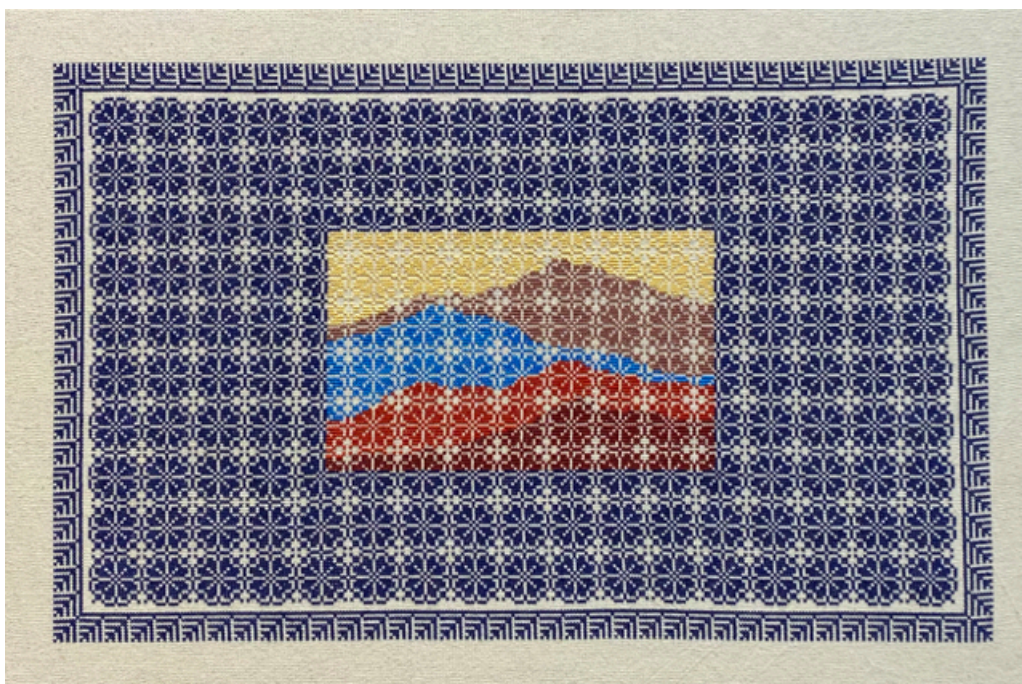


Heritage is to Art as the Medium is to the Message: The Responsibility to Palestinian *Tatreez*

Reem Farah

Introduction

When a viewer first sets eyes on a Jordan Nassar work, it is particularly gratifying. The aesthetic quality of the pastel, colour-blocked, textured tessellations can invoke a state like that induced by experiencing the golden hour or the golden ratio. At first glance, Nassar's Palestinian landscape embroidery seems to reinforce the message of Palestinian embroidery or *tatreez*, tightly stitching Palestinian land and culture in an artful rebuttal against the erasure of Palestine. It seems to say: 'The land is Palestine, Palestine is the land'.



Jordan Nassar, *In The Yellow Lake*, 2020, cotton on cotton, exhibited at The Third Line Gallery, Dubai, photo courtesy of the author

Tatreez is an indigenous embroidery practice and cultural art form that illustrates Palestinian land and life: the tradition of reading the bottom of the coffee cup embodied as a brown octagon, a diagonal culmination of lines depicting wheat, or an endless squiggle impersonating a row of snails. History tells us that couching is popular in Bethlehem because of the influence of the Byzantine Empire there.¹ The predominance of amulets or triangle crescents among bedouin

¹ Couching is a technique of surface embellishment embroidery

women is because they believed it repelled the evil eye; birds are showcased in Gaza and Haifa as they were especially visible in coastal towns during migration seasons.² The variations and significations of motifs are specific according to the women who embroidered them, but they are also adaptive as they were worked on collectively.

Following the Nakba of 1948,³ tatreez transformed into an act of resistance against Zionist claims of Palestinian non-existence. As Palestinians were forcibly displaced, women wore their *thobes* (their embroidered dresses) or carried them on their backs. The thobes, with their different motifs, laid claim to the villages the women were expelled from and where they vowed to return. Discussions of tatreez's significance in Palestinian history often go back to ancient history,⁴ but what makes tatreez significant today is how it has been practised and preserved since the Nakba.

Once established, the state of Israel co-opted Palestinian culture (including tatreez) to perform history and ifrogndigeneity. In 1954, Ruth Dayan, the wife of the Israeli military leader Moshe Dayan, founded Maskit Crafts as a fashion house to support Zionist goals of establishing a national culture. In 1966 Miss Israel wore a Bir Saba' dress to the Miss Universe pageant (and won 'best native costume'). In the 1970s, the Israeli airline company El Al assumed the embroidered Palestinian dress as their uniform. Israeli designers continue to utilise the *kufiyyeh* headscarf and tatreez in an effort to appropriate them. In the 1960s Samiha Khalil opened up her garage in Al Bireh to embroiderers, establishing the Inash Al Usra Society. Similarly, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) established SAMED (following from the concept *sumud*, meaning steadfastness), a cultural arm of the resistance which organised a workforce for cultural production. During the First Intifada from 1987–1993, as Palestinian flags were being confiscated by Israeli authorities, thobes were adorned with flags and other nationalistic symbols. A labour-intensive undertaking itself, tatreez thus gained value as a metaphor of steadfastness.

