CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Frontiers and conflicts

Azza Abo Rebieh



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Some, in this part of the world, dream of a different country, culture, language and life style. They struggle in many ways to get there by applying as a refugee or a student or an investor…. Me, I always applied for art residencies abroad to discover the world, educate myself visually and emotionally as well as technically. Unfortunately, almost all countries complicate the entry at their border from fear that the intention is to immigrate.

Artworks without visa

As an artist, I feel this troubled part of the world. It moves my senses and imagination. I have the need to stay connected to these everyday realities, whether cruel or loving, recording for future generations our experiences, struggles and state of mind. My artwork has travelled many continents, entered many renowned exhibition spaces and museums, but I was denied a visa even when these institutions have sent me a generous invitation for a residency or an exhibition or a symposium. Many of very famous artists in the Middle East face this disappointment and yet we are still refusing to immigrate far away from our culture.

On my recent art residency in the American Academy in Rome, I was fascinated seeing closely artworks that were so important in my academic years: they were real. Art is to be

shared by all humans. My need as an artist is to be able to see, feel and live thru art.

Talking to my friends who took refuge in the western world, I learned that contemporary art is too conceptual, to which they feel alienated .Too early for them, they miss their techniques and can’t find a common language on the issues that matter to them. They feel suppressed, lost and depressed, unable to go back home. Contemporary art in the Middle East is still not mature for lack of funding and acceptance from the public and the commercial galleries.

Contemporary art birth

During World War II, the relations between art and war became ideological. Many artists had to hide or leave their countries by “urge to create”. Their power to influence people and embody the identity of a community or a group of people was a threat to these regimes. They found many ways to avoid censorship, by using abstract forms, bright colors, and an indirect message anti governmental to assemble activists and awaken the masses locally and internationally.

As I know the contemporary art is a need, to say a message or to change concepts, I saw a lot of this kind of art in my country Syria, when the revolution started, that was one of the peaceful methods that we did, and not necessarily by artists. A lot of examples I have in my mind, I will share with you this video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=086d-2lFF58

This guy is from Douma the city near the capital Damascus, which is known as a religious city. He refused to be part of the armed protesters. He loves music. And he is illiterate. I discovered ABO ALI when i visited Douma to do a puppets workshop with the children and I saw what he did. So I filmed him to send his message to the universe. Carrying a camera was a crime, every single methods of activism were forbidden.

Arabic spring started in many Mediterranean countries in 2010. We used Street art and video art and other ways to send messages that all we wanted was our freedom from the dictatorship. For 30 years, censorship was so tough on everything especially theaters, TV shows, cinema… Not only if we talked about the regime but also, if we wanted to raise issues about our civil rights, or sex or LGBT or religions or…

White t-shirts

The peaceful demonstrations were unacceptable in Syria, as any dictatorship country. The state media was showing that the demonstrators were terrorists… We started to create peaceful and artistic movements. One day, in Damascus the capital, and the hardest city to do any activism, the army was everywhere. We all wore a white t-shirt and walked in silence, the little shops dressed their models with white shirts as well. After 10 minutes, the army came with the green sticks, beating anybody on this street, arresting many. Those who escaped would avoid going back home from fear to be followed. We would change our telephone numbers and try to find some unknown places to our relatives and friends. But we kept on going created something else, like the “Easter eggs” colored and written on them messages for freedom and spread them all over the city…

Brides

“Stop killing. We Are All Syrians” was a movement created in Damascus in 2012. It was different from the others. Most of the demonstrators were few women. They chose a day and one or two of them stopped on the main street carrying this message: (“Stop killing” we are all Syrians) written in white painted on a red flag. Anyone at these events knew that they might not go back home. In the next days, the activists decided they should be in crowded places like “Medhat Basha” the old souk in the city. Four women wore a bride dress and stood in the middle of the souk, holding the same statement “Stop killing”. Who will arrest a bride? They thought this was the most peaceful expression but, unfortunately, the army arrested the four of them for 2 months…

Violence control and censorship

We the young could not meet to create a movement of protest for equality. We were observed and many intellectuals disappeared overnight. We kept our hope that one day things should change. Revolutions in neighboring countries were happening and we found the courage to vindicate our rights for freedom and democracy.

