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'Israeli Museums Are Afraid to Talk About the Nakba': The Abu Shakra Artist Family Makes History

For the first time, an Israeli museum is dedicating nearly all of its exhibition space to a show of Palestinian art. The artists, all members of the Abu Shakra family, want to talk about a taboo subject



Said, Karim and Farid Abu Shakra. Credit: Gil Eliahu

The date is October 31, the day before the Israeli election. At the traffic circle at the entrance to Umm al-Fahm, two women are holding signs urging residents to go to the polls the next day and vote. Four huge billboards look down on the intersection, each one bearing the portrait of a different candidate from the Balad party slate, and a fifth billboard predicts the four Knesset seats the party is going to win, ensuring its place in the next Knesset. But now we know how that turned out. (Balad did not pass the threshold of votes needed to enter the parliament.)

Karim Abu Shakra admits he doesn't plan to vote. In fact, in all his 40 years, he has not set foot in a voting booth. The large and lovely gallery space where he presents his paintings to collectors and curators interested in his work is situated in the neighborhood up the hill, next to his studio and the house he shares with his wife and their four children. Large oil paintings hang on the walls. Some are very expressive self-portraits, some are paintings of flowers and plants – cyclamens in a flowerpot, a bird perched on a thistle, and numerous cactuses in an array of shapes and colors. Hanging by the door is a framed black-and-white photograph of his uncle, the artist Asim Abu Shakra, who died of cancer in 1990, at age 28. Karim was only 8 years old at the time, but not long afterward, it became clear that he was destined to continue his talented uncle's path. "He is my teacher. He took my hand and said to me, 'Keep going,'" Karim says.

For him, “Spirit of Man, Spirit of Place,” the exhibition that opened last month at the Mishkan Museum of Art at Kibbutz Ein Harod, in which works by all of the artists of the Abu Shakra family are represented, is a dream come true – literally. A dream that he actually dreamt. “For me, showing my work for the first time with Asim’s work, that’s the big thing. It’s something that appeared to me in a dream when I was 16, and today I see it happening in reality,” Karim says.

When the exhibition was first planned and the opening date was set, November 11, which is also Asim’s birthday, no one imagined that it would be just a week after [a fateful election](#), whose outcome would be so troubling to so many, and that the event would take on such a symbolic dimension: Five Palestinian artists, all from one extended family, exhibiting at one of the iconic kibbutzim in the Jezreel Valley, in the country’s north. While the kibbutz (which actually split into two separate communities on ideological grounds, in 1952) may not actually sit on the site of a former Palestinian village, buried in the surrounding land are the remains of [villages that were destroyed in 1948](#), in what Palestinians refer to as the Nakba. That includes the village from which the Abu Shakra family fled to Umm al-Fahm, Lajjun (site of present-day Kibbutz Megiddo).



Asim in his art school studio, in 1986.

In their work, the five – Walid, Said, Asim, Farid and Karim, in order of their dates of birth – each of whom holds a prominent place in the Israeli art scene, reflect different issues that are tied to identity, history and contemporary Palestinian-Israeli life. While from the outset this was clearly going to be a significant cultural event, the show has now become an event that could even be considered subversive. And that is [precisely why this exhibition is necessary, here and now](#).

“For people not involved in this discourse, words like ‘Nakba’ or ‘Palestinian’ sound like subversion of the foundations of the state,” says Dr. Galia Bar Or, the show’s co-curator, together with Dr. Housni Alkhateeb Shehada. “But if you develop relations of trust with worlds that have a different language, then the dialogue is much better and there is a lot to learn from it. The Nakba is a wound that hasn’t healed. We need to understand that there is this abyss of loss, and we need to mark this in the public space as well. A moment of solidarity. It’s elementary to respect the pain of the one who dwells with you. It is possible to acknowledge and to be sorry. Not to cancel or erase the pain. Do you think that if you erase it from your history, you’ll also erase it from the other’s memory? Even in your memory, you cannot erase it. It will just harden, like kidney stones, and block vital systems.”

But that’s what people do.

“We need to work on it. In Israel, there have been many different types of repression, and often there’s a reason for it, because there’s a latency period after you go through a trauma, and a need not to deal with it. But it’s also a matter of time. Time brings things back to the surface and then you have to deal with it.”

Ideally, says Bar Or, the former longtime chief curator of the Mishkan Museum of Art, the current exhibition would be mounted in a museum in Umm al-Fahm, where all the artists hail from. But the gallery there has not

yet been able to persuade the relevant government institutions to recognize it as a museum, and provide the necessary funding. If it couldn't be there, the choice of Ein Harod was a natural one, because of the many years of good relations and partnership between it and the Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery, and between Bar Or and Said Abu Shakra, its director.



