

**Malak Mattar**  
**LONG LIVE GAZA**

**30.12.2025 – 30.03.2026**

Laveronica Arte Contemporanea is pleased to present the solo exhibition of **Malak Mattar (Gaza, 1999)**, *LONG LIVE GAZA*, for the first time in our gallery spaces with a text by **Vijay Prashad**.

***How Do You Paint a Genocide.***  
***On the Art of Malak Mattar.***

A bomb falls on a building. It rapidly decimates the structure with its explosion and tears the skin off humans. Those who die are dead, and the rest are consumed in the collapse and the fire, some of them being able to survive but only barely. Down the streets, a home is not bombed, but the inhabitants hear the sounds and the screams. They will never forget those noises. They look to the sky every few minutes to see if there is a missile pointed toward them. An ambulance rushes to the scene, but before it gets there, a bomb falls on it, and it flies into the air, its medical workers dead instantly. A journalist standing nearby is hit by drone fire, unleashed because it recognises his face. His colleague, a photographer, takes a picture, but is hit in the leg by some shrapnel. He cannot photograph himself.

**These are scenes from the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians – ongoing for almost a thousand days, if not since 1948 when the *permanent nakba* [catastrophe] was unleashed by the Israeli state.**

**But what is the painter to do with these and a million other scenes?**

The most compelling painter might be the child, whose eyes are innocent to the larger stories of human violence and of the narrower stories of colonial violence. The child draws a house with a roof that slopes even if there are no sloping rooves in Gaza, and then there is the bomb which is already on fire as it travels to hit the house. The innocence of the tragedy is captured in another frame by a stick figure on fire, a stick figure so much easier to absorb than an actual photograph of a person on fire. The child's perspective abstracts from the violence and creates the genuine concept: the actual, horrible devastation of the viciousness. **There is no grey area; there are no two sides: there is a bomb, and then there is total destruction, the dropping of the bomb a ferocity that has no justification.**

Malak Mattar was born in 1999 in the Gaza Strip. When she was fourteen years old, Israel began its Operation Protective Edge (2014) and decimated most of Gaza. **This was not her first experience of Israeli violence.** Throughout the Second Intifada, when Malak was a little baby and toddler, Israel routinely bombed Gaza till 2003. Then began an almost annual bombing raid: Operation Rainbow and Operation Days of Penitence (2004), Operation Hot Winter (2008), Operation Cast Lead (2008-09), and Operation Pillar of Defence (2012). This was her childhood. As a form of therapy, Malak's mother urged her to take up painting. Her parents are both refugees: her father is from al-Jorah (now called Ashkelon) and her mother is from al-Batani al-Sharqi, one of the Palestinian villages along the edge of what is now called the Gaza Strip. On 25 November 1948, the newly formed Israeli government passed Order Number 40, which authorised Israeli troops to expel Palestinians from villages such as al-Batani al-Sharqi. **'Your role is to expel the Arab refugees from these villages and prevent their return by destroying the villages...Burn the villages**

**demolish the stone houses', wrote the Israeli commanders.**

Malak's parents carry these memories, but despite the ongoing occupation and war, they try to endow their children with dreams and hope. Malak picked up a paint brush and began to envision a luminous world of bright colours and Palestinian imagery, including the symbol of sumud ('steadfastness'): the olive tree. Since she was a teenager, Malak has painted young girls and women, often with babies and doves, though, as she told the writer Indlieb Farazi Saber, the women's heads are often tilted to the side. That is because, she said, **'If you stand straight, upright, it shows you are stable, but with a head tilted to one side, it evokes a feeling of being broken, a weakness. We are humans, living through wars, through brutal moments... the endurance sometimes slips'**.

Malak's work is rooted in Palestinian traditions of painting, inspired by a history that dates to Arab Christian iconography (a tradition that was developed by Yusuf al-Halabi of Aleppo in the seventeenth century). That 'Aleppo Style', as the art critic Kamal Boullata wrote in *Istihdar al-Makan*, developed into the 'Jerusalem Style', which brightened the iconography by introducing flora and fauna from Islamic miniatures and embroidery. Malak's early work was spectacular, showing an innate talent for colour and perspective. When I first saw Malak's work, I thought of how fitting it was that she had redeemed the life of **Zulfa al-Sa'di (1905–1988)**, one of the most important painters of her time, who painted Palestinian political and cultural heroes. Al-Sa'di stopped painting after she was forced to flee Jerusalem during the 1948 Nakba; her only paintings that remain are those that she carried with her on horseback. **Sa'di spent the rest of her life teaching art to Palestinian children at an UNRWA school in Damascus. It was in one such UNRWA school that Malak learned to paint. Malak seemed to pick up al-Sa'di's brushes and paint for her.**

Malak painted animals and people, mostly women, with halos. This use of halos echoed the paintings of the earlier generation of Palestinian artists, such as **Ismail Shammout (1930-2006)** and **Sliman Mansour (1947-2011)**. In their work, the halo signified strength and martyrdom, the sacredness of the struggle for Palestinian liberation. Shammout's extraordinary painting, *Halo of Light* (1969) depicts a fedayeen (a fighter) sitting beside an olive tree and holding his gun, resting – perhaps after the defeat in the Six Day War of 1967 – but resolved to continue the struggle to defend his land and his people. The halo that surrounds the scene sets the mood of expectation. The work of Malak before the genocide built on these modernist giants and advanced their work – her female figures bathed in bright colours, tilted to the side, their heads framed by halos of resistance and resolve.

Malak and I have corresponded throughout this genocide, her fears manifest, her strength remarkable. On 6 January, she wrote, 'I'm working on a massive painting depicting many aspects of the genocide'. On a five-metre canvas, Malak created a work of art that began to resemble Pablo Picasso's celebrated *Guernica* (1937), which he painted to commemorate a massacre by fascist Spain against a town in the Basque region. In 2022, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) published a profile on Malak, calling her 'Palestine's Picasso'. In the article, Malak said, 'I was so inspired by Picasso that, in the beginning of my art journey, I tried to paint like him'. **This new painting by Malak reflects the heartbreak and steadfastness of the Palestinian people. It is an indictment of Israel's genocide and an affirmation of Palestinians' right to dream. If you look at it closely, you will see the victims of the genocide: the medical workers, the journalists, and the poets; the mosques and the churches; the unburied bodies, the naked prisoners, and the corpses of small children; the bombed cars and the fleeing refugees. There is a kite flying in the sky, a symbol from Refaat Alareer's poem 'If I Must Die' ('you must live to tell my story... so that a child, somewhere in Gaza while**

*looking heaven in the eye... sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above and thinks there is an angel there bringing back love').*

This collection of postcards brings together a different sensibility. Israeli missiles fall on Gaza and hit the most unexpected things – people yes, even babies, but also household objects. Almost as in a child's drawing, the missile does not explode because then one would only see the fire – but it sits beside the person or the animal or the object, and it seems to settle in beside them domestically. It has not exploded yet in the drawing. But Malak seems to encourage us to imagine the next instant, the explosion. The genocide of the Palestinians has been photographed and videotaped, images everywhere. There is no point being realist with a painting. It would simply mimic the photo or the film. It is better to paint the genocide with a juvenile eye – a missile flies into the head of a parrot or the side of a baby's carriage, it strikes a tiger in the face or strikes a paint brush; there are echoes of Abu Ghraib and Oslo, of Marwan Barghuti's chained hands and of Handala being hit in the back. **How do you paint a genocide? Either like the *Guernica* or through a child's eye.**

Vijay Prashad

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