

Blank Canvases, Paintbrushes, and a Stroke of Freedom



By Lina Abdul-Samad*

"We Palestinians should know how art relates to our identity."
Yara Hussein

If we can create, then we exist, we document our existence and our experiences as humans, as individuals, and as victims. Living under occupation shouldn't restrict our ability to say all the things we simply cannot otherwise express, whether by picking up a pen and writing or using a color palette and paintbrush.

In most societies, including our own, there tends to be a lot of stigma surrounding brushes and other craft stuff that can only be for "artists," and that being an artist is a God-given talent rather than a honed skill. I don't think everyone should become an artist, but I do think people should try art as a means of expression. You don't have to pursue art professionally to create. You should create because you can. Drawing isn't just for artists, you know. Art is a language, and anyone can learn new languages.

What is so personal about art? Art is an extension of the artist. My work branches from tiny, black and white doodles on the edge of my school notebooks to mythological creatures on canvas in watercolors. Each piece is full of meaning and conveys certain moods I was in at the time I created it. Each work is a part of me and my surroundings. I'm probably the only one who can see the meaning in my pieces, but that's OK. I think that people react to art differently based on their own experiences. People still enjoy my work, and I like to know what they perceive as the meaning behind these pieces.

My paintings and sketches tend to fall into two types of artwork: internal art and external art. Internal art tends to be messier, a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing, with stronger lines and more edge. External



Freckled. Painting and photo by Yara Hussein.

art, on the other hand, is planned and goes through trials and phases, with softer edges and a concise image. It relates to outer factors that inspire me to create these pieces. Sometimes it's something I have heard about. At other times it's something I've seen or read. The cat painting, for instance, I classify under external art. The day I drew the

Metamorphosis. Sketch and photo by Yara Hussein.



initial sketch, I read a myth that said that when a cat lives for a 1,000 years, it gains power from the moon and its tail splits in two. The myth lingered in my mind and then found its way onto my fingertips.

Internal art is spontaneous in spirit and captures more emotion, I think. Generally, I feel insecure about sharing these pieces. It feels like I'm exposing myself. The thing is, when I make this kind of art, I'm much less focused on technicalities and more focused on putting the emotion I'm feeling onto paper as quickly as possible. This results in what some like to call "technical mistakes," whether in proportion or lines or whatever. That's why I hate to show these more intimate pieces. These works are my attempt to put down my emotion on paper, and people make remarks such as, "Oh, her hand is too small," or other such stupid comments. I feel it trivializes the emotions I put into them.

Yet with external art, critique is warmly welcomed. The person who critiques my external artworks is commenting on structure and form, not on pieces of me. My painting is like journal writing. Imagine someone going through your personal journal and criticizing your grammar. That is why I generally don't share internal artworks except with a few people close to me.

Most importantly, what people, especially people in our society, overlook is that art is freedom. You can say so much with sketches, and not just in an artistic or emotional sense. As an artist, I am given freedom to create anything I want on a blank page. I can express myself with sketching and painting. A kind of visual storytelling. Poetry in pictures.

*Based on a conversation with Yara Hussein.

Lina Abdul-Samad is a nutrition/dietetics student at Birzeit University and posts writings in a blog called Lina's Thoughts and Words.