

25.77x25.95	1/2	8 עמוד	haaretz-front	31/05/2016	53509387-0
גלריה לאמנות אום אל פח - 52380					

If you will it: Said Abu Shakra's dream of a Palestinian art museum

Shany Littman

The founder of the Umm al-Fahm Gallery once again seems close to establishing Israel's first museum of Arab art and culture

Four times a week, Said Abu Shakra rises at five in the morning, drives from his home in Umm al-Fahm to nearby Kibbutz Megiddo and briskly walks the fields to stay in shape. A seemingly minor detail in his daily routine, but with Abu Shakra there is no such thing as a minor detail. He is like an arrow in flight, headed straight for a single target; every action, every memory, becomes part of the big picture, of the dream he is working to bring to life: building the first Palestinian museum recognized by the authorities within Israel proper, as a continuation of the gallery he founded in his city 20 years ago, the first art gallery in an Arab city in Israel.

If you ask Abu Shakra, the museum's purpose will be to preserve and nurture Palestinian culture. So when he talks about his walks in Megiddo, it's also an opportunity to say that every morning he reminds himself of what was lost — the village of Lajoun, which was situated there before Israeli independence and the Palestinian Nakba, and where some present-day Umm al-Fahm residents used to live. These plowed lands once belonged to the wealthy residents of Umm al-Fahm, like much of the land in the Jezreel Valley. Before Israel's establishment, these fertile lands on which kibbutzim now sit were home to people who fled to or were exiled to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria or the Gaza Strip. One way to generate respect and empathy, Abu Shakra believes, is through the archive he opened in his art gallery in 2008, where visitors can learn about life in the region before the Nakba.

This need to talk about the past and the future in the same breath arises from Abu Shakra's delicate and tricky position, between Palestinian society and the Israeli state.

In Umm al-Fahm in particular and in Arab society in general, he is sometimes looked at askance, because he exhibits contemporary art and because he cooperates with the institutions of the Zionist state. Jews' attitudes can be very fickle too, depending on the security situation.

What now stands between Abu Shakra and realizing his dream of turning the gallery into an official museum, recognized under the Museum Law, are tens of millions of dollars. His plan was nearly realized, when around eight years ago Umm al-Fahm set aside a 15-dunam (four-acre) lot near the entrance to the city for the project.

The museum's \$25-million cost was supposed to come from the Culture Ministry and Arab donors abroad. An architectural design competition was held in 2008, and the winners were announced at a ceremony at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The opening was planned for 2013.

But the model that won the competition has gone no further in the last eight years than a glass display case on the second floor of the Umm al-Fahm Gallery, and Abu Shakra sighs sadly as we pass it during a tour.

He explains that one of the conditions was that 40 percent of the funding come from Arab donors, and he discovered a great reluctance to contribute to an institution in Israel, even an Arab cultural institution.

"I hoped that philanthropists from the Gulf states would give money, but everyone who heard we were an Israeli institution and get funding from the government said they wouldn't contribute. The Arab states see us, the Arabs living in Israel, as assimilated," he says.

After the plan for the new building was shelved,



Said Abu Shakra. "The Arab states see us, the Arabs living in Israel, as assimilated."

Daniel Tchetchik

17.32x32.08	2/2	8 עמוד	haaretz-front	31/05/2016	53509388-1
גלרייה לאמנות אום אל פח - 52380					

Abu Shakra resolved to try to obtain recognition for the museum within the gallery's current building.

Recently the building project was revived, giving Abu Shakra new hope for his old dream. He has met several times with the Finance Ministry's budget director, and a funding plan is being drawn up. Abu Shakra says his preference is to build the museum in stages, in the hope of being able to obtain foreign Arab donations in the future, "and to leave something for the next generation to do," he says.

Taxpayers' rights

"When you're given everything on a silver platter, you don't have the same commitment. As soon as I have the money from the Finance Ministry, I'll be able to use it to seek matching funds to raise the remainder. The money from the state is my right as a taxpayer. It's easier for me to receive money from the state, since I paid the state and I'm fighting to get this money."

But Abu Shakra knows that if even he can get the project off the ground, he will face criticism. Comparisons are sure to be drawn with the Palestinian Museum, which opened in May in Bir Zeit, in the West Bank.

