

A Story of Arab Loss Comes to Life at a Kibbutz in Israel

A museum founded by pioneering Zionists has been hosting a sweeping retrospective of Palestinian art.



By Isabel Kershner

Isabel Kershner, who is based in Jerusalem, made several visits to Kibbutz Ein Harod Meuhad, Kibbutz Ein Harod Ihud and Umm al-Fahem to report this article.

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For years, the kibbutz of Ein Harod has prospered in the Jezreel Valley, a fertile plain in northern Israel still scarred by the convulsions that accompanied the creation of the Jewish state 75 years ago.

Looming on a hill above the kibbutz are the ruins of a Palestinian village that, like others in the area, was destroyed when Israel was established in 1948; down the road is the hardscrabble town that took many of those displaced.



By The New York Times

Now, Ein Harod, an emblem of early Zionism for Israelis, has become an unlikely home to the stories of Arab loss in the valley, expressed by a family of Palestinian artists whose parents and grandparents were forced to abandon their own village near the kibbutz.

An exhibition at an art museum in the kibbutz features the works of five members of the Abu Shakra family and has struck a chord with Israelis trying to understand the traumas endured by Palestinians when the state was founded, as well as with Arabs from surrounding areas.





The project was first proposed to the museum by Said Abu Shakra, one of the five artists whose work is featured. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

The unusual exhibition — titled, “Spirit of Man, Spirit of Place” — has attracted record crowds to the small museum, almost 100,000 people since it opened in November 2022. A program built around the exhibit brings Jewish and Arab children together.

Works include paintings of the sabra, or prickly pear, bushes that marked the boundaries of Palestinian villages and were adopted by early Zionists as a symbol of their own identity. A video installation flickers with a Palestinian matriarch in her dying days sharing memories of trauma and loss. Intricate embroidered pieces are spattered with red, like blood, symbolizing the violence that has long gripped the region.

The project was first proposed to the museum by Said Abu Shakra, 67, one of the five artists whose work is featured, during a spasm of Arab-Jewish mob violence that rocked Israel two years ago. He said the aim was to create empathy between Arabs and Jews, while asserting Palestinian identity and pride.

“I refuse to be a victim in Israel. I am strong, I want to be excellent and lead, and speak about my culture,” he said. “I want a dialogue with Jews in Israel, but a dialogue of equals.”



A video installation by Mr. Abu Shakra shows Mariam, the family's matriarch, sharing fading memories of trauma and loss. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

The exhibit comes at a tense time, as generational, social and demographic changes have deepened divides across Israel. It has also coincided with the rise of the most right-wing government in Israeli history, which includes members with a history of anti-Arab racism.

“Each side has sharpened its narrative and become more extreme,” said Galia Bar Or, who curated the exhibition along with Housni Alkhateeb Shehada, a Palestinian-Israeli art historian. The project “is built on respect for, and recognition of, the pain of the other,” she said.

“There is no point in trying to erase history,” she added. “It never disappears.”

A Troubled History

The history that the exhibition highlights is the event that transformed the landscape surrounding the kibbutz — the creation of the Jewish state of Israel 75 years ago.

Palestinians mark that event as the Nakba, or “catastrophe,” referring to the expulsion or flight of about 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and the depopulation of about 400 of their villages in the territory that is now Israel.

Relations between the Jewish and Arab communities in the Jezreel Valley area today are generally cordial, and some of Ein Harod’s Palestinian neighbors work in the kibbutz industries. But scars from 75 years ago are still visible.

The ghostly remains of Qumya, one of the villages cleared, hover above Ein Harod, one of about two dozen Jewish communities that were set up in the area immediately after a major purchase of land there by Zionists in the early 20th century.



Qumya, one of the Palestinian villages cleared in 1948, is still visible from Ein Harod. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Mr. Abu Shakra's mother, Mariam, lived for several years in a village, Al Lajun, that was displaced by another kibbutz and is today in ruins. She moved there in the early 1940s after being married off at 12 to a man 15 years her senior, carrying her rag dolls with her, according to family lore.

In 1946, at 16, she gave birth to Walid, Mr. Abu Shakra's elder brother. As fighting raged in 1948 between Arab armies, Palestinian irregulars and Zionist forces, Mariam and her family fled to a Palestinian farming village, Umm al-Fahem. Today, that village has become a working-class city that sprawls across the hills a few miles west of the Jezreel Valley.

Walid, the oldest of Mariam's seven children, left school at 16 and went to work at a bakery in Tel Aviv, then as a tax clerk in the coastal town of Hadera. The Jewish family who rented him a room in Hadera saw one of his drawings and urged him to pursue art and enroll in a painting class. His teacher then recommended him to an established Israeli art school.

Encouraged by his mother, and inspired by her traditions of Sufi mysticism, Walid eventually became a full-time artist, creating paintings and engravings of the evocative landscape around Umm al-Fahem. He died in 2019.