Dr. Galia Bar Or. Credit: Gil Eliahu

“We’re like family. And also, this is truly art as art,” Bar Or says. “These are artists whose abilities are truly on an international level, and who are at the stage where they wish to have their work shown in the context of art. Housni and I decided to show all five and not to mix them up – to present it as the equivalent of five solo exhibitions. The time had come for each one to have his own show. At the same time, there are no doors here, and viewers move from one [gallery] to another. It’s all open. So there is also the context. The dialogue is like veins and capillaries. You see the blood flowing between them, and this blood contains all the components at once.”

This is the first time in Israel’s history that a museum – one of the first art museums to open here, in 1937 – has turned over all of its temporary-exhibition space to a show of Palestinian-Israeli art, says co-curator Alkhateeb Shehadeh, a scholar and lecturer at both the Bezalel School of Art & Design and the Levinsky-Wingate Academic Center. A point of light, he calls it, especially now, given the election results. He hopes that more will follow and that art will succeed where politics has failed. “It’s not about doing anyone a favor. This is not a group that is searching for representation, but a very good group of artists who have something to say. It is essential to bring this voice to the forefront. The Arabs don’t only need funding for Mansour Abbas [head of the United Arab List, a member of the outgoing government coalition], we also want cultural artistic representation. Especially now, more room needs to be given to our voices.

Continues Alkhateeb Shehadeh: “The Zionist movement nurtured all sorts of myths, such as the concept of ‘making the wilderness bloom,’ and so on. And we as Arab citizens supposedly have no history, heritage or memory. And this is exactly the point that this exhibition is here to make – our importance here, as natives of this place.”

Aren’t you afraid that instead this might be the last opportunity to address this subject in an institution that receives state funding?

“Somebody said that after the election, there will be a culture minister who will decide to shut down the exhibition. I don’t think so. And I don’t believe that this is the last exhibition of its kind. I refuse to engage in this fatalist thinking. The museum is concerned about attempts at censorship, like what happened in Ramat Gan not long ago. [The Ramat Gan Museum of Israeli Art shut down temporarily in the wake of a controversy earlier this year over its decision to remove a politically provocative piece of art from an exhibition.] But there are no slogans on display here. You can’t argue with the artistic quality of this exhibition.



Dr. Housni Alkhateeb Shehada. Credit: Gil Eliahu

“If there’s no place for artists like these, then there is no place for any artist in Israel. If someone believes it’s inappropriate to display this art because of the political contexts, then it means that the country has gone totally off the rails. People said there might be protests. Fine. We definitely invite both Arabs and Jews to come to the museum. That’s part of the idea. How many exhibitions have you seen that drew busloads of Arabs to see them? We are doing that. The Arabs are going to the museum in droves.”

Said Abu Shakra is also not worried about the reactions to the exhibition in the wake of the election results. But he says he is afraid that “people will lose all their humanity and that all the red lines will be crossed. I think we are all paying a heavy price because of the condescending discourse between everyone – Jews and Arabs, left and right, East and West. Intolerance has divided everyone and created an atmosphere of disrespect and distrust. The exhibition is important in order to focus public attention on a people that exists within this country and long ago ceased to be a water carrier and cutter of wood. The discourse with the Palestinians in Israel needs to change. Today we don’t just labor to make a living, we are also involved in culture. There is a call here for an egalitarian cultural dialogue.”

Walid: The pioneer

The first, the artistic pioneer, was Walid Abu Shakra. He was born in Lajjun in 1946, and was the first child of Maryam, who was only 14 when she gave birth to him. Maryam had been married off by her parents at age 12 to Abdel Qader Abu Shakra, who was 17 years her senior. In the 1948 war, the family fled from Lajjun, which was destroyed, and settled in Umm al-Fahm. There, the couple had six more children.

Walid loved to draw from the time he was very young, but when he was 16, his father took him out of school and demanded that he go to work to help support the family. Although Umm al-Fahm was under military administration at the time, which restricted Arab citizens' right to travel around the country, Walid was able to get to Tel Aviv, where he worked in a restaurant kitchen there for several months. Then he found work at the Income Tax Authority office in Hadera and rented a room from a couple who lived in the city. He showed his landlords some of his drawings and they encouraged him to enroll in an art course at Beit Hagefen in Haifa. In 1968, he enrolled in the Avni Institute of Art and Design in Tel Aviv. His father didn't like the idea of Walid studying art instead of working.

"Our father said to him – What is this art? Go work and put food on the table. Who cares about these scribbles?" his younger brother Farid recalls. So, in addition to his studies, Walid had to keep on working and would send a third of his income to his parents.



