



Vladimir Tamari

After 46 years in Tokyo, one of Japan's earliest Palestinian residents knows the trials of being a diaspora artist

It's the peak of Japan's sweltering, humid summer and Palestinian artist Vladimir Tamari is quick to reject an interview. These days he's feeling the impact of Japan's 'muggy' Augusts, he says, and prefers to chat in the springtime – 'when there are cherry blossoms and I feel great.' After some nudging, he changes his mind and settles into conversation from the comfort of his self-described 'apartment-cum-studio-cum-storage-cum-workspace' in the southern Tokyo suburb of Setagaya.

At 74 years old, he's worn many hats on his way to becoming a celebrated artist of the Palestinian diaspora, often jumping between projects and odd jobs to provide for the family he's built on the Pacific island nation. 'My brain is made of tofu!' Tamari declares, swirling his hands above his head like a tornado, to signify commotion. This year marks 46 years in Tokyo, or 46 years of tofu.

It's difficult to define exactly what Tamari does because of his tendency to experiment and dabble. Though he's known predominantly as an artist, his website yields search categories such as 'inventions', 'typography', 'physics & maths', 'art', 'fun'. Best known for his abstract paintings,

Vladimir Tamari has kept all 312 of his sketchbooks, which combine artworks, research notes and short diary entries. A look through one of them provides a glimpse into the diverse fields where his interests lie. 'These are some 3D drawings from 1976 – I was inventing machines and calculating stuff,' he says, turning to a page at random. 'Here I was studying mathematics. Here's a drawing of a potted plant. And next to it I wrote, "I've never felt in the past to this degree, the difference of what I see originally and what I draw on the page"'

Among Tamari's miscellany of titles is that of inventor: between the 1960s and 1980s, before the advent of the personal computer, he built 17 stereoscopic machines to assist with his passion in 3D drawing



which have toured the Institut du Monde Arabe and Darat al Funun, he only gained recognition amongst collectors in the past three years, he says. Born in the mid-1940s, he belongs to Palestine's 'lost generation of artists' as he puts it, living life on the fringes in an adoptive country.

His time in Japan has seen him work as a radio announcer, an accountant at an Arab embassy, an Arabic teacher at Tokyo University and an English teacher at a number of small schools. He smiles at the thought of

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one particularly odd job: Arabic narration for a national refrigerator commercial. Pointing one finger to the ceiling, he clears his throat and recites his script with laughter; 'Hathehe reфриdgerate al National!'

'In the past people became very familiar with West Bank artists because they were part of the resistance, but in the diaspora we were on our own,' he says. Born in Jerusalem and raised in Ramallah, Tamari was pursuing a physics degree in Beirut in 1967 and unable to return home. He lists his sister Vera Tamari, a ceramicist living in Ramallah, and Sliman Mansour as examples of pioneering artists who stayed behind. 'Some artists were better than others at promoting – I was never good at that. Luckily, people realised there's this whole generation of Palestinian artists producing meaningful stuff. I started selling my work recently and I'm very happy about that.'

Though there isn't a record of how many Palestinians are living in Japan, Tamari says he's met only a few since his arrival. And from his knowledge, he's the second Palestinian to live in Japan, following a friend from Jaffa who arrived in the 1960s. As one of Japan's few longstanding Palestinian residents, he's been witness to the (slowly) expanding presence of his home country in Tokyo throughout the years, like when the PLO office opened in 1977. He also witnessed Japan's strange, but exciting, mulukhiya campaign. Arabic scholars from Tokyo University tried the dish in Egypt in the 1970s and brought seeds back with them, he remembers. 'Mulukhiya became incredibly mainstream and there was this whole campaign. People wrote books about mulukhiya. There was even a mulukhiya song. Today, it's on the shelves of local supermarkets,' he says. 'They call it mo-lo-kee-yuh,' he adds, in a mock accent.