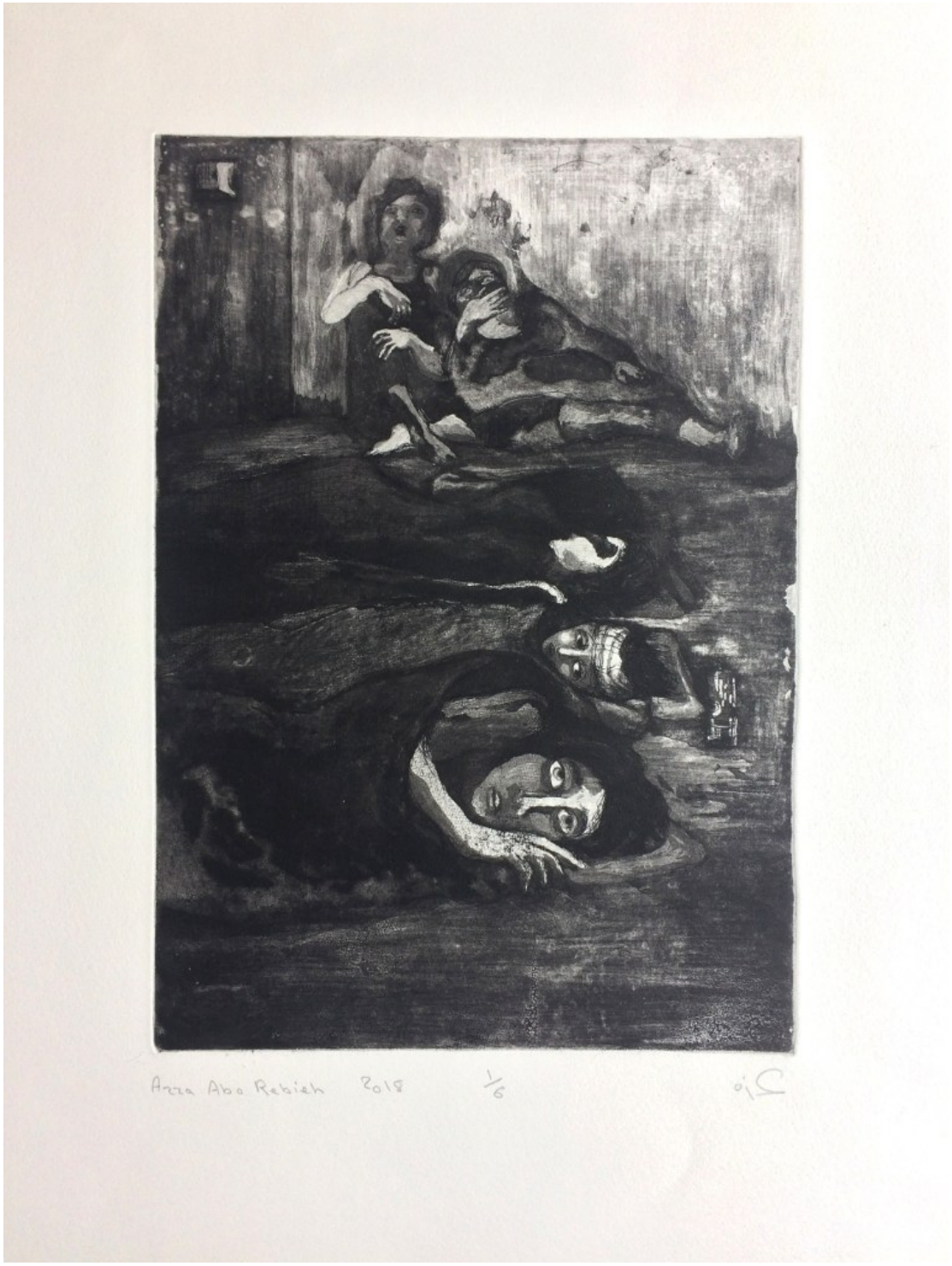
For 6 years, our number was growing but so were the arrests, torture, and death. I didn’t give up even when I knew that at any second I could be imprisoned or killed. And that is what happened one evening. They had tortured a friend until she gave names of activists.

