

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Across the region, art is helping to support the displaced, counsel distressed children, raise awareness and confront inequality

WORDS: OLIVIA CUTHBERT



'HALF MAN/HALF WOMAN'
PAINTING IN AMMAN BY
ARTIST FALK LEHMANN AKA AKUT
PHOTO CREDIT: SAMANTHA ROBISON/APTART

The face; half male, half female; gazes out from the side of a building in downtown

Amman. Both sides share an expression of stifled desperation on the verge of speaking out. For many looking up at this painting, it's an apt depiction of the relationship between the genders in Jordan, where men and women, so alike beneath the surface, are polarised by prescribed roles that dictate how they can and can't behave, what's acceptable and what is not.

When German artist Falk Lehmann, aka Akut, painted the piece last year, the response on social media was immediate. "Some people supported the concept and others did not like it at all," he says. "It's the idea that men and women are one in their humanity and for humanity to be the best it can be, they need to be treated as equals."

CONVERSATION PIECES

The mural was one of a series painted on walls around the country as part of the Open Space programme, which aimed to inspire gender dialogue by portraying men and women as equal contributors to a healthy society. "While some of those commenting were against gender equality, it was still important to have the conversation," says Samantha Robison, founder and director of aptART (Awareness & Prevention Through Art), which launched the initiative in collaboration with USAID Takamol.

Other paintings from the project dealt with different issues affecting women, including shame culture. Last year, the number of women killed in so-called honour crimes in Jordan reached an alarming high, rallying activists to renew cries for a significant shift in perceptions of women and their place in society. "Change can only happen when people are exposed to new and different ideas. Street art is unique in that it is available to everyone," Robison explains.

For artist Dina Fawakhiri, the very act of creating street art in the Middle East is a display of

defiance against cultural norms. Last year she produced a piece, since white-washed over, depicting a duck with a broken wing. "I chose this because they break wings in this society. Everything is 'I can't' and 'you're not allowed' and 'it's not according to our culture'. That's why I chose the duck, because the duck is the most mistreated female bird by its males."

CREATING CONNECTIONS

While Robison is encouraged to see more and more artists around the region using street art as a means of social commentary, it can also, she says, be a powerful tool for bringing people together. Across the region, public art projects are helping to create community cohesion and alleviate discord in areas affected by migration. "Whenever you have a new population in a community, such as refugees, there are tensions. An 'us against them' mentality can emerge," she explains.

Jordan and Turkey host more refugees than any other countries in the world - 2.7 million and 2.5 million respectively - according to a report published last year by Amnesty International. With resources and employment



opportunities in short supply, aid agencies emphasise the need for integration activities in host communities struggling to shoulder the strain. "Creating something public together breaks down some of the social barriers and allows an opportunity for everyone to interact in a tension free-environment," adds Robison.

"THEY BREAK WINGS IN THIS SOCIETY. EVERYTHING IS 'I CAN'T'"

Through his organisation Artolution, artist Joel Bergner organises community-based art projects around the world designed to connect diverse peoples and address social issues. "Art allows people to communicate with each other

even when they don't speak the same language," he says.

Bergner describes the positive results he's seen working with Palestinian and Israeli youth on group art projects. "There have been so many situations when they discuss their lives and realise they have more in common than they thought. They get a sense of the humanity of the other side, which they were always taught to fear and hate."

He's also used art to help displaced youth adapt to life in the West. One community mural project, conducted in several major European cities, teamed teenagers arriving from Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea with adult mentors from local companies, universities and other institutions. In some cases it even helped to secure internships and employment for the youngsters. "Young people, who often feel that they are victims of their circumstances, see through these projects that they can make a difference and be agents of positive change," says Bergner.

SPACE TO SPEAK

The Artolution projects also function as a forum for expression, where participants can open up about their experiences and the pain they've endured. Bergner





REEMA MURAL ZA'ATARI
PHOTO CREDIT: ARTOLUTION

recalls one 11-year-old Syrian boy living in Za'atari, the vast rebel camp in Jordan that's currently providing makeshift shelter to almost 80,000 refugees. After two weeks participating in the project, he opened up about the horrors he had suffered in Syria. "He rolled back the sleeves of his shirt and revealed these burns. He was very disfigured," Bergner recalls.

