

The Imago Mundi Project

Palestine: Contemporary Art from within and beyond the Border



By Faten Nastas Mitwasi

Imago Mundi is the contemporary art collection that Luciano Benetton has commissioned and collected during his travels around the world. It is composed of thousands of works and has involved – on a voluntary and nonprofit basis – established artists and emerging talents from various countries, each of which has created artwork whose sole limitation is the 10 x 12 cm format. Under the auspices of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche, Imago Mundi is a nonprofit, democratic, and global project that looks to new horizons in the name of the union and coexistence of expressive diversities. It aims to catalogue the works, poetics, and languages that diverge from the usual



Vladimir Tamari, *Seen/Unseen* acrylic on canvas.



Vladimir Tamari, string and nails on canvas, 2015.



Palestinian collection at the exhibition.

methods, be they museum-based, trend-led, or market-driven, with the goal of driving the promotion, research, and knowledge of artistic realities from all over the world. Furthermore, and above all, it hopes to facilitate dialogue between various cultures.

To date, more than 25,000 artists from 150 countries and native communities around the world have joined the project. Each country is represented by a collection that includes between 140 and 210 artists who are selected by a local curator.

For Palestine, I had the honor to be the curator of the collection. Back in June 2015, when I was invited to do the curatorial job, I was very enthusiastic; I wanted to create a holistic work that reflects the richness and diversity of Palestinian art. As I began to delve deeper into the project, however, I realized that it is not easy to define Palestinian art. “Palestinian art” is a term that is not defined by geographical space or by the citizenship of the artist. The geographical borders of Palestine have rarely been outlined and are undefined, certainly at present, because Palestine has been under occupation for

“Imago Mundi is a cultural, democratic, and global project that looks to the new frontiers of art in the name of coexistence of expressive diversity.”

Luciano Benetton

centuries, absorbed into different empires throughout its history. Thus, Palestinians have always been and are still being displaced and granted different nationalities. Today, there are more Palestinians living in exile than in their original homeland, the homeland of their ancestors. Yet – or possibly for this very reason – Palestine, the land, the identity, and the dream, is a mystery for Palestinians –and especially for its artists.

The famous Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata describes the work of young Palestinian artists: “New generations of Palestinian artists continue to emerge wherever Palestinians are found in the world



Laila Shawa, *Handala*, acrylic on canvas, 2015.

today. Similar to the tillandsia – the evergreen plant that needs no soil to live and flower because, tough and rootless, it grows on tree branches and rocks, and extracts its nutrients and moisture from the atmosphere – Palestinian artists may live in different places, scattered around the world today, but they all meet through their art as individual voices in a chorus, which resounds with the different modes of growing out of the Palestinian experience.”

Faced with the above-mentioned ideas, I decided that the collection should include the artwork of 140 artists



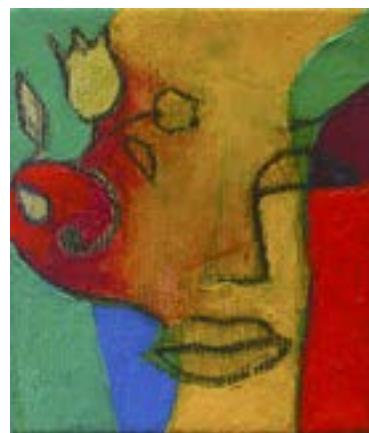
Shareef Sarhan, *Letters and City*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2015.

from within and beyond the undefined borders of segregated historical Palestine: those who live in the West Bank, Gaza, and the territory occupied in 1948, as well as those who live in exile, be it the neighboring Arab countries, Europe, North America, or Asia. The collection offers these artists the opportunity to think once again of their belonging and invites them to unite under that one enigmatic nation called Palestine. What we seemingly cannot materialize on the ground can be achieved through art. The Palestinian collection has the title “Palestine: Contemporary Art from within and beyond the Border.”

Nasrin Abu Baker, *A Jerusalem Stone*, stone, thread, and glue on canvas, 2015.



After defining the theme of the collection and specifying which artists to invite, the challenge was how to contact the artists and convince them to participate in the project. I approached world-famous artists, as well as emerging ones, young and old, across three generations. Regardless of their place of birth and their current place of residence, each one of the artists belongs to Palestine in his/her own way, and has a special feeling towards it that was emphatically reflected on each small canvas. Actually, convincing the artists was not a big issue since artists always



Hosni Radwan, untitled, acrylic on canvas, 2015.

like new challenges, and painting on such a small scale, 10 x 12 cm, was an interesting proposition for most of them.