"I feel as if I printed my last work of art only yesterday." Walid Abu Shakra, on his return to the printshop after a decades-long hiatus, in 2012. Credit: Amar Younes

Galia Bar Or says that Walid was already a standout by the second year of his art studies. "At first, he painted still lifes, and then his painting changed and turned into Islamic architectural structures, or architecture of the Middle East, in bold colors." He completed his studies in 1972 and began showing his work in exhibitions. Around that time, he also met Penny, a young Englishwoman who became his girlfriend and then his wife. They went to London where Walid attended art school and studied etching techniques. An exhibition of landscape photographs he saw in London in 1975 helped him to find the "missing link," in Bar Or's words, that he'd been looking for in his etching work – and that was the effect caused by the light.

Walid began working with the aquatint technique, which enabled him to create more abstract images. He visited Umm al-Fahm every year and photographed its changing landscapes, the olive trees and the hills. Later, back in London, he would use the photographs to create prints that depicted the natural surroundings of his childhood.

"He took landscapes from the East and processed them in the West," says Farid, who has curated exhibitions of his brother's work, and written about it. "Here Walid saw a line vibrating from heat and from the sun that was beating on the landscape. It was a landscape that was hard to see and hard to draw, because it was constantly moving. Walid took this vibrating line to England, and drew it, but in his works there is also the English climate. Walid was constantly examining – what happens when I take my culture to another place? And sometimes he felt that it falls apart."

On a 1985 visit to Umm al-Fahm, Walid was stunned to discover that the landscapes of his childhood had completely vanished, due to massive construction of new neighborhoods. Back in London, he responded by creating prints of chopped-off trees. Around the same time, an encounter with the Sufi sheikh Muhammad Nazim Al-Haqqani, who was very active in London in that era, inspired Walid to set aside his art and devote himself to a mystical religious lifestyle. He traveled to Baghdad to visit the grave of Abdul Qadir Gilani, the great Sufi mystic of the 12th century, who also happened to be one of his ancestors, and connected with the Sufi tradition that had been part of his family for generations, although not necessarily very present in his parents' home. Farid says, "In order to understand what was happening to him, he had to connect to the mystical Sufi side."



"Composition" (1971), by Walid Abu Shakra.

Bar Or found Sufi motifs in Walid's early work as well, such as the use of certain shades of red – the color of the mind in Sufism, and green, the color of the heart. And she also believes that Sufism is at the base of the Abu Shakra family phenomenon. Because it is a path, she says, where "everyone who walks it is dealing with the purification of the heart. This is a family that believes in dialogue."

They grew up with an illiterate mother who began having children when she herself was still a child, and a father who left them and took a second wife, with whom he started another family. So who did they get this legacy from? Where did it come from?

“In the home of Walid, Said and Farid, there was also their grandmother, Balkis, their father’s mother, living with them. She went blind when she was young and the grandfather took another wife. And the mother Maryam, who had been married off at 12 to Balkis’s son, took care of her mother-in-law.” It was Balkis who was descended from the Sufi family of Abdul Qadir Gilani.

“All kinds of unusual abilities were ascribed to the family, of blessing and healing and seeing the future, and if you did anything bad to them, they also had less benevolent abilities. When they came to Umm al-Fahm in 1948, people in the village gave them land, out of awe,” says Bar Or. “It was these two women, the mother and the grandmother, who were the dominant figures in the house. And it wasn’t that they recited poetry every morning or showed the children paintings by Picasso. But it was there in the practice and the intention. The priority was for them to fulfill themselves as their soul desired and called to them. Whereas, with the father, it was all about material considerations and force.

“Notwithstanding all of the harsh circumstances I’ve described, this mother raised seven children, three of them artists, and the others have all prospered too. When Said and Farid opened the gallery, there were a great deal of worries, and their mother, Maryam, who was a radiating and loving and optimistic and generous individual, said to them, ‘You will succeed. I dreamed a dream of a wondrous lake, with birds from all over the world coming to drink from its water, and that is the gallery.’”



