

THE DEMOKRATIK

Equality | Diversity | Inclusion | Democracy | Transperency

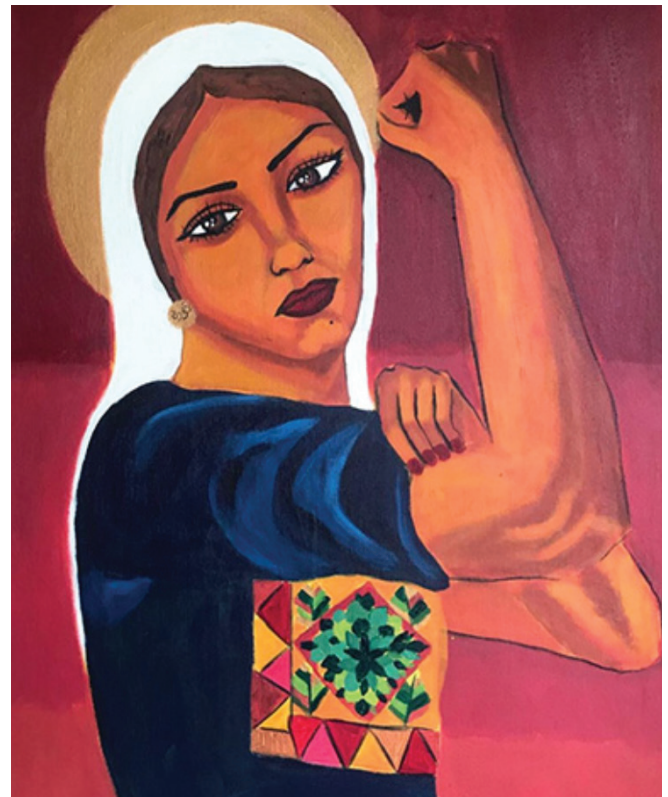
For the Visual Arts World

Palestinian Artists and the Struggle for Freedom of Expression in the West

Freedom of expression in the West has been a contentious issue, often intersecting with political censorship, discrimination, and restrictions based on geopolitical interests. The ongoing genocide promoted by Israel in Palestine has put the land through dark times, with, its consequences have a great impact in the lives of Palestinian artists — specially those who use their voices as a form of resistance, bring awareness and criticizing Israeli actions — they, however, often face restrictions, cancellations, or funding cuts.

It is no surprise to see such repression occurring. Throughout history, authoritarian regimes and states with heavy political agendas have targeted the arts due to their profound influence on society. Art serves as a powerful medium to expose injustices, criticize government actions, and mobilize public opinion. The Palestinian struggle is no exception. The Israeli occupation has not only sought to erase Palestinian presence physically but also to silence its cultural and artistic expression. The intent is clear: to erase a population, one must erase its culture and any trace of its existence. As UNESCO aptly states:

“Culture, being on the front lines of conflicts, is too often a victim of hostilities. The destruction of heritage fuels violence, hatred, and vengeance among people and weakens the very foundations



Artist: Ismail Shammout

of peace, hindering reconciliation when the dust of war settles.”

In Gaza, the destruction extends beyond homes and residential areas — it also targets cultural institutions, including theaters, libraries, galleries, and museums. It is said that more than 200 cultural institutions and heritage sites in Gaza have been demolished by Israeli bombardment since 7 October 2023. The devastation, however, is not limited to buildings. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, 45 artists, writers, and cultural activists were killed between October 2023 and February 2024. This systematic targeting of cultural figures further exemplifies the deliberate erasure of Palestinian identity and artistic resistance. Some

of the artists include: Nesma Abu Shaira, a visual artist; Halima Abdel Karim Al-Kahlot, visual artist; Roshdi Sarraj, a Palestinian journalist and filmmaker; Palestinian photographer Majd Arandas; poet Heba Abu Nada; painter Heba Zagout; Mohammed Sami Qariqa, a painter and teacher; and playwright and actor Inas al-Saqa. All of these artists were killed holding onto the hope of a free Palestine.

