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Roni Ben Efrat

Israel. When Art Breaks Walls

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2010 - NÂ° 20 Mai 2010 - English -

Date de mise en ligne : Saturday 15 May 2010

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Once a year, in January, a meeting point is created between artists and farm workers. The artists are both Jewish and Arab. The workers are Arab women. The contact is made through an art exhibit called Bread and Roses, organized by the Workers Advice Center (WAC-MAAN). This year 250 artists took part, 40 of them Arab. At the opening on January 9, 2010, more than half the works were sold, to the amount of \$80,000.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH303/assad_azi_violets-e4d10.jpg

"Violets" by Asad Azi. Sold at \$1200.

WAC works all through the year to create points of contact at job sites and among youth. "We won't be able to improve the society, to build true social justice, if we don't start tearing down the walls that separate us," Nir Nader told visitors at the opening ceremony. It was Nader's fourth straight year of organizing Bread and Roses.

Maha Yihieh from Kfar Qara has worked three years in the framework of the job placement project. WAC, which organizes both Jewish and Arab workers to protect their rights, enables Maha and her colleagues to earn the minimum wage and receive the legal benefits. That sounds like little, but the sad truth is that if Maha were employed like most Israeli Arab women who work—namely, through a subcontractor (ra'is)—he would take a third of her pay, and there would be no question of a wage slip or benefits. Maha took part in the WAC delegation that came to Bread and Roses this year. She carefully examined the hundreds of paintings crowding the walls. It was her first time at an exhibit. She had a special reason for excitement because, she told me, she paints.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH296/exhibit-828d9.jpg>

Among the thousand visitors at Bread and Roses that day, at the gallery of the Minshar School for Arts in Tel Aviv, was the Minister for Minority Affairs, economist Avishai Braverman. "It's no accident that he came," says Nader. "This year there is more sensitivity in public opinion to the poverty of the Arab population. Israel wants to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), but the staggering poverty here and the social gaps are impediments. Braverman was on the team that negotiated with the OECD, and he knows very well that the tiny proportion of Arab women in the labor force [18.6%] is one of the reasons why Israel has been rebuffed until now."

One of the speakers was Wafah Tayara, a former farm worker and today the Coordinator of WAC's branch in Baqa al-Gharbieh. Will her words penetrate to the consciousness of decision-makers? Here is an excerpt:

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH283/Wafah-f1187.jpg>

Wafah Tayara

"I was once a farm worker. I experienced in my flesh all the varieties of exploitation that exist in the agricultural branch. I joined WAC, and today I'm responsible for bringing in and placing the farm workers in the Baqa region. In the name of hundreds of farm workers from Baqa, Kfar Qara, Kfar Manda and Tamra, I thank all the artists who contributed their work to this exhibit. Their support shows us that a person doesn't have to be a farm worker to support our demand for fair job conditions.

"It isn't easy to open organized jobs for women, especially when cheap workers are being imported. They too are exploited, but with their low wage they compete with us. It takes enormous effort to persuade a boss to hire a local

worker at 20 shekels [NIS] per hour, when he can get a Thai worker for 13.

"What gives us the power to go on, in WAC, is the knowledge that every job we've managed to open rescues a woman and her family from poverty and from being exploited by a ra'is. Through WAC we earn 160 NIS per day [\$43], plus full social benefits. Women who work through a ra'is make only 100 NIS for eight hours' labor and get no benefits. The government talks plenty about the need to encourage women to work, but in practice it continues to import. In effect, the government subsidizes the farmers at our expense, while accusing us of not wanting to work. We are the proof that Arab women do want to work, on condition that we receive the legal wage and our legal rights. We don't want to be a temporary, unorganized labor force, hired or fired according to the need of the moment. We want our work to be recognized and appreciated."

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH300/persimmon-04f8b.jpg>

WAC has placed hundreds of women, but thousands more are waiting.

In conclusion, Tayara said: "Work is important to us, first of all for the income. Without this we won't ever escape the circle of poverty. Beyond that, however, work opens a new world to us. It delivers us from the isolation of the house and enables us to be an active factor in the society. In addition to the jobs, WAC has opened for us an infrastructure of learning and empowerment, thanks to which we can bring to our tables not just bread but roses too."