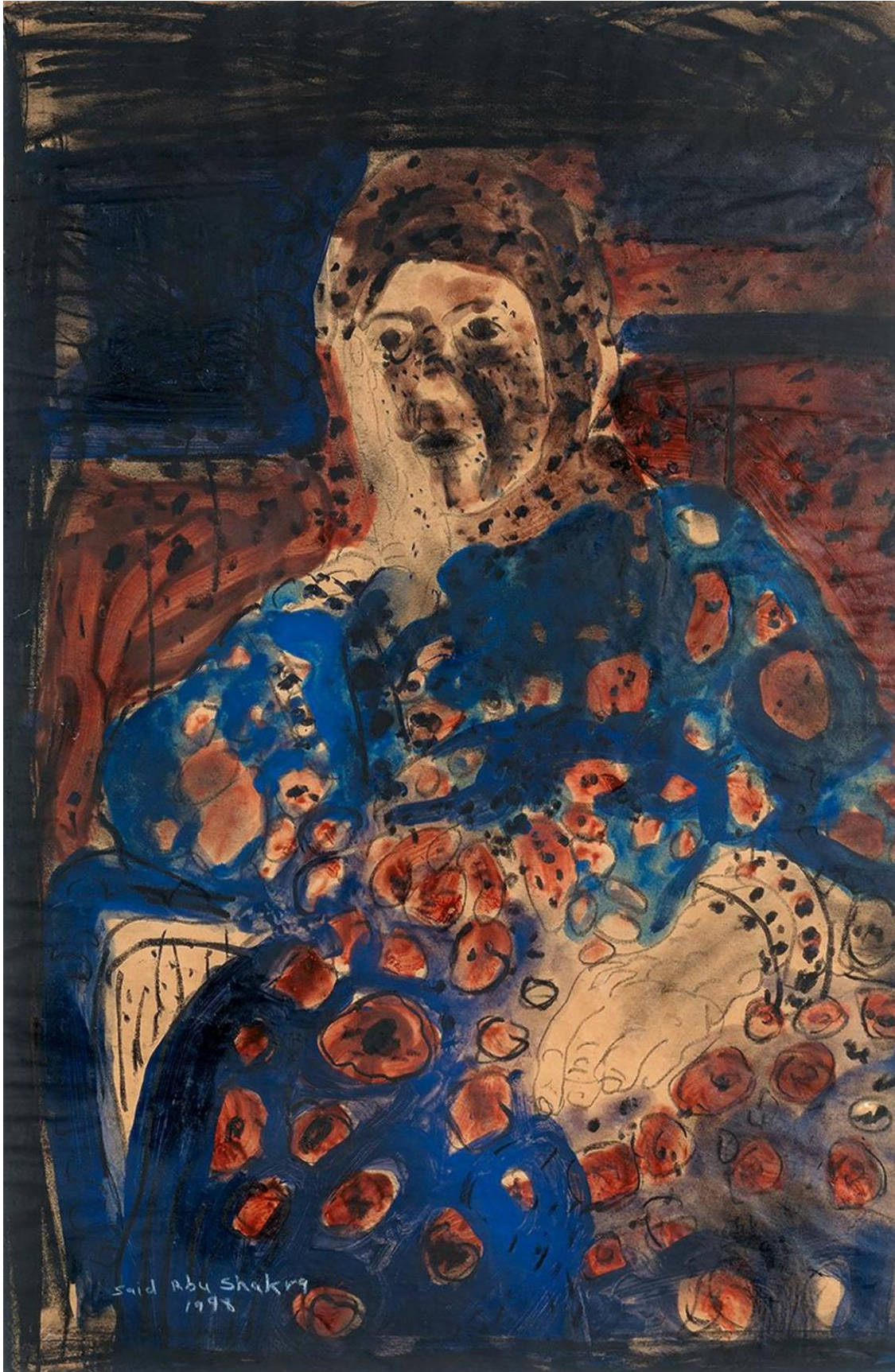
Said, Farid and Karim Abu Shakra. When the show was planned, no one imagined it would open right after a fateful election, and thus take on such a symbolic dimension. Credit: Gil Eliahu

Walid stopped making art in the mid-’80s. Like his father, he also married a second time, this time to a Muslim woman from Umm al-Fahm, who moved with him to London and bore him two children. In 2009, when Walid’s mother was on her deathbed, she asked him to return to making art. Walid acceded to her request and created another series of etchings, which would be the last series he would do; it focused on landscapes of Umm al-Fahm.

In 2012, a major exhibition of Walid’s work was mounted jointly at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and at the gallery in Umm al-Fahm. In preparation for that, Farid accompanied Walid to print his artwork at the etching workshop at Kibbutz Cabri. “When we printed the first artwork,” he relates, “decades after Walid had last touched [a press], he said, ‘I feel as if I printed my last work of art only yesterday.’”

In 2019, Walid became ill with cancer. When it became clear that he had only a few months to live, Said flew to London to see him, and brought with him 80 of Walid’s works of art, prints that had been stored in the archive of the Umm al-Fahm gallery, but that he had not signed.

“When I arrived there, he asked ‘what is this?’ I said to him, ‘Can you imagine, Walid, 80 works of art that you have not signed.’ And he said, ‘I don’t see what the problem is. I’m coming next summer, and I’ll sign them then.’ He was in denial. On the last night, before my flight home, all of a sudden he called me in and said, ‘Give me a pencil, and a knife to sharpen it. He sat down and signed all of the works of art, and told me about each one of them, when and how and why he’d painted it. And as he was telling me this I was filming him.”



