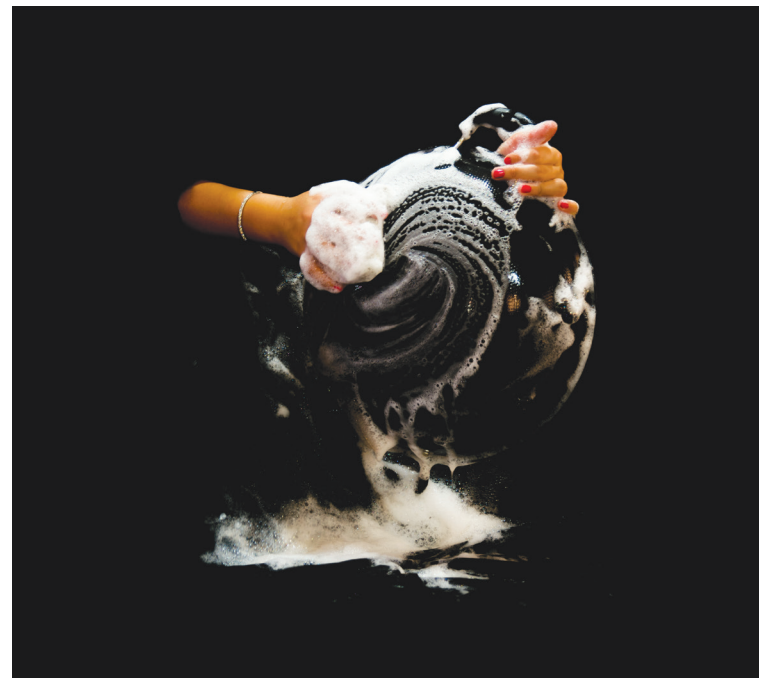


Gallery director Sa'id Abu Shakra holds a photo of his mother. (Yiga Pardo)



Hands washing vessel: Amira Ziyani, Shirin, 2017, photograph mounted on Dibond, 100x100 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Umm el-Fahm Art Gallery)

Art in Umm el-Fahm

• By PAMELA PELED

So here's a small-minded confession: when an adventurous, utterly lovely friend suggested we drive to the Umm el-Fahm Art Gallery in her snazzy convertible, my first thought was that no roof meant no protection from flying rocks. I hate reactions like that; I hate myself for having them. So I lathered sunscreen on a brave face.

"Would love to," I said.

We swung off Route 65 and into the village on a flawless day in early spring. The houses lay sunbathing along the Wadi Ara mountainside, bougainvillea and almond trees blooming like ubiquitous umbrellas. The steeply winding roads, the sunshine and the vivid colors reminded me of Italy, although horticulture on the Riviera is not what pops initially into mind when considering Umm el-Fahm. I admit with shame that I had not given much thought to the place, and when I did it was in connection with Days of Rage and Islamic extremism. I expected to feel uneasy there.

Sa'id Abu Shakra, the director of the gallery, greeted us with dates and coffee and a warm hug. We maneuvered our way through throngs of teachers from Israel's North – Arabs, Jews, Christians – all sticking and painting and giggling through a workshop. Artists walked the educators through the rudiments of pottery; then everyone tucked into huge platters of scrumptious vegetarian delights over discussions common to classrooms everywhere – like ADHD pupils with cellphones.

The gallery rocks with energy: people creating, discussing, eating, having fun. The walls of the 2,000-square-meter structure showcase Israeli art, irrespective of what God each artist invokes. Art aims to provoke; in the Middle East, just holding the paintbrush in your left hand or your right could probably spawn a doctorate. But forget politics: in a largely conservative city, exhibiting most art that probes and questions is edgy, and brave. Nudity, for example, would not be welcomed by most patrons there, though such sensibilities are not limited to our region. Even the Italians had their drama when, in 2016, the Romans bowed to Iranian pressure and covered up ancient marble nudes while President Hassan Rouhani was in town.