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH263/emek_yizreel-6b4cf.jpg

Nov. 6, 2009. Dozens of women take part at a conference of WAC and Emek Yezreel College on the issue of employment.

Naomi Leshem, artist and photographer, won the 2009 Constantiner Photography Award of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. She is presently exhibiting there as well as abroad. This is her first year at Bread and Roses. She was present when Tayara spoke. "Bread and Roses is different from all the shows I've exhibited in," she said. "That's what I felt when I heard about it, and it's why I decided to take part. I felt strengthened in this at the opening. There is something very clean here. This is so both on the side of the organizers and on that of the participating artists. There was the feeling of a will to give and help. Sometimes I have the feeling that the art world is closed in on itself, but here art merges with society. The opening was also different from other openings, and this moved me. That same evening I phoned people abroad who exhibit my work and told them about it. I wanted them to know this project exists."

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH350/naomi_leshem-36a91.jpg

Work by Naomi Leshem. Price \$3000.

Nir Nader explained the popularity Bread and Roses has earned in artistic circles and in the public as a whole. "No commercial body stands behind it. There are no financial interests here, and the earnings go to the really needy by creating job openings." WAC, he added, is active among artists and in art schools. Most artists are also poor. They work at several jobs, running from one school to another in order to get through the month, while struggling for time to create. For this reason the exhibit's organizers pay 25% of each sale to the artist.

I asked Asad Azi, whose "Violets" is pictured above, what motivates an outstanding Arab artist like him to take part—a painter with more than fifty single-person exhibits behind him, as well as a hundred group shows and innumerable prizes. "Despite the publicity I have garnered all these years, my earnings amount to minimum wage. My sales are insignificant enough that you can call me an artist in poverty, living in a modest flat in Jaffa. Along with that, human solidarity is important to me, and that's why I take part." Azi's Violets was sold immediately.

Dani Ben Simhon, an artist and a member of the Bread and Roses staff—who also stands at the head of WAC's employment project—talked about the impressive rise in the number of participating Arab artists. The response was

nearly 100%. "There are many who have taken part through all four years and who see us as an address, a bridge to the art scene in Tel Aviv. For some of them, the annual WAC exhibit was the one that presented them for the first time to the art collectors who come each year. Some of the Arab artists are better known, but they're still happy to take part. I should mention that 85% of the work by Arab artists gets sold, which is very encouraging and shows the interest they arouse." Ben Simhon also talked about the wide variety among the buyers. "Beside the permanent collectors, there was this time a large number of art lovers who bought paintings for themselves. The large price spread, from \$50 to \$5000, appealed to various audiences, making it easy for people of modest means to buy."

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH350/nassrin_abu-f3d98.jpg

Work by Nasrin Abu-Baker, sold at \$600.

Another speaker making an impression at the opening was Oded Yeda'aya, Director of Minshar College, which is hosting Bread and Roses in its halls for the third consecutive year. Minshar College has also pioneered in another respect: it has enabled its workers to organize within the WAC framework. Yediah himself led the process, and this is how he described it: "At first I worried I was entering a relationship with a trade union that would cause an upheaval in the college, but very quickly I discovered a responsible organization that always favors dialogue over confrontation, for the good of both workers and administration."

Artist Tami Barka'i was the moving spirit behind the exhibit. For months on end, she took it on herself to meet with artists, coordinate their contributions, and establish the whole administrative infrastructure. "Although I was totally involved in the exhibit," she told the audience, "I couldn't ignore what was going on around me in WAC's Tel Aviv office: a campaign to organize truck drivers, meetings with workers and artists on the issue of pensions, the editing of a film on the Wisconsin Plan, and more." She voiced her appreciation for the voluntary work that went into Bread and Roses: "We published a call for volunteers to help put up and take down the exhibit. Many artists answered it. Collectors also took an active part, bringing in other collectors as well or putting us in touch with them. There were artists who told me that for WAC they were willing to lower their prices or do the framing themselves, and so on. I'm only sorry that our lack of resources forced us in the end to put off good artists who wanted to participate."

Post-scriptum :

Note: WAC has joined Sindyanna of Galilee in publishing a calendar for 2010 based on 12 works by Jewish and Arab artists from Bread and Roses. To see and purchase the calendar :

<http://www.sindyanna.com/index.php?id=74>