The silencing of Palestinian artists is not merely an attack on freedom of expression — it is an extension of the broader oppression faced by the Palestinian people. Just as their land is stolen and their lives are endangered, their cultural heritage is also under attack. This cultural suppression seeks to dehumanize Palestinians, reducing them to nothing. Even outside Palestine, Arab artists or even just allies are placed under scrutiny, accused of “inciting violence” or supporting “terrorism” for simply advocating Palestinian rights. In Brazil, for example, artists painting a mural in a building in support of Palestine were violently attacked. One man kicked over paint cans and attempted to pull down the harness suspending visual artist Kleber Pagu — an act that could have killed him.

Palestinian and other Arab artists, critical of Israeli actions often find their work censored, events canceled, or funding withdrawn. Examples include venues withdrawing support for artists who express solidarity with Palestine or critique Western involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts. In Germany, for instance, numerous cultural events were canceled, according to The Markaz Review, one of them was the Frankfurt International Book Fair where Palestinian author Adania Shibli was to be awarded, but received an email regarding the cancellation of her event. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen had his scheduled reading canceled at the 92nd Street Y (in New York)

after signing an open letter condemning Israel’s action in Gaza, according to Reuters. Freemuse reports that in Bristol, the Arnolfini Gallery canceled two events linked to the Palestinian Film Festival, concerned over hosting events that might be seen as “political activity”—an implication that they feared losing government funding if they proceeded.

Freemuse’s 2024 report highlights a crescent global surge in censorship and targeting of artists and creative professionals, since the events of October 7. Many artists have been pressured to change their themes, labeled as problematic, censored for calling for peace, dismissed from their jobs, or silenced by the very institutions that once supported them. Artists who speak out risk losing platforms and opportunities to sustain their livelihoods. Art has always been a powerful tool for denouncing injustice, creating spaces for dialogue, driving protest, challenging societal structures, and pushing society toward transformation. But in a sector already marked by financial insecurity, the threat of losing support simply for expressing an opinion also threatens artistic freedom.

Yet, despite these relentless challenges, Palestinian artists continue to resist through their work. Digital platforms, independent exhibitions, and grassroots movements have become alternative spaces where Palestinian voices can thrive. Art remains a crucial instrument of resistance, ensuring that Palestinian stories are told, preserved, and amplified in the face of suppression. The struggle for artistic freedom is thus deeply intertwined with the broader fight for justice, dignity, and liberation. But the question remains: How much longer will the world tolerate the silencing of Palestinian artists?

Nicole Cunha

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At the homeland

of the Imagination



Artist: Zeina Ibrahim

Let us begin with a few gestures.

In The Mapping Journey Project, Bouchra Khalili invites migrants to narrate their crossings while tracing their paths onto maps. The simple format – voice-over narration and hand traced lines – unravels a quiet counter-cartography, rooted outside the freezing vernacular of border control. In her Constellations series, these journeys are further transformed into celestial maps, transfiguring terrestrial displacement into cosmic navigation. Migrants emerge as opaque astronomers, speaking through dislocated orbits, and tracing a fugitive ethics in their wake.

In Where We Come From, Emily Jacir asks Palestinian exiles what they would do if they could return to Palestine. She then performs those acts on their behalf – playing soccer, visiting graves,

eating home-cooked food... These intimate gestures form a living record of denied desires and suspended returns. They compose an archive of absences, which renders visible the absurd machinery of borders and the immeasurable weight of what is lost in exile. Where legality forbids presence, art steps in as a surrogate body – through statelessness, longing breathes.

In Saydnaya: Inside a Syrian Torture Prison, Forensic Architecture, in collaboration with Amnesty International, reconstructs a prison based on sound-memories. Survivors – who were blindfolded and silenced – recall the clang of a door, the hum of a fluorescent light, the echo of footsteps... A “sonic epistemology” emerges as survivors become sonar cartographers of hidden and captured violence, mapping the architecture of state brutality through resonance.

