

TO MEASURE JERUSALEM: EXPLORATIONS OF THE SQUARE

KAMAL BOULLATA

A Palestinian artist, in discussing his work, cuts back and forth between his past and the present, retracing his itinerary from Jerusalem to the United States, from Morocco and Andalusia to France, linking each place to stages in his artistic explorations. In so doing, he sheds light on the ancient roots of his art and says as much about the condition of exile as about painting.

VISUAL EXPRESSION IS A LANGUAGE that is separate from that of verbal expression. One cannot give voice to the other, nor can one be a substitute for the other. Painting proceeds from painting just as much as writing proceeds from reading.

For me, words have always come *after* painting. It is never the reverse. But since images flow from one's imagination, the unfolding of which is bound to memory, both painting and writing are twin products of the same memory. It is the completed images, however, that reawaken my conscious memory. Otherwise, why would a painting's title, the only link between words and visual form, come to mind long after I put the finishing touches to a painting? At best, the title is a bridge that allows the viewer to negotiate an entry into the language of a painted image; it attempts no more than to sum up or evoke certain associations with memory, be they personal or collective.

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I know with certainty that a man's work is nothing but the long journey to recover, through the detours of art, the two or three simple and great images which first gained access to his heart.—Albert Camus

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As a child, the first contact I ever had with painted images came through Byzantine icons. A number of them were placed high up in a niche of the

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Jerusalem home in which I was born. One of them, probably belonging to the Jerusalem School of icon painting, had an Arabic inscription on it. Years later, I was able to decipher the name of a paternal ancestor as the man who had commissioned the icon.

Icons seemed to provide my parents with a strength I did not understand. For them, an icon was a window through which they could gain entry into their own interior worlds. As for me, I was told that the icon's niche was the place where the angels left their gifts during the night preceding a church feast day. As long as I could last, I would wait through the night to see the angel, but all I could make out in the dark was the light of the lantern flickering before the icons' reticent colors. As for the images the icons represented, they always struck me with a mysterious awe which always left me speechless. Only now, I realize why I was told that an iconographer does not *paint* an icon. He *writes* it.

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From the vaulted roof of our home within the walled city, there was a splendid view of domes and cupolas, belfries and minarets. The closest and most majestic dome in our neighborhood was that of the Basilica of the Resurrection with its adjacent rotunda of the Anastasis Chapel, which we used to call in Arabic *nuss iddiniyya*—"the nave of the world." The furthest in the distance was the tower of the Church of the Ascension, nestling on the Mount of Olives. In between the two sites stood the exquisite Dome of the Rock.

Each of the three sanctuaries had been built after a certain rock had been unearthed. The building of the Basilica of the Resurrection began in 327, soon after the rock of Golgotha had been identified. Half a century later, the rock believed to have been the one from which Christ ascended into heaven became the center around which the octagonal ambulatory of the Church of the Ascension was constructed. Between 688 and 691 the Dome of the Rock was elevated around the rock believed to have been the one where Abraham brought Isaac to be sacrificed and from which the Prophet Muhammad began his mystical night journey to heaven. At the time, it never occurred to me that each of the three Jerusalem monuments sheltering a rock, the most elemental matter intrinsic to earth, had an identical building plan: one that was based on the rotation of two squares circumscribed within a circle and intersecting each other at an angle of 45 degrees.

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Geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the art of the writer.—Guillaume Apollinaire

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During the early 1990s, I left the United States, where I had been residing for the previous twenty-five years, for Morocco and Spain, where I wanted to pursue research in Islamic art. After years of working on the exploration of the square, the eight-pointed star generated by two squares intersecting at 45 degrees intrigued me. The octagonal star not only seemed to be at the center of every arabesque I examined, but its configuration, depending on the proportional subdivision of its module, formed the master grid of endless patterns. From the tiniest ornamental detail adorning a personal object to the most complex structures found in a monument, it was the same octagonal constellation, its derivatives, or its double or triple rotation within the circle that formed the underlying grid of the most complex arabesques. What was the secret principle of this master grid? How was it capable of generating all these enigmatic complexities of pure abstraction which continue to create unspeakable pleasure for the eye and mind?