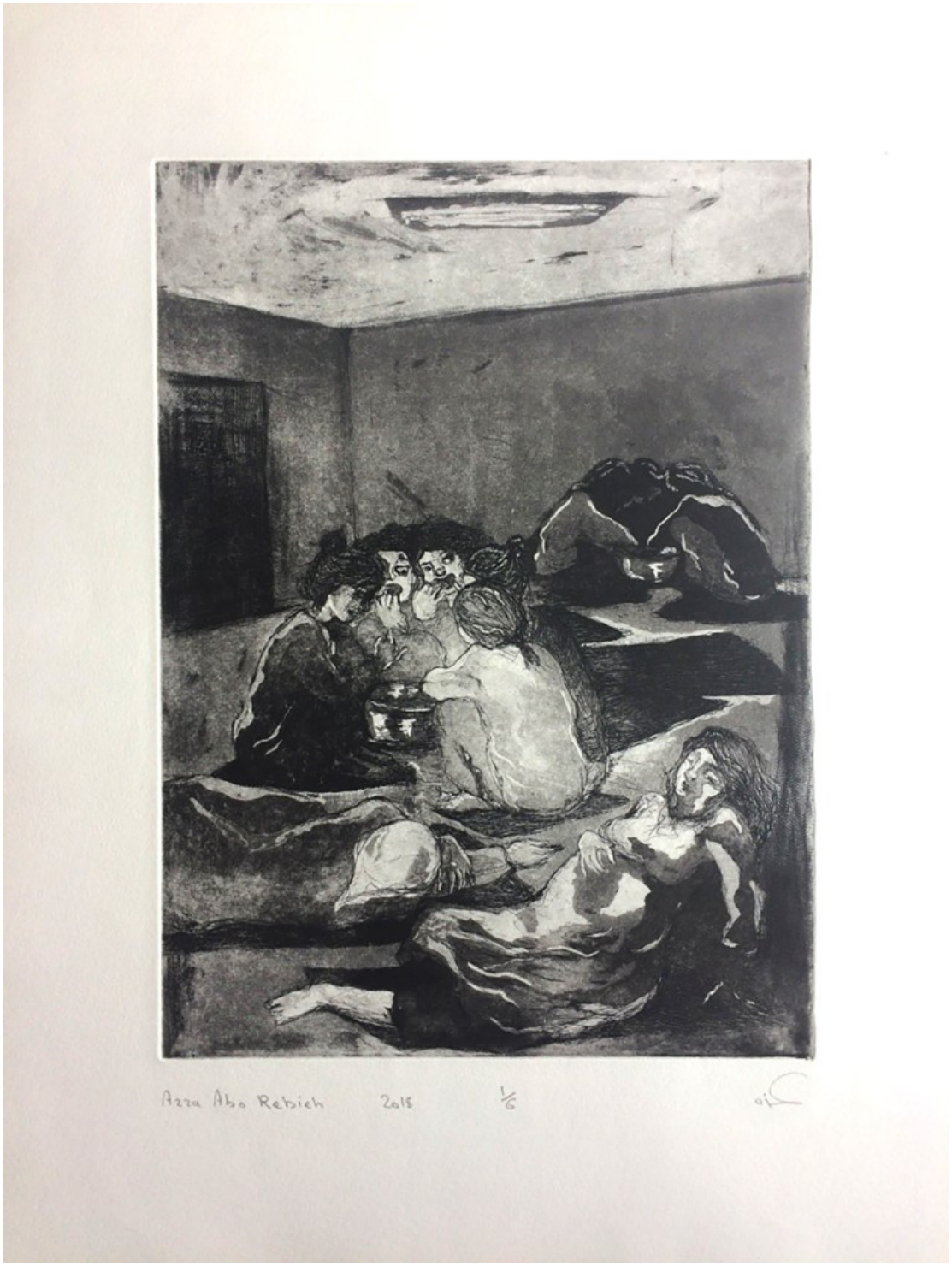


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My story started after the massacre of Hama in 1982. My home city where 28 of my family were cold murdered. I was 2 years old. I grew up hearing stories of atrocities and cruelty. In my junior years everyone had to swear allegiance to the “Commander”. I drew and painted and dreamt of a fair and better world. I loved my culture and the dynamic hard working people who built this homeland in all the fields.

Art can express violence, control and many other subjects without having to be direct. History and art critics will find a way to pass it on. TRACES, my first solo exhibition in 2018 recorded the life of many innocent people, regardless of where it takes place. Goya has accompanied me in this journey. While he recorded the outside life of the many, I the inside the prison of the few. I chose a title to avoid future problems with the regime that tortured and killed so many potential talents.


