

## Introduction

Sliman Mansour is a painter, born in 1947 in Birzeit, Palestine. He grew up living in both Bethlehem and Birzeit, and spent time with his grandmother, a potter who used traditional methods of mud and straw – both of these experiences would later influence his artistic career. Mansour was set to study abroad, at the Art Institute of Chicago, when the Six-Day war broke out in 1967 and Israel's victory reshaped the territory, seizing land, destroying Palestinian villages, and dismantling refugee camps. Fearful of not being able to return home, Mansour decided to stay and instead attended Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, earning a BFA in 1970.<sup>1</sup>

Among the most celebrated Palestinian artists, Mansour has dedicated his career to visualizing the Palestinian struggle throughout history. Early in his career as a social realist painter, his aim was to depict a people rooted to the land. Mansour's renderings invoked the 1948 *Nakba*, Palestinian folk culture, villagers and farmers, olive groves, and orange trees. In his art, Mansour articulates the conviction of *sumud* a term that encompasses unwavering faithfulness, dedication, and resoluteness. Mansour famously captured the concept of *sumud* in his 1974 painting *Camel of Hardship*. In the picture, a porter endures to remain standing as his back bows under the load he carries, the city of Jerusalem. By 1975, the painting was printed as a poster and hung in many households across the West Bank and Gaza, its message resonating with the people.<sup>2</sup> In an interview, Mansour recounts the making of posters as a political act, "One of the main problems that we faced when we started working in '75 was a lack of places where we could show our work. Because in many places there was no electricity, and halls were not prepared to show our works. So, we decided to print our works as posters and postcards and distributed them to the people. And immediately we got ourselves in trouble with the Israeli authorities because they started confiscating these posters and postcards. They were finding people who were distributing them. Then they started coming to the exhibitions and confiscating paintings that they didn't like."<sup>3</sup>

At the start of the first Intifada in 1987, Mansour founded an art movement titled New Visions. Together with artists Nabil Anani (b. 1943), Tayseer Barakat (b. 1959), and Vera Tamari (b. 1945) the New Visions members practiced a cultural resistance, evading Israeli art materials, and using only natural, locally found materials such as coffee, henna, mud, and clay.<sup>4</sup> The New Visions mandate opened up new materials and methods of working for Mansour, that although still politically charged in concept, lead him away from his original figurative, popular imagery and towards abstraction. He was not only painting political subject matter but also making the process of artistic production a political act. Mansour's new mud paintings, covered in drying cracks on the surface, eluded to the impermanent and corrosive nature of time and to notions of being rooted to the land. By using the mud of the land itself, Mansour created compositions that invoked the traditional construction methods of the past – recalling his grandmother's work and the land and its people – and remained faithful to giving visual expression to the Palestinian struggle.

Mansour was the head of the League of Palestinian Artists from 1986-1990. He is a co-founder of al-Wasiti Art Center in East Jerusalem as well as director between 1995-1996. He helped establish the International Academy of Art Palestine in Ramallah and the University Art Centre in East Jerusalem and has taught at Al-Quds University among other educational institutions in the West Bank. From 1981-1993 Mansour was a contributor of cartoons in Al-Fajr English Weekly, once published in Jerusalem. A winner of the 1998 Nile Award at the Cairo Biennial, and the Palestine Prize for the Visual Arts. He was a participant in the 1997 exhibition "Artiste Palestiniens Contemporains," Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sherwell, Tina. "Jerusalem: City of Dreams." *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 49 (Spring 2012). [http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/49\\_Jerusalem\\_2.pdf](http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/49_Jerusalem_2.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World, s.v. "Sliman Mansour," by Sarah Rogers, <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/en/bios/Pages/Sliman-Mansour.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Lakoff, Aaron. "Aaron's Reports." *Cracked and Shrinking Maps: An Interview with Palestinian Artist Suleiman Mansour*. May 1, 2008. <https://aaron.resist.ca/cracked-and-shrinking-maps-an-interview-with-palestinian-artist-suleiman-mansour>.

<sup>4</sup> Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World, s.v. "Sliman Mansour," by Sarah Rogers, <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/en/bios/Pages/Sliman-Mansour.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

### ***Nude Man, 1967***

Pencil and water color on paper



1967 was a year that marked the reshaping of the Middle East. Israel claimed victory in the Six-Day war, conquering more territory, leaving countless Palestinians and Arabs deposed. *Nude Man*, made in the same year renders two figures in an empty space, the vacuous environment disrupts their sense of place, invoking feelings of estrangement and displacement from within.

### ***Reclining Nude, 1968***

Pastel and charcoal on paper

60 X 50 cm



*Reclining Nude* (1968) shows Mansour's continued exploration with the effects of war and displacement on the body. Here a male figure writhes among the debris and human remains, his immediate surroundings are unknown.

### ***Portfolio, 1968***

Pastel and charcoal on cardboard

22 X 24 cm



Mansour's portfolio from 1968 shows the twenty-one-year old's skill at rendering the figure. His interest in capturing the essence of the person is clear in his early compositions, which would set the course for his later work.