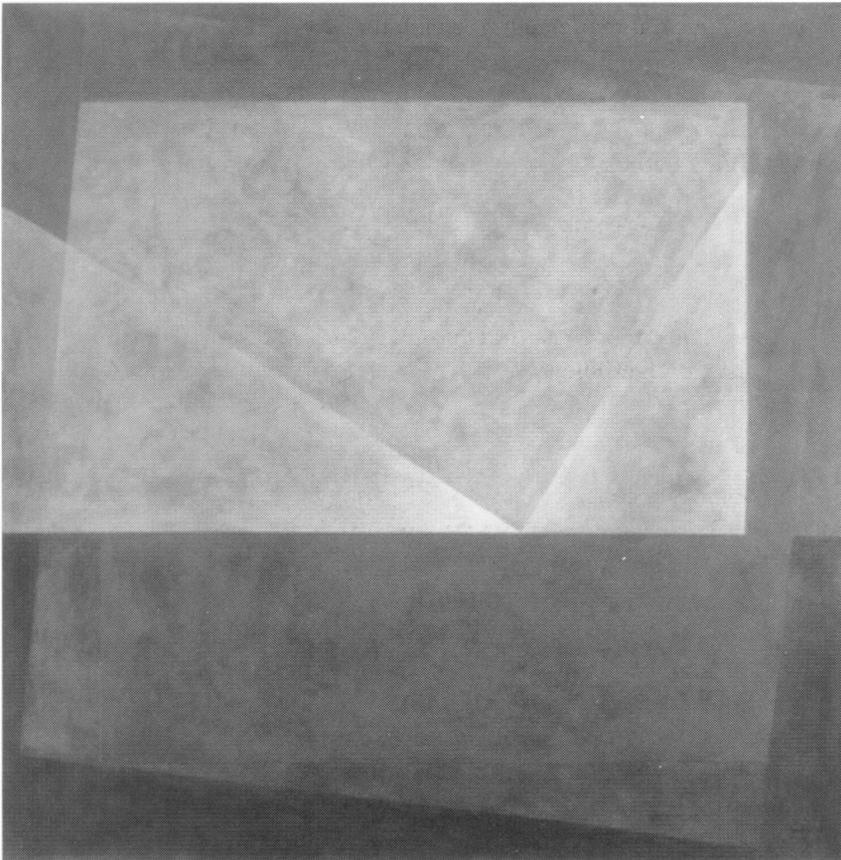
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Image making begins with interrogating appearances and making marks. . . . If one thinks of appearances as a frontier, one might say that painters search for messages which cross the frontier: messages which come from the back of the visible. And this, not because all painters are Platonists, but because they look so hard.—John Berger

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I was soon to learn that since antiquity, the square and the circle had been fraught with symbolical and philosophical connotations. The earth was often symbolized by the square for its four axes of spatial orientation, whereas the form of the circle represented the heavenly sphere. The rotation of the square within the circle was often referred to as the squaring of the circle. In it, the perimeter of the square is virtually equal to the circle's circumference. The geometric exercise sought to infer that the dimensions of the finite are able to express those of the infinite. It was through my research in Islamic art that I was finally able to retrace my earliest contact with image making. By "looking hard" at the octagonal star made up of the intersection of two squares within the circle, I remembered Byzantine icons, whose motifs embodied the meeting between earthly and heavenly bodies. This meeting of the square and the circle was represented in the geometric shape of the mandorla surrounding the figure of Christ in the icons depicting the Transfiguration, Christ Pantocrator, or Christ on the Celestial Throne. In each of those themes the mandorla had unfailingly taken the shape of two superposed quadrangles within a circular form.