His art inspired other family members to follow in his footsteps. His younger brother Said embraced video art — his installation with his mother sharing fading memories is one of the centerpieces of the Ein Harod retrospective.



Said Abu Shakra has his own gallery in Umm al-Fahem. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times



Artwork of Mr. Abu Shakra at his studio. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Another brother, Farid, created the intricate embroidered pieces on display at the museum, alongside pictures of wild cactuses in plant pots painted by a cousin, Asim, who died of cancer at age 28 in 1990. Asim's nephew Karim contributed bold and colorful portraits that include sabras and other local plants.

Said Abu Shakra has his own gallery in Umm al-Fahem, a city more known for Islamist radicalism than art and for the rampant gun violence now plaguing Arab society in Israel.

As well as displaying the work of Arab and Jewish Israeli artists, his gallery houses a visual and audio archive he has been compiling of Palestinian life in the area before 1948.

On a recent morning, a group of Jewish artists from Rehovot, in central Israel, were visiting.

They crowded into a room in the gallery that had a mound of brown soil in the middle, the work of a prominent Israeli sculptor, Micha Ullman, with an empty coffee glass — a symbol of congeniality for both Jews and Arabs — buried in it.



Umm al-Fahem used to be a Palestinian farming village. Today it is a working-class city that sprawls across the hills a few miles west of the Jezreel Valley. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Mr. Ullman had been searching for coffee-colored earth for the sculpture. Mr. Abu Shakra said he himself had found it in the ruins of Al Lajun and offered it to the sculptor.

While the sculpture provided a poignant symbol of the ties to the land of both Arab and Jewish communities, Al Lajun, like other destroyed villages of the Jezreel Valley, remains contested space.

An annual spring march to commemorate the Nakba by Palestinian citizens of Israel ended this year where Al Lajun once stood and in June activists held Friday Prayer there.

“We want to claim them back,” said Yousef Jabareen, a politician and academic who lives in Umm al-Fahem, talking of the confiscated village lands.

Culture and Conflict

When Said Abu Shakra proposed holding the exhibition of his family's art at the kibbutz as violence peaked in May 2021, the museum took him up on his offer without hesitation.

"The mission was as clear as day to me," said Orit Lev-Segev, the museum's director. "To create a better reality here."

The museum, which sits in a quiet part of the kibbutz, has had a long history at the center of conflict.



"The mission was as clear as day to me," said Orit Lev-Segev, right, the museum's director. "To create a better reality here." Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Established in 1921, Ein Harod was the first large kibbutz, or rural collective, to combine agriculture and industry. The pioneers who founded it, aspiring to create a complete society, also valued culture. So in 1938, as they battled malaria and faced a Palestinian nationalist uprising against British rule and Jewish immigration, the members voted to create a museum.

The original mission of the museum, initially housed in a shed, was to gather early Zionist art and salvage art and artifacts from the doomed Jewish communities of Europe. In the fall of 1948, while Israel was still fighting Arab armies in its war of independence, the first wing of the museum's permanent building was inaugurated.

Anat Tzizling, the granddaughter of a founder of Israel who runs the kibbutz archive, recalled that the residents of Qumya, the Palestinian village, fled during the hostilities.

"The Palestinian leadership told them to leave and British trucks came to take them," Ms. Tzizling said. Ein Harod took over some of Qumya's lands, she said, but a formal land deal was never finalized.



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The kibbutz soon found itself rived by a conflict of its own. One side, Ein Harod Meuhad, remained more oriented toward Marxism and the Soviet Union while a breakaway — Ein Harod Ihud — leaned toward the United States and the West. A line was drawn down the middle of the communal dining room. Families were divided.

But the art museum, on the communities' border, remained a shared space.

Like many kibbutzim, the two parts of Ein Harod have changed drastically over the years, moving away from their collectivist roots. Meuhad was privatized in 2009 and has morphed into a more bourgeois version of communal living that resembles life in a gated community. Ihud recently voted to go the same way.



Israeli children making their way to the kibbutz's dining room. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

That has made the contrast with ruined Palestinian villages like Qumya, covered in weeds and windswept on the hill above the kibbutz, even more stark.

In Ein Harod, people prefer not to speak about Qumya — out of fear, one resident contended, that the Palestinians may demand it back.

“I think the people who are aware of the village of Qumya are all over the age of 90,” said another resident, Moshe Frank, 88, who came from Minnesota to live in Ein Harod Ihud 55 years ago.

“I can understand the Palestinian view,” he said. “It’s a very difficult situation. But I was on the side of the people who came here and not of those who were here before.”

Still, he said, he was impressed by the Abu Shakra exhibition, echoing the generally positive reaction it has received within the kibbutz. “I think it’s wonderful. We live so close,” he said.



Artworks by Karim Abu Shakra exhibited at the museum. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Isabel Kershner, a correspondent in Jerusalem, has been reporting on Israeli and Palestinian politics since 1990. Her latest book is “The Land of Hope and Fear: Israel’s Battle for its Inner Soul.” More about Isabel Kershner

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