***Sad Tune I, 1972***

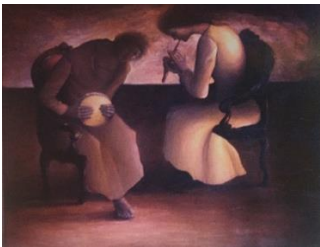
Pencil and acrylic on paper  
50 X 32 CM



To invoke the Palestinian struggle, Mansour depicted the Palestinian people in the act of creative action or labor. Here a sketch depicts a person playing the riq, a traditional Arabic tambourine, essential in the composing of folk music throughout the Arab world. Mansour places his subjects in a void, an unknown blank landscape, with the figure foregrounded in front.

***Sad Tune, 1972***

Oil on canvas  
67 X 82 CM



Music is an important element in Mansour's depiction of Palestinian culture, echoing memories of the land, agriculture, and its people, it also speaks of the Palestinian struggle and dreams of self-determination. In the painting, *Sad Tune* (1972), Mansour conjures a scene of two musicians set in an unknown, empty landscape. The riq is joined by what appears to be a Palestinian flute, the shibbabe. Both musicians sit opposite one another, enveloped in their serenade, a light appears to emerge in the horizon and glow around them.

***The Harvest (sketch), 1975***

Charcoal on paper  
70 X 50 CM



In Mansour's work, Palestinians are depicted as agricultural people who are connected to the land and its natural resources. *The Harvest* (1975) illustrates a Palestinian woman, collecting wheat. Her eyes gaze out

into the distance with a steadfast bravery and strength. Mansour's use of the female figure relates to ideas of motherland as portrayed in the strong and solitary female figure.

***Sad Tune II (sketch), 1977***

Pencil on paper  
69 X 52 CM



In the sketch *Sad Tune II*, a Palestinian woman is depicted in a thobe, the traditional dress. Her shoulders are squared and her head is raised firmly over her shoulders as she plays the Palestinian flute – her melody flowing into the air, carried by the wind that sweeps her hair and veil. In this sketch, Mansour transforms the image of the Palestinian from that of a victim to a survivor and a revolutionary. The figure of the woman appears throughout Mansour's oeuvre, symbolizing the revolt and the strength of the Palestinian people.

***St. George (sketch), 1977***

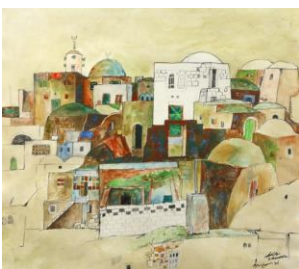
Pencil on paper  
70 X 50 CM



In the legend, the Christian martyr St. George is a Roman soldier who was born in historic Palestine and lived in al-Khader a village near Bethlehem. St. George is celebrated among Palestinians as a courageous and peaceful figure, he made sacrifices to fight evil and when one is in need of help, St. George is called upon to channel his courage. In Mansour's sketch, St. George is depicted as a figure wearing a kuffiyeh, carrying a farming hoe, his combative posture is prepared to swing back.

***Al Samoo' Village, 1980***

Water color on paper  
33 X 55 CM



Mansour lived through Jerusalem's border transformations and witnessed the segregation – from checkpoints to the separation wall – of Palestinians in various parts of the city and its suburbs. In 1967, the map was again redrawn and after the Six-Day war, Israel occupied Hebron with the rest of the West Bank and settlements began to sprout throughout the newly occupied land. Al Samoo' is one such village under Israeli occupation, which Mansour depicts with its historic houses and minarets.

### ***Ras Karkar Village, 1981***

Watercolor on paper

32 X 45 CM



Ras Karkar is a Palestinian village in Ramallah. After the Six-Day War in 1967, Ras Karkar came under Israeli occupation. Today settlement roads intersect through the village, restricting Palestinian access and movement. In Mansour's watercolor, Ras Karkar is depicted as a historic neighborhood. Documenting lost and occupied villages through his art, Mansour depicts Palestinian homes and life of the past in effort to remember what had been lost and to defy the systematic erasures of Palestinian culture implemented by Israel.

### ***Alteereh Village (sketch), 1982***

Pencil on paper



Al Teereh is a village in Ramallah and is adjacent to the Green Line, which was the border drawn after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and marks the separation between Israel and its neighboring Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria before the 1967 Six-Day War. Depicted in Mansour's sketch is the village of Al Teereh after the Six-Day War. His drawing of the Palestinian neighborhood, among his other artworks of Palestinian villages – suggests the separation and further hardships of Palestinian civilians who continue to endure as new and changing borders divided their homes from their livelihood.

### ***Girl in the Village, 1982***

Oil on canvas

82 X 71 CM



In *Girl in the Village* (1982) a young woman stands in her traditional Palestinian dress, the thobe, framed by an abstract landscape in the background. Evocative of an agricultural scene, unlike earlier figurative artworks where the landscape is portrayed as desolate, empty, and unfamiliar. Here Mansour portrays his subject set in her natural landscape environment, possibly representing the idea of the motherland.