"They're trying to manufacture a competition between us and Bir Zeit. And I say it's a good thing that they're going before us. The museum there is something that has to exist and, if it didn't, I would feel shame. In any case, we'll be two different institutions. My people is awaiting a museum in Umm al-Fahm, but this anticipation is mixed with trepidation and wariness — for fear that the Israeli establishment will take over its content and make its funding contingent upon obedience. But we have no choice, because we are taxpayers and we will demand our rights."

Abu Shakra was born in 1956 in Umm al-Fahm, the fourth of seven children. He was inspired to open the gallery following the death in 1990 of his cousin, the artist Assem Abu Shakra, from cancer at the age of 29. Assem was known in particular for his recurring use of the sabra prickly pear cactus. In 1994, a large retrospective of his work was held at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art's Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art.

"Four full buses came from Umm al-Fahm for the opening, but it didn't make me happy. I felt the show really should have been held in Umm al-Fahm, not in Tel Aviv. But there was no exhibition space in Umm al-Fahm, or Nazareth, or Haifa, or Jaffa, or in any Arab locality, for a show of Assem

Abu Shakra's work. And the material about Assem in the catalog was also written by Jews. Not that we didn't want to write about him, we just weren't capable of it," Abu Shakra says.

Thank you, Yoko Ono

In April an exhibition opened at the gallery that is laying the groundwork for the future museum. Called "The Identity of the Palestinian Artist" and curated by Farid Abu Shakra, Said's younger brother and an artist in his own right, it consists largely of works from the museum's collection, including by some of the best Palestinian artists. There are works by Suleiman Mansour, Sofi Halabi, Sharif Waked, Khaled Hourani,

tion will bring all-new techniques and approaches."

The gallery owes its big breakthrough to Yoko Ono, who staged an exhibition there called "Open Window" in 1999.

"She brought with her the international aspect, and a certain high quality that goes with that," Abu Shakra recalls. "The whole world was going to come here, so I realized that I had to maintain a very high professional level." But a year later, all that effort appeared to be in vain. The big sign advertising the Yoko Ono exhibition was still hanging at the entrance to Umm al-Fahm and was one of the first sites vandalized by protesters during the intifada that erupted in 2000, along with banks and post offices in the city. Abu

Shakra says it delivered a serious blow to the gallery.

"Umm al-Fahm was wounded and bleeding, and no one wanted to come here again. People came from all over to see the Yoko Ono exhibition, but after that everything turned bleak. I raised a little money from people, I painted and fixed the place up and I told the secretary to turn on the lights in the gallery when she comes in and not to turn them off until she left, so from the outside it would look like there were visitors all the time. It was very sad, because before that on weekends the gallery would be filled with people from Umm al-Fahm, from Haifa, from Jaffa, from all over the north. And all of a sudden it was deathly silent. Visitors gradually returned, because memory is short, and because everyone wants to return to sanity."

The challenge of keeping the gallery going is not just in dealing with the Jewish establishment and Jewish public, but also with Palestinian society, says Abu Shakra.

"The Islamic Movement in Israel, which was in power, is against art — 'thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness.' And that's what I deal with. In Umm al-Fahm most of the population is poor and traditional. So how do I connect this poverty with an elitist gallery whose whole purpose is to show fine art to the world? How do I connect it to people who say, Leave me be, it's not for me? How do I operate amid all these contradictions and turn Umm al-Fahm into a multicultural center? Some are quick to say that this desire makes me a 'good Arab.' But that's not it. I'm creating a new type of dialogue here."



Independence Day in Umm al-Fahm, 1965.

GPO



A detail from a self-portrait by Michael Halak.

Amar Younis

Abed Abdi, Butaina Abu Melhem, Fatma Abu Rumi, Michael Halak, Khader Washah, Samah Shehadeh, and Walid, Said and Farid Abu Shakra, among others. There are also works by Assem Abu Shakra, on loan from collectors, and a new representative of the artistic Abu Shakra family — Karim Abu Shakra, Assem's nephew. In total, 35 artists are being shown. The vast majority are figurative painters, though the exhibition also features a few interesting videos and one installation.

Is this exhibition representative of Palestinian art today?

"No, we are showing what we were able to buy. It's a collection exhibition, and a bit more than that. A lot is being done today in the area of conceptual video art, and there is also abstract art that isn't represented here. I hope that in the years to come, the young genera-