Once I saw the link between a central motif in the icons of my childhood and the octagonal star from which radiated those mesmerizing arabesques evolved in Islamic art, I realized why all three monuments I could see from



Homage to Sophronius, 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 131 x 131 cm, Shoman Collection, Amman.

our roof in Jerusalem shared a common building plan. By circumscribing the intersection of two squares within a circle, the ground plan of the Basilica of the Resurrection, the Church of the Ascension, and the Dome of the Rock all sought to mark the divide between heaven and earth.

Only in the Dome of the Rock, however, did the architectural expression of the convergence between the physical and the metaphysical realms itself reflect a historical meeting that made Jerusalem a city open for all its citizens and the rest of the world. The meeting, documented by various chroniclers, took place between Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and Sophronius, the Byzantine patriarch of Jerusalem. It was Sophronius who demanded that the caliph come to Jerusalem in person for the signing of the treaty that handed the city over to the Muslim Arabs. We are told that it was he who led the caliph through the city and who, legends claim, helped him remove the debris from the sanctified rock that now stands at the heart of what has been considered for thirteen hundred years Jerusalem's crowning jewel. Is it any coincidence, then, that Islam's foremost monument continues to mirror the visual expression of a perfect architectural marriage between Byzantium and Islam?

Looking back at that meeting, which the world of today no longer seems to remember, I cannot help but think that Sophronius may have been the first native of the city of my birth to realize that the road to Jerusalem is in the heart and that only after one is capable of renouncing what one loves most can one hope to recreate it.

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Is not love the origin of all creation?—Henri Matisse

Artistic creation is in fact fundamentally an act of generosity.—Bridget Riley

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According to legend, as Christ was bearing His cross to Calvary, a woman called Veronica came forward from the crowds and took off her veil to wipe the sweat from the face of the Man from Galilee. It is believed that the image of His features was miraculously imprinted on the material, later referred to as the *sudarium*. In none of the Gospels is there any mention of such an incident or of the woman who often appears in European paintings wearing a turban, in allusion to her Eastern origin. And yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, Rome dedicated a church to Veronica—whose name, *vera icon*, means “true image”—on the Via Dolorosa. The church replaced the Vatican’s original idea, which had been to build a missionary school in Jerusalem to teach the city’s Arab natives the fine art of European painting (in an attempt to rival the influence of the Russian School, which had begun to offer classes in Russian icon painting to the Christian Orthodox Arabs). Had the school been built, it would have been the first institution ever to teach the European painting tradition to the Arabs of Jerusalem. But then, would my father have sent me there, instead of sending me as an apprentice to the workshop of Khalil Halabi, one of the last icon painters in the Old City?

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Representation is one thing, and what it represents is another.—St. John the Damascene

Art does not render the visible; rather, it makes visible.
—Paul Klee

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By the end of my first decade in the United States, geometry, originally meaning “measurement of land,” became central to my work. The square was the underlying unit in a grid upon which I constructed linear mazes and right-angled interlaces of Arabic words extracted from Christian and Muslim mystical expressions. Through these images I sought to propose an exercise

of reading that is interchangeable with the sensorial experience of color. Creating images based on the grid soon reawakened in me the memory of some of the earliest drawings I had done as a boy, when Khalil Halabi first taught me how to trace all visible forms through the rigid structure of the grid. Apparently, the memory of filling up square after square with different hues of soft-colored pencils continued to seduce me while I stood in a terrible distance from the country of my birth.

Within a decade, the linear rhythms of geometric words ultimately began to challenge me with questions of symmetry. Words based on the square totally disappeared, and the square itself became not only the subject of my work but also the vehicle by which I began to explore the illusions of symmetry. My explorations were chiefly carried out through the diagonal dissection of the square and by the process of its gradational doubling or partitioning. The simple system generated symmetries and proportional intervals of refractions that often reflected spatial and geometric relations in accordance with the Golden Mean, the ancient system of proportion devised to create harmony between two extremes. Nowhere did squares overlap in any composition. How could they meet without being a repetition of our ancestors' eight-pointed star? Overlapping squares at 45 degrees within the circumference of a circle represented to them the convergence of heaven and earth; today, could two squares really meet, when heaven and earth seem to be as distant from each other as the exile is from his native land?