Arriving home from a day's work, his wife, ballet costume designer Kyoko, joins in the conversation. 'Not many people know how to make mulukhiya, they do it in a very Japanese way – making it a salad or soup.' The couple met in the US, wed in Lebanon and relocated to Japan in 1970. 'We first came to exhibit drawings by young refugees and meet Kyoko's parents, and what was meant to be one restful year extended 46 years!' says Tamari. Having lived in Beirut for three years, Kyoko learned Palestinian recipes from Tamari's mother and aunt. Every day she rolls labneh to soak in jars of olive oil.

'Food!' Tamari says quickly when asked what he misses most about the Arab world. 'But maybe that's selfish,' he adds. 'People look you in the eye in the Middle East when you talk to them, I miss that. And I miss casual contact, like hugging and shaking hands.' He finds comfort in the overlaps of culture, listing love of tradition and respect for family and elders as examples. 'You know, in Seven Pillars of Wisdom the author,



01 A photo of Tamari's wife Kyoko with one of the couple's two daughters, Mona. Their eldest daughter, Mariam, is an established Soprano singer who regularly performs in Palestine

02 'I studied physics initially and after three years I started sketching the teachers, students and drawing cartoons – not paying attention – and realised I needed to start studying art,' says Tamari







'I loved Japan's art before I came to Japan. I knew almost nothing about Japanese modern art but I admired the 19th century woodblock prints, ukiyo-e,' says Tamari



T.E. Lawrence, wrote of Arabs having very quick minds, like the Japanese.'

At home, English and 'Japanese gibberish' are spoken between himself, Kyoko and their two daughters. He feels regretful for having a semi-poor command of Japanese after spending nearly half a century in Tokyo, an attribute of being a more visual person, he says. But Tamari and Kyoko have always lived an existence together outside of their mother tongues.

'It was as if I was entering this very cool, calm place,' he remembers of his first years in Japan with Kyoko. 'At the time, the Middle East was turmoil and shouting.' Leaning into his chair, he trails back in time. 'Japan was so beautiful.' The kindness of his in-laws and daily Japanese baths are among his most impressionable early memories. 'Kyoko's parents had such a small apartment in Akabane, a suburb in northern Tokyo, yet they fit me in their life. I'm so thankful for that.'

Nowadays, Tamari prefers to spend his time in Setagaya, where he's lived since the beginning of his time in Japan. 'I'm not too interested in wheeling and dealing,' he says. Much of his time is spent between Ward Chuo Library and coffee shops. Riding his bicycle is another hobby. 'I'm rather eccentric when I'm cycling,' he says. 'I'm usually listening to Bach, Mozart or Italian pop and whistling. Sometimes I'll sing to the music. The adults are too polite to stare, but I get weird looks from the children.'

The nearby Tama River is where he goes to unwind. Sometimes, he sketches strangers and friends – a hobby he picked up as an art student in London, where he found muses on tube rides and in museums. Tamari moves a large, abstract painting that rests against a shelving unit to reveal his life's work of sketches. Stacks of numbered manila sketchbooks, the latest labelled #312, mix between political posters he designed early on.



There's a noticeable change in style and content from sketchbook to sketchbook. As he flips through one from the late 1960s in Beirut, his drawings are dark and harrowing. In another, sketches of landscapes, people and buildings in Palestine fill the pages. While in Japan, he developed an interest in more bright and abstract painting. 'My friend Kamal Boullata, a painter from my generation, has a theory that the further artists go from their homeland the more abstract their art becomes. But if they stay in their environment, it becomes more figurative.'

Full pages of physics notes and sketches of stereoscopic drawing inventions he'd go on to create are scribbled between portraits of his daughters and the Japanese coastline. It's a testament to how quickly he can switch between projects, having ventured into both typography and science. He once took a nearly 20-year hiatus from physics after earning his bachelor's degree, returning to the field at 42. 'It's not hard for me, I've gotten good at focusing on one project at a time. Of course you have to learn the new tricks of the trade from zero sometimes, but like a fool you enjoy hard work.'

04 'My wife's a fantastic ballet costume designer for professionals. She works from home too sometimes,' Tamari says. 'It's a very mixed and messy house we live in – just like a big machine.'

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