

# Kamal Boullata: A Walk through Memory

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Kamal Boullata (born 1942, Jerusalem - died 6 August 2019, Berlin).

The first time I met Kamal Boullata was in 1979. We sat for long hours talking in his small two-room apartment on Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. I looked at his round face with dimpled cheeks and thick curly hair and knew that he was listening to me and feeling with me. My pain as I described daily life under occupation was his pain. He had an exceptional capacity to empathize, to put himself in my place and imagine how it would feel if he went through the difficulties of living under those conditions. It was a meeting that left a strong impression on me. We became friends ever since.

That initial visit with Kamal had a lasting effect on my life. At the end of it he said to me: “Why don’t you write down what you told me? Just write it as you said it. People here don’t know what you go through. Even I did not and I try to keep up. Think about it.” I did and eventually turned the lengthy letters I sent him after my return and in which I described daily life in Palestine under occupation into my first book, *The Third Way: A Journal of Life in the West Bank*.<sup>1</sup>

My visit also coincided with the launch in New York of a book Kamal coedited, *The World of Rashid Hussein*.<sup>2</sup> He invited me to the event, my first experience with

a launching of a new book and my first meeting with Edward Said, one of the contributors to the anthology. Kamal was not only ecstatic because the book – celebrating the life of his poet friend who had died tragically in New York – was finally getting launched, but also because he had just met in Paris the woman who would become his life partner, Lily Farhoud. Throughout the train journey from Washington to New York, Kamal did not stop singing the praises of Lily. I couldn't wait to meet her.

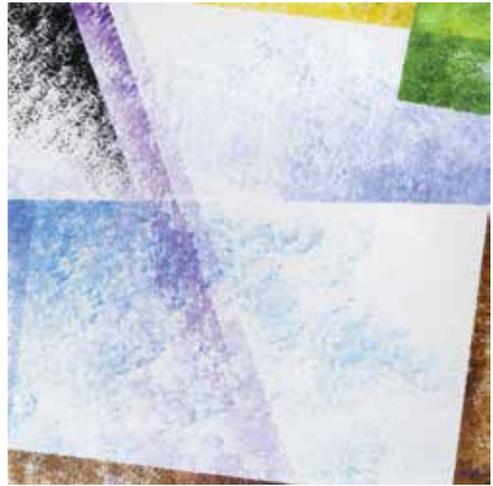
A first meeting was followed by many others over the years. I would stay with Kamal and Lily in their small apartment and observe how generous they both were

with their time. I remember how much time Kamal spent with the child of an American friend who stopped by for a visit unannounced. He had been complaining what little time he had to finish work he was engaged with, yet he left everything he was doing to give all his attention to the child and encourage him to draw. That love of children and appreciation of their art comes across in his 1990 book on the drawings of Palestinian children, *Faithful Witness: Palestinian Children Recreate Their World*.<sup>3</sup>

Kamal never lost the child in him, even as he became a leading artist and writer. He was as adept with the pen as he was with the painting brush. He spent his whole life developing both means of expression and he made great strides in producing a body of visual art as well as of analytical writing about art. In his seminal article “To Measure Jerusalem: Explorations of the Square,” he wrote that “visual expression is a language that is separate from that of verbal expression. One cannot give voice to the other, nor can one be a substitute for the other. Painting proceeds from painting just as much as writing proceeds from reading.”<sup>4</sup>

I continued to visit Kamal in the various countries where he and Lily lived. I always looked forward to my visits with him. They helped me keep abreast with what he was working on and what he was thinking. In Menton in the south of France, where they resided for a number of years, he continued to explore the “link between a central motif in the icons of [his] childhood and the octagonal star from which radiated those mesmerizing arabesques evolved in Islamic art.”<sup>5</sup>

So often Kamal would dazzle me with his great output in both writing and painting. He seemed to find joy in both. “An inner joy mounts,” he wrote, “when advancing and receding properties of geometric colored shapes begin to act like the ebb and flow of a musical piece taking visual body. The sound of the brush thumping on the stretched canvas like a muffled drum echoes the shaping of geometric space.”<sup>6</sup> Out of that joy emerged a series of paintings which he called “Surrat al-Ard” (the Navel of the Earth), a term used