"Mother Maryam," Said Abu Shakra, 1998. Credit: Yigal Pardo

Said: Documenting and remembering

Inspired by his older brother Walid, Said, who was born in 1956, relates that he began to engage in intensive and comprehensive documentation of Ummal-Fahm and of the entire Wadi Ara region, where the physical and human landscapes are being transformed beyond recognition. In recent decades, Said has been occupied mainly with running the gallery that he and Farid established in 1996, and which he made into the important cultural institution it is. But the exhibition in Ein Harod will feature his own new works of art, his having resumed painting during the past two years. Said’s work moves along the axis between documentation – such as a video work about his mother, Maryam, whom he filmed in the period before her death, when city elders came to say

their goodbyes to her, and she spoke about her own childhood, about heritage, about the Nakba – and between more abstract artistic expression of his memories, his mother’s memories and memories of dreams and sensations that flowed between her and him, from his birth until her death.

In light of Walid’s success, Said also dared to take up art studies, in his case in 1977, although he, too, needed to work at the same time and assist in supporting the family. He studied, like Walid, at the Avni Institute, and also at Hamidrasha Art School, then in Ramat Hasharon. At the same time, he enlisted in the Israel Police and became an officer.

Fifteen years ago, he relates, he felt that the professional and spiritual satisfaction he gained from his work in the gallery was exceeding that of whatever he was gaining from his individual creative outlets, and he ceased making art. “But during Corona [the pandemic], I wanted to go into the studio, which is here in my house on the top floor, and I felt that it was like returning to a lover I had left 15 years ago.”

Did you have an outburst of creativity?

“I hadn’t created art for 15 years, but during all that time, I was recharging myself, and these energies were trying to break out. During COVID, I also began writing a memoir, in which I reconstructed my childhood. And that was the trigger for me to make drawings that were inspired by these stories that had risen to the surface.”

Said shows me a painting on the wall of a truck carrying refugees being taken from their homes, and in the sky we see planes flying over.



"Hyena," Said Abu Shakra, 2020. Credit: Yigal Pardo

That’s not something that you yourself experienced. You were born after the Nakba.

“No. My mother experienced it in 1948; my mother was with Walid at home in Lajjun, making food for my father, who was supposed to come home from work. My father was a very difficult man, and he expected a hot meal to be waiting for him. In the meantime, the attack on the village began, and the next-door neighbor came in and told my mother, take the baby and run away from here. My mother wasn’t afraid of the war; she was afraid of my father coming home and being mad that the food wasn’t hot. So, before fleeing, she took the meal and wrapped it up in a blanket and put it off to the side. My father snuck into the house at night and took the food that she’d left there. By the next day, when he tried to go back to the house, he discovered that it had been blown up.”

It was Said who initiated the joint exhibition at Ein Harod. He approached Galia Bar Or and the museum’s chief curator, Yaniv Shapira, with the idea, which they gladly embraced.

Did you consider the political significance of mounting such an exhibition at Kibbutz Ein Harod?

“Of course. I wrote to someone in Umm al-Fahm, inviting him to the opening of the exhibition in Ein Harod, and he said, I’ll come, but it isn’t Ein Harod, it’s Ain Jalout. He reminded me of the Palestinian name. I said, you are right, it is Ain Jalout, but come. Where are we? In a place that was Palestine first, and now it is Israel. What are we going to do, sit around and cry? No, this is reality.”

Did you have the sense that there are things that you had to be careful about displaying, saying or writing in the framework of the exhibition, that the museum was worried about certain statements being made, such as use of the charged word ‘Nakba’?

“I felt that there was some concern in the air, but they never said no to me. [Co-curator] Housni’s text refers to the occupation and to the Nakba. There was one sentence there that stressed them out. The main problem today is that artists in Israel are already censoring themselves, ever since the military rule put into place by [former culture minister] Miri Regev, who threatened that without loyalty there would be no funding. She simply castrated the artists. [David Reeb is the last samurai who still speaks very politically](#) and very sharply, without fear. Nowadays, people are afraid to talk about the Nakba.”

Said says that one can see in the exhibition the stylistic and thematic contexts that link the family’s various artists. “All of us are influenced by, and influence, one another. I always liked Asim’s airplanes. And the airplanes also appear in Farid’s work. Walid painted the landscape of his childhood and his memory. Karim draws the flora of the surroundings. And Asim draws the sabra cactus. Although the overall landscape wasn’t that important to him, only his own personal landscapes. The sabra stands on its own.”



"Plane" by Asim Abu Shakra. Credit: Yigal Pardo

Asim: ‘He couldn’t go a minute not painting’

Asim Abu Shakra’s potted prickly-pear cactus (the “sabra”) long ago became an icon of Israeli art, along with the man who created it – the total, charismatic, complex artist who, like many a rock star, died young.

Asim, cousin to Walid, Said and Farid, was born November 11, 1961, the fifth son in a family of 10 children. One of his brothers is Sheikh Raed Salah, born in 1958, founder of the (now-outlawed) Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, and a former mayor of Umm al-Fahm. Two years ago, Salah served several months in prison for incitement and expressing support for terror. In the family, they say that he, too, possesses the family talent and is a fine painter in his own right.