***Prison, 1982***

Oil on canvas

71 X 60 CM



*Prison* (1982) depicts five men, their hands cuffed behind their back and their heads covered so they cannot see. They are huddled together, back to back, confined within the walls of a prison. Most likely Palestinian and although faceless, the men appear strong, youthful and resilient in their stance. Yet melancholy undertones run throughout, as the future for this generation appears desolate and bleak. The oppression has caused for a fractured identity.

***Mother and Two Child (sketch), 1983***

Pencil on paper

50 X 70 CM



*Mother and Two Child* (1983) is a drawing of a woman carrying her two children, a boy and girl, on her shoulders. The three figures look straight back at their viewer, almost defiant in their gaze. The mother wears the Palestinian thobe, holding a bouquet of wheat and flowers, a faint circle outlines her and her children's heads, suggesting a saintly scene. The flowers could be the poppy, which symbolizes the martyr and is also collected by children in the spring time. In Mansour's drawing, the children wear the *keffiyeh* – a symbol of the Palestinian struggle – around their shoulders, like wings on their backs, as though to symbolize them as the future of the Palestinian struggle. In Mansour's artworks, the woman symbolizes the motherland. Here, she is possibly nurturing her offspring, the Palestinian people.

***Collecting Grapes (sketch), 1984***

Pencil on paper

70 X 50 CM



*Collecting Grapes* (1984) is a drawing that reveals Mansour's articulation of the female figure as a homeland. Three women are depicted, two are picking grapes, and the third woman carries a full basket of grapes on her head. Their labor not only suggests the strength of the Palestinian people but also the land that they have lost.

***Dovecote (sketch), 1984***

Pencil on paper

69 X 39 CM



A dovecote is a house built for doves and pigeons. Many Palestinian families build dovecotes in their homes for birds to fly in and out, taking shelter. A typical scene unfolds in Mansour's sketch, *Dovecote* (1984). A woman carries a basket of citrus fruit on her head as she walks past a dovecote. Through the depiction of the woman and the dovecote Mansour reveals a desire for peace in the motherland.



### ***Father and Mother on their Wedding Day, 1984***

Oil on canvas

92 X 85 CM



As the title might suggest, the artist's parents are captured on their wedding day in *Father and Mother on their Wedding Day* (1984). Mansour's newlyweds pose side by side, his mother's arm draped casually on his father's shoulder. The figures are likely extracted from an old photograph, a method that Mansour often adopted when painting portraits, and supplanted them in a decorative floral background, enclosed in a frame of olive trees.

### ***On the Edge, 1985***

Oil on canvas

70 X 80 CM

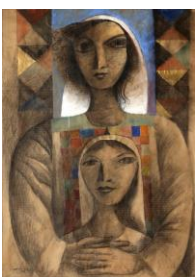


*On the Edge* (1985) best describes the notion of the Palestinian who still lives in former Palestine yet as though exiled, they no longer live in their homeland as their identity is denied. The painting represents the experience of estrangement as Arab villages are dissolved and communities are separated from one another. In the painting, a man lays on a yellow line, he appears homeless, his body sitting between two sides, evoking the feeling of dislocation and displacement.

### ***Sisters, 1986***

Acrylic, watercolor, and charcoal on paper

100 X 70 CM



To Mansour, the female figure does not just symbolize the motherland, but also the revolution. In the portrait *Sisters* (1986), a young woman wearing a traditional Palestinian thobe embraces her younger sister. For Mansour, the image of the youthful Palestinian woman is a recurring theme. He considers her the leader in the resistance and the center of life within the Palestinian struggle. Yet the sense of loss persists as the two young women, in the hands of the occupier, find themselves alone together, orphaned by displacement.



### ***The Village, 1990***

Mud on wood

80 X 85 CM

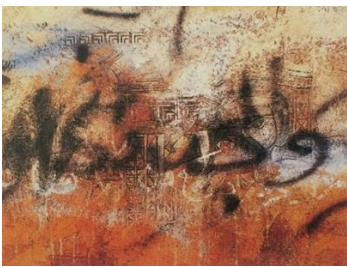


After cofounding the New Visions artistic movement and working solely with natural and locally produced Palestinian materials, Mansour created abstract forms using mud on wood. Rather than painting the landscape, Mansour now used the earth itself to depict the land and its people. In *The Village* (1990), square forms of textured mud are marked with patterns likened to traditional Palestinian embroidery. The surface of the painting is made to look like the decaying facades of buildings worn out by time.

### ***Grafitti, 1990***

Mud on wood

118 X 80 CM



*Grafitti* (1990) recalls the graffiti covered walls on the streets of Gaza and the West Bank towards the end of the first Intifada. The surface of *Grafitti* is weathered and marked with geometric patterns, evoking traditional Palestinian embroidery. Although not legible, an Arabic text appears as though it is spray-painted across a surface of red and white paint. *Grafitti* conveys the breadth of Mansour's experimentation and skill with varied materials. While immediately reflecting the Palestinian struggle, it also points to the fragility and fleeting of time.