



Expressing the 'closure of thought'

His works have appeared in shows in Paris and New York, but Palestinian artist - and so-called 'illegal sojourner' - Hani Zu'rob has never been allowed to attend them.

By [Amira Hass](#)

The impression upon leafing through a computerized album of paintings by artist Hani Zu'rob is that the earlier works, from 1999 and 2000, are "airy" and very colorful: Human figures dance in them, arms stretched out wide, almost reaching outside the frame. In the later works the colors grow darker and the figures take on the artist's face and shrink into themselves. And then, gradually, the figures vanish or blend into the background and remain only as hands and feet - the former trying hard to open some kind of gate, the latter trying to walk. But something unseen is stopping them.

Currently, the 29-year-old Palestinian artist says he is in the midst of a transition to more abstract painting. And if in his works there still remain the clear outlines of a hand, for example, the barrier that it is trying to open has undergone a transformation in recent weeks: Not the sharp lines of a gate or a door that refuses to open, but rather something vague, misty.

"I've come to the conclusion that the problem isn't just the physical closure that is imposed on us, but rather mainly the spiritual, conceptual and cultural closure that this physical closure imposes on us," says Zu'rob.

He expresses the physical closure in the figures gradually closing in on themselves, and seeks an abstract expression for the "closure of thought."

Doesn't dare move

Zu'rob, a native of Rafah, is one of a number of young artists from the Gaza Strip in their 20s and 30s whose work has stood out on the Palestinian artistic scene in recent years. Their works are shown at exhibitions in Gaza and in Ramallah, but also in Cairo and Amman, Paris and New York. In 1994, when he was 17, Zu'rob went to study at the art college at Al-Najah University in Nablus. In 1999 he moved to Jenin and taught painting and art in two villages in the area. He moved to Ramallah, where he now lives with his wife, in March, 2000. He has already had a one-man show and has participated in about half-a-dozen group exhibitions here and abroad. His works have been carefully packed and sent across the sea, but he himself has had to refuse the many invitations he receives to attend the exhibitions in which he has shown his artwork and to participate in various art workshops.

For 12 years now he has lived in the West Bank, but according to the definitions of the Israeli authorities he is an "illegal sojourner" and a deportation order is pending against him. Five years ago the Israeli authorities decided that natives of Gaza who live in the West Bank, in territories of the Palestinian Authority, are classified this way. As though they were in Tel Aviv or Umm al-Fahm. An Israeli soldier or policeman who encounters these illegal sojourners has the authority to arrest and deport them to Gaza immediately, even if they have been living in the West Bank for years and even if they have established their families there. Therefore, for five years now Zu'rob has not dared to set foot outside of Ramallah - something that would obligate him to encounter a military roadblock, submit his identity card for inspection and risk deportation.

Hundreds of people have been deported in this way to Gaza during the past five years: Some of them have been cut off because of this from their families, some have had to stop their studies and some have lost their jobs. If Zu'rob were to accept one of the many invitations he receives to travel abroad, it is possible that the Israeli authorities would allow him to leave over the Allenby Bridge (or travel to Gaza and leave via the Rafah border crossing), but there would be no guarantee that they would allow him to return to his home in Ramallah. In fact, he is convinced that they would make him go to Gaza.

A recent phenomenon

The classification of natives of Gaza who live in the West Bank as illegal sojourners cropped up in official Israeli documents only after the outbreak of the current intifada. During this period the phenomenon of the deportation from the West Bank of people born in Gaza has increased. But even before 2000, Gaza-born Palestinians who lived in the West Bank found that their movement was restricted. They could not go to visit their families regularly, because since 1991 their departure from the West Bank has required a special permit, and after entering Gaza they are not assured of a departure permit. They could not travel abroad for studies, vacation or work - unless they relinquished the possibility of returning to their homes.

When they thought that they could solve the problem by changing their residential address in their identity card, they discovered that the Israeli authorities do not allow them to do so. The Palestinian Interior Ministry may have changed the address, but for the most part the change was not entered into the data bank that makes the difference -that of the Israeli Interior Ministry computer. That is, when they encounter a soldier at a roadblock or at the Allenby Bridge, the details that appear on his computer screen are the details that are in the Israeli computer, according to which he is still a resident of Gaza.

