

Painting in America as an Arab-American after 9/11:

One Artist's View

Helen Zughaib

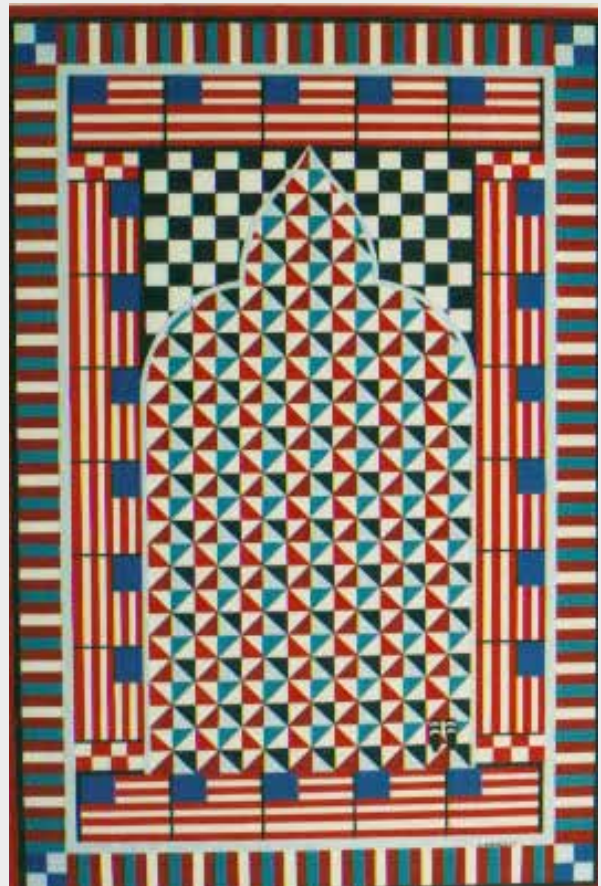
The tragic events of 9/11 changed everything. I realize that this sentiment has been expressed many times and with regards to many different situations both in America and the Arab world.

As a Lebanese-American artist living in Washington, DC, before and during 9/11, that day's events served as a benchmark for me and my work, marking both an end and a beginning.

Facing stereotypes, generalizations, and a new sense of marginalization, my work started to reflect these changes too. Prior to 9/11, I worked to create paintings that provided a platform for dialogue and fostered mutual understanding between East and West. Though I still aspired to expanding this dialogue, I felt a certain sense of urgency to redefine what it meant to be an Arab-American on my own terms and not according to a distorted and misguided view by others and the media.

The first painting I created in direct response to 9/11 and to address this new reexamination of what it meant to me to be an Arab-American, was a piece called, "Prayer Rug for America". In this piece, I used symbols from Islamic art and the American flag to form a synthesis and unity between the two seemingly disparate elements. I limited my palette to reds, whites, and blues to further emphasize the bold and graphic representation of a prayer rug. Though I am not a Muslim, I chose to portray the prayer rug as a symbol of Islam since the religion itself seemed to be garnering such negative

treatment in the media. With this piece, I hoped to create a spiritual place for the viewer to enter and reflect.



Prayer Rug for America, gouache on board, 18 x 20"

At the same time, I began to look at my background as a Lebanese-American and what that identity meant to me living in post 9/11 America. It also led to a renewed interest in my father's journey as an immigrant coming from Lebanon to New York in 1946. My family and I had grown up listening to his stories of Lebanon and Syria but it was not until I wanted to paint them, that I asked him to write them down. I called this series "Stories My Father Told Me". These twenty-one stories encompassed his early years in Syria and Lebanon, stories of family and tradition, and eventually his arrival in America.

The first exhibition of this series was held in Washington, DC. I hung the paintings and the corresponding stories side by side so the viewer could take in not only my painting but read the story in my father's own words. Together the stories and paintings proved to be a powerful counterbalance to the negative image of Arab-Americans prevalent in the media in the aftermath of 9/11. I hoped that they could, at least, serve as a starting point for honest dialogue.

Two years after 9/11, the United States invaded Iraq. This ill-conceived and tragic war, once again, affected my work. I began a new series of Prayer Rugs, in direct opposition to the war in Iraq. With these pieces, I again tried to create a place for spiritual reflection and peace. This series continues today.