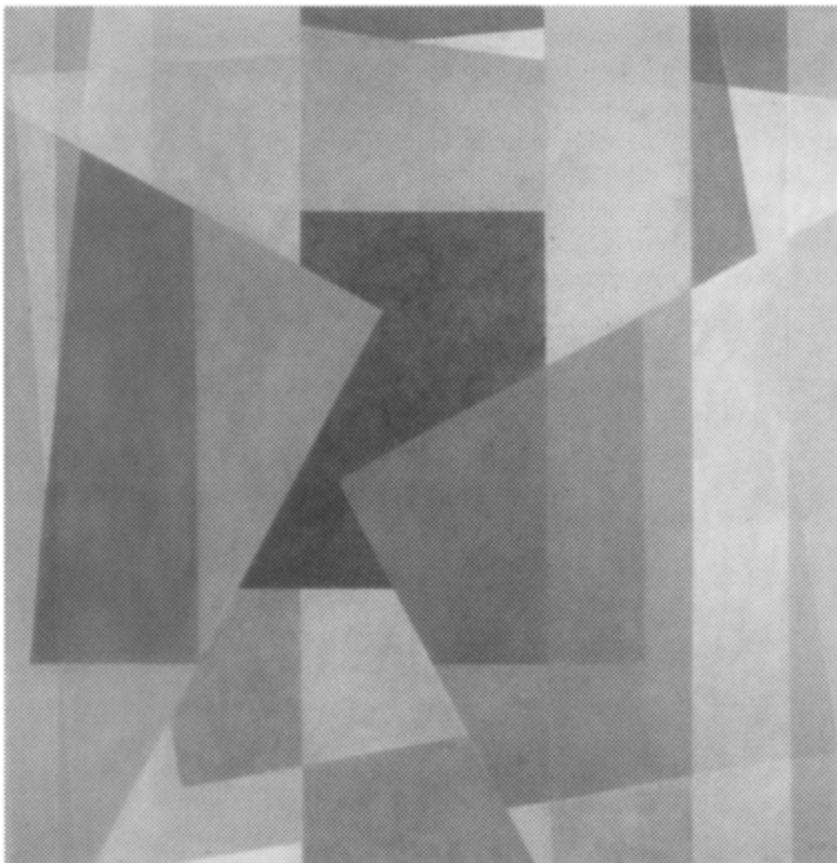
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Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimension, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal. For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environment are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.

—Edward Said

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With full awareness of the risks looming along my way, I started delving into the realm of overlapping squares. In one year, while I was finishing a project inspired by the architecture of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, I filled up dozens of sketch books that I carried in my pocket everywhere I went. Some drawings may have been no larger than my thumbnail. Within the following two years, as I moved from my home in Rabat to one in Paris and from there to the present one in Menton, in southern France, I continued



***Surrat al-Ard*, 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 131 x 131 cm, Shoman Collection, Amman.**

to explore the metamorphosis of the most stable of all geometric forms and the one that once represented the equilibrium of earth.

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Then I said, where are you going? and he said to me, to measure Jerusalem, to see what is the breadth and the length thereof.—Zechariah 2:2

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Squares overlapped in the void. Some multiplied to two. Others seemed displaced against one another. In minute degrees, the square rotated. Every little fraction of its rotation attempted to describe the circumference of a circle. But nowhere in any of the configurations was there a trace of a circular form. Instead, a horizon kept emerging behind them. At times, it stretched across the upper half of the work, at other times across the bottom half. A few decentered squares interchanged their positions above and below the

horizontal line, leaving behind traces of a shadow. A half square completing another's tilt transposed itself in the opposite direction. One square appeared to fall off the picture's edge, another drifted slightly, still another was suspended over an ever-shifting ground. All seemed to float in a perpetual challenge to gravity.

Drawings I sketched on the road were soon to develop into a series of paintings that were realized in the three different places I have resided over the last two years. Some paintings took their title from the names associated with specific sites in Jerusalem. Titles of others in the series have been borrowed from names associated with being in-between two opposite states or places corresponding to Jerusalem. The name given to the entire series was *Surrat al-Ard*—the navel of the earth, a term used in medieval sources to refer to Jerusalem's central rock.

