel in the place where her house was and it grew to a tremendous size. . . . Ever since her death, this is the place where my family gathers to remember her."<sup>3</sup> Watching her mother praying and placing her hand on the tree to gather strength from it, the drawing was born.

While Shihadi was born in Sha'ab, a village southwest of Acre with its own story of partial destruction and forced exodus, her family is from Mi'ar in western Galilee, also near Acre – a village first dynamited by the British during the Great Arab Revolt and then destroyed by Israel in the summer of 1948. Returning to the exhibit for a last look, we found the artist and asked her if there was a reason that the drawings that spoke to us of the Nakba were in charcoal – which seemed to us more ephemeral – instead of her usual pencil. She explained that she had just begun to use charcoal, but added: "When things are destroyed, only ashes remain."

This past year has been an unremittingly dismal one for any prospect of political justice. The four art exhibits we saw over that year of public oppressions and pending catastrophes displayed contradictions and tensions in their settings in official Israeli institutions. But many of the works, mostly by Palestinians from inside the Green Line, but some as well by Israeli Jewish artists, offered sparks from these ashes to stir the imagination, much as the fiery kites from Gaza allowed us to see the ruins of three villages. The Nakba is indeed the return of the repressed.

*Penny Johnson is on the Editorial Committee of the Jerusalem Quarterly. Her book Companions in Conflict: Animals in Occupied Palestine was published by Melville House Books in 2019.*

*Raja Shehadeh's latest book is Going Home: A Walk through Fifty Years of Occupation (London: Profile Books, 2019).*

#### Endnotes

- 1 James Morris, *Time and Remains of Palestine* (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2015).
- 2 See Kamal Boullata, "Palestinian Visual Arts: Pathfinders, 1955–1965," *Palestinian Journeys*, online at [www.paljourneys.org/en/timeline/highlight/10589/palestinian-visual-arts-ii](http://www.paljourneys.org/en/timeline/highlight/10589/palestinian-visual-arts-ii) (accessed 15 October 2019), adapted from Kamal Boullata, "Art," in *The Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, ed. Philip Mattar (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 85.
- 3 See the informative article by Vered Lee, "Feminism, Nakba, and Tears: This Young Palestinian Artist's Works Are Hard to Look Away From," *Haaretz*, 19 September 2019, online at [www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium.MAGAZINE-feminism-and-the-nakba-this-palestinian-artist-s-works-are-hard-to-look-away-from-1.7857800](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium.MAGAZINE-feminism-and-the-nakba-this-palestinian-artist-s-works-are-hard-to-look-away-from-1.7857800) (accessed 15 October 2019).