"I wake in pain, move through the day in pain, and sleep in pain"

For nearly 30 years, artist and curator Said Abu Shakra has been building bridges. The museum he founded in Umm al-Fahm serves as a hub for dialogue between Palestinian and Israeli artists, based on a belief that art is a tool for understanding and coexistence. A former police officer who once walked the tightrope between Palestinian and Israeli identities now watches his world collapse

Bull in Flight, 2014 | 140/70 | Said Abu Shakra

Nissim Douek

"112 members of the Abu Shakra family were killed in Khan Younis. Children, women, men. One hundred and twelve! And I, who grew up here, who served in the police and the Justice Ministry, who founded this gallery to connect worlds—I now feel that my path is no longer safe." Hearing a statement like that from Said Abu Shakra is like taking a punch to the gut. Abu Shakra, 68, served for many years as a police officer. Born into a family of artists, he too gravitated toward the arts, studying at Avni Institute and the Art College in Ramat Hasharon. In 1996, he founded the Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery, his life's work, which he envisioned as a major center for contemporary Arab and Jewish art and as a platform for cultural dialogue. For years, he has worked to strengthen ties between Jewish and Arab artists, using art as a vehicle for understanding and shared society. But since October 7, he finds himself at a loss. The dual identity of a Palestinian citizen of Israel carries sharp weight these days.

When you meet people abroad, how do you present yourself—as Israeli, Palestinian, or something else entirely?

"That's a complicated question, because these are complicated times. We're no longer just dealing with life—we're witnessing catastrophe. On screen, we see massive bombings, children being killed so that Ben Gvir can get back into the government. There's no honor in this. No heroism. There's nothing here we can connect to. Someone presses a button, fires a missile, kills people—I see it as incomprehensible. "I don't want to draw comparisons, but I also worry when civilians are killed here in Umm al-Fahm due to crime. The government doesn't provide us with the protection we deserve. I'm a person who doesn't feel safe in his homeland, in his country, in his own city. So how can I feel Israeli?

"If I speak about Gaza, I'm arrested; if I condemn Hamas, my own people attack me. Children are being killed 'because every child is a future terrorist,' and I can't speak. I've learned: when a fight breaks out, keep your distance. Don't step in to separate—it's you who'll get hit by both sides"

"At the same time, I see what's happening to my people on the other side—they're being crushed, starved, left homeless, without water, without medical care. I don't think that we—as Jews or as Arabs—are managing to heal and construct any kind of framework to define how we feel in this place. What's happening is a catastrophe. I feel afraid, in shock, exposed. I feel like the people I've worked with for years could collapse at any moment. Many of my longtime Jewish friends—some of them have suddenly shifted rightward. Something has cracked in the state, and I don't know how to define it anymore. I don't know if we can even define ourselves."

Do you feel that you're being required to "explain yourself" and your identity more than others—especially now that in some parts of the world Israel is being accused of crimes against humanity?

"When people see children blown to pieces, their instinct is to side with the Palestinians in their pain. They identify with the catastrophe unfolding there. When there was a glimmer of hope for peace, people felt more Israeli. But in times of war like this, the instinct is to align with the weaker side."

Much of the world condemns Israel's conduct in the war. How does that wave of condemnation affect you?

"I have children abroad—in Germany and in Canada. Neither of them says they are Israeli. They identify clearly as Palestinian. When they present their Israeli passport, they explain: 'We are Palestinians from Israel.' "Both are YouTubers—one of them has more than 1.2 million followers. They say: 'It's just my passport.' Their allegiance is with the weaker, crushed side. My son in Germany, who completed a master's degree in architecture, grew up in a home where Jews and Arabs always came together. A home that welcomed guests, where Hebrew was always spoken. He was never politically active. But on the day of the protests in Jerusalem that preceded Operation Guardian of the Walls, he climbed a mountaintop, wrapped himself in a Palestinian keffiyeh, and waved a Palestinian flag.

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"We're under attack. I, as a Palestinian-Israeli, see how the right is becoming more extreme. In the past, they searched for reasons when calling to 'kill the Arabs.' Today, they don't even need reasons. Settlers in the West Bank—where there was no October 7—are burning homes and vehicles.

"How do these events affect me? How do they not. I wake up in pain, live the day in pain, and go to sleep in pain. If you say a word—they'll come after you. I don't even know if I'll be able to exhibit my work at the museum anymore, because a museum is a statement. And statements bring persecution. Will I be arrested? Artists must be free to express themselves. But I also want to build a future of dialogue. Luckily, I started this work 30 years ago. If I hadn't started then, I couldn't possibly begin today. I continue on this path to give that hope a chance."