In 1981, Asim left Umm al-Fahm in order to pursue art studies at the Kalisher School of Art in Tel Aviv. His abundant talent was not discovered right away. “It’s part of the story of dual identities, of torn identities,” Bar Or says. “You come to a place, you don’t belong, you feel that you are suspect; new language, you don’t understand the codes.”

During the years 1984 to 1985, Asim’s painting improved. “He began to be influenced by Giacometti, by [Moshe] Kupferman; he adopted motifs from Egyptian art, graphic elements; he used a lot of crucifixions and airplanes, and also, a lot of humor found its way into his artwork,” says Bar Or. From there, she adds, he took off like a meteor. “His painting was spiritual but also very sexual and physical, and he understood where he was heading. And at some point it became obvious that there was nothing more that he needed to be taught.”

By the time Ahuva Ashman arrived at Kalisher as a teacher in late 1985, Asim was already the undisputed star of the school. She was 21 years old and they quickly became good friends. The encounter with his art shook her to the core.



Asim with one of his artworks. Credit: Vered Shapira

“From my very first day there, I never stopped hearing about Asim, Asim. He was a dominant figure, he was much-loved, friendly, inquisitive and also very good looking. He asked me if I wanted to see his paintings, in his studio in the school. I walked in and saw a painting of an airplane against a green background, and my body went limp,” Ashman recalls. “I experienced the sort of feeling that made me understand that maybe it would be best if I left the school. I had a good hand, but I understood that doing something like that was not something I could not do. Intuitively, I understood that I was seeing a great artist here.”

During his studies at Kalisher, Asim worked at his studio in the school and also lived there most of the time. Then too, it wasn't easy for an Arab to rent an apartment in Tel Aviv, and the poor state of his finances also played a part. In 1986, he developed an aggressive case of cancer in the lymph nodes, which got worse, they say in the family, due to his prolonged exposure to paint and turpentine fumes in the studio.

At the height of Asim's illness, Ashman relates, he invited all of the students at Kalisher for a two-day painting marathon in Umm al-Fahm. “He wasn't able to go a single minute without painting. His neck was all swollen, but he nevertheless organized all this and set up a place for us to sleep in the school gymnasium. We painted all night long.” Asim started chemotherapy treatment, and quickly regained his health.

Subsequently, Eitan Hillel, at the time a young and energetic gallery owner, became a patron of Asim and his art. Hillel let him work in an expansive studio in the gallery he opened in the Red House on Nahmani Street, and Asim flourished. This was the period when he began painting potted cactuses, which critics are now inclined to interpret as self-portraits. He lived in Tel Aviv with his girlfriend, taught at Kalisher and painted. The art world welcomed him with open arms and collectors began to show interest in his work. But in 1988 the cancer recurred, and this time there was no cure. In his final days, Asim Abu Shakra returned to his parents' home in Umm al-Fahm, where he died in April 1990.

By then, Ashman was no longer in contact with him, but based on her prior close acquaintance with him, she thinks that his final days were accompanied not only by physical suffering, but also by feelings of guilt. “Perhaps at the end of his life he was even inclined to think that he was being punished. He loved to paint the motif of a crucified Jesus, the victim; he was very much connected with Christian imagery. Somewhere inside, he thought he was being punished for the choices he made in his life. In the course of our conversations, he more than once expressed feelings of guilt over the fact that he was not living the proper life. His existence was between Tel Aviv and Umm al-Fahm. He was of two minds in regard to his identity, in an especially polarized way.”



“Sunflowers” (1989), by Asim Abu Shakra. Credit: Yigal Pardo

Farid: The earth and the body

Farid Abu Shakra refuses to see the family exhibition as a sort of Palestinian “Pride March,” as he terms it. In his opinion, it is a natural and obvious event. “It is not as if to say, ‘I am showing here because I am Arab and I am ostracized, and the museum has an agenda of presenting outsiders.’ That is not at all what we are about. None of us is just starting out, our artwork is found in the finest collections, in Israel and elsewhere in the world. So any place where this exhibition would have been mounted, it would be on the merits of the art. No one is doing us a favor.”

In any event, this is by all means a dream that has been realized, and perhaps an opportunity to bring together these artists who are members of a family that has somewhat grown apart over the years and amid the circumstances.

Farid, the younger brother of Walid and Said, was born in 1963, and he enrolled at Kalisher one year after his cousin Asim.

Did you never think of studying art at a Palestinian university?

“The multicultural space has an effect. At Kalisher, everything was allowed – even to the extent of permissiveness, at times. And it produced good artists. If I’d studied art at Bir Zeit or An-Najah [universities], I would have been a narrative artist, an ‘enlisted’ artist, one who is mobilized for the [sake of the] Palestinian narrative.”

