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Biography and art criticism reconciled

By India Stoughton

BEIRUT: Some pictures, as one old warhorse of an expression would have it, are worth a thousand words.

Telling a story that needs no introduction, explanation or elucidation, some artworks can be isolated from context and remain powerful, engaging and readily absorbed. Others thrive in discussion.

While many Arab artists suffer from being overcontextualized and pigeonholed – their work always approached from the perspective of their nationality or ethnicity – there are instances where scrutinizing an artist's practice with biography in mind can be no bad thing.

"Between Exits: Paintings by Hani Zurob," written by artist and Palestinian art historian Kamal Boullata, is a monograph of the France-based Palestinian painter's work. Boullata approaches Zurob's output chronologically, linking each stage of his artistic production to his personal history.

Boullata writes with sensitivity and insight, basing his observations on numerous interviews with the artist, and his biographical approach to Zurob's work makes for effective and enlightening reading.

As the author explains in his introduction, the aim of "Between Exits" is to demonstrate how Zurob, as a Palestinian artist living in exile, manifests space, the concepts of "here" and "there" in his work.

To this end, he begins with a description of Zurob's early years, providing an insight into his life as a Palestinian living under occupation.

Born 1976 in Rafah refugee camp, Zurob had a natural talent for drawing and for Arabic calligraphy. Growing up in the overcrowded, isolated Gaza Strip, however, he was almost totally isolated from the wider art world, knowing nothing about either Western art history or the work produced by artists in Palestine and the wider region.

As a teenager, at the onset of the first Palestinian intifada in 1987, Zurob began producing posters and spraying graffiti in support of the uprising under cover of darkness.

By the time he finished school, he was determined to be an artist. His only option for continuing his studies was to travel to Nablus, in the West Bank. After his applications were repeatedly rejected, he undertook the journey illegally.

Boullata's first chapter explores Zurob's struggle to establish himself as an artist, explaining that it

was not until after the onset of the second intifada, while living in Ramallah, that the painter was first exposed to contemporary work by international artists.

Visiting exhibitions by local artists in the West Bank, Zurob's early encounters were predominantly with resistance art – imbued with a political agenda and nationalist symbols. Zurob's response to these types of work, Boullata explains, largely shaped his later practice.

Having established a historical and sociopolitical context for Zurob's work, Boullata approaches it series by series.

“Siege,” the first of these, is a sequence of self-portraits inspired by Egon Schiele, whose autodepictions often capture his nude body racked with pain and suffering. Zurob's nude self-portraits, painting from studying his reflection in angled mirrors, for the most part capture the artist in profile.

Boullata explores the context in which Zurob chose himself as subject, and continued to develop in spite of accusations of narcissism. The author's straightforward yet illuminating analysis of the series links the figurative paintings to the artist's view of Ramallah's comparatively high standard of living – thanks to the presence of international aid organizations – when compared with his experiences growing up in Gaza.

In a particularly fascinating passage on the scarcity of portraits and self-portraits in Arab art (relative to their ubiquity in Western art), Boullata explores the link between visual and written representations of the self. He points out that in Arabic, autobiographies are often written in the third person, creating a distance between reader and narrator, a quality he suggests is mirrored by Zurob's use of the profile, as opposed to frontal portrait.

In 2004 Zurob was offered a grant to study in Paris for six months. From this point forward, Boullata's discussion changes from contextualizing the “here” portion of the Palestinian artist's work to analyzing the “there.”

Two series produced soon after Zurob's arrival in France continue his exploration of the self-portrait. The first is titled “Sortie” (Exit), one of the first French words he learned. The second is “Barrage,” while a third series, “Marbles' War,” tackles the artist's childhood memories in Gaza.

Zurob, who managed to remain in Paris after his grant ended, now lives in exile, his work tied up both with his memories of Palestine and Israeli occupation and with his outsider status in France.

Boullata explores his series “Waiting,” based on photographs of the artist seated naked in various positions, characterizing it as a communal expression of the Palestinian experience.

In addition to exploring Zurob's practice, Boullata's discussion places the work within a larger context of contemporary Palestinian artistic production, both within Palestine and among artists living in the diaspora.

In 2009, Zurob won the Renoir Grant, which entitled him to an eight-month residency in the French village of Essoyes, where he was almost totally isolated, parted even from his wife and young son, who were forced to return to Jerusalem every six months.

“Flying Lessons,” which he started during this time, is placed within a broad exploration of

portrayals of flight within Palestinian art.

The series marks a departure from Zurob's earlier work – taking for its subject not the artist himself but his young son Qudsi, and evincing a marked change in style, from gestural and figurative to photorealistic.

Boullata infers the series is concerned with the impossibility of horizontal movement in space limited by towering walls, such as Gaza and the West Bank, leaving the verticality of flight the only option to achieve freedom of mobility.

An unusual undertaking, "Between Exits" covers just a decade of the young artist's production, leaving readers to wonder where Zurob is now – one year after the last pieces the book discusses – and what he's working on.

Boullata's sensitive and highly readable text, combined with Zurob's powerful imagery, is a compelling combination, one worthy of a follow-up volume.

"Between Exits, Paintings by Hani Zurob," by Kamal Boullata, is published by Black Dog Publishing and is available from selected local bookshops.

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