Kamal Boullata, *Addolcendo II*, 25 x 25 cm water color on paper, 2015. Solo Exhibition at Meem Gallery.

in medieval sources to refer to Jerusalem's central rock. One of these, inspired by the Mediterranean Sea, is called "Mare Nostrum" (Our Sea). The painting has the freshness and clarity of glass. Kamal describes how he deemed the painting to be completed:

Once I begin to sense that I could almost plunge through the painting's surface as in a pool or a mirror, I realize that the work is finished. Days or weeks later, when I look back with surprise at what had actually been accomplished before my eyes. I cannot help but wonder what images that particular surface reflects from my memory.<sup>7</sup>

This he would explore in his analytical articles about painting.

Kamal always set high standards for himself, whether in what he wrote or what he painted, and he expected the same of others. He did not have an ounce of pretension and was intolerant of mediocrity. He was a patriot and spent a lot of his energy and time volunteering his services to the Palestinian cause, but decried narrow nationalism and never exhibited it. As a mentor, he was generous with his time for those in whom he detected promise. His 2012 book, *Between Exits: Paintings by Hani Zurob*, traces the artistic trajectory of a Palestinian artist from Gaza whose work Kamal valued.<sup>8</sup> The book was instrumental in introducing this talented artist to the world.

In "To Measure Jerusalem," Kamal quotes Albert Camus:

I know with certainty that a man's work is nothing but the long journey to recover through the detours of art, the two or three simple and great images which first gained access to his heart.<sup>9</sup>

To Kamal, these were the circle and the square, with the earth often symbolized by the square and the circle representing the heavenly sphere. Throughout his life he seemed to be trying to square the circle of the various influences on his life, whether Christian and Islamic cultures or Jerusalem and the rest of the world.

In one of Kamal's visits to Jerusalem, which would turn out to be his last, we managed to take a walk in the lovely hills around Ramallah – I always looked forward to the hours of strolling and talking with Kamal whenever we got together, long walks from which I always returned enriched and inspired. But he had been uneasy and on edge. From what he told me, I could tell that he wasn't comfortable in his native city of Jerusalem. Could he have lived there if the bureaucratic obstacles were removed and it was possible to move to Palestine? I wonder.

For most of his life Kamal seemed to be always looking for a center, for a quiet place where he could work in peace. He didn't find it in America; after he and Lily moved from there, he never wanted to go back. Nor did he find it in the south of France, although he cherished the landscape and the Mediterranean Sea. It was in Berlin, the cosmopolitan city where many other artists found refuge, that he ultimately found a home. Penny and I visited him and Lily several times there, but always in grey winter or cold early spring. Kamal urged me to come when the trees have sprouted young

leaves and the colors are enchanting. We both looked forward to taking a long walk in the Tiergarten park and enjoying the myriad colors and beauty there. It was never to be. On 6 August 2019, Kamal died and I was overcome by grief for losing a special friend impossible to replace.

Now it is only possible to walk with Kamal through my memories.

– September 2019

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

#### Endnotes

- 1 *The Third Way: A Journal of Life in the West Bank* (London: Quartet Books, 1982).
- 2 Kamal Boullata and Mirène Ghossein, eds., *The World of Rashid Hussein, a Palestinian Poet in Exile* (Detroit: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1979).
- 3 *Faithful Witness: Palestinian Children Recreate Their World* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1990). The book included text in English, French, and Arabic.
- 4 Kamal Boullata, "To Measure Jerusalem: Explorations of the Square," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 83–91.
- 5 Boullata, "To Measure Jerusalem," 85.
- 6 Boullata, "To Measure Jerusalem," 90.
- 7 Boullata, "To Measure Jerusalem," 90–91.
- 8 *Between Exits: Paintings by Hani Zurob* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012).
- 9 Boullata, "To Measure Jerusalem," 83; cited from Albert Camus's preface to the reprinting of his first book *L'Envers et L'Endroit* [Algiers: Sharlot, 1937] (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).