In her book *Threads of Identity*, Widad Kavar, the custodian of the largest collection of Palestinian thobes, shares the story of Halimeh, a woman from the village of Beit Jibrin who had become a Palestinian refugee in Jordan after the 1967 war. Halimeh knocked on Kavar's door and sold her dress to her on one condition: that it would be preserved. It was becoming customary for thobes to be cut up and reused decoratively and Halimeh had wanted her thobe to stay intact as one whole piece of Palestinian history, a piece of herself. Kavar relates how she took Halimeh's terms so seriously that at a dinner party she was unable to swallow food because the host's chairs were upholstered with cut-up thobes.⁵ Kavar continues to criticise the practice of cutting up vintage thobes to be sewn into another commodity, and to collect the textiles that represent women's lives.

² See Widad Kavar, *Threads of Identity: Preserving Palestinian Costume and Heritage*, Rimal Publications, Cyprus, 2011

³ The Nakba, Arabic for 'catastrophe', refers to the Zionist raids and massacres in 1948 that aimed to ethnically cleanse Palestinians from Palestine

⁴ See Margarita Skinner in association with Widad Kamel Kavar, *Palestinian Embroidery Motifs 1850–1950: A Treasury of Stitches*, Rimal Books, Cyprus, 2010

⁵ See Widad Kavar, *Threads of Identity: Preserving Palestinian Costume and Heritage*, op cit, pp 22



Thobes in the collection of Widad Kavar, installation view at the Tiraz Centre, Amman, Jordan, photo courtesy of the author

Tatreez became incorporated in the art produced as part of the Palestinian Liberation movement. In painting, Tamam Al Akhal (b 1935) and Ismail Shammout (1930–2006) popularised scenes of Palestinian women wearing a thobe, the tatreez detailed into the thobe enhancing the reference to the motherland. The labour and care of illustrating tatreez can also be seen in the work of Abdel Rahman Al Muzain (b 1943), an artist who has centred embroidery motifs in political posters, consulting his mother, an embroiderer, about the relevance of symbols in commemorating labour resistance or international solidarity. Although primarily a painter and sculptor, Jumana El Husseini (1932–2018) exhibited her large-scale embroidery works as part of her practice, a craft she practised as a Palestinian woman and which influenced her production as an artist.



Abdel Rahman Al Muzayen, *The Revolution is a Weapon and a Worker's Arm*, poster for International Labour Day, 1979, originally published by SAMED (Palestine Martyrs Works Society), courtesy of the Palestine Poster Project Archives

Majd Abdel Hamid, one of the younger generation of Palestinian artists (b 1988), uses the techniques of cross-stitch in his work, speaking of ‘the slow process of rendering stitches on a surface and the acceleration of time, imagery and trauma’.⁶ As Tatreez journeys into subsets of contemporary design today, designers maintain that the medium is inextricable from the message. Omar Joseph Nasser-Khoury historicises and politicises tatreez through anti-fashion design,⁷ while fashion designer Natalie Tahhan modernises cross-stitch production by printing digital pixels on capes and dresses, and the Naqsh collective, based in Amman, Jordan, etches tatreez motifs in wood, stone, brass and marble furnishings. On Instagram, embroidery communities among Palestinians encourage learning the craft and experimenting with the medium, claiming to preserve it.



Majd Abdel Hamid, *Screenshots: Aleppo* 2016, *Woman Running between Body Bags*, 2016, cross-stitch, thread on canvas, 15 x 19 cm, courtesy of the artist

However, for Jordan Nassar the medium is not necessarily the message. Through his use of tatreez, Nassar tells a narrative of cultural dialogue and exchange that is exhibited in prestigious galleries and at international art fairs. This article assesses the implications of an artist’s personal politics when handling heritage and what happens when you bring an indigenous cultural currency into a white cube space. It explores the power relations between Palestinian labourer-embroiderers who preserve the heritage, and the up-and-coming Palestinian diasporic artist who utilises heritage in artwork that explores his own identity. The article aims to warn against the

⁶ See the artist’s website www.majdabdelhamid.com

⁷ As a tatreez practitioner himself, Omar Joseph Nasser Khoury has written an impassioned response to the issues addressed in this article: ‘Let’s Not Tatreez: Normalisation in the Age of Neoliberal Depoliticisation’, *Counterpunch.org*, 28 August 2020 www.counterpunch.org/2020/08/28/lets-not-tatreez-normalisation-in-the-age-of-neoliberal-depoliticisation/

trappings of cultural appropriation, symptomatic of normalisation projects, or partnerships that depend on cheap workers and their indigenous knowledge and practice. It asserts that protecting tatreez from appropriation simply by claiming it as heritage is insufficient if it is disassociated from those who have actually been doing the preserving for over eighty years – predominantly Palestinian refugees.

Born out of the politics of steadfastness, in 2005 Palestinian civil society called for a global movement of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), asking the international community to enact principled solidarity with Palestinians, denormalise relations and forgo opportunities that Palestinians living under Israeli occupation may not have the option to avoid. This article asserts that Palestinian artists in the diaspora must centre Palestinian heritage and those who have conserved it, while leveraging their own approximation to capital to serve principled solidarity with Palestinian demands for freedom, justice and equality.