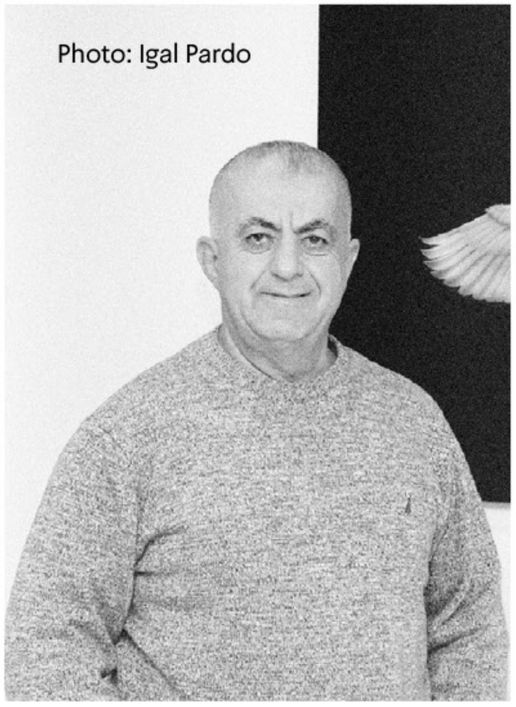
Photo: Igal Pardo

"Anyone who says a negative word is suddenly an antisemite. I'm a Semite—aren't Arabs Semites too? You're allowed to kill and destroy, but not to be criticized? When you're so drunk with power, you lose all ability to hear criticism."

On October 7, did you feel shame?

"What Hamas did is inexcusable. Everyone condemns it. Everyone understands it's beyond the pale. Palestinians in Israel oppose it. But afterward, I felt Israel should have demonstrated wisdom. If it had responded with restraint—extended a hand for peace—it would have won over the world. Today, with Gaza in ruins and everything broadcast on social media, the situation is drastically different."

Would it be fair to say that the public you belong to is caught between a rock and a hard place—accused by Palestinians of being Israeli, and by Jews of being Palestinian?

"Palestinians in Israel after October 7 held themselves back. They didn't go out to the streets, didn't demonstrate, didn't express an opinion. They respected a country tending to its wounds, recognizing a crisis that demanded restraint. If someone dared to speak, they were arrested, shackled, and filmed in front of the flag. People were detained for posts they wrote two years ago about Gaza or misunderstood religious remarks. First they were fired, humiliated, and only then reinstated. People live in fear. They told me: 'Stand up and speak. If you don't, how will I know you don't support October 7? If you don't condemn it, you have no right to exist.' "I stand in between—between the Palestinian and the Israeli. When a strong wind blows, I lower my head to avoid harm. Some in the Jewish public want to see me protesting with them against the Palestinians. If I say a word about Gaza—I'm arrested. So I can't condemn what's happening in Gaza, because I'll be arrested. Children are being killed, 'because every child is a terrorist in the making,' and I can't speak. I refuse to play this political game. I've learned: when there's a brawl, walk away. Don't step in to break it up—you'll get hit from both sides."

Could the global condemnation of Israel actually be a good thing?

"Israel is intoxicated with power. Backed by the U.S., it's like a spoiled child who thinks he can do whatever he wants without recognizing the dangers. But the dangers aren't just financial—they're moral. On social media, I see soldiers who served in Gaza, and to them, running people over with a tank is second nature. So how will they behave as civilians? Toward Arab citizens? Toward their own families? The trigger finger is now quick. This intoxication with power—if I were Jewish, I'd be ashamed. My grandmother always said: it's better to go to sleep as the wronged than as the wrongdoer. When you are wronged, you can sleep peacefully. When you wrong others—you should worry."

Israeli politicians and the Jewish public say that criticism of Israel is antisemitic.

How do you view Israel's collapsing global image?

"The world is reacting to what it sees—it's a natural reaction. Netanyahu's son lashes out at anything that moves, because he was raised spoiled. The state behaves the same. The International Criminal Court threatens arrest, but they keep lashing out, convinced they have the power and the mandate to do as they please."

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Where do you think this wave of criticism is heading?

"To Israel's humiliation. Continued isolation. If the fanatics in the government keep leading, the sane, decent people will keep leaving. When I travel abroad, I feel the difference in how people look at me when I say I'm Israeli.

"In Umm al-Fahm, crime families are ostracized. People don't talk to them, confront them, marry them, interact with them—not even say hello. That's how we deal with them on the micro level. On the macro level, the world will treat Israel the same. As a pariah. A place no one wants to engage with. Israel's isolation will grow, and those who've lived through this will continue to reject it."