

Witnesses To Oppression

(Exhibition At
The Alternative Museum)

by Tom Wachunas

Geno Rodriguez, founder and artistic director of the Alternative Museum at 17 White St., doesn't take the term "political art" very lightly. In fact, he bristles at the term's application to art informed by the barest, reactionary readings of a given situation. He has little patience for bandwagon mentalities that latch on to a hot issue just because it may be an opportunity to be in a big show. My impression of the man is that he seeks out those artists who have made direct contact, real-time experience of the subjects they embrace.

In that spirit, the Alternative Museum organized a trip for 15 Americans, most of them artists, to visit Israel's Occupied Territories—the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—in March, 1989. The result of that itinerary is an exhibition now on view at the museum, "Occupation and Resistance: American Impressions of the Intifada," on view through June 30. The show is a cathartic, if not disturbing concentration of images and objects that give renewed significance to the idea of art as an effective source of alternative information—information you won't get from your favorite tv news report, or daily tabloid editorials.

One group of four Jewish women artists from the San Francisco Bay Area—Miranda Bergman, Susan Greene, Marlene Tobias and Dina Redman—lived for nine weeks in a refugee camp with a Palestinian family. Working with local artists, they taught classes and produced six murals under the collective title "Break the Silence Mural Project," a grand gesture of solidarity with the Palestinian's search for peace and stability in their homeland.

Photographer Bill Biggart has become a frequent contributor to several major tabloids. Here, his 14 black and white photographs have a particularly muscular presence. Biggart frames his subjects with an eye for undeniable urgency. One of his most arresting images is of a young woman with a broken wrist. Her face says it all—anger, pain, pleading, and dignity.

Magda Djani, who works in a variety of media, got her inspiration for "Mona Lisa Minus the Forbidden Colors of the Palestinian Flag" from the Palestinian folk painter Fathi Ghaban, who has been jailed and beaten several times for disseminating his art that violates Israeli rules against displaying the Palestinian colors—green, red, black and white—in the occupied territories. The reproduc-

tion of Leonardo's classic painting is a computer graphic in garish blues and eerie gold. It's an effective indictment of one culture attempting to forcibly subjugate, or perhaps totally eliminate a neighboring one.

"Two States Now 1990" is a mixed media sculpture by Yong Soon Min. It's a tall, free-standing map of Palestine with the words of African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass cut into it: "The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress." The front is black, and the backside is faced with images from camps against a wallpaper pattern of U.S. dollar bills.

In Terry Berkowitz' "The Statistics of Intolerance," a landscape photo hovers in the air over two piles of stones, each numbering the dead on both sides since the Intifada birth, in 1987. She has also installed what she calls a video-object, "Somebody's Brother, Somebody's Son (Homage to Hamad)." The object is a sort of corrugated metal shack, or maybe even a bunker or tombstone. The top is covered with soil—a mini-landscape with a tiny tree and a video monitor. The video tells the tragic story of a young man who died from a bullet inflicted by an Israeli soldier.

Gadi Gofbarg's photo installation with text "A Land Without People for a People Without Land," addresses the roots of Zionism, excerpted from diaries by the movement's founder, Theodor Herzl. This is a chilling account of deliberate property expropriation with no accountability to those displaced.

Gofbarg views this exhibition as an opportunity to know that "art has a capacity to facilitate a discourse, to counter-balance misinformation." Terry Berkowitz sees the show as communicating a vital social issue as opposed to a merely political one.

The most significant element in the power of this exhibition is the realization that each of the artists lived with and witnessed the situations they address, drawing their own conclusions about the sociopolitical ramifications of one of the world's most urgent conflicts. This show isn't about making stars or selling art, necessarily. It's about telling a truth. "I'm interested in what art *could* be," says Geno Rodriguez, "...in refining and expanding definitions. We don't need the wealthy to define what art is. Artists can do that."