





Essay by Razan Samara

My tongue is heavy. I trace the outlines of a dove in Palestinian artist Ibrahim Abusitta's painting hanging on the James Street wall. I trace its beautiful shape with my finger, at some point trailing off the painting, reaching into the clouds.

I close my eyes and see my people rising, martyrs and ancestors reuniting. To die in Gaza, is to die a freedom fighter and teach the world what the struggle for sovereignty and self-determination looks like. I think about the children of Gaza, wondering if they know that their struggle and stories are radicalizing a new generation that is re-imagining a world beyond settler colonialism:

Abusitta's painting invites us to consider liberation as inevitable, a dove with wings stretched wide above a drone. The dove is the only outline filled in, bright white paint contrasts against a black-blue backdrop. I focus my eyes again on the dove, squinting as the warm sunlight reflects off the painting. My attention diverts again; seasons have changed and the Zionist occupation has only become more violent, more insatiable in its thirst for land and a falsified narrative of belonging. It's been 76 years of occupation, and there's so much that has been stolen from your little life, my dear Hind. The sun is our people's witness.

This grief tastes metallic. Blood stains every word I am writing. Ibrahim, I know you're right, liberation is inevitable, but it is so painfully slow. In Gaza, water and fish and little boats are life, but all I see is water mixed with sand, rubble, flour, rice, and blood. I want so badly for all the outlines in your painting to turn into lifelines. I want so badly for the earth carrying our ancestors to crack open, revealing our truths. I want to see her big round brown eyes opening up, glorious and raging. Our people grew grains and nourished these lands, while they stole, extracted, and dropped plastic boxes from the sky. I can almost hear the drone in your painting hum, a tune so deafening and persistent it has earned its own name. Zanana.

I let the grief pulse through me, feeling the vibrations from the homelands.

Hope. I remember our first conversation about this banner. I asked you so many questions that required you to be vulnerable; What is at the heart of your art practice? What does it mean to be making art during a genocide? What are the possibilities of this work?

As you talked about your painting, the outlines came to life. Minimalist white paint strokes danced on wood, like a motion picture. You told me about how important symbols, stories, and research have been to your artwork exploring Palestinian identity, and the possibilities for connections to our people and homelands that this work allows for. You shared your desire to create art that honors the past and hopes to inspire the future. I imagine the silhouettes in your painting talking to one another, sharing their stories and lifeworlds across time and space. Sometimes the silhouettes are shuhada' (martyrs) and aslaf (ancestors), other times they are a son and a grandfather or maybe Abusitta himself with his ancestors. I even imagine two Palestinians in the diaspora witnessing, painting, and writing about life despite it all. In Abusitta's own words, the silhouette's can even be the future looking back on us. Each symbol has been placed so deliberately to create a story that can be seen and read in all directions.

To create this piece for Hamilton Artist Inc., Abusitta began with a silhouette of a figure in the ground, looking up at a drone. It pointed to the reality of Palestinians living under siege and occupation on their homelands, but, as Abusitta describes it, it didn't give anything to hope for. At that point, Abusitta added another silhouette of a figure and a dove, the only symbol filled in, to create a story that centres a triumphant white dove, victory soaring above tyranny.

When you approach the banner on James Street, you will first see the dove. Liberation is not only the focus, but the moral imperative of the story. As you look closer, you will see the finer details, silhouettes of a people whose identities are inextricably linked to the soil and whose stories are traversing even the darkest, deepest parts of the sea; a metaphor for Palestine and Palestinians themselves.

Victory Soaring Above Tyranny will be a daily, persistent reminder of this reality for everyone that walks by it for the remainder of the year. It's an invitation to consider our roles and responsibilities for building a better future, one where drones are no longer humming over Palestinians and their homeland.