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Resisting through her canvas, Emad Malak Mattar paints for change

Emad Malak Mattar wants you to know that she is here. In a time where “even on Google Maps you can barely see Palestine,” Mattar communicates that Palestine and Palestinians are here through her choice of resistance — art.

At 19-years-old, Mattar has endured three wars on Gaza Strip. She compares aspects of the experience to quarantine, as she and her family remained housebound for the course of the violence. “You are just sitting and waiting for an alarm,” Mattar said. To cope, Mattar knew she needed an escape because “you can’t guarantee life there [Gaza Strip].”

Head of the Palestinian Mission to the United Kingdom and the Strategic Affairs Advisor to President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine, Dr. Husam Zomlot, reflects Mattar’s sentiment. “The peace process, may I say, it’s on a life support machine.”

With the gift books she received from school, Mattar began dipping a paintbrush in her pain. Gaza Strip, for instance, averages four hours of electricity each day. As a child, Mattar wished she “could have the moon in my room” in order to paint at night. This inspired her painting, *Electricity*, of a solemn girl holding the moon in her hands.

When the 51 Day War ended, Mattar decided to continue to speak through her canvases. “I went to the store and bought what any artist actually buys — acrylics, canvases, paper and pencils,” she said.

Mattar on Life after War (Audio)

Palestinian women in traditional embroidery dresses with big eyes and brown skin are a staple of Mattar’s work. Self-identifying as a feminist, Mattar jokes that whenever she attempts to paint a man, the man somehow turns into a woman.

Mattar on Feminism in her Art (Audio)

Just a year later, Mattar had her first solo exhibition in Gaza Strip. She couldn’t “help but feel that we Palestinians have to speak up for what we want and what we desire.” Mattar views incorporating Palestinian culture in her art as a means of doing so because she believes Israel’s military and economic advantages are undeniable.

As opposed to mobilizing with Palestinian culture, Zomlot asserts that “our best form of resistance is democracy. Once we revert back to the people, then we fix the relationship with the people and we fix the relationship with the world.”

Now, attending university in Istanbul, Turkey, Mattar continues to resist with through canvases. In reference to what Palestinians do want and desire, Mattar said that “We only want to create — creating art, creating success and also peace.”

Since her debut in Gaza Strip, Mattar’s work that has been displayed in approximately 60 locations internationally, including Jerusalem. There, she observed that some visitors ignored her pieces because of sadness and discomfort they invoke. “When you look at the painting and feel something, this feeling cannot be wrong. You can’t feel something in your gut and say, ‘No, that’s wrong.’”

Similarly, last month at her exhibition in Germany, the organizer invited friends to Mattar’s exhibition. The organizer’s friends refused to come because of the somber tone of Mattar’s work. “For people who grew up, especially in Europe and the US, who’ve never had the experience of conflict or attack, they have this self-denial,” Mattar said.

Mattar said that she cannot change who people are. Regardless, she urges people to speak up about something that matters, even if that issue is not Palestine.

“If you’re not helping anybody, if you’re not speaking up for anything, your life will get empty, even if you don’t feel it,” Mattar said.

Mattar on Speaking Up (Audio)

Despite different approaches to resistance, Zomlot is in agreement. “No matter how much we want to kick and scream, we rely on each other. We are interconnected.”