Boullata: Like a Fish Out of Water. Or, Art as a Visual Thesis

Palestinian visual artist Kamal Boullata (b. 1942, Jerusalem) departed this world on August 6, 2019, from his exile in Berlin at the age of seventy-seven. He leaves behind a formidable artistic legacy, which has made him stand out in the field of criticism and artistic production within the Palestinian and Arab art scene. In this article, Moroccan artist and poet Samir Salmi tries to present a comprehensive portrait of a multi-faceted artist, and reveals the strengths of his research, creative and critical work.

Essay / Samir Salmi April 22, 2020

Kamal Boullata (1942-2019) was a Palestinian artist and art historian. He was born in Jerusalem, and graduated from the Academy of Rome and the Corcoran Art Museum School in Washington, DC. Boullata is a distinguished name that calls to mind his colours and patterns of lines as a reference to where the secrets of form and space intersect, and where the line gains dimensions of artistic beauty and majesty.

I knew Kamal personally during the 1990s, when I introduced him at the Faculty of Arts in Rabat, as part of a literary-artistic debate that brought him together with my teachers – the poet Mohamed Bennis and the artists Diaa al-Azzaw, Ali Salim, Mohamed al-Qasimi, and French poet François Duvalier.1

Kamal drew my attention with his technical and theoretical expertise in analysing the connotations of calligraphy, miniatures, and mosaics, as well as his knowledge and mastery of modern and ancient techniques of painting and printmaking.

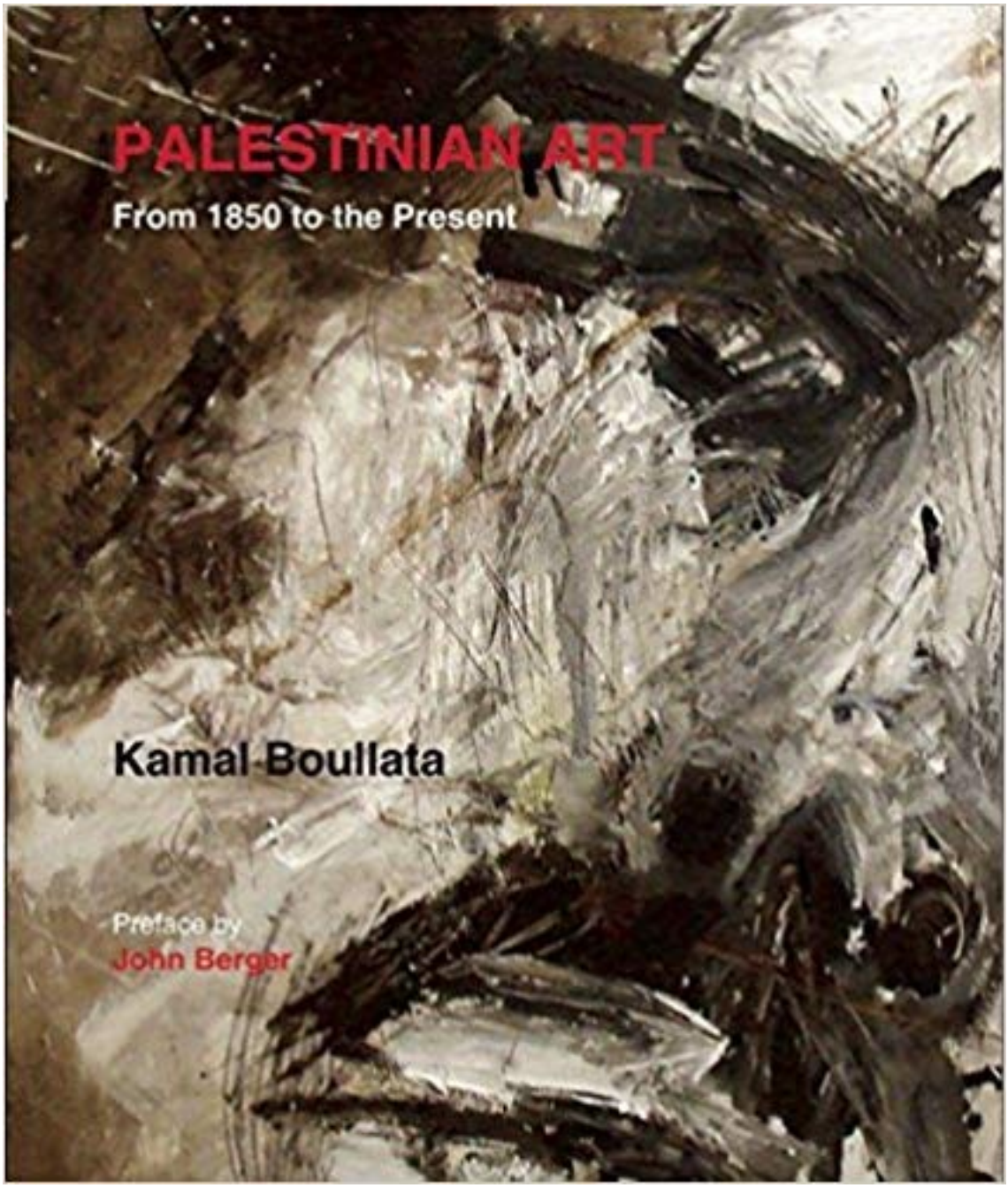
This combination of practice and theory meant his artworks were able to take the form of a visual thesis informed by his intellectual observations, and the features and specifics captured by his sensibility. This harmony between the artist–theorist and the theorist–artist, which he displayed at distinguished forums for writers and artists, was the most prominent thing that attracted my interest as a visual artist and art researcher.