An Artist's Identity

Jordan Nassar is half-Palestinian, half-Polish and a second-generation American. Like many artists and the children of displaced people, he struggles with questions of home and identity. Nassar has expressed that growing up in a Palestinian household on New York's Upper West Side 'felt like the whole outside world was telling me something conflicting with what my family was telling me at home'.⁸ Nassar explains that he coped with the dissonance by avoiding discussions on Palestine, and in a podcast conversation he states that the taboo of speaking critically about Israel deterred him even from taking politics courses at university.⁹ As a white-presenting American, Nassar was able to evade conversation or the limitations typically posed on Palestinians. Later, as an artist, he was able to tap into and take ownership of his Palestinian heritage, although for his first exhibition he expressed apprehension at how gallery clients may perceive his Palestinian background and how Arab viewers may question his aesthetic, with his embroidery works entirely in blue and white that may have been perceived as a nod to Israel.¹⁰ He confessed that he 'felt an urge to downplay the "Arab thing" – after all, I'm very gay, tattooed, American – and shy away from it so as not to cause trouble'.¹¹ The mentions of 'gay' and 'tattooed' as tokens of his Americanness are evident fears of being Palestinian in the Upper West Side, or an Arab man in the post-9/11 United States. In the same breath, he continues: 'I have more recently whole-heartedly embraced the fact that my work is political... it's what, I

⁸ Claire Wrathall, 'New Threads', *Christie's Magazine*, June–July 2019, pp 45–47 www.anatebgi.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-June_Nassar_Christies-Magazine.pdf

⁹ 'Jordan Nassar: Initiating deeper and meaningful dialogues', The Amad Show podcast, 27 July 2020 www.podtail.com/en/podcast/the-amad-show/jordan-nassar-initiating-deeper-and-meaningful-dia/

¹⁰ See 'Artist of the week: Jordan Nassar', LVL3, 15 September 2015 www.lvl3official.com/artist-of-the-week-jordan-nassar/#.Vfg5xmTF-LR

¹¹ Ibid

hope, makes my work important, relevant, and contemporary'.¹² His previous hesitation demonstrates that his politics were not fully formed and yet inevitable, so he taps into politics to present his work as relevant and contemporary to an intrigued viewership.

Nassar credits Etel Adnan (b 1925), an Arab diasporic artist, not only for inspiring his landscapes, but also for modelling a political diasporic Arab voice. Regarding Adnan, Nassar says 'as an Arab living outside the Arab World, outside the Arabic language... her relationship to her Arab identity and how she navigates that relationship, has helped me understand mine'.¹³ While Nassar extrapolates from Adnan's experience and aesthetic, the two artists remain very different in principle. Adnan's landscapes are not of her motherland (she was born in Lebanon), but of California's Mount Tamalpais, where she has lived for many years and which she adopts as a sort of mother. In her abstraction of the mountain, she humanises and centres it as a bedrock of her community and environment. Adnan understands that the personal is political, and she is fundamentally anti-imperialist. Meanwhile Jordan Nassar makes figurative the landscapes he embroiders as 'the Palestine that might exist only in the imagination... the perfect, magic, dream-Palestine'.¹⁴ Palestinian landscapes are very real, however, as the artists Sliman Mansour and Nabil Anani persistently demonstrate in their paintings. Nassar speaks personally but apolitically of the Palestinian landscape as a 'utopia for the diaspora', when the Palestinian landscape is one that *all* Palestinians – including those living under occupation, in the '48 areas,¹⁵ or in refugee camps – seek, dream of and promise to return to as a real, not imaginary home. Nassar sketches the landscape digitally, following Adnan's model of colour-blocking but assigning colour with thread in mind, preplanning fault lines between hilltop and horizon. Always the poet, Adnan describes the smudging of unending lines as ever-changing, transcending the paint, the mountain, and the self.¹⁶ Adnan is critical of her position, studying and reflecting before committing to a stance, while Nassar presents his embroidered landscapes as a 'conversation starter' on Palestine and Israel.

An article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in 2019, 'When You're Palestinian, American and Jewish, Life – Like Your Art – Is Complicated', states that Nassar feels part Israeli and will not advocate for either side of the conflict.¹⁷ Nassar identifies as Jewish, citing his Israeli husband and his maternal grandmother, who he believes has ties to Judaism. However, he does criticise the Israeli military occupation and advocates for Palestine. On Instagram, he creates stories where

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Leah Olman, 'Jordan Nassar at Anat Ebgi: Palestinian cross-stitch art as boundary-breaker', *Hartford Courant*, 2017 www.courant.com/la-et-cm-jordan-nassar-review-20171021-htmlstory.html

¹⁵ Palestinians refer to present-day Israel as "'48", referring to the lands confiscated from the Palestinians in 1948

¹⁶ See 'Etel Adnan: Excerpt from Journey to Mount Tamalpais', San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) website, pp 9–18 from Etel Adnan, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, The Post-Apollo Press, Sausalito, August 1986 www.sfmoma.org/read/journey-mount-tamalpais/

¹⁷ Joy Bernard, 'When You're Palestinian, American and Jewish, Life – Like Your Art – Is Complicated', *Haaretz*, 22 October 2019 www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-when-you-re-palestinian-american-and-jewish-life-like-your-art-is-complicated-1.8015886

he applies a 'Free Palestine' filter-tattoo on his cheekbones. Lately, he has become more vocal, clarifying his stance by posting a montage of Palestinian children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks, calling on Americans to 'pressure the government to stop paying upwards of \$3.8 Billion per year directly towards the military occupation',¹⁸ and even starting a book club entitled 'Jordan's Educate Yourself Challenge'. Yet, Nassar has not acknowledged Israel as an apartheid state, nor has he himself divested from Israel. He is critical of other Palestinians with staunch anticolonial politics, calling his friends and his father as radical or naive on the issue and positioning himself to an international arts audience as a temperate and progressive liberal voice.¹⁹

Nassar refers to Palestine and Israel as one, 'a place from the river to the sea'.²⁰ He describes his visits to Palestine and Israel saying: 'I can go into Ramallah one day, and go to Ra'anana for Shabbat dinner at my husband's family the next. That's my life, that's who I am'.²¹ Nassar, an American male presenting as white, and being married to a Jewish American man with Israeli citizenship, can reside on both sides of the apartheid wall, while Palestinians are constricted to live in and inbetween bantustans. He is perceived by other liberals as a bridge – but in an apartheid state there are no bridges, only bypass roads for Israelis to access illegal settlements.