In one of Zu'rob's paintings, which hangs in the United Nations building in New York, his shoes are walking out of the painting - blue footprints are painted on the floor. But he remains inside the frame, imprisoned. I'm lucky, says Zu'rob, that I can break out of the closure in my art. He discovered this "good luck" when he was a child, "thanks to the curfew," he says.

His family lives in a house on the main street of Rafah. When the Israel Defense Forces imposed a curfew there for many days at a time, and sometimes many weeks, Zu'rob the child would "die of boredom." Unlike the people who lived on side streets or in the refugee camp, he could not slip out of the walls that closed in on him and escape from the depression that descended on him. He started to look at books in his parents' library and concentrated on the paintings in them.

To keep himself busy he tried to copy the paintings. He says that his artistic talent saves him from degenerating into extremist behavior or mental paralysis.

Zu'rob says he can find a release, make things easier for himself, by bluntly expressing the feeling of strangulation and imprisonment that is the lot of the Palestinians who have been living for many long years in a reality in which they are denied their freedom of movement and all that derives from that: the freedom to study, to see family and friends, to travel, to develop oneself.

"My luck is that in my paintings I can show everyone's aspiration to be free, to develop, to open up to the world," he explains.

But Zu'rob's talent has not always saved him. Tears flow from his eyes as he recalls the last minutes of the "interrogation" he underwent in May, 2002. Like thousands of others, he was arrested during Operation Defensive Shield and sent to the Ofer prison west of Ramallah. The prosecution demanded that he be held under administrative detention, because of "confidential information." This information did not suffice for the military judge, who ordered that Zu'rob be released after the prosecution failed in putting together an indictment against him. He was under arrest for 52 days.

Every so often he was taken for "interrogation." Tell me the names of your brothers and sisters, ordered the interrogator. He listed them. The interrogator said to him: You've forgotten someone. Zu'rob was confused. Whom had he forgotten? You forgot Nawal, said the interrogator, your sister's new daughter. Celebrations of births and weddings and sad occasions such as illness and death - participating in these family events is regularly denied to the Gazan "illegal sojourners" in the West Bank. So is it any wonder that Zu'rob forgot to mention his newborn niece to the interrogator, who had access to all the details concerning his subject on his computer screen?

Zu'rob's family did not attend his own wedding in July, 2005. They had to be content with pictures. Only once during the past five years has he seen his parents: His mother fell ill and with huge efforts received permission to get treatment in Ramallah.

A scholarship

He paints strangulation, but his head does not stop thinking: Together with 12 other young Palestinian painters, he has established a center called Ishkal (Shapes). It aims to find ways to break through the walls that separate the world of art from the public. In cooperation with the Women's Center in Ramallah the artists prepared a traveling exhibition of paintings dealing with violence against women.

"We have to deal with our own mistakes, not only with the mistakes of others (i.e., the occupation)," says Zu'rob, "even though it is clear that the physical closure imposed by Israel exacerbates our mistakes."

He draws a parallel between the reality of the closure and the strangulation in which the Palestinians are living, and the strangulation of women by social traditions. In a block print he made for the exhibition there is that same hand that is trying to open something.

Another "mistake" that the Israeli closure only exacerbates is one that he has experienced personally: The distaste of inhabitants of the West Bank for Gazans. For four years Zu'rob fought to convince the family of his girlfriend, a resident of Jerusalem, to agree to their marriage. They did not have anything "personal" against him; indeed, he was successful in his work, and thus far has sold many of his paintings. But his girlfriend's family knew that marriage to a Gazan would lead to problems: If she moved to Gaza with him, they would not be able to see her more than once every several years, with great effort. If his address is not changed, they will always be living on tenterhooks. Perhaps they will decide to move abroad - something the family certainly does not want.

About a week ago Zu'rob was informed that he had been given a living stipend for half a year by the French government to work in the Palestinian studio at the International City of the Arts in Paris. Last year, too, he was awarded this scholarship, but had to refuse it because he feared that he would not be allowed to return to Ramallah and did not want to be tempted into staying in Europe. My place is in my country, he says.

Now Zu'rob is determined to accept the scholarship and go to Paris in the middle of February. It is no longer enough for him to break out of the strangulation through his paintings: He yearns to travel, to see museums, and imagines how he will go into the Louvre, the Picasso Museum, walk through the streets without someone in uniform stopping him and demanding to see his papers. He is dreaming that as he works and develops his art, his wife will phone him and tell him that "the Israeli authorities have agreed to change that part in his identity card - the line for the address."