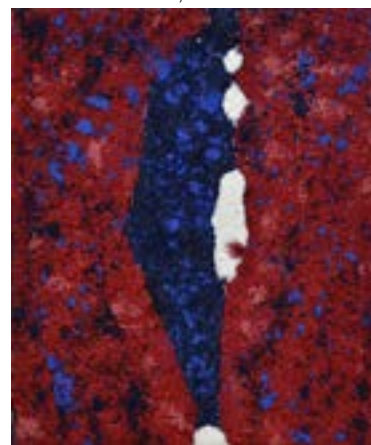
On the other hand, reaching the artists was not easy. Being born in Bethlehem, I have a West Bank identity card issued by the Palestinian National Authority which, unfortunately, does not allow me access to the rest of historical Palestine. Being an artist myself and the curator for the Imago Mundi Project does not qualify me to get a permit from the Israeli authorities to allow me to enter Jerusalem or the lands of the rest of historical Palestine from 1948, or the Gaza Strip. My movement is limited to within the West Bank area and, with



Eman Haram, *Mother and Child Study*, digital pigment print on Japanese gampi paper, 2016.

great difficulty, Jordan. As a result, I had to organize the work through the Internet: e-mails, Skype, Facebook, and phone calls; ironically, the same way I contacted and followed up with the artists who live in exile. For those living in exile, canvases were sent to them directly from Italy, and after completing their work, the artists sent their canvases back to Italy. For artists living in historical Palestine, I had to rely on my good friends and artists who generously assisted me by delivering the canvases to the artists who live beyond the checkpoints, past the separation wall, and under the siege of the Gaza Strip. The way the Palestinian Collection was gathered reflects the creative resistance of the Palestinians and their determination not only to exist but to excel and have an abundant and creative life.

Nasser Soumi, *of Purple and Indigo*, pigments and mixed media on canvas, 2015.





Faten Nastas Mitwasi, *A Fragment*, terracotta and embroidery thread on canvas, 2016.

The collected artworks confirm the diversity of the individual voices in the chorus. Artists used painting, drawing, digital print, collage, and relief to express their visions. The topics were also diverse, ranging from self-portraits to landscapes, abstract expressions, and conceptual art. Each work is special and unique, reflecting the individuality of the artist. As one looks at the collection gathered together as a whole, one appreciates and understands the beauty and authenticity of Palestinian art and culture.

Plates of the Palestinian Collection – as with all the collections of the Imago Mundi Project – were published in a dedicated trilingual (Italian, English, Arabic) catalogue that contains all the artworks, printed in real size, and includes the biographies of

the artists together with a series of introductions that were entrusted to experts. In addition, all the artworks are professionally displayed on specially made show walls and are featured on the Web platforms www.imagomundiart.com and Google Arts & Culture.

Imago Mundi is an itinerant project whose themed exhibitions have already visited Venice – on the occasion of the Biennale – New York, Vienna, Dakar, Sarajevo, Rome, Palermo, and other cities. On April 4, 2018, Imago Mundi inaugurated its new home in the Gallerie delle Prigioni, the former Habsburg prison that has recently been restored by architect Tobia Scarpa and is located in the heart of Treviso, Luciano Benetton's birthplace. It is a new exhibition space that is dedicated to contemporary art and to integration among cultures from all over the world.

Together with another 39 collections, a total of over 6,000 artworks, the Palestinian Collection is currently displayed at the exhibition "Join the Dots – Connect the Distances" at the Salone degli Incanti, the main exhibition space in Trieste, Italy. The exhibition was inaugurated on May 29 and will run until September 2, 2018.

Although the Imago Mundi Project represents the convergence of some

of Mr. Benetton's personal passions, it is at the same time a very important global art project that introduces art as a key to the interpretation of our times; it gathers together various cultures and offers an international platform for well-established artists and young talents who succeed in overcoming geographical, political, ethnic, and psychological boundaries to achieve – both in art and in society – what the great German artist Joseph Beuys called "unity in diversity."

Art is a creative tool for communication that can bring people closer to each other at a time when politics is fragmenting nations.



Born in Treviso in 1935, Luciano Benetton created Benetton Group in 1965, alongside his sister and brothers. He was a senator of the Italian Republic from 1992 to 1994, and today he is the chairman of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche, created in 1987 upon the wishes of the Benetton family. A great traveller and lover of art, Luciano Benetton has firmly united these two passions in the Imago Mundi Project, the contemporary art collection with the goal of uniting the diversities of the world and passing on to future generations the widest possible mapping of human cultures at the start of the third millennium.

Palestinian collection at the exhibition.