As the war dragged on, the negative portrayal of Arabs in the media also continued. This distorted image of the Arabs led me to create a new series of work I called "Changing Perceptions". I chose to focus on the outward appearance of the women and specifically the wearing of the *abaya*. Here again, it seemed to me, that the negativity and misunderstanding which surrounded the *abaya*, was shocking. The *abaya* was portrayed as yet a further indication of oppression and subjugation of the female population, an anathema to most contemporary Western views of women. In "Changing Perceptions", I used images and elements of recognizable Western artists, Picasso, Mondrian, Lichtenstein, and combined them with the traditional black *abaya* to undermine and replace



Making Kibbeh on Sunday Morning, gouache on board, 15 x 20"



Walk to the Water Fountain, (Mishwar Al El-Ayn), gouache on board, 15 x 20"



Prayers for the People, gouache on board, 18 x 25"

the negative stereotypes with a sense of humor and strength rather than the sense of confinement as seen by much of the West.



Abaya Series #2, gouache on board, 15 x 20"

In 2006, I planned to return to Lebanon for the first time since our evacuation in 1976. My return was not to be as the war with Israel began. Once again, addressing the horrific events, I created a series of paintings called "Weeping Women". Like my series "Changing Perceptions", these pieces also borrowed elements of known Western artists in combination with the black *abaya*, though in these paintings I tried to reflect the anguish and suffering of the women which I also felt.

In 2008, I was sent to the West Bank in Palestine as a Cultural Envoy by the United States Department of State to work together with thirteen Palestinian women artists. I spent one month in Palestine during which time we created an exhibition of the artists' work and exhibited at the Khalil Sakakini Centre in Ramallah. The theme of the exhibit was based on the idea of hope and vision for a better future. Despite the pain of their daily lives, these women, amazingly, retained a sense of hope for a better life ahead. This was exemplified in one particular piece in which the artist portrays the separation wall in the West Bank though she is seen to be parting it, almost as if it were a curtain.

After my return to Washington, much of my new work reflected what I had seen in Palestine. I was inspired by the beautiful and vibrant embroidery, for which Palestinian women are renowned. With my painted versions of their embroidery, I created

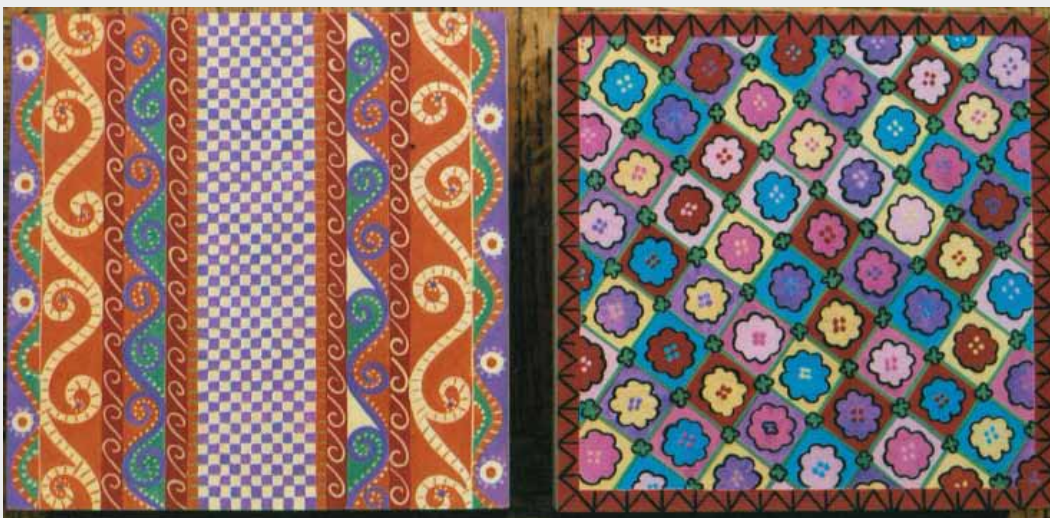
my own separation wall. I wanted to express the concept that each village is known for a certain style of embroidery, passed on from generation to generation and mothers to daughters. One can tell where the others came from by the embroidery on their dresses (i.e. *thobes*). The separation wall has effectively separated people from their land and villages, and in some cases, villages were completely destroyed. In my piece, "Another Wall", comprised of twenty-four six by six inch squares, sewn together and painted, I hoped to bring attention to what the separation wall is doing to the people in Palestine.

Though it has been nearly a decade since 9/11, I find I am still trying to define what it means to me to be an Arab-American, living and painting in America. I still aspire to the themes of universality and spirituality in my work, though I continue to examine my identity, straddling two cultures, each holding mutual misconceptions about the other.

Helen Zughaib is a Lebanese-American painter living and painting in Washington, DC. Her work is included in the collections of the Library of Congress, the Arab-American National Museum, the World Bank, and the White House. Email: Hzughaib@aol.com



Weeping Women, Series # 1, gouache on board, 15 x 20"



Another Wall, detail #2, gouache on canvas, with stitching, 6 x 12"