The child's father had defected from the military to join rebel forces, says Bergner, so his son had been kidnapped and electrocuted. "For him to be able to talk to us about this terrible suffering was made possible by the bond we formed through the art projects we were working on together," says Bergner. "That's the key to this project; the expression created through the art and the human connections that are formed." British artist Hannah Rose Thomas uses the proceeds from her paintings to fund humanitarian projects overseas. In a recent exhibition in London, she depicted some of the refugee men, women and children she met on these trips. "I painted these portraits as I feel we must recognise our common humanity with the people fleeing their homes across the world, especially in the current tense political climate that accentuates difference and fear."

After hearing their stories, Thomas wanted to create an outlet for the refugees to express themselves and came up with

the idea of using old tents from the camps as canvases. The goal, she explains, "was to turn these symbols of loss and displacement into beautiful pieces of art, in order to raise awareness of the plight of refugees." Themes for the tents centred around the impact of war, memories and hope, but the most common images conveyed by the refugees was home.

Thomas cites Mohammed, a 12-year-old boy from Dara, Syria, who confided to her that "the war in Syria is scary, but the scariest thought for me is the

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thought of not being able to return one day."

"Art creates a free and safe space for children like Mohammed who might feel trapped by their ordeals," says Thomas. "Many find the creative process to be cathartic and helpful in counteracting psychosocial problems that may otherwise develop as a result of the distress they have faced when forced to flee their homes." Her next destination is the Jinda Centre in Kurdistan, which provides a safe haven for Yazidi

women and girls who have escaped captivity under ISIS. The project will support staff at the facility in providing post-traumatic care and therapy.

CONFRONTING FEARS

Art therapy sessions are an integral part of the psychosocial support programmes run by Save the Children throughout the region. HEART (Healing and Education Through Art) uses arts-based activities to help children share their feelings about the issues affecting them. In Za'atari, the risk of early marriage is all too real for girls as young as 13, whose families may see this as both a financial solution and a way to protect their daughters from sexual harassment in the camp.

During support sessions conducted by Save the Children, girls created caricatures illustrating their fears about being married to older men. The images highlighted the dangers of early pregnancy and the opportunities that marriage would deny them. They were published in a report entitled *Too Young to Wed*, which highlighted the negative impact that child marriage has on all aspects of a girl's life. One of the illustrations shows a young girl in a wedding dress being dragged away from her toys and teddy bears by an old man with a walking stick, while another depicts a child bride being pushed towards an open grave.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

In a crowded classroom in Lebanon, Anita Toutikian teaches children to paint. Her students are Syrian refugees, some of the 1.3 million estimated to have fled here. Most of these children live far below the poverty line, relying on handouts for food and shelter. But for many, it's not their current living conditions that disturb them. "Some have experienced multiple losses, like the loss of loved ones, home, security, honour, dignity and health," explains Toutikian, an artist and clinical psychologist who runs art therapy sessions for refugee kids.

She describes how distress changes a person mentally, making them view their environment as a hostile place: "In the Middle East, such shock and pain has become multifold. We call it Complex Trauma, meaning these ordeals are repeated every day. The mind lives this trauma constantly. The clinical consequence is the gradual collapse of defense mechanisms. It can lead to mental illness or to crime."

Through art therapy, a child's mental map of their hostile world can be changed and their feelings of defenselessness reversed. "The most important issue to be addressed is the feeling of being locked in a memory, in a time, in a bad dream, in an impossible situation, in a fear; but also being locked in pain, humiliation, poverty, injustice, and even in longing. Art is able to break this lock, that's why humans invented it tens of thousands of years ago," Toutikian says.

Colour is key, she adds, pointing to students who can't resist plunging their hands into paint pots. It gives them a deep sense of peace.

"Art therapy is a mix of psychological and recreational help. Both are employed to restore the psychological wellness of the child," Toutikian says, adding: "I've learnt that one of the greatest joys in life is to draw a smile on the face of a deprived child." 