Normalisation

In an interview with *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*, Nassar stated that 'aside from the obvious philosophical rights and wrongs... this is just how it is, people need to live their lives, follow their dreams. It's important to be active and vocal about the situation, but you can't let it ruin your life'.²² While Nassar sees 'the conflict' as one that must be bridged through dialogue, the anti-normalisation campaign rejects the false impression that Israel is 'normal' and sets out to materially address the power imbalance between both sides. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) urges international cultural collectives and public figures to cancel events or reject funding from the Israeli government, stating: 'Israel's cultural institutions are part and parcel of the ideological and institutional scaffolding... implicat[ing] through their silence or active participation... Israel's occupation and systematic denial of Palestinian rights'.²³

Another reason for the lack of popularity for normalisation among Palestinians is its ineffectiveness. Palestinians have endured the myth of dialogue and decades of peace talks that have left them worse off, most notably since the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993–1995. Dialogue

¹⁸ Seen on the artists's Instagram page

¹⁹ 'Jordan Nassar: Initiating deeper and meaningful dialogues', The Amad Show podcast, 27 July 2020 www.podtail.com/en/podcast/the-amad-show/jordan-nassar-initiating-deeper-and-meaningful-dia/

²⁰ Joy Bernard, 'When You're Palestinian, American and Jewish, Life – Like Your Art – Is Complicated', op cit

²¹ Ibid

²² Katrina Kufer, 'American-Palestinian Artist Jordan Nassar Examines The Crossovers of Culture, Identity and Tradition', *Harpers Bazaar Arabia*, 29 April 2019 www.harpersbazaararabia.com/artists/reframing-inherited-nostalgia-jordan-nassar

²³ See 'The Case for a Cultural Boycott of Israel', on the BDS movement website www.bdsmovement.net/cultural-boycott

and exchange are not novel interventions in the history of Palestine. Normalisation is both the past and the default, it is what people do when they have no other choice. It is why the BDS movement tasks Palestinians with relative privilege in the diaspora to weaken Israel's hold on Palestine from the outside in. During the South African anti-apartheid campaign, musicians such as Elvis Costello, Stevie Wonder and Steven Van Zandt joined the cultural boycott and changed the perception of South African apartheid internationally. Having learnt from the South African anti-apartheid movement, cultural figures such as Roger Waters and academic activists like Angela Davis have become mobilisers of the global BDS movement for Palestinian human rights. Yet despite this, in 2017, Nassar joined the Artport art residency in Tel Aviv, a programme that is partly funded by individuals that support the illegal Israeli settlements in Palestine. Although Nassar was aware of this fact and of the boycott, he still went on to take part in the residency.²⁴ While living in Yafa, Nassar also joined an Israeli fashion brand that aims to incorporate tatreez on streetwear as its creative director.²⁵

In 'The Sea Beneath our Eyes' at the Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv in 2019,²⁶ Nassar looked outside tatreez to other crafts produced by Palestinians, Israelis, and other residents of Israel and Palestine, creating a 'period room' or an installation of a living space. *Haaretz* described it as a 'quintessentially Israeli apartment', 'the home [Nassar] envisions he could have lived in if he ever made good on his right to return to his ancestors' homeland'.²⁷ The political contradictions of the statements are explicit; on the one hand it is quintessentially Israeli, on the other it is his return to the homeland. The commissioned crafts that hung on the installation's walls or sat on its countertops were from diverse ethnic communities, including Ethiopian Jews, Palestinians in Gaza, Bedouin Palestinians and Armenian Palestinians.²⁸ Nassar presented these communities as part of a thriving 'multi-ethnic melting pot',²⁹ glancing over the colonisation and persecution these communities endure at the hand of the Israeli state: Armenians' claim to historical land in Jerusalem is under threat of annexation; Bedouin Palestinians are erased in the Naqab (Negev); Ethiopian women migrants are sterilised in an effort to reduce their population size; and Gazans are locked into what is described as the world's largest open air prison without access to basic necessities. Their cultural output cannot be

²⁴ See Aaron Hecklin, 'Fall Into This "Flamingly Gay" Palestinian Artist's Cross-Cultural Web', *Out.com*, 2 April 2018 www.out.com/out-exclusives/2018/4/02/fall-flamingly-gay-palestinian-artists-cross-cultural-web

²⁵ See Andrew Wilkin, 'In Search of Palestine with Jordan Nassar', *Ahwam Magazine.com*, undated www.awhammagazine.com/jordan

²⁶ 'Jordan Nassar: The Sea Beneath Our Eyes', Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, 21 September – 30 November 2019 <http://cca.org.il/jordan-nassar-the-sea-beneath-our-eyes/>

²⁷ Joy Bernard, 'When You're Palestinian, American and Jewish, Life – Like Your Art – Is Complicated', op cit www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-when-you-re-palestinian-american-and-jewish-life-like-your-art-is-complicated-1.8015886

²⁸ Aaron Hecklin, 'Jordan Nassar's new apartment exhibition lives between the Israel, Palestine binary', *Document Journal*, 26 November 2019 www.documentjournal.com/2019/11/jordan-nassars-new-apartment-exhibition-lives-between-the-israel-palestine-binary/

²⁹ Ibid

divorced from their political experience. The issue with Nassar's use of tatreez, and heritage in general, is underscored in this project; the presentation is beautiful, but representation is missing.