In approaching Boullata’s work, I tried to comprehend it through its civilizational, cultural, and technical wellsprings. A work might be simultaneously a patch, a colour, and a subject. The self in the artwork may be hinted or openly stated. A work might represent the self with its embedded roots and lush extending branches.

Boulatta's work draws on a culture that precedes the invention of the term dimensionality,2 and moves on to other cultures and visual artistic perspectives, which constitute a return to time and to the undoing of the logic of dimensionality,3 that is, the transition from precision to reduction, from opulent detail to a paucity of lines and colors. It has a consciousness in which less symbolizes more, and brevity expands meaning, containing its pluralistic aspect and its complexity within simplicity.4

That is how, in my opinion, Kamal Boullata’s work has attracted attention in many Arab and non-Arab artistic and cultural circles, and his experimentation came to be seen as creation through a shift in perspective.

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[1]Kamal Boullata, Palestinian Art: 1850 to the present, Saqi Books, Beirut, 2009

The Square of the Self

A gaze painting a frame, then breaking through its four corners towards enigmatic potential energy, outlining dimensions of openness and expansion through ancient and modern times, and creating a focused abstraction of these dimensions into significant forms and pure brushstrokes.

All seduction begins with the eye, then contemplation opens windows and doors that take vision towards authentication and expression of the self. The self is the microcosm that enfolds the macrocosm, as Ibn Arabi has said.5

This self, in its transition from vision to concept, at the intersection of influences and effects, reveals its pristineness, which is a synonym for its uniqueness, and what it has added to the values of knowledge and creativity; these are values that we can see only with contemplation and discover only through investigation and research.

The Square of Entanglements

A notable power of abstraction, and the ability to condense and simplify, characterize the artist who follows the expansive aesthetic pathways and techniques, initiated by Paul Cézanne's reduction of forms to geometric shapes, and consolidated by Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse in the creation of infinite ways for figurative and abstract artistic representation, and in the contraction and shattering of dimensions. Generations of avant-garde artists have followed this path.

Boullata's talent and knowledge complemented each other, and allowed him to untangle the web of intersecting and connecting lines and angles in Arabic geometric arts, and to grasp the fixed focal points in his art, which are the parts that represent the whole and meanings beyond image and word. Perhaps we can see this in a phrase he has repeated in various forms and on different occasions: "I am like a bird who sees a fish in the sea, then dives and catches the fish, which is simultaneously the bird's food and that part of the sea that is his own."

The Square of the Line

Kamal Boullata executed his artworks with consummate skill. After a preliminary study, which often began with the drawing of lines and dimensions and the folding of the square into rectangles or into two right-angle triangles, he then dragged or scraped colours in a partly calculated manner or painted them across the surface of the painting.

Through a preliminary inventory of the spaces that he has worked on, we might consider Kamal Boullata an artist of small and medium spaces, as evidenced by his works on canvas or paper – a significant part of his output – where his experience is reduced to the geometry and the line structure of the picture.

In these works, Boullata seems to have found the Golden Ratio[6] for his square surfaces through their diagonals, through control of their horizontal and vertical intersections, and the determination of their proportions and measurements. This enabled him to automatically define the foci of the relationships within congruent areas. This Painstaking work combines the expertise of both designer and artist, in which the geometry of the line reveals the secrets of a comprehensive aesthetic awareness of the art of spatial distribution, and the exploration of the depths of shapes, sizes, and spaces.

This awareness was consolidated by years of study and research, and decades of practice and theorizing. It is an awareness that has led the artist to tangible, concrete results, through a vital creative imagination, fed by a rich and diverse visual culture.

The Square of the Letter

He makes a square by using the angular *waw* elongated the or (و) *alif*,obedient ,streamlined ,fluid -(ا) from the base of the letter to the base of the square, signs that are not only related to measuring the

geometric area, and searches for points of condensation or points of release. Within these lines of meaning, what is before or after a scene opens up. Abraham, for example, when he was “raising the foundations of the House” [Al-Baqara 127]. Or, it is open to an Andalusian-Moroccan tradition that has sanctified the square as a basis for making books and miniatures, as well as building shrines and granaries. The square is a dwelling and a fortress, the source of blessing and refuge from all evil.

Thus, in the works of Kamal Boullata, the square is a window into a special world that opens up to meanings of multiplicity and amplitude. The painting is essentially the artist’s cause and the expression of active issues in his existence, and the contact with his human senses and his technical and artistic sensibilities.