Taysir Batniji, *Wallpaper/Drones*, oil on canvas, 2015





Ahed Izhiman, *Jerusalem*, ink and acrylic on canvas, 2015.

Artists participating in the Imago Mundi Project:

Varvara Abd Elrazek, Abed Abdi, Hala Abdul Baqui, Ahmed Abu Al-Rob, Maymona Abu Arra, Nasrin Abu Baker, Nabil Abu Ghanima, Nadia Abu Kharmah, Tasneem Abu Salah, Koloud Abu Sbeih, Mohamed Abusal, Ibrahim Abusitta, Abdel Raouf Alajouri, Tamam Al-Akhal, Remaz Al-Araj, Ismat Al-Assad, Ibrahim Al-Awadi, Muhannad Al-Azkeh, Maysaa Al-Bardaweel, Mohammed Al-Dabous, Maha Al-Daya, Fayez Al-Hasani, Mohammed Al-Hawajri, Diana Al-Hosary, Bashar Alhroub, Ruqaia Al-Lulu, Said Alnahry, Abdullah Alrozzi, Bashir Al-Sinwar, Basil Al-Zeri, Hazem Al-Zomar, Abdel Nasser Amer, Mohammed Amous, Nabil Anani, Rania Andon, Johnny

Mohammed Musallam, *My ID*, cover of a Palestinian Passport on canvas, 2015.



Andonia, Rafat Asad, Hamzeh Atrash, Ala'a Attoun, Salem Awad, Ayman Azraq, Mirna Bamieh, Tayseer Barakat, Taysir Batniji, Rana Batrawi, Fadi Batrice, Rana Bishara, Ahmad Canaan, Nihad Dabeet, Amer Dabdoub, Dina Daboub, Ismaeel Dahlan, Salam Diab, Anas Dweik, Taleb Dweik, Sameer El-Hallaq, Basel El-Maqousi, Assel El-Rayes, Linda Elshami, Mark Emaya, Mohammed Emrany, Ayman Essa, Sana Farah Bishara, Ashraf Fawakhry, Fathi Ghabin, Amjad Ghannam, Samar Ghattas, Inas Halabi, Samia Halaby, Juhaina Habibi Kandalaft, Michael Halak, John Halaka, Layla Hamdieh, Eman Haram, Mohammed Harb,



Khader Fawzy Nastas, *It is Coming... Unless...*, threads and glue on canvas, 2015.

Khitam Heibi, Ibrahim Hijazi, Farah Homoudah, Raed Ibrahim, Raed Issa, Salwa Issa, Ahed Izhiman, Maram Jaafreh, Naser Jawabra, Ibrahim Jawabreh, Monther Jawabreh, Mohammed Joha, Ahlam Jomah, Mohammad Joulani, Hafiz Kassis, Bashar Khalaf, Mohamed Saleh Khalil, Mohammad Lubbad, Sliman Mansour, Dina Matar, Fuad Mimri, Jabra Mitwasi, Mohammed Mostafa, May Murad, Mohammed Musallam, Nissreen Najjar, Marwan Nassar, Fairouze Nastas, Khader Nastas, Fida Nastas, Fawzy Nastas, Faten Nastas Mitwasi, Majdal Nateel, Salman Nawati, Balquees Othman, Sondas Qaddomi, Zohdy Qadry, Bashir Qonqar, Hosni Radwan, Shafik Radwan, Saada Rady, Yousef Rajaby, Sanaa Rashed, Raeda



Michael Halak, *Living in a Bubble*, oil on canvas, 2013.

Sa'adeh, Issam Sabbah, Iyad Sabbah, Cecile Elise & Steve Sabella, Osama Said, Sohail Salem, Shareef Sarhan, Rufaida Sehwal, Fayez Sersawi, Majed Shala, Mohammad Shaqdi, Laila Shawa, Ali Sheikh Ahmed, Nasser Soumi, Vera Tamari, Vladimir Tamari, Mary Tuma, Firas Twemeh, Basel Uraiqat, Ahmad Yaseen, Saeed Zaidan, and Hani Zurob.

Faten Nastas Mitwasi is an artist who works mainly in installation art. She was a key person in developing and establishing Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture. A scholar specialized in Palestinian art, Faten is the author of three books, among them Reflections on Palestinian Art: Art of Resistance or Aesthetics (in English, Beit Jala, 2015). She has curated several exhibitions and art projects, including the Palestinian Collection for the Imago Mundi Project.

*Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art from 1850 to the Present*, Saqi Books, London, 2009, p 36.

Imago Mundi, Palestine cover.