Reflecting on his time in Israel, Nassar states that he feels an affinity or sense of belonging in Israel, as many people there are, like him, a mix of Middle Eastern and Slavic, which is foreign elsewhere but normal there.³⁰ Nassar stated that he feels less comfortable, even claustrophobic in Palestine 'because I have to hide my tattoos, and I can't wear any jewelry. It's benign in a way, but a hugely tricky thing for me to navigate emotionally.'³¹ Unintentionally, Nassar feeds into Israel's pinkwashing campaign, which highlights Israel's liberal approach towards the LGBTQ community over their human rights record, promoting it as peaceful and progressive amongst an Arab region that is violent and backwards. Al Qaws, an LGBTQ Palestinian community organisation, actively counters pinkwashing narratives by reminding the international

community that Israel does not spare queer Palestinians in their military occupation. Queer Palestinians cannot move freely when and where they feel claustrophobic in the apartheid state.

While Nassar states that he 'fits in' in Tel Aviv, he seems to navigate Palestine with an air of exceptionalism as a man who embroiders among Palestinian women.³² However, embroidery is a staple of Palestinian society; it is known to be widely practised by men as well as women, and particularly as a pastime among incarcerated men. Abdel Rahman Al Muzain depicts tatreez in his work as part of a foundational and complex language that circumvents Israel and speaks resistance to all Palestinians.³³ Tatreez is fundamentally a collective art form known for its 'tatreez circles'. This can be compared to the indigenous 'potlatch' in aboriginal communities where communal gathering and sharing is



Abdel Rahman Al Muzayen, *Untitled*, 1977, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 70 cm, courtesy of the Dalloul Art Foundation, Beirut

³⁰ See Aaron Hecklin, 'Fall Into This "Flamingly Gay" Palestinian Artist's Cross-Cultural Web', op cit

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ See Maymanah Farhat, 'Under the Voices of Fire: Artists in Gaza', *Monthly Review Online*, 16 January 2009 www.mronline.org/2009/01/16/under-the-voices-of-fire-artists-in-gaza/

as important as the food itself. In the case of tatreez, collective labour amalgamated tatreez as a language of cultural motifs, which with the course of history has become a discourse of liberation. In the contemporary art world, Nassar is not perceived as part of a history or collective of the practice, but as a singular actor of tatreez, its gatekeeper and translator.

'Diaspora Tatreez'

The mainstream art world likes to discuss culture while evading politics. It largely celebrates Nassar as he wants to be viewed, as a figure that 'can perhaps break us free of blinkered and reductive "us vs. them" thinking... [by illuminating] how identity is built on a constant process of cross-pollination and cultural accumulation'.³⁴ Nassar speaks out against military violence against Palestine but does not seem to see the violence of normalisation, cultural appropriation, and their linked roles in oppressing Palestinians.

While tatreez is signified by motifs that correspond to specific Palestinian villages,³⁵ new practitioners of tatreez are expanding and evolving this practice. Having never lived in Palestine, Nassar embroiders symbols from his neighbourhood such as the roundabout by the 79th Street Boat Basin. In one of his works, Nassar inserted a Ukrainian rose symbol, traditional to Eastern European embroidery, to show how European Jews have absorbed aspects of Arab culture and vice versa. 'How long does it take for something associated with one culture – in this case Ukrainian rose patterns – to be accepted as a legitimate facet of another culture?' Nassar asks, going on to say 'it's about hummus... Is hummus Israeli yet? How long do they have to eat it before it's Israeli? We talk so much about the whitewashing of cultures, but what if it's not active and violent – what if it just sunk in?'³⁶

The appropriate response to Nassar's question is simply that the whitewashing of culture is both active and violent. Eighty-five per cent of Gaza's fishing waters are off-limits to Gazan fishermen.³⁷ Seventy per cent of Gaza's population experiences food insecurity.³⁸ Agriculture and food exports once made up a third of Palestinian GDP; today it has sunk to less than three per cent.³⁹ This is the actual contextual violence of Israel's appropriation of hummus. The conservation activist Vivien Sansour, founder of the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library, and the

³⁴ Aaron Hecklin, 'Fall Into This "Flamingly Gay" Palestinian Artist's Cross-Cultural Web', op cit

³⁵ See Wafa Ghnaim, 'Palestinian Tatreez Embroidery', *Tatreez&Tea.com* www.tatreezandtea.com/tatreez-and-tea

³⁶ Aaron Hecklin, 'Fall Into This "Flamingly Gay" Palestinian Artist's Cross-Cultural Web', op cit