Finally, in his State of Palestine project, Khaled Jarrar stamps passports with an unsanctioned seal of Palestinian statehood. This seemingly minor act appears – at the level of political ritual – as a profound performance of sovereignty. Each stamp is an insurgent fiction, a wager against the terms by which legality is granted. By politicizing the aesthetics of documentation, Jarrar’s work parodies bureaucratic authority and engages in a tactical form of civil disobedience – at once intimate and geopolitical –, which reclaims imagination as a space of political intervention.

Taken together, these practices trace a polyphonic language of exile – dispersed, fragmented and resistant. They reflect an aesthetics made through dislocation – understood as a political, affective and epistemological matter.

Where displacement fractures continuity, these works embrace incompleteness. They first teach us that the refusal to finish a story can itself be ethical – resisting the spectacle’s appetite for

coherence, demanding opacity over commodified performance. They invite us to listen differently; and to understand borders not merely as lines drawn across maps, but as ideological incisions – etched into bodies and landscapes alike. As concrete violent fictions, upheld by surveillance, militarization, and legal abstraction. To live on the wrong side of a border, then, is not merely to be elsewhere, it is to be rendered other – outside the grammar of citizenship, beyond the jurisdiction of rights, negated from the scope of public empathy. At the negated point of the nation-state – and its performative rituals –, suspended in a zone of indeterminacy and unrecognition, estranged from the framework that makes us legible, protected and grievable.

Exile is the name we give to that unmooring.

As such, exilic art does not seek to redeem the conditions of displacement. It rather dwells within its contradictions, and speaks from its wounds. It reimagines its coordinates, and in doing so, it enacts new forms of (political) life – beyond legality and surveillance, below spectacle. By proposing a resonant aesthetics of the unmapped, it more generally reimagines the world as a space of contested movements, as a field of flows, frictions and crossings. It also reminds us that visibility is a battleground: Who gets to be seen? and under what terms?

To speak of exile is to speak of the universal condition of being-outside – of being thrown beyond what seems given. Exilic art consequently touches anyone who has known instability, and who senses the fragility of belonging. It speaks to those who know homes are made, not inherited; that every inclusion bears a cost – and who remember the ones kept out.

By fracturing the architecture of the familiar, such art more generally imposes meaning in the absence of certainty. It breeds an epistemological restlessness, asking again and again: What becomes visible after loss? It dares us to feel what it means to live at the edges – between languages, between histories, between maps. It urges us to fight

against (physical and symbolic) erasure by living routed lives, unfinished and in motion. Shaped by movement, unfixed by layers and echoes. In the cracks of violence, from the fragments of suffering, a poetics of refusal emerges. A politics of becoming. New forms of presence rise, not by being sanctioned, but by being felt. New presences, which seek to rewrite what it means to appear, to endure, to be... at the homeland of the imagination.

Thibaud Choppin de Janvry

Artistic freedom under fire

Artistic freedom around the world continued to get challenged in 2024, characterized by escalating state repression, the chilling effects of conflict, and a pervasive self-censorship that silences diverse voices. However, while facing these pressures, artists worldwide are demonstrating valuable courage and resilience, still working to create and challenge narratives that seek to marginalize them. This complex reality is detailed in “The State of Artistic Freedom 2025”, a comprehensive report from Freemuse, an independent international organization committed to defending artistic freedom.

The report serves a critical purpose: to document violations of artistic freedom, provide evidence-based support for better protection, and promote enabling environments for creative expression. The findings of the report highlight how different forms of art, as crucial channels of societal reflection and change, are increasingly targeted by forces aiming to control expression, and limit who has the right to be heard. Lebanese ceramicist Nathalie Khayat, quoted in the report, articulates: “Art is the opposite of war; I need to create while the world around me is being destroyed. It is as simple as that” (4). Khayat’s sentiment captures the human need for expression that encourages artistic resilience.

A Landscape of Unequal Opportunities

Freemuse’s analysis of 2024 reveals some frightening global trends that affect certain artists and create an unequal artistic landscape:

The impacts of war and global conflict extend beyond the immediate war zones. The wars in Gaza and Ukraine not only devastated the local cultural and artistic life, but also triggered global censorship of related artistic work, notably in Western nations like Germany and the USA. The report talks about artists killed in Gaza, including Palestinian calligrapher Walaa Jumaa al-Afranji and her husband Ahmed Saeed Salama, and digital artist Mahasen al-Khateeb. In Russia, the death of pianist Pavel Kushner in prison made clear the severe risks for artists opposing the mainstream trends and state narratives (6). Such events boldly show how war and global conflict can erase specific cultural voices and perspectives.