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*Nothing visible is understood by the sense of sight alone,
save light and color.*—al-Hasan Ibn al-Haitham

Water is the color of its container.—al-Junaid.

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As much as a simple geometric form may be a product of discursive thought, color is from intuitive feeling. While the conceptualization of a certain form may be a reflection of a seen or imagined body, its color is its flesh and soul. Consequently, the process by which a line drawing is transformed into a color composition is one that develops, as it were, from a skeleton into a living entity of light. A viewer may measure the effectiveness of the fusion between form and color by the degree to which the structure of the skeleton had been turned into a body of light.

In an attempt to translate the minimal shifts of superimposed squares, the range of colors in each work is minimized. Applied in layer over thin layer through which the eye may continue to trace the preceding underpainting, colors begin to glow with the ambiguous interplay between opaque and transparent polygons. Balancing colors is no more confined to the position of a certain color in relation to another, but also in proportion to the transparent depth each color retains. An inner joy mounts when advancing and receding properties of geometric colored shapes begin to act like the ebb and flow of a musical piece taking visual body. The sound of the brush thumping on the stretched canvas like a muffled drum echoes the shaping of geometric space. One understands why it has been said that Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew* was composed with ruler and compass.

As soon as they dry, colors should feel as fresh as spring water and as clear as glass. Once I begin to sense that I could almost plunge through the painting's surface as in a pool or a mirror, I realize that the work is finished. Days or weeks later, when I look back with surprise at what had actually

been accomplished before my eyes, I cannot help but wonder what images that particular surface reflects from my memory.

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Just below our roof, amidst our neighbors' houses in the Old City, we could also see a walled and rectangular place that must have once served as a water reservoir. We used to call it Birket il-Khan, The Pool of the Inn. I do not know why, but I always thought that this open space must have been the site referred to in the Gospel of St. John as Bethesda Pool. According to legend, the waters of Bethesda Pool had miraculous healing powers. People believed that an angel occasionally came down to stir its waters and that the first person to dip in it was healed. For decades, it was told, a paralytic man had never succeeded in being first because he had no one to assist him. When Christ saw the man lying there, He commanded him to stand up, carry his bed, and walk. The miracle believed to have taken place led to the Man's condemnation by the city's Jews for having ordered the lame to take up his bed on a Sabbath.

The place I used to believe was Bethesda Pool was no more than a dry basin for most of the year. Our time, I was soon to realize, was not one of miracles. Refugee families from the 1948 war had swamped the houses surrounding the site. Today, it seems that the pool's basin has expanded beyond Palestine's borders to reach wherever the country's disinherited continue to live. All around, one sees the multitudes who have been maimed by the wars. Who can tell whom not to wait for a miracle anymore?

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Here, on the shores of the Mediterranean, in this little town in southern France where one can practically walk to Italy, I am away from all that I have come to know in recent years and close to a place that reminds me of my earliest home. The bells of St. Michel's Chapel marking the day's passage do not sound like any of Jerusalem's bells, but painting continues to come from painting. Here, as I absorb the visual sensations around me, I recognize particular relationships with my colors that are familiar in the light and air of the place. Outside one window, I see the silver green of an olive tree against the lavender of a bougainvillea. On our neighbor's side, Lily and I are inundated by a flowering laurel and a jasmine next to a cactus and a lemon tree. Below the window of my studio we can see the old city's houses assuming the colors of Giotto's dwellings as their rooftops descend among palm trees, black pines, and cypresses toward the ever-changing blues of the ancient sea. On top of this hill in Menton, I am on the roof of the world.

Two French painters who escaped the worst wars this country had seen in our time found solace in this region. I realize now, perhaps as they had then, that nothing remains after wars except one's love of beauty. Matisse and Bonnard were at home in this place. As for me, in the words of St. John Perse, here "I shall dwell in my name."