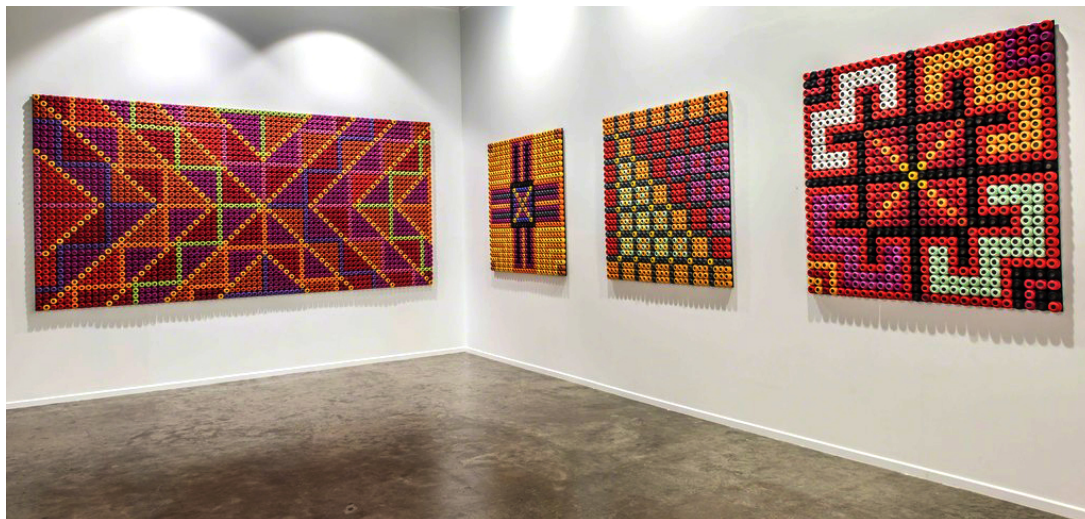
³⁷ See 'Gaza's fisheries: record expansion of fishing limit and relative increase in fish catch; shooting and detention incidents at sea continue', *The Monthly Humanitarian Bulletin*, October 2019, United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)/Occupied Palestinian Territory, posted 19 November 2019 www.ochaopt.org/content/gaza-s-fisheries-record-expansion-fishing-limit-and-relative-increase-fish-catch-shooting

³⁸ 'Gaza Crisis', Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) www.fao.org/emergencies/crisis/gaza/en/#:~:text=Around%2072%20percent%20of%20families,28%20percent%20the%20previous%20year

³⁹ See Ligaya Mishan, 'The Rise of Palestinian Food', *The New York Times*, 12 February 2020 www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/t-magazine/palestinian-food.html

artist Mirna Bamieh, founder of the Palestine Hosting Society, both remind us how the fragmentation of the land has rendered some traditional foods and recipes impossible today. They aim to reconnect Palestinians to the land by contextualising culinary traditions with geographical knowledge of Palestine. Similarly, Palestinian embroiderers embroider traditional and regionally specific Palestinian motifs to conserve Palestinians' connection to the land.

In his work *Broken Weddings* (2018) artist Amer Shomali tells a human story through tatreez. In 2017, he found a traditional Palestinian wedding dress for sale in an Israeli auction.⁴⁰ After investigating the backstory of the garment, he discovered that the dress was taken from a Palestinian home in 1948 by a Haganah member.⁴¹ The condition of the dress made it clear that it had never been worn. Shomali remembered Ernest Hemingway's story titled 'For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn', and he imbued the same kind of grief about this wedding dress by reconstructing the details of dresses from several depopulated villages, replacing each stitch with a whole ball of unused yarn, representing 'dresses that were not embroidered, broken weddings, unperformed songs, unbuilt homes, unborn children'.⁴² Without even engaging in the actual practice of cross-stitch, Shomali has done the work of Palestinian embroidery.



Amer Shomali, *Broken Weddings*, 2018
DMC embroidery thread on aluminium and wood
Above: installation view at Art Dubai 2018, left: detail
Courtesy of the artist

⁴⁰ See Amer Shomali, 'Broken Weddings', on the artist's website www.amershomali.info/broken-weddings/

⁴¹ Haganah was the Zionist paramilitary group that fought against the British mandate until 1948 when it became the core of the Israel Defence Forces

⁴² See Amer Shomali, 'Broken Weddings' www.amershomali.info/broken-weddings/

In the installation *Twelve Windows* (2012–13), Mona Hatoum collaborated with INAASH, an organisation that promotes the work of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and the Palestinian artist and collector Malak Hussein Abdulrahim, to create twelve one metre-square, embroidered fabric panels, each representing a region of Palestine. The panels hung so that both the front and back of the embroidery pattern can be viewed, displaying the tidy precision of each of the women's work: an embroiderer's show of labour, skill, and pride. The work's message stays true to craft and is an ode to its craftspeople.



Mona Hatoum with Inaash, *Twelve Windows*, 2012, design by Mrs Malak Abdulrahim and executed by Inaash embroiderers, courtesy of Mona Hatoum and Inaash, photo by Dina Debbas

The Ethics of Embroidery Labour

In 2017, The Palestinian Museum put on the exhibition 'Labour of Love: New Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery', historicising tatreez and studying its political economy and labour market. In the catalogue, the exhibition's curator, Rachel Dedman, discusses how the appropriation and commodification of tatreez by international NGOs disassociated it from the message of cultural heritage, marketing it instead as a humanitarian cause and a means of women's empowerment.⁴³ As with most humanitarian goals, refugees' dreams of poverty reduction were never realised through such microfinance schemes as the structures that they

⁴³ *Labour of Love: New Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery*, exhibition catalogue, The Palestinian Museum, Birzeit, Palestine, 2018

exist under remained as rigid and impervious. Employing the labour of poor Palestinian women, or the commodification of tatreez by NGOs, caught the attention of middle and upper class Palestinians, and a gulf widened between ‘the poor uneducated women who usually stitch it and the educated privileged women who usually run the organisation’.⁴⁴



The dress that artist Amer Shomali found in an auction (centre) included in the 'Labour of Love: New Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery' exhibition at The Palestinian Museum, 2017, after it was acquired by the researcher and collector George Al Ama, photo courtesy of Amer Shomali