Authoritarian tactics are getting more fixed and rooted. Governments are increasingly utilizing foreign agent laws – with examples in Hungary, Georgia, Slovakia, and Indonesia – to marginalize and defund artists and organizations, who advocate for minority rights or offer critical perspectives. Public art institutions are also experiencing state interference for them to better align with dominant ideologies. This was evident in Slovakia when the Kunsthalle Bratislava faced closure after the withdrawal of their funding, and in Egypt, where arts syndicates sometimes function as censors and limit the creative autonomy of their members. (7)

Vulnerable and marginalized groups are consistently subjected to suppression, creating deep inequalities in who gets to participate in the making of cultural life. The report looks at restrictions on women artists in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In Afghanistan, Taliban’s 2024 “Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Vice” seeks to eliminate women from public and artistic spaces, such as banning them from singing. LGBTQ+ artists also face suppression, through their autonomy being shut down in countries such as Brazil, El Salvador, Slovakia, Hungary, and Turkey, under the pretext of “protecting family values.” These actions deny entire communities their right to artistic existence and representation. (7-8) Silencing dissent and satire remains a common tactic. Artists critiquing power or using satire face frightening consequences. In Saudi Arabia, cartoonist Mohamed al-Hazaa received a 23-year prison sentence. Egyptian lyricist Galal El-Behairy remains in prison years after his sen-

tence for his critical lyrics should have finished. In China, artist Gao Zhen was arrested for sculptures “slandering China’s heroes and martyrs.” The severe punishing of critical voices reinforces an unequal system where only certain narratives, often the mainstream and easygoing ones, are permissible. (9)

Film and music continue to be highly targeted art forms. Iranian filmmaker Mohamad Rassoulof was forced into exile. Musicians worldwide faced arrests and show cancellations. In Nigeria, Yahaya Sharif-Aminu got punished by death sentence for blasphemy. Furthermore, in regions like Latin America, the organized crime creates an unsafe environment for artists from less protected communities. The murder of Famo musician Lisuoa Khupolo Khuloe in Lesotho shows the harsh consequence. (10-15)

This climate of fear inevitably fosters self-censorship. As Ghanaian artist Jean Pierre Bekolo observed, “Self-censorship has taken over to the point that the system no longer has to exercise it” (10). When artists, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, feel compelled to silence themselves to avoid persecution, the entire artistic ecosystem suffers, becoming less diverse and less representative.

Regional Realities: Resisting Erasure and Demanding Space

The Freemuse report provides crucial insights into specific regional contexts where the fight for artistic equality is particularly acute:

In Iran, despite escalating repression, exemplified by the persecution of rapper Toomaj Salehi and the imprisonment of cartoonist Atena Farghadani, an underground film scene grows. Singer Parastoo Ahmadi’s virtual concert was an act of defiance, with Ahmadi saying: “I am Parastoo, a girl who cannot stay silent and refuses to stop singing for the people she loves.” (25-6)

In Afghanistan, women artists continue to create in secret, forming online networks despite the risks. Omaid Sharifi, founder of the exiled ArtLords collective, stated their solution: “We will never censor the work, but we will go underground... When there is oppression like this... artists and creatives become more creative and more courageous” (76). Their efforts are a direct challenge to attempts to erase their voices.

Sub-Saharan Africa saw the continued use of insult laws to suppress criticism, as the detention of musician Ugbaad Aragsan in Somaliland. Yet a positive development occurred in Zimbabwe

where the court has decriminalized insult laws, and taken a step towards fairer legal frameworks for freedom of expression. (9)

In Latin America, Cuban visual artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s cell exhibition during the Havana Biennial was a statement of artistic persistence from confinement. However, Nicaraguan artists Kevin Laguna and Oscar Parrilla faced exile and loss of citizenship, exemplifying the price paid by being denied their homeland. (30-1)

The Unbroken Spirit and the Freemuse’s Recommendations

Despite the concerning trends, Freemuse’s report is also a testament to the “remarkable forms of artistic resistance” (11). In 2024, throughout the world artists are refusing to be silenced, facing the overt and covert forces that try repressing and silencing them. Freemuse concludes their report with recommendations for governments, cultural institutions, and artists themselves. They argue for upholding rules and obligations to protect artistic expression, ending censorship, and encouraging supportive cultural sectors.