To be provocative, of course, does not necessitate being naked. The contemporary searing Amira Ziyani photographs on show now reveal no forbidden flesh, but explode the myth about Druse women's acceptance

of their submissive role nonetheless. The stark black backgrounds are shot through with luminous manicured hands scaling a fish, or bare feet on a soapy floor, conjuring up the traditional chores of housewives. Ziyani herself was on hand to share the disconnect between her love of tradition and belonging and her wish to break through the barrier of female repression in her world.

Some 25 years ago there was no space for Arab artists to exhibit in their own communities. When Assim Abu-Shakra, a respected up-and-coming painter, died at the age of 29, it was the Tel Aviv Art Museum that showed a retrospective of his work. Assim was related to Sa'id Abu-Shakra, who at that time worked as a policeman. Sa'id, who comes from a family of artists and has a degree in art himself, was concerned that "the Jews were commemorating our artist because we couldn't do it for ourselves." At that time there were no Arab curators in Israel, no Arab art galleries, no Arab reporters covering the subject.

"A nation without artistic tools needs someone else to help them," he explains. "I felt bad about that."

He set about finding a solution. In 1996, he opened the first Arab art gallery in Israel; 100 square meters in Umm el-Fahm, with Yoko Ono as one of the first exhibitors. Today the three floors of the building house multiple exhibitions, a ceramics center, a residency area where artists can live and work, and archives holding the testimonies of 500 inhabitants of the town from the early 1900s, including that of a 104-year-old gentleman who recalls Turkish rule!

Maryam Shraideh, Sa'id Abu-Shakra's mother, smiles down in black-and-white from her frame in the little room dedicated to preserving local history. Her life reads like a documentary, illuminating both the status of Muslim women in the last century and the trajectory of many Arabs in Israel. Shraideh's own mother died when she was only four; her stepmother was stereotypically wicked. One morning, when the then 12-year-old was playing with her dolls, her father burst into her bedroom with the sheikh. "This is the girl," he announced. "She must be married off immediately."

Despite the sheikh's misgivings, the child-bride was promptly wed to a man 15 years her senior. Every morning she extracted her dolls from their hiding place and invited the neighborhood girls to play. Every evening her 27-year-old husband returned, demanding a meal and the ministrations of a wife.

At 13, the child was a mother herself; by 1948, aged 16, she had two children. One morning Shraideh was told to flee her home in Alajoom, as the Jews were coming. Figuring the family would return within two hours, she wrapped her pots in a blanket to keep the food warm. The family has been living in Umm el-Fahm ever since.

Back in the village of her birth, Shraideh gave birth to five more children before her husband abandoned her for a second wife (whose wedding feast she offered to prepare). Poor and overworked, she brought up her children with no bitterness and with a sense that life, despite the knocks, was good.

"My mother's hand gave us life," recalls Abu-Shakra. "I don't remember the poverty and the hunger."

This lack of resentment, this drive to take charge and make things better, propels him until today.

"I speak Hebrew like a native," he says, "and in my youth I never had the dirty look of a construction worker. Israelis said to me: 'You're an Arab, but Jewish blood runs in your veins.' I want to prove that Arabs can be equal to Jews on their own terms: our art museum is a symbol of that."

Abu-Shakra and his wife Siham (principal of a local school and winner of a government prize for education) have five children and a grandchild. One daughter, a dentist, lives in Rehovot; her young son learns at a mixed Arab-Jewish nursery school. Abu-Shakra is determined to advance the culture of Israeli Arabs, while at the same time furthering dialogue with all Israelis.

In a village that has its fair share of extremists, in a country that has more than its fair share of crazies on all sides, Abu-Shakra's voice is one of a growing community of Arabs looking for integration and coexistence in Israel. He is dedicated to remembering and showcasing the Arab narrative, yet he fully accepts Israel as his homeland and understands that cooperation between peoples and a desire to move forward with mutual respect is the only way to go.

I myself am extremely grateful for the experience: the art, the blue sky, the stories, the optimism – and for the refreshing assurance that we might someday attain more than "a glooming peace" in the mountains and in the valleys of our sun-drenched land.

Get in your car and see for yourself. An open sunroof is an optional extra.

For more information: www.ummelfahmgallery.org
The writer lectures at Beit Berl and the IDC.
peledpam@gmail.com