While fair trade organisations exist and prosper because of their stated commitment to workers rights, among many social enterprises the goal of keeping Palestinian heritage alive has overshadowed the issue of fair pay for the workers. Whereas embroidery was once seen as a solution to finding employment for refugee women, the preservation of heritage has, in many cases, become an excuse for their exploitation. Women’s role as safekeepers of culture has impeded on their rights as workers. The refugee’s placement in camps as cheap zones of labour has been exploited by the market. Organisations justify a high retail price for authentic handmade products with social impact, yet give disproportionate compensation to the women

⁴⁴ Ibid, p 47

who produce them. Despite the feminist justification that embroidery production yields women's work, and in turn empowerment, the craftsmanship of the refugee women has left them subject to structures of power rather than empowered. As a result, refugee embroiderers cannot afford to buy the products they themselves create.⁴⁵ Refugees even sell their inherited and prized thobes because the labour of heritage does not pay the bills. And while the attention that the commodification of tatreez is receiving continues to grow, Palestinian refugees remain faceless and in most cases poor and in a state of precarity.

Tatreez distributors in the diaspora and on the internet speak in complimentary terms, if vaguely, of Palestinian refugees as a chain of ancestors, an authentic root, a tireless workforce of cultural preservation, yet perpetuate a working model that does not centre them or fairly compensate them financially. Artists and designers employ Palestinian embroiderers as their labourers rather than collaborating with them as participants – or more accurately, as creatives and as experts. The brand *ADISH*, for which Jordan Nassar is creative director along with two Israeli co-founders, employs over fifty Palestinian embroiderers. It recently engaged in a donation campaign for vulnerable Palestinians. Yet Nassar's participation in *ADISH* normalises the iniquities and harsh realities of the occupation, enmeshing Palestinian labour under Israeli leadership. Rather than working directly with Palestinian women as equal partners, Nassar employs Palestinians and initiates charitable projects for them, capitalising on normal relations with Israel and performing goodwill rather than attaining real power for Palestinians. Nassar conveniently presents his position as a diaspora story of unique inbetweenness that inspires peace building, when, in fact, it perpetuates the harmful status quo.

While most tatreez-based social enterprises are apparel and product based, 81 Designs commissions refugee embroiderers to make art. While an admirable initiative, it reproduces the same model as other tatreez-based enterprises. As 81 Designs commissions refugee embroiderers to recreate art by the likes of El Seed and Hassan Hajjaj, recreating artwork by existing artists promotes the artists, not the refugees – nor the abilities of the refugees beyond tatreez. As in the case of Nassar, the diasporic artist remains the incredible individual, and refugee embroiderers an unremarkable collective of labourers.

As a slow, long-lasting, handmade labour, tatreez is an inconvenient commodity. For the idle refugee, it is considered a perfectly productive pastime for which they are the perfect labourers. Yet, it is tatreez's inconvenience that makes it valuable. Relatively privileged artists must choose to be idle, they must be patient to make onlookers exclaim about the detail, the scale, and the time invested into each work, which accounts for the value of the art. The refugee's idleness fills an economic need for society and is treated with the opportunity for work and pay; the artist's idleness produces creativity and is rewarded materially.

Jordan Nassar employs Palestinian embroiderers to fill in the repetitive sections of his works. He speaks about this process proudly as a collaborative one: 'In the art world, the fact they're

⁴⁵ Ibid, p 48

made by others for me means it's less authentic, but in the real world, employing their inherited living traditions and craftsmanship is what makes it authentic.⁴⁶ However, the power dynamic in these labour relations is inequitable. Nassar's artworks sell for up to USD 20,000,⁴⁷ and he has stated that he simply pays the embroiderers what they ask for their labour.⁴⁸ However, the power disparity is apparent simply in the artist's ability to make art, much less reach international acclaim, while Palestinian embroiderers implement designs, receive compensation, and remain unknown and unseen. Since the war in Syria and the economic recession in the region, cotton fabric and thread have become less accessible and more expensive, resulting in refugee embroiderers using more synthetic material and creating smaller tatreez products such as key chains and bookmarks. Meanwhile, the scale of Nassar's cotton-on-cotton landscapes has grown steadily.

In July 2020, the Mosaic Rooms in London hosted a virtual conversation where Nassar was asked why he crossed the anti-normalisation picket and broke the call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.⁴⁹ He responded that he 'takes cues from Palestinians themselves' and that the women he employs express their willingness to work with Israelis as they simply want peace.⁵⁰ What Nassar fails to recognise is that under a system of Israeli apartheid, Palestinians employed in factories, construction sites, and any supply chain within the apartheid state, are fated to work for, not with Israelis. Arguments against the BDS movement often reiterate that Israeli companies hire Palestinians, and that boycotting them would hurt workers. Human Rights organisations report how Israeli companies are complicit in the oppression and occupation of Palestinian society.⁵¹ Nassar has said that instead of boycotting Israel he has used 'Israeli money' to pay 'normal Palestinian people trying to feed their families'.⁵² The BDS movement states that 'those with a genuine concern for Palestinians should work to end Israel's systematic oppression of Palestinians, including its deliberate destruction of Palestinian economic activity'.⁵³ Although many artists and Israelis have joined the BDS movement, when asked if he would consider joining the movement, Nassar claimed that due to his role as an artist and his personal familial ties in Israel he prefers to partake in soft activism by making art that opens up space to discuss

⁴⁶ Katrina Kufer, 'American-Palestinian Artist Jordan Nassar Examines The Crossovers of Culture, Identity and Tradition', op cit