Over the years, Farid has engaged in various and sundry art techniques. He paints, embroiders, creates installations and works of performance art. In 1996, he also collaborated with his brother Said in establishing the Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery, although four years later, he decided that he needed to make room for his own creative endeavors.



"Embroidered Landscape" by Farid Abu Shakra, 2008. Credit: Yigal Pardo

To what extent does contemporary reality permeate your artwork?

“I am an artist who responds to reality. In my artwork, I have engaged with what’s happening in Syria and Iraq, in the deaths of children and refugees. I have a series of toy weapons that I buried in the ground, which I created in 2007. I am not a narrative artist; I am a reactive artist. I am not a political artist, and neither am I a feminist artist because I weave. I have that in my toolbox, and I know how to create the encounter with the airplane and with the needle and the thread. We also make the voice heard; in general, Palestinian art has not yet arrived at a place of making art for the sake of art. We are only beginning to touch that place. But it is not possible to say that the cannons are thundering, and that we are making art for the sake of art. The protest exists, and the reaction exists. The Green Line passes right between our legs, we are inside the Israeli reality as well as the Palestinian reality. We are biting into this reality and biting into that reality. When people tell me that it is frustrating, I say that it’s also the most beautiful thing in the world. I am inside two cultures, without conceding either of them.”

Which is why you stayed in Umm al-Fahm?

“I like to travel. From 2004 until 2017, I was in Tel Aviv, and I also traveled abroad a lot. I got divorced, and then I remarried and I built a home with a studio in Umm al-Fahm. Once upon a time, I would sing songs of praise to my soil, which someone had occupied, and I would say: This is my soil and my home. And over time I began to feel that my true home is the body, and it will accompany me everywhere, even to the grave.”

Karim: Beyond the borders

Karim, born in 1982, never moved away left Umm al-Fahm and has never spent any length of time studying in art school. In contrast with the older artists in the family, who had to struggle to pursue their art in light of family expectations, Karim’s parents imposed on him the task of becoming an artist and continuing the legacy of Asim.



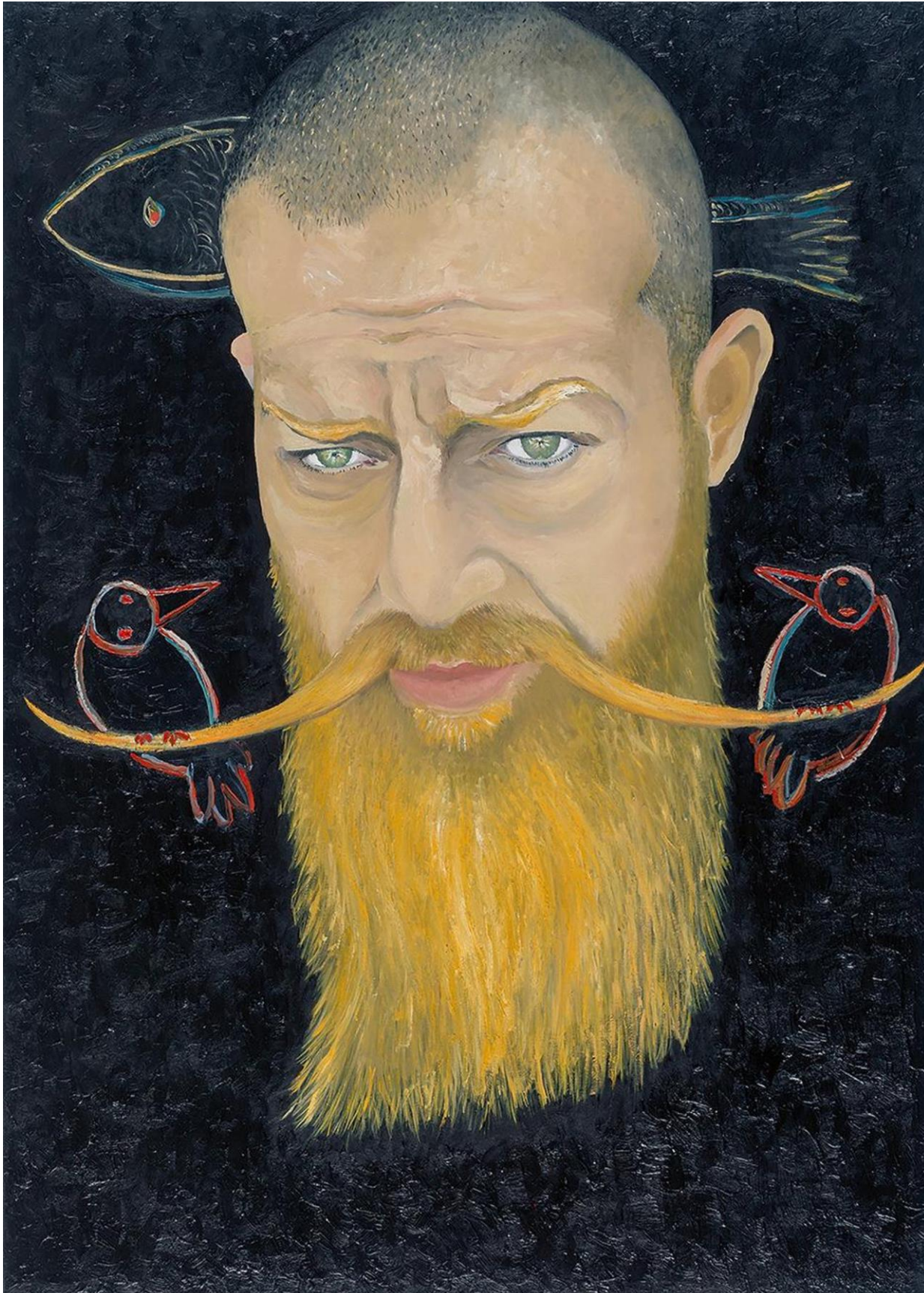
An untitled work by Karim Abu Shakra, 2019. Credit: Yigal Pardo

