

I would like to thank Cheryl Kramer for inviting me to share my thoughts with you about this exhibit of Iraqi and Palestinian art. I intend to speak only briefly but I've written up my comments since I was initially invited to make a presentation; only this morning did I learn about the roundtable format.

Since Beth (Harris), has already given us some sense of the political contexts in which the art was produced, I will focus on the contexts in which we are viewing it tonight. By "viewing" I don't mean the individual act of looking—about which I cannot, in truth, say very much—but, rather, the sort of public gaze that art galleries both enable and authorize. In other words, it is our *collective* encounter with this art that I want to speak about and I want to do so in terms of a self-critique.

This is because I am assuming that many of us are here not just to indulge our aesthetic sensibilities or out of a voyeuristic curiosity, but to express solidarity with the people whose art we have come to view. Or, at least that is my hope. And, to me, there is no better way to be in solidarity with a people who are facing terrible destruction—some would say genocide—at the hands of the U.S. or as the result of its policies, than to engage some painful political and ethical issues evoked by our arrogance, our ignorance, and our militarism.

I have titled my commentary "Celebrating Humanity or Cannibalizing It?" and I don't pose this merely as a rhetorical question. Rather, I believe there are different ways to think about art itself, one celebratory, the other necrophilic. Perhaps this is too stark of a binary and, in the "real world" the line between celebrating something and consuming it is not so finely drawn. Even so, I want to inhabit this binary because I want to speak of two different approaches to art.

One is the seemingly universal view of art as the lowest common *denominator* of humanity, as what *connects* us irrevocably, if ineffably, with one another. This is the tendency that I believe is most conducive to recognizing and honoring our common humanity through shared aesthetic experiences.

The other tendency, which I think is quintessentially Western, is to use art as a *classification* of humanity, as what *separates* the civilized from the primitive or—to put it in more contemporary terms—the human from the terrorist, or, "us" from "them." I contend that when we treat art in this way, as the signifier of another's humanity, we also risk dehumanizing and cannibalizing the other.

I want to extend this critique to the present exhibit or, rather, to the curator's view of this exhibit. Earlier this month, Meg (Novak) sent out an email in which she wrote "I think the exhibit is powerful in that it provides proof that Iraqis are human beings that are cultured and capable of creating beauty in a time when Iraqis are increasingly being portrayed as uncivilized terrorists."

Even though this explanation clearly means to *defend* the humanity of the Iraqis, I found it disturbing at many levels. Before I say why, I should clarify that the object of my critique isn't Meg; rather, it is the general Western discourse about art which I have just mentioned of which her comments are illustrative.

I was struck first by the irony of trying to rescue the Iraqis from stereotypes of them as terrorists that we ourselves have created, or to be more accurate, the Bush regime and mainstream media have created, even though not a single Iraqi was involved in 9/11 and even though there were no WMDs stashed away in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was about to unleash upon the world.

I also find it troubling that, even though it is the U.S. that went to war with Iraq and not the other way around, it is we who are looking to prove the humanity of the Iraqis. In this context, I have always wondered why U.S.-Americans seem to need proof that the other—whether Iraqi or Palestinian or Muslim or Arab—is indeed a human being. Why do we not take the existence of the other simply as a given, as an ontological fact? Are Iraqis and Palestinians not human beings until we have had a chance to view and pronounce upon their art? And from what vantage point do we speak about Iraqi humanity post Abu Ghraib? What sorts of displacements allow us to make the other's humanity, but not our own, a matter of interrogation or dispute?

I couldn't find any compelling answers to these questions and so I did not come to see this exhibit earlier because I felt I did not need proof that Iraqis and Palestinians are in truth human beings; I have known this all along and without having to consume or to collect their cultural artifacts.

I also did not come to see this exhibit because I feel deeply dismayed by the one way gaze, by which I mean the fact that even as we are viewing Palestinian and Iraqi art what they are seeing today is not our art, but the U.S. war and torture machine and the nakedness of U.S. imperialist power.

And, yet, in spite of this, the victims of the U.S. take the humanity of its people for granted, which is why they can *still* be outraged by Abu Ghraib. Meanwhile, many of us aestheticize their torture and their suffering by putting up pictures from Abu Ghraib in a museum in New York City.

So, as you can tell, I was deeply troubled by the framing of this exhibit in terms of the *humanity* of the Iraqis and Palestinians.

I am also troubled by putting together their art in this way because it might implicitly suggest some congruence between the nature of their political oppression. I don't want to construct a hierarchy of suffering, but it helps not to conflate different forms of suffering under the rubric of oppression. That is why I think it is essential to distinguish between the occupation of Palestine by Israel and the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination and the Iraqi resistance to the dictatorship of Saddam Hussain. Unfortunately, the exhibit

Art Across Borders: Celebrating Humanity or Cannibalizing It?
Exhibition of Iraqi and Palestinian and Art, Ithaca College, October 28, 2004
Asma Barlas

provides no contextualization of the politics of these different forms of oppression and hence also of these different arts of resistance.

Finally, it seems to me that framing an exhibit like this one in terms of border crossings ignores that some borders will in fact never be crossed and were never meant to be crossed. Indeed, I wonder if the transborder mobility of art obscures and is inversely proportionate to the immobility of people in real time and space. More than that, I wonder if we will ever be willing to cross the borders of our own ignorance to embrace the other as a human being, without requiring visual or artistic proof of the cultural beauty that the other is “capable” of producing.