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Detainee – Feminism

Not only me, but maybe I have been chosen to tell the stories of lots of women and children and men. They tried nonstop activism for years against the regime, I am not a feminist but I cannot see weakness. That was my part of responsibility during the revolution. I forgot that

I am an artist. There was something historical happening and many people needed me and counted on me and other activists.

My crime was painting graffitis, helping children to overcome the fear of war with puppets, filming, and painting on the signboards for the demonstrations. I was detained and interrogated for 72 days with no one knowing my whereabouts. I shared this 3×3 m room with 15 women, some of them under 18. After this period, I was taken to the central prison and saw my parents for the first time.

The art of surviving

Lucky we the artists, I always said, our imagination takes us to different places and allow us to behave as different characters, so we have a special mental power. That is also another responsibility to share with the world. When I was detained with 15 other women in a 3 square room at the interrogation headquarters of the regime, a place of physical and mental torture, days and nights went by without knowing where we were or when we will be released. No one from our relatives and friends knew where to look for us. Are we alive? Hungry? Frozen? Dead? The women and I started to get depressed day by day. I decided then to create a workshop to help them overcome our reality. Nothing was available but the fibers of the blankets, and some olive seeds that became our tools and gave us hope that one day we will all be freed. We would create stories of a better life and even sometimes jokes. Their concentration was in their craft. Art was a powerful mean to get emotionally stronger. After a while I found them ready to go on hunger and medicine strike. Two weeks later, some of us were sent to a central prison.

In the central prison, I heard a bigger room with women who have been there for many years… Their crime was: “you are against the regime”, or if they were living in the Anti-regime areas.

I found kids with their mothers and young girls under 18. Here the parents were allowed to visit and bring us some necessities. Mine were the pen, papers and books. I started drawing the women to remind them how beautiful they are, I lent them the books and taught some of them how to read and others how to draw. One lady drew a house with flowers and adopted it as her home.

One night, we noticed that the New Year was coming and we wanted to celebrate. We got the approval from our jailer, and we started. They asked me to paint on their faces. We were so happy, super happy. They said that this is the first time that they have an artist inmate… and suddenly Fatima decided to thank the authority and asked me to write on a board: WE THE PRISONERS want to wish you a happy New Year… I only changed the word prisoners to LADIES. She looked with wide-open eyes and a shy smile, as if she remembered that she is a Lady after all.

Every day we would wake up to the voice that calls the release of 5 to 8 women from the prison. We always celebrated and cried of joy and hope. One night we went to sleep,

imagining a whale carrying us all out of here. On January 19 2016, my release came through. I spent 10 months home with my warm parents and my two cats, avoiding seeing anyone knowing I am being watched. And one day I received a phone call from my lawyer:" YOU HAVE TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY IMMEDIATELY" or you will be arrested again.

I left to Beirut, Lebanon with my parents where I am currently residing. My father was a great man and my greatest friend. He always supported me, and never showed his fear for my safety or the troubles that I caused to my family. Yes, he was proud of me and never expected me to be weak. It was the hardest feeling in my life to leave my country, everyone and everything by force. I was given a one-way ticket. Yes, I was in a very bad situation and traumatized. But I looked at my mirror , and I told myself that I have to go on living that if they can kick me out of my country they cannot kick the freedom out of my brain. I have to tell the stories of these women, and our revolution. I must draw; I will share it with the world. That is my admiration to Francesco Goya who by engraving on metal and wood was able to print many copies to reach many people.

In 2018, on March 15, the commemoration of the Syrian revolution, I opened my first solo exhibition in Beirut, TRACES , with 30 engraving artworks realized savagely in 6 months. And my anger is still alive as much as my hope that one day we will be FREE.



Azza Abo Rebieh

Azza Abo Rebieh is a Syrian artist and printmaker, graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus 2002. She has been Artist Protection Fund fellow at the American Academy in Rome for 4 months (2019-2020) and she is now based in Beirut. She was one of 30 women sharing a cell in the Adra prison in Damascus, detained because of her art and her activism. Her drawings have been shown at the Drawing Center in New York, and her solo exhibition was exhibited in 392 Rmeil 393 Galley. In addition, her project Beirut "Traces" was presented with a talk at King's College, in the UK, and also in the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. The British Museum obtained three of her etching artworks in 2014. She won the first prize of the Youth Printmakers in Damascus and the Ostrobothnian Museum obtained her artwork.