He is the son of Muhammed, Asim’s eldest brother, and grew up in the shadow of a legal struggle over the estate of his late uncle. He absorbed not only the art of Asim, but also his image, he relates, as if it were a blood infusion. “In the Arab sector, being an artist is like telling someone he can go and live on the moon. It was a very strange thought, but after Asim passed away, and when the family saw that people wanted to buy his artwork, all of a sudden they realized that this was something big.”

After Karim graduated high school, his father made the decision to send him off to study art. “I felt as if they were teaching there for [only] a teacher’s certificate, not to give an artist a steady hand and thoughts and courage. Instead, I built myself a studio in Umm al-Fahm, I bought books, I visited exhibitions and I taught myself. The learning process,” he says, “went on for 20 years.”

The choice to stay, live and create in Umm al-Fahm, was a conscious one, Karim adds, in spite of the fact that as far as he is concerned, art is not only a life mission, but also a career, and that he aspires to take it as far and as high as possible. Meanwhile, in financial terms, as well, it is doing pretty well. He says that he sells a lot of his work, and that he makes a living from art.

His canvases include distorted portraits of children, some of which were shown earlier this year at a solo exhibition at the Petah Tikva Museum of Art. The portraits are his response to the severe epidemic of violence that is harming primarily Arab society in Israel.



An untitled work by Karim Abu Shakra, 2016. Credit: Yigal Pardo

For Karim's part in the group exhibition at Ein Harod, curator Housni Alkhateeb Shehada chose his paintings of distorted-looking children and his paintings of flowers, whereas co-curator Galia Bar Or selected several self-portraits that had not previously been on display.

"What interests me in Karim's artwork is the struggle that he waged with himself, with the painting, with development of the language, with his own breaking down of the boundaries to reach new places," Bar Or says.

“Because just as Farid and Said said earlier, any painter for whom painting is his life wants observation of his painting to be a studied look at everything that has been put into it, and not only Nakba and not only a cactus. What’s important to an artist is his people and the things that are important to his people, but he is an artist, too.”

The fact that the exhibition is being mounted in Ein Harod – a neutral zone for the family, and not at the gallery in Umm al-Fahm – is perhaps what made it possible to present all of the family’s artists together, one alongside another. It is not certain that the family reunion would have been feasible in the city from which they emerged, and in a gallery founded by Said and Farid, in part due to the sensitivities and emotional baggage that have accumulated over the years.

But Karim admits with candor that Ein Harod’s main advantage, in his opinion, is the opportunity to expose their artwork to new audiences. “There are a lot of people who like my work but who are afraid to come to Umm al-Fahm,” he says.

The decisive component in the creative oeuvre of the Abu Shakra family, says Alkhateeb Shehada, has been the women in the family. Although they themselves were not able to take the art route, they encouraged their sons to do so. “The mothers here were key figures, and they remain the same in the exhibition, as well. There is this feminine softness that embraces, that understands that the way of art can also be a way of life. Asim’s mother, who is still alive, talks about it, too. I tried to understand if it is the place, if it is Umm al-Fahm. It isn’t an easy place, partly in terms of its landscape, which is rigid and unpleasant. And strangely enough, it is from this tough location that the softest cultural baggage emerges. It’s a sort of coping mechanism, one in which the difficulties are expressed artistically.”

So far, the dominant status of the Abu Shakra family’s male artists has been maintained. Women have not made their way into the family guild. But toward the end of our meeting, Said Abu Shakra offered a news scoop of sorts: There is a female presence lurking in the younger generation.

“I am about to mount at the gallery an industrial design exhibition of someone who is quite astounding, who has a master’s in architecture and who teaches at the Technion and at Bezalel. Her name is Sophie Abu Shakra, she is 26 years old, and she is my cousin’s daughter.”