

The Watermelon

Solidarity, Subversion, and Sumud

In the wake of *Al Naksa* (the June/Six Day War) in 1967, Israel made it a crime to raise the Palestinian flag or to present any visual material that combined its four colours: black, white, red, and green. Over two decades later, in 1980, three Palestinian artists (Nabil Anani, Issam Badar, and Sliman Mansour) were arrested by Israeli forces in Ramallah for including the colours of the flag in their works. The artists were consequently told to present their future works to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to ensure they were devoid of political content and the colours of the flag – and were reminded by an Israeli police chief that “even if you do a watermelon, it will be confiscated.”

In 2007, artist Khaled Hourani drew inspiration from this story when asked to submit a new design for the Palestinian flag as part of the *Subjective Atlas of Palestine* project. Hourani’s flag was the only one out of the 36 included in the *Atlas* to completely depart from any clear reference to a conventional flag design, instead

submitting an image of a watermelon. Despite using the four colours of the Palestinian flag, Hourani’s design initially appears humorous, apolitical, or indeed absurd. However, for those “in-the-know”, Hourani’s watermelon flag is instantly recognizable as an earnest representation of Palestinian creative resistance strategies – or *sumud* (steadfastness) in the face of occupation and repression.

In May 2021, during global protests against the Israeli war on Gaza and attempts at ethnic cleansing in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem, images of Hourani’s work “Watermelon Flag” proliferated social media, finding their way onto t-shirts, protest banners, graffiti works, and even tattoos across the world. Thus, at the time of mass censorship of Palestine-related content, the image of the watermelon cemented its place as an international symbol of solidarity with Palestine.

Chrisoula Lionis (Athens/Manchester) interviews Khaled Hourani (Ramallah) to find out more about the impetus behind the Watermelon Flag, and the role of humour and art as forms of creative resistance in the face of Israeli settler colonialism.

on Flag

Chrisoula Lionis,
Khaled Hourani

Chrisoula Lionis: Over the past years, there has been much written about the watermelon as a symbol of solidarity with Palestine – with much speculation as to the “real” story behind the watermelon becoming a symbol of resistance. I wonder, when did you first hear the story of the watermelon?

Khaled Hourani: I first heard the story sometime in the 1990s. I then revisited the story in 2007 while I was working on the *Subjective Atlas of Palestine* project with a group of artists. An art book published in the Netherlands and in Palestine, the *Atlas* focused not only on Palestinian geography, but also on national symbols, customs, food, currency, and so on, as well as the concept of knowledge. Many artists contributed wonderful submissions to the *Atlas*, and my contribution was the watermelon flag and its origin story.

CL: On the subject of Palestinian artists – I understand you are good friends with artist Sliman Mansour. You are both central figures in Palestinian art for your respective generations – that is, Sliman for the generation of the revolution (*jeel al thawra*), and you for the generation of the first intifada (*jeel al hijara*). What do you consider to be some of the main differences between these generations of artists?

KH: While there are, of course, differences from generation to generation – as individuals, artists experience the passage of time differently. I con-

sider myself fortunate to be in contact with the generation of artists who preceded me, including Sliman Mansour. I was fortunate to share a friendship with him, one that I still share. It is natural that there is a dialogue, different visions, enmeshment, and synchronicity. These experiences inspired me and I think it was critical to grapple with them.

In terms of characterizing general features of art in Palestine – you might say that the result of dealing with political affairs and national concerns is that, often, there has been an overwhelming romance and engagement with national symbols. However, I am part of a generation that no longer felt the need to paint national leaders and abstract symbols. For example, I drew my father instead of drawing Abu Ammar [Yasser Arafat], and drew portraits of neighbours and women in the neighbourhood, rather than choosing to depict women as symbols of nationhood. This approach wasn't about creating a completely new visual language, but it was rather about expanding the vocabulary.

Broadly speaking, in my work I have been inspired by stories relating to artistic processes in general and by stories centred on artistic practice under occupation specifically. It is in keeping with this that I liked the story of the flag and the Israeli soldier who banned the painting of the four colours of the watermelon. This is a story that happened to Sliman's generation and they told it to me without attempting to translate it visually and this is simply what I did.

However, it wasn't easy to suggest that a funny fruit like the watermelon could symbolise the flag. In a heavily burdensome situation marked by a rigid nationalist discourse, it was a form of satire.

CL: The story of the watermelon is, in essence, a story of creative resistance. What do you see as other forms of creative resistance visible in Palestine? What is the potential of these forms, and possibly their limits? And, I wonder, do you see art, or the artist, as having a political responsibility?

KH: Art is always a responsibility. However, the expression of this responsibility is more sensitive and difficult when it is tied to people with whom you share dreams and a sense of common destiny. Moreover, the challenge of this responsibility is heightened when it is linked to a cause and a heavy national burden, such as the experience of living under occupation under which your basic human rights are nullified – not just as an artist, but also as a person.

The ideas of revolution and resistance free you from some things but also restrict you from others. Art in Palestine is part of this tension and it is an expression of it – sometimes it is able to reconcile this tension, other times it fails. This is to say that I consider art to be an affirmation of life and I would say that art-making is a good deed, or at least it should be. However, we should be conscious of not asking forms of creative expression, such as art, to be laden with more than they could carry.

CL: You are a master storyteller and one of the funniest people I know. I wonder, do you think humour plays a significant role in art?

KH: Thank you – this is praise I don't know if I deserve. I do prefer to write instead of drawing sometimes. There is a famous saying in Arabic, "the worst calamities are the ones that make you laugh," and life does not need more worries. It is not black and white. I love operating in the grey area and I love satire. I think it is suitable for all ages and arenas, as it provides a space for meditation and flexibility.

CL: Few people can take credit for giving an emoji a new meaning! The watermelon emoji is now a "secret" code of solidarity with Palestine. Why do you think the watermelon has (re) emerged, with Sheikh Jarrah? Is it connected to the proliferation of social media activism? What do you see as new counter-authoritarian strategies for an emerging generation?

KH: The emerging generation has its own forms of speech and language, and I would say that con-

temporary means of communication play a role in this. And so, while life moves along, so too does our visual and written language. Every generation has its own language and we must be happy in recognizing, engaging, and learning that language. To do so is to create an effective dialogue with our children.



Every generation has its own language and we have to pass it down. We have to learn that language anew and to be happy in creating an engaging dialogue with newer generations. Why did the watermelon appear suddenly as a symbol for a new generation? This emanated out of

everyday life. People found something in it that spoke to them and expressed the contemporary moment. It is light-hearted and very simple. And that's the secret, the simplicity of things, which is an amazing force in art.

CL: What authority are we subverting with these symbols? Is it only clear forms of Israeli oppression?

KH: I would say it is important to reconsider everything. Our way of life is changing quickly, and the rules of the game (art-making, representation of the struggle for liberation) have changed. The central notions in Palestine were revolution and liberation. Why shouldn't we revolt against these symbols as well? These forms can represent an occupation of a different kind.

CL: If you had to redesign a flag today, would you still include the watermelon? Or would you replace it with something else?

KH: The flag in Palestine is an important national symbol and a design that I would like to keep as it is. As for the watermelon, it is great for eating with white cheese, especially in the summer.