“The State of Artistic Freedom 2025” makes it clear that the struggle for artistic freedom is necessarily linked to the broader fight for equality. The report is a powerful call to action, emphasizing a meaningful cultural sphere can only exist when all artists, regardless of their background, identity, and viewpoint, have the right to exist, create, and be heard. The art world must actively work to overcome the structures of inequality that silence and marginalize, and strive to become a space where the diverse nature of human experience can be freely expressed.

Deniz Alize Unal

FROM BARRIER TO BRIDGE: SPACE THAT SHAPES INCLUSION

In recent years, cultural and educational institutions have faced growing pressure to diversify their audiences. Not just in terms of race, class, and culture, but also in who feels genuinely welcome within their spaces. While programming and outreach have been obvious starting points, a less visible but equally powerful factor is beginning to gain traction: the design and layout of space within museum walls itself. This is where space syntax comes in - a theoretical and analytical approach.

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY...

In the 1980s, Professor Bill Hillier and architect Julienne Hanson at University College London developed space syntax as an analytical method to study spatial configuration. Their core idea was that space is not a passive backdrop for human activity, but an active agent that shapes how people move, interact, and engage with their surroundings. From this perspective, architecture doesn't merely frame experience. These two scholars noticed space either invites participation or subtly excludes.

HOW SPACE SHAPES ACCESS

Space syntax provides a set of tools to analyse layouts using measurable terms like "integration" (how well-connected a space is), "depth" (distance between areas), and "isovist" (what's visible from a point). These terms have helped researchers map how people actually experience and navigate spaces.

Seeking to explore how spatial layout influences the museum experience, Profes-

sor Bill Hillier and researcher Kali Tzortzi applied space syntax theory to museum design in a landmark study published in *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Their analysis demonstrated that better-integrated galleries - those with intuitive, open pathways - promoted deeper visitor exploration and greater overall engagement with the exhibitions.

At the Tate Britain, for example, space syntax analysis revealed that most visitors began their journey along the central axis of the museum and many quickly veered off toward the Clore Gallery - the space devoted to paintings of William Turner, painter of the Romantic period, disrupting the intended chronological flow of the collection. The researchers used visual integration analysis to demonstrate how spatial configuration influenced behaviour. It simply turned out that the spaces that were easier to reach or more visually accessible attracted more attention, regardless of curatorial narrative.

INCLUSION BEYOND WALLS

Space syntax also helps reveal why certain spaces feel more inclusive than others. A 1996 project at Tate Britain, conducted by the Space Syntax Laboratory (University College London), uncovered an interesting paradox: despite its neoclassical architecture often associated with authority and hierarchy, visitors found the gallery welcoming and relaxed. The

explanation? Its intuitive layout created a sense of familiarity and ease. This shows how the atmosphere is shaped as much by spatial structure as by architectural style.

SEEING WHAT'S MISSING

The real value of space syntax lies in how it shifts the question from “Why don’t certain groups come?” to “What in our space or structure prevents them from feeling welcome?” This is particularly crucial for racially and socio-economically marginalized groups who may find traditional institutional spaces alienating. By combining spatial analysis with demographic and behavioural data, institutions can identify which rooms, exhibits, or pathways are underused—and by whom. These insights help dismantle unintentional barriers created by design.

TOWARD EQUITABLE SPACE

To foster genuine diversity, institutions must rethink how their environments communicate inclusion—or exclusion. Are there places to pause? Is movement intuitive? Is the signage accessible? Does the space encourage autonomy or conformity? Space syntax doesn’t moralise, but it visualises. It turns gut feelings about exclusion into data points and ultimately - into better design. By rethinking how museum space speaks, we open new possibilities for who feels seen, heard, and at home.

