

'The Thousand and One Nights'

Postmasters

Like Scheherazade, who entertained her husband, the heartless king, with stories to delay her execution, the contemporary Palestinian artists in this thoughtful exhibition, curated by Mary Evangelista with Michael Connor, engaged viewers with an eclectic array of artworks created against a backdrop of political strife. Rather than allow politics to dominate their work, the artists addressed conflict and displacement in subtle and intriguing ways, without delivering a sermon or history lesson.

Most of the six artists in this show were born in either the West Bank or Gaza and now live in Europe, the United States, or Israel. As a result their works bear tinges of nostalgia. Hanna Farah-Kufer Bir'im, who adopted the name of the depopulated village near his hometown as his surname, explores his identity with photographic diptychs in which he appears, for example, standing by an arch near his grandfather's home and as John the Baptist, his head on a silver platter. Jumana Manna's *Familiar* (2007) pairs a photograph of herself and her mother with a video showing the artist as an adult suckling her mother's breast; it's as if she cannot break her ties to her family or roots. Taysir Batniji's duet of photographs, *Sky Over Gaza* (2001/4),

taken three years apart and showing the same television antenna, conveys the sense that little changes in his homeland.

Sharif Waked transformed an image he found in Hisham's Palace, an archeological dig in Jericho, of a lion devouring a gazelle into a series of pictograms on 30 canvases. In this series the animals gradually intertwine, finally merging into a big red circle. The work is an apt metaphor for the Middle East crisis, with two opposing sides enmeshed in a cycle of violence, but it is punchy and graphic, and only a bit didactic. —*Barbara Pollack*

Steve Huston

Eleanor Ettinger

Some see boxing as an art; others view it as a blood sport. Steve Huston portrays it as a combination of both. In his well-wrought, action-packed oils, the ring is a dramatically lit arena in which savagery and survival go hand in glove. Huston's



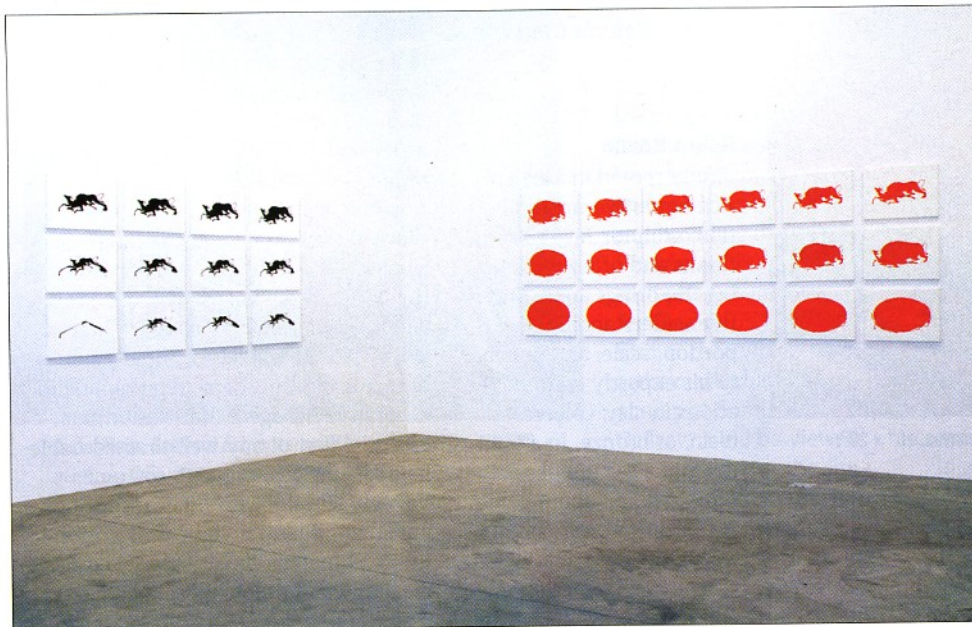
Steve Huston, *Fist Fall*, 2009, oil on linen on panel, 24" x 36". Eleanor Ettinger.

gritty subjects—jabs, clinches, and body blows—are neither sweet nor subtle. But the luscious look of his wet-on-wet paint is especially beguiling. Because opposites intensify each other, the split between the violent, ugly ritual Huston depicts and the gracefulness of its execution ratchets up both sides of his enterprise.

The artist derives certain subjects and pictorial devices from Marvel and DC comics, which feature archetypal male heroes whose muscles have muscles. Huston eliminates backgrounds for dramatic effect, and he transforms comic-book speed lines into gestural brushwork. Some might claim his art is illustrative, but that would imply that the story takes precedence over the image. Not so for Huston's works, whose formal properties echo and amplify the narrative content.

Ropes, sinews, veins, and the stripes on the combatants' trunks are all rendered with fibrillating, whiplash brushstrokes. *Tug* (2009) depicts a solitary figure grasping a rope and hanging on for dear life. His knotted arm looks flayed in the manner of Francis Bacon, and his taut diagonal pose underscores the urgency of the moment. The lone protagonist in *Right Jab* (2009) feints and throws a quick right hand toward the frame's edge. Like many of Huston's paintings, the 8-by-12-inch panel is deceptively small: a welterweight that delivers a knockout punch.

—*Gerard Haggerty*



Sharif Waked, *Jericho First*, 2002, acrylic on 30 canvases, 14" x 19 3/4" each. Postmasters.