

My Mother

MALAK MATTAR

A PROFILE OF MALAK MATTAR, JUNE 2021

By Winnie Wong

Malak Mattar is a feminist Palestinian artist. She was born in 1999 in Gaza to a family of artists and engineers. Her mother's father, Mustafa Musallam, was a poet. Her mother's brother is Mohammed Musallam, a Palestinian artist who holds a PhD in philosophy of art, and who taught drawing, painting, and art history at the Al-Aqsa University in Gaza until 2016. He now lives and works in Toronto, Canada. Malak Mattar grew up surrounded by poetry and art but also asked a lot of questions about why things were the way they were. She was a child when she concluded that patriarchy was illogical.

Mattar is also a twenty-one-year-old survivor of four Israeli bombardments of Gaza. When she was a small child, her father took their family for a year to Malaysia, where he got his master's degree in computer programming. They returned to Gaza in 2006, and then the Israel-Egyptian siege began in 2007. In 2014, when she was a teenager, Mattar lived through fifty-two days of continuous bombardment. She witnessed the death of her neighbor, an elderly Christian lady who celebrated many holidays with Mattar's family. Mattar saw her neighbor last as a body in pieces being pulled from the rubble of a building. She began drawing and painting during that 2014 attack as a way to process her trauma. She has said, "I didn't want to wait for my murder. I wanted to do something."

In 2017, Mattar took her high school matriculation exams and placed highest among nearly seventy thousand students in Palestine. She was awarded a scholarship to attend university in Turkey. But young, single women do not leave the Gaza Strip alone easily, and she spent a long time convincing her family and friends to let her go. She then spent months trying to get the necessary permissions and visas.

She had a sense she might never be allowed to return home again. When she finally crossed the border into Egypt, she was the only woman making the crossing. She was held for days at the border and saw the soldiers treat travelers “like animals.” She spent an