

CUCUMBERS AND KOMPRESSORS

IF BAD PLANS ARE CUCUMBERS,
WE ARE ON THE VERGE OF A SALAD

“WHAT IS A CUCUMBER?” was the title of resident artist Tom Bogaert’s wry and humorous exhibition at Makan in April. The cucumbers weren’t just any cucumbers: they had the Jordanian and Palestinian flags on them. Not only that, they had something to do with Khalid Meshaal, the leader of Hamas who was nearly assassinated by the Mossad in Amman in 1997.

Bogaert has spent 15 years working with refugees all around the world; he worked for UNHCR and for Amnesty International in Belgium, where he took part in some small group exhibitions, but it was only after a stint in Bangkok that he decided to make a career of art. He spent five years in New York, “at the center of the art world,” until his wife, also a refugee worker, was offered a position in Amman.

Just before coming, he was given some books on the Middle East, including *Kill Khalid*, Paul McGeough’s story of Mossad’s failed attempt on Meshaal’s life. “It’s a very visual book, which reads like a thriller,” Bogaert said. One chapter in particular attempted to humanize the Hamas leader. It told of how he had kids, went to the gym, spoke good English, polished grapes before eating them and especially loved toying with language.

“One of his favorite wordplays was in regard to something called the ‘Jordanian Option’” explained Bogaert, “basically the proposal by Israel by which West Bank Palestinians simply have to come to Jordan for all their problems to be solved.” Unsurprisingly, it’s an idea that Jordan’s government and people have consistently rejected as both unjust and unfeasible.

When spoken in Arabic, the word for “option” sounds suspiciously like “cucumber.”

“Whenever Khalid gave speeches in the mosque he would talk about the ‘Jordan cucumber,’ which of course, as a visual artist I loved,” Bogaert said

Hence the exhibition. Its centerpiece was a



poster of cucumbers branded with Jordanian and Palestinian flags. A digital photoslide documented a Jordan cucumber succumbing to the process of decay, the rotten vegetable possibly reflecting the status of the “Jordan option” as a political possibility.

Elsewhere, the artist decided to grow his own cucumbers in a light box constructed with a little help from a local carpenter. The political implications of the idea were vast, but Bogaert seemed more interested in the simple visual aspects of the concept than its political message. Perhaps he just likes painting cucumbers!

In addition to the cucumber project, Bogaert also exhibited a work called “Kompressor,” which featured waxed-down strips of metal in the colors of the Jordanian flag, with sections of the famous Mercedes-Benz “Kompressor” logo affixed to each. It was part political statement, part simple satire on Jordan’s obsession with cars, and Mercedes’ in particular. Both pieces were playful and, in subtle ways, quite challenging, and made for an interesting show.

—John Lillywhite



‘KOMPRESSOR,’ BY TOM BOGAERT.



TOM BOGAERT.