The Patch of Colour

The artist’s colour wheel revolves, only to stop at choices that are key to his colour scale (sfumato), the gradations of colour and the variation of shade, from primary colours to compound ones. Pure colours that are full of heat and light: immersive blue, glowing yellow, burning hot red...

This is the visual identity of an itinerant artist moving between “East” and “West”, an artist the light of whose sun is submerged in the shadows of exile and displacement. From here, too, derive the splendour and radiance of Kamal Boullata’s palette, complex simplicity and depth of light that saturate the surface with brilliance and serenity.

Yes, Byzantine and Arab mosaics are present in the background as initial choices,[7] but they are choices that have been subjected to pruning and refinement by the artist, and have advanced through experience and time. A lived experience based on empirical knowledge and practice and a renewed changing time, open to real revolutions in the areas of drawing, geometry, printmaking, and colouring. From natural organic colours, as in ancient mosaics and miniatures, to chemical dyes and digital colours.

His was an ongoing, comprehensive, acclaimed expertise, that of an artist designer of shapes and colours through paintings and visual motifs in the publications of books, magazines, and designs for 3D or 2D visuals, and physical or virtual highlights.

The Window of Capabilities

Kamal Boullata rightfully holds a position of an expert devoted to shapes and colours, and of one of the most important Palestinian and Arab artists; an artist most capable of presenting art as a visual thesis articulating the language of art with art’s logic, speaking to the world in the language of knowledge, experience, and modernity, and revealing the secrets of a culture that is deeply rooted in time from “the very beginning to the very end”.

The works of Kamal Boullata, his intimate and hidden worlds, his traces, his paintings that are the pulse of his tangible and visible life... a flash of a splendid, radiant civilization, and a glowing flame of an ardent identity, proud and free.

* Translated from Arabic by Raphael Cohen

- [1.] A debate that I organized at the Faculty of Literature in Rabat, in 1994, which was conducted in parallel with an art exhibition, entitled “About Mohamed Bennis”, which was hosted by the French Cultural Centre. Participants in the debate were artists: Kamal Boullata from Palestine, Diaa Al-Azzawi from Iraq, Ali Salim from Algeria, in addition to Mohamed al-Qasimi from Morocco, and poets Mohamed Bennis from Morocco, and François de Valier from

France, the latter writing, along with Moroccan intellectual Abdelkebir Khatibi, the introductory text for this poetic and artistic encounter.

- 2. There are, in principle, necessary thresholds that must be crossed to absorb the semantics of words and terminology. In this text we distinguish in principle between drawing as an action and as a way in which the line is executed, and between the form of the line, in what might be compared in palaeography from abstract symbols, signs and illustrations expanding to include figurative shapes and images. See also, for example: Gérard Dessons, “l’illusion graphique”, in: Peinture et écriture 3, Frontières éclatées, coll. Traverses, ed. UNESCO, Paris, 2000, pp. 349-56.
- 3. If the line is geometrically a sequence of points, then a two-dimensional space is visually akin to a precise network of compact points that, according to Paul Klee, the artist’s eye scans and penetrates to make lines through for selected paths, usually referred to as lines of force. These lines form the structure upon which the artwork for drawing and painting hangs, and they serve as a hidden basis for a set of hidden motivations to harmonize the creative impact and its organic visual unity. Hence, it is true that lines of force, as Charles Bouleau sees, are in the place of the hidden geometry of every artistic structure. See in detail: Charles Bouleau, Charpentes - la géométrie secrète des peintres, éd. Seuil, Paris, 1963. Within this dimension, Panovsky sees “that the greatest revolutions that rocked the history of art are those that touched the laws of dimensionality and perspective.” Erwin Panofsky, L’œuvre d’art et ses significations. Essais sur les arts visuels, Trad. Marthe Teyssèdre, Gallimard, Paris, 1969. p.2.
- 4. What is remarkable about Kamal Boullata’s artistic–creative and artistic–theoretical project is his ability to constantly renew and develop according to the archaeology of knowledge that distinguished him, that refined his consciousness as an artist, and that represented the specificity and clarity of his visual thesis to combine critical-theoretical practice and artistic-experimental training to formulate works of art relevant to the depth of his Palestinian identity and the stolen Palestinian locale (*Editor’s note*).
- 5. Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyyah* (Dar al-Fikr: Beirut), vol. 2, p. 473.
- 6. The golden ratio or proportion, or holy ratio, is the most pleasing division of the line into unequal parts.
- 7. In his introduction to the catalogue of Boullata’s exhibition “The Navel of the Earth”, at Darat al Funun (Amman, 1998), Abdelkebir Khatibi wrote: “Behind his passion for geometry lies the tradition of drawing icons that marked the beginnings of his artistic training. This tradition has preserved a remarkable continuity between the Byzantine era and the Arab-Islamic civilization. Boullata not only explores this double tradition, but rather transfers it to a new framework as an artist with his own aesthetics.”

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