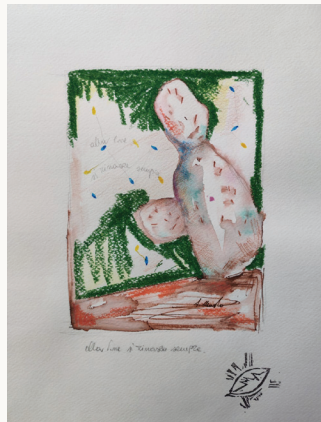
Kornelia Starczewska



ARTWORKS!

LIMITED EDITION

*finally you are
always reborn*



Alessandra Maisto

Watercolors, oil chalk and pencil on paper.
20x 29 cm, 2024

<https://www.alessandramaistoart.com/>

curator@alessandramaistoart.com

98€

Untitled 26



Amine Naima

Acrylic on canvas, 40 cm x 40
cm, 2022

https://www.instagram.com/amine_naima/

300€

Contact Artist

*Untitled no.9 (you can't
untoast the toast)*



Andre Pace

2022 (5x7x8x10) oils. Pastels,
crayon and acrylic.

[Http://andrepace057@instagram.com](http://andrepace057@instagram.com)

andrepace057@gmail.com

7/200€

UNpredictable Gallery



David Hinojosa

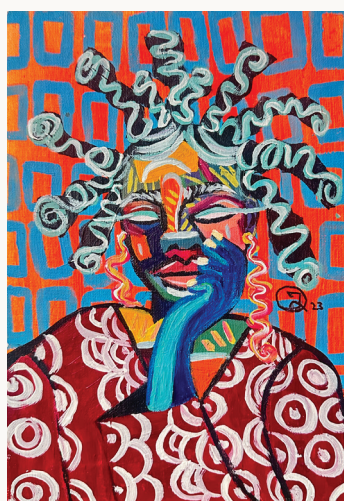
Inkjet and markers, 15 x
14 cms , 2009

<https://dhadmann.com/>

dave@dhadmann.com

**Edition of 50
50€**

Diversity Woman



Esther Phillips

21 cm x 27.9 cm, 2023

<https://www.jungelqueenart.uk/>

estherphillips260@gmail.com

**Contact
Artist**

Home Hospice



Joanna Skurzevska

Oil Pastels, A4, 2010

https://www.joannaskurzevska.com/?fbclid=PAQ0xDSwKciple1-BuA2fBQtsMQABp1GCUaxeY1W1Jklu081448S63cuD79-LukoY-045SU8aK9D04j3QH188yuNS_aem_XCQIwAAf0zZXCPE3csulA

skurzevska@hotmail.com

**Contact
Artist**

People As We Know Them



Loisel

Photography, 8 x 10 inch 2025

studiesaccount1@gmx.co.uk

Edition of 100
140€

Codex of Colours



Luna Azul

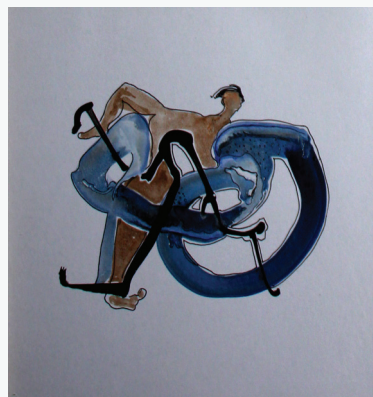
Acrylic on paper, 21x29,7 cm, 2025

<https://www.kaleido.art/card/LunaAzul>

Gladis.demarchi@outlook.cl

45€

Circus is going no _27



Md Monirul Alam

acrylic, 26x26cm, 2024

monir_artist2003@yahoo.com

250€

Beneath the Layers



Zeina Ibrahim

Acrylic, canvas, 2023, 30x40cm

<https://www.instagram.com/zeinaabdelkhalek/>

zeinaabdelkhalek02@hotmail.com

170€
Contact Artist

Unicorn



Nasta Martyn Martyn

21x30 cm, 2025

Nasta.Martyn33@yandex.by

10€

Long Live the Student Intidafa



Roan Wade

Risograph print of ephemera, 12 x 18 inches, Spring 2024

<https://www.roanwade.com/>

roanwade@proton.me

Edition of 10
\$250
single edition of
this color

"Himmel im Bewusstseinsfluss" Aus der Reihe "Experimente mit Blei" von Christopher Kneuer