⁴⁷ See Melissa Gronlund, 'The art of tatreez: How Jordan Nassar is teaching the world to master Palestinian embroidery', *The National*, 24 June 2020 www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/the-art-of-tatreez-how-jordan-nassar-is-teaching-the-world-to-master-palestinian-embroidery-1.1038505

⁴⁸ Conversation: Jordan Nassar and Rachel Dedman, online, 16 July 2020, The Mosaic Rooms, London, recording available on *Soundcloud* www.soundcloud.com/themosaicrooms/jordan-nassar-conversation

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ See 'Occupation, Inc: How Settlement Businesses Contribute to Israel's Violations of Palestinian Rights', *Human Rights Watch*, 19 January 2016 www.hrw.org/report/2016/01/19/occupation-inc/how-settlement-businesses-contribute-israels-violations#

⁵² Aaron Hecklin, 'Fall Into This "Flamingly Gay" Palestinian Artist's Cross-Cultural Web', op cit

⁵³ 'Doesn't BDS hurt Palestinians?' FAQs: Understanding BDS www.bdsmovement.net/faqs#collapse16245

Palestine.⁵⁴ BDS does not ask Palestinians or Israelis to boycott personal relationships to comply with its targeted campaigns. Nassar can love and be there for his family while refraining from platforming himself at Israeli institutions.

The Audience's Responsibility

In his seminal essay 'Are Art Museums Racist?', the late Maurice Berger interrogates the white bias of art museums as they 'preserve the narrow interests of their upper-class patrons and clientele'.⁵⁵ I wish to bring into question here the political biases of the white upper-class clientele. While 'ethnic artists' appear alluring to white cube spaces, artists do not often reach international success unless their politics are palatable to white liberal upper-class tastes. Art spaces' intolerance of controversial progressive politics has long been complicit in erasing, or at least ignoring Palestine and Palestinians. Nassar (whether strategically or sincerely) presents himself as not-too-Palestinian, offset by his gradually adapted Israeli identity, which yields him access to the intrigued viewership of the target clientele. As such, many of Nassar's works are collected by Israelis. He has expressed the hope that as owners of his work, Israeli collectors not only appreciate Palestinian art but humanise Palestinians.⁵⁶ However, history shows us that the claims over artefact in contexts of settler colonialism reinforces the settlers' narrative of history. Nassar's successfully shapeshifting identity allows for Palestinian collective and political heritage to be presented and collected simply as art by a Palestinian-Israeli artist.

As he gains exposure to a larger Palestinian audience, Nassar has seemingly grown more vocal on Palestinian politics, presenting a more activist image of himself. While this shows signs of growth on the matter, it alludes back to his shapeshifting and code-switching identity as an effort to remain appealing to international clientele and Israeli collectors, while pursuing participation in the Arab market and to Palestinian institutions as well. Palestinian and Arab audiences are quick to embrace and celebrate the international platform for Palestinian heritage and the success of a Palestinian artist. However, heritage is not apolitical, and an artist's own political identity influences their use of heritage as a medium. Claiming ownership over Palestinian heritage without presenting its anticolonial significance, all while claiming cultural proximity to Israel, dilutes the political value of tatreez as a practice of Palestinian steadfastness and resistance. Cultural appropriation is not a sudden overtaking, but a process that requires the complicity of its internal community, not only in approximating it to an external occupying force but in devaluing the political history of heritage. Cultural appropriation is preceded, and even

⁵⁴ See Melissa Gronlund, 'The art of tatreez: How Jordan Nassar is teaching the world to master Palestinian embroidery', op cit

⁵⁵ Maurice Berger, 'Are Art Museums Racist?', first published in *Art in America*, Vol 78, No 9, September 1990, pp 68–77, republished online, 31 March 2020 www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/maurice-berger-are-art-museums-racist-1202682524/

⁵⁶ 'Jordan Nassar: Initiating deeper and meaningful dialogues', The Amad Show podcast, 27 July 2020 www.podtail.com/en/podcast/the-amad-show/jordan-nassar-initiating-deeper-and-meaningful-dia/

predicted, by a process of normalisation. Indeed, Israeli social enterprises have cropped up in the Naqab, where Israelis claim cross-cultural cooperation with ‘Israelis, Bedouin, Jews, Muslims, and Christians’,⁵⁷ approximating bedouin weaving traditions to Israel while erasing Palestine.

This article calls on Palestinians in the diaspora who profit from tatreez, whether business owners, designers, artists or collectors, to establish fair financial compensation schemes. It does not advocate for tatreez purism, as tatreez is fundamentally ever-evolving. It does, however, aim to remind readers of the practice and message of tatreez as inextricable from indigenous Palestinian identity and heritage, which should not be thoughtlessly subverted in its application. Those claiming social impact through tatreez should make it their challenge to find models of collaboration that empower rather than employ. To truly celebrate and uplift the refugees at the centre of the history of tatreez, refugee embroiderers must be given value as creatives with the potential of artists and designers rather than as a cheap and disposable labour force. All communities, especially those resisting ethnic cleansing, should proactively critique themselves, only this would enact the political awareness critical in preserving the integrity and identity of heritage.



Palestinian refugees embroidering in Lebanon, courtesy of Inaash, photo by Dina Debbas

Reem Farah writes about art and politics

⁵⁷ See Rabbi Bluth, ‘Traditional Weaving with the Ghazala Collective’, *Living Jewishly.com*, 26 November 2020 www.livingjewishly.org/traditional-weaving-with-the-ghazala-collective/