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Bowls in BAM exhibit contain hope and grief for the Mideast

By **Haley Edwards**
Seattle Times staff reporter

Robi Damelin, an Israeli woman, and Ali Abu-Awwad, a Palestinian man, are sitting in the cafe at the Bellevue Arts Museum talking about ducklings. Damelin is almost old enough to be Abu-Awwad's mother, and their friendship is laced with the exasperated affection of a mother and son.

Abu-Awwad: "They were just so little, the ducklings. She couldn't leave them."

Damelin: "They were going to get run over! So I made Ali get out of the car and help me shoo them off the road. But we couldn't touch them and they couldn't get up on the curb, so Ali lifted each of them on his boot, like an elevator." The friends laugh.

Damelin and Abu-Awwad are the face of the new exhibit, "Offering Reconciliation," at the Bellevue Arts Museum. Even as international relations deteriorate in the Middle East, they are an Israeli and a Palestinian, united by a single vision: Peace in their homelands. They met several years ago through Parents Circle — Family Forum, an international organization that unites Palestinian and Israeli family members who've lost loved ones. (Damelin lost her son. Abu-Awwad, his brother).

The concept of the exhibition is simple: 135 Palestinian and Israeli artists were asked to decorate bowls (each was given an identical 2-foot-long serving platter-like dish) in a way that reflected their relationship to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The show displays all 135 pieces.

Although the art is not all professionally executed, the exhibit is emotionally compelling. Some of the bowls are painted with doves and handprints, or etched with Arabic and Hebrew scripts, the black lines waltzing in unison. One bowl, painted by Aliza Olmert, the wife of the Israeli prime minister, displays the words "Jew doesn't expel Arab doesn't expel Jew" in an arching spiral. Half pleading, half mantra.

Nearby, another bowl is painted white, decorated only with a bundle of sharpened yellow pencils. Perhaps it's meant to suggest the blank slate where a lasting peace accord may be written, but for now its gaping emptiness — the daunting enormity of the task it suggests — leaves you breathless.



IIAN AMIHAI

Mohammad Said Kalash's mixed-media artistry at Bellevue Arts Museum's "Offering Reconciliation" exhibit.



IIAN AMIHAI

Ofra and Narin Zimbalista's bowl is included in the BAM show featuring Israeli and Palestinian artists.

Other bowls relate the disillusionment and indoctrinated hatred that

Now on view

"Offering Reconciliation" 10 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Fridays, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Saturdays, 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Sundays, closed Mondays, through Aug. 19, Bellevue Arts Museum, 510 Bellevue Way N.E., Bellevue; \$5-\$7, free from 5:30-9 p.m. on the first Friday of the month (425-519-0770 or www.bellevuearts.org).

plague the 60-year-old conflict. One bowl has been broken in half. Its fractured, irrevocably broken spine glows in the overhead lights.

A few tables away, another bowl offers the rotting carcass of an opossum — or is it a black, mythical beast? — curled up like a sleeping dog. Its eyes are bloody and swarming with larvae. Plastic flies feast on its wet innards. Not exactly a symbol of reconciliation.

Damelin and Abu-Awwad recognize the disparate messages — hope, grief, disillusionment — in the show.

"There is a lot of pain on both sides right now," says Damelin. "You meet these hardened people — kids, even — who have no reason to believe in reconciliation. How do you fight [against] that? The point is not to hug and kiss and forget our pasts. The point is to realize, 'OK, we disagree. But you're human and I'm human and the pain we're causing each other is not the answer.' It's one small step at a time."

"I do not need to love my neighbor to have peace with my neighbor," says Abu-Awwad. The friends call their task — delivering a message of nonviolent reconciliation to a group of people indoctrinated in violent opposition — "Sisyphean." They say their strength comes not in expecting peace, but daring to hope for it, one person at a time.

The Association of Israeli Decorative Arts and James Wolfensohn, former president of the World Bank, helped fund the small exhibit's travel expenses to the United States this year. The show has come to Bellevue from the World Bank and leaves for the United Nations in September. At the end of the tour in November, the bowls will be auctioned as a fundraiser for Parents Circle — Family Forum. (Bids are collected at each stop in the tour).

In the cafe at Bellevue Arts Museum, Damelin drops her dirty napkin in Abu-Awwad's espresso. She didn't know he wasn't done sipping on it. She laughs and apologizes.

"You see? You see how she drives me crazy?" Abu-Awwad asks, his eyes smiling.

"Yes, I do drive him crazy. We're not so mootsy-cutesy that we don't argue. But we have to live next to each other now. All the time. Isn't it funny how the world works?"

Haley Edwards: 206-464-2745 or hedwards@seattletimes.com