Rosalie Cella

Papier, A4, September 2022

<https://www.instagram.com/cyrilo.sp/>

rosalieantonellacella@gmail.com

400€

Contact Artist

Girl with Butterflies



Tea Silagadze

50x30 cms. 2024

tea.silagadze30@gmail.com

Contact Artist

checkmate!



Sebastian Restrepo

acrylic on wood, 22x21.5 inches, 2025

<https://soundsignals.wordpress.com/>

juansebastianrestrepo.1989@gmail.com

Contact Artist

Read More



Witte Wartena

2025 Watercolour and pencil on paper 30 x 40 cm

<https://www.wittewartena.nl/>

witte@wartena.nl

700€

Contact Artist

Waves of Emotions



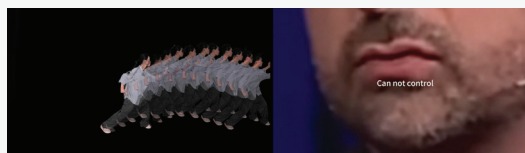
Sunil Kumar

Oil on Paper, 11X8 Inch, 2014

sunilcreativestrokes@gmail.com

50€

Brand New World



Yanzi Zou

Dual-channel video; 02:22 mins; 2024

<https://youtu.be/X8WLKrV44Aw?si=GTHcBTiZc-GctY0p>

z1242891273@outlook.com

Contact Artist

*Temporary
apperception*



Zita Vilutyte

Acrylic, canvas, 2025, 40x30cm

<https://zita-vilutyte-art.com/>

svajokz@gmail.com

100€

*Between Maps and
Memory*



Mohamed Soussi

50 x 65 cms, 2024

https://www.instagram.com/med_soussi_34/

lkorn34@gmail.com

300€

Fresh Tuna



Cyrlio Cyrlio

Acrylic on linen textured paper,
30x40cm, 2021

<https://www.instagram.com/cyrilo.sp/>

emanuelzabala@hotmail.com

100€

Cactus World



Meriem Wakrim

20x30

<https://meriemwakrim.com/>

meriemwakrim95@gmail.com

Edition of 25

\$180

Flowers Are Forever



Lisa Lemke-Bianchi

Scanography Collage, 30cmx 40cm, 2024

https://www.instagram.com/lisa_alliteration/

lemkelisa@gmail.com

20.5€

Artist: Zeina Ibrahim

A Person is not a Country



“A Person is Not a Country,” A Conversation on Migrant Artists

A Conversation on Migrant Artists

“When I first met Vero Rivera, she was thriving as an artist in our hometown. She was crafting, teaching, writing, organizing events. Twelve years later, as we catch up over coffee in Neukölln, it seems as if nothing has changed. She continues to thrive and is glowing as she ever was.

However, we both know that a lot has happened since we first met, all those years ago. After leaving South America, pushed out by the oppressive political climate, she had a rough start in Berlin and faced a harsh truth first-hand; that being a migrant artist is a story more twisted than it is heroic.

After years of studying, working hard, and learning to navigate the German system, today she feels at home, and she has begun to help other migrant artists find their peace in Berlin through her project called a better side, which has received grants, awards, and attention in national media.

Her story is, unfortunately, incredibly relatable for many migrant artists. As we drink our cappuccinos, we discuss the question of whether it always has to be this way? Is the system supporting or discouraging art from crossing borders and flowing? What is the nature of the institutions we must live and work within?”

Many people see Berlin as a welcoming haven for artists. Looking back, do you think it is as inclusive a city as it presents itself as?

