

Palestinian lives between the walls



Photograph by Philip Rizk.



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By **Mariam Hamdy**

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It has always been a familiar vehicle for political expression. It's quite rare though to find a political artwork that succeeds in treading the thin line of being both political and artsy.

"Between the Walls is the first exhibition I've attended in quite some time that evades subjectivity without distancing itself from the topic it covers: the Palestinian cause. Hosted by the Townhouse Gallery, the exhibition features photographs by Philip Rizk and Michael Kennedy as well as short documentary films by Maryam Monalisa Gharavi.

Rizk's photographs were taken during a trip to the Gaza Strip in January 2008. The portraits provided an intimate look at Gaza's residents. The subjects of Rizk's work are, in fact, friends he made during the time he spent there.

The photos are essentially a small glimpse of their larger stories.

Next to each photograph are captions explaining the background of each person depicted. With Stories of how these simple folks lost their business, trade or homes to the Israeli occupation illustrated pictorially and verbally, Rizk has managed to create a solid understanding of how the Gaza landscape has changed and persevered.

Unlike the usual news coverage of the region, there is no blood or violence to be found in Rizk's photos; just the overbearing weight of these people's suffering and our own passivity towards them.

On the other hand, Kennedy's work illustrates how imagination can be stronger than the best of literature and cinema combined, if given the right tools. His photographs are set in El-Fara'a, a former detention center in the West Bank where Palestinian minors were tortured by the Israeli forces.

Kennedy's photos are composed mainly of walls and empty spaces. His compositions are simply beautiful, supplemented by captions that tell the stories of former detainees previously held in the facility.

The viewers at the gallery scurried along from caption to caption, as though they were watching a horror movie that reaches a fatal climax with no relief or resolution. The final caption, written on the wall in Arabic, reads: "I will kiss the ground of my prison cell because it is part of my country.

The former detention center has now been transformed into a youth center for Palestinian children.

Maryam Monalisa Gharavi's series of short films titled "Inessential are the final component of the exhibitions. Her videos record the impact of the Israeli blockage on Gazan society. Highlighting the dwindling economy of the once proud and rich fishermen and farmers, Gharavi's documentaries voices the otherwise muffled stories of these forgotten people.

The success of the exhibition lies in how it strikes the balances between art and politics, fact and emotions. The content is strong and the curation of the show is flawless.

The walls of the gallery are set up in such a way that forces the visitors to abandon their passivity and actively scoot from one image to another. The videos are placed at the end of the space obliging the visitors, who were prepped by the line of photographs, to watch the stories.

The entire exhibition strikes a chord in how simple and straightforward it is.

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It's both aesthetically well crafted as well as emotionally and mentally moving in depicting everyday Gazans under siege. Both the images and the captions are simple and straightforward with no overbearingly emotional fluff.

"Between the Walls is the perfect way to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba.

The exhibition was the sole major cultural event the NGO, Housing and Land Rights Network, succeeded in putting up with no constraints. Angie Balata, Global Program Officer of the NGO, told Daily News Egypt that their efforts to organize a cultural week commemorating the nakba have been hampered by security issues.

"All venues welcomed the idea. But when it came to obtaining security permission, everything fell apart, Balata said.

"The event was supposed to be strictly cultural. We were planning to host different poets, singers and artists to celebrate Palestinian culture. We wanted to present the ordinary lives of these people, their society and their art. I don't know why we weren't given permission; maybe due to the current state of unrest because of the bread riots or fear of the Muslim Brotherhood. I don't know.

"Between the Walls runs until April 30. The closing ceremony will include an additional exhibition, musical session and poetry recital.s



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