Tina Sherwell

534 words

**Hallaj, Mustafa** (1938-2002)

Mustafa Hallaj is considered a pioneer of Palestinian graphic arts and an important figure in the resistant art movement of the Palestinians. He was born in 1938 in Salame village in the Jaffa district. His early childhood memories of exodus and exile from the homeland in 1948 were to be a recurring theme that haunted his artistic works. In 1958, he went to study sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo. In 1968, he completed his postgraduate studies of higher education in the Luxor Atlier, where he focused on the history of ancient Egyptian, Canaanite and Phoenician art that had a significant influence on his entire oeuvre. After 1968 his interest changed increasingly from sculpture to etching, engraving and printing, which he found to be a more accessible medium that could reach large audiences. Hallaj spent eight years in Beirut, and left following the Israeli invasion of the city in 1982. He lost significant content of his studio when leaving Beirut under severe bombing. He went to Damascus, and after recovering from the devastating events in Beirut he established The Naji al-Ali gallery in 1987. His work, structured mostly as murals, is dominated by linear forms, outlines and silhouettes. Hallaj is most known for his etchings and woodcuts, and his distinctive style of representation, characterised by a bold linear style, which draws on ancient traditions.

In an interview in 1979, when asked about the relationship between art and Palestinian revolution Hallaj stated, “The artist is a continuous revolutionary power, revolting against the reality and criticizing it in an image that is more beautiful and supreme than reality itself. The artist is the dream cell in the body of the nation.”

His work is infused with reference to mythology and symbolism, inherent from his readings of historical texts. Recurring images in his work include the bull, the cow, birds, heroic male figures, nude females with flowing long hair, forests and half-human half-animal forms. His figures assume a modest and fearful relationship to the elements of the natural world and the vast terrain of the earth, in which the relationship between animals, humans and the landscape are intertwined, undetermined and continually fluid and permeable.

His major work was *River of Life* incomplete at his death; a monumental work of 104 meters-long beginning with the creation of man, primitive life on earth, but it also includes visual memories and recollections, myths and reference to the Palestinian struggle. (Al Hoash, 43) He remained in Damascus until his tragic death in 2002 in a fire in The Naji Ali Gallery while trying to save sections of his 104 meter long mural from the flames.

During his career he was recipient of several awards, including: Silver medal for Palestinian Exhibition, Cairo, 1961, First Prize for Sculpture, Alexandria Biennale 1986, International Honorary Award Sharjah Biennale 1995, Gold Prize for Etching Mahras Festival Tunis, 1997, First Prize for Etching Laodicea Biennale, 1999.

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