I do feel there is a lot of artistic diversity in Berlin. You can find a lot of resources and all forms of expression, from big museums to small galleries and independent venues. There is a lot of funding available, which translates to free or cheap access to art and an active community. In that sense, Berlin

continues to be a great place for culture. But the atmosphere of freedom that impregnated the city since the '90s, which was so positive for artists and gave Berlin the reputation it still enjoys today, has faded by now in the practical reality. The cost of living is higher, the housing crisis is difficult, and as an artist, you no longer have the option to lead an affordable life while you build your career. Even a residence permit is tricky to get and limited in time.

I guess you could debate on certain points if the scene is inclusive or not, especially if we talk about artists with a migration background. I'm not sure it was ever like that. Often the opportunities are not the same for European and non-European artists. There are big differences in the requirements and in the amount of funding.

What are some of the structural obstacles that are getting in the way of a more inclusive art scene?

Well, globally speaking, there is a trend for certain governments to have more control over controversial narratives. And with recent funding cuts, art is often the first to suffer. I think art is one of the main pillars in any democratic state. The way I see it, it has a similar role to journalism and education. Artists create space for expression and critical thinking. They make people realize they are not alone in feeling a certain way. But they also have the power of influence, which means that in any autocratic trend, those are the first to take a hit. Nowadays we are hearing reports of discrimination and censorship of certain projects and lines of work. For example, some Palestinian artists are denouncing that they are being censored or are having their funding removed, because they're making pro-Palestine art.

In your experience accompanying migrant artists, what are some of their recurring emotional or psychological challenges that institutions tend to overlook?

There is often what I call “migration burn-out”. As a migrant artist, you have this heavy, additional overload that locals don't have.

You need to constantly take care of paperwork. You get the feeling that your being able to live here has an expiration date. You worry about people back home. You feel a disconnection between where you are and where you belong. You get the feeling that you have to work harder to prove your value.

You often say that “a person is not a country”, what do you mean exactly?

I mean that a person cannot represent the whole country they come from, in the same way that a country's identity cannot be used to profile people individually. Stereotypes are problematic, regardless of whether they're viewed as positive or negative. In a way you are putting limits by not allowing the person to say 'hey, but I'm actually this way instead'.

Speaking of stereotypes in art, what do you think of open calls for artists from certain nationalities?

I think it's positive if it's aimed at giving space to perspectives that we think we are missing. So if we feel we don't get enough voices from Latin America and we make an open call to that community, I think that is a valid effort. We just need to be careful of how that effort is presented and what's exactly the mission there.

Of course, the problem of systemic discrimination in art cannot be completely solved with little things like these. But it's a matter of saying 'ok, we cannot do that, so we are going to do this'. It's one way we can bring to light those voices that are not being heard enough.

Do you feel there are also changes needed in public perception, and how we interact as a community, to empower migrant artists? This reminds me of the most important thing I wanted to say: The best we can do is join a community or build one ourselves. Not only attending an exhibition or a performance and then never thinking about it again - but actually interacting with others on a regular basis. Self-organized groups can be found online or also arranged spontaneously in art events, etc..

We also need to be careful of how we are using our language as artists, because we might be pushing this anti-migration narrative by perpetuating a us-versus-them language, and that's not useful for anyone.

I often say with a better side that the migration system is broken and that is not going to change anytime soon, so we can do more by working in small groups or connecting to communities, especially from different backgrounds: if you're a local, connect with foreigners; if you're a foreigner, connect with locals, or with other migrants. That creates a real sense of support in the broader art community.

If you could speak to someone about to start their migration journey as an artist, what would you tell them, that you wish someone had told you?

The first thing I can think of is: you don't need to feel less because you're new. Many of us in Latin America tend to idolize Europe and undervalue our skills and experience. The second thing is: There is still space for you as you are. You might need to adapt, but you don't need to change who you are completely.

As we part ways and promise to catch up again during Berlin's summer frenzy, Vero's words stick in my mind. The migration system is broken, but perhaps the sense of belonging we are craving is not given by the system, but by the community we build around us. Perhaps that's how modern art will dissolve borders.

Verónica Rivera is a designer, illustrator, speaker and certified coach, founder of a better side, which offers guidance and resources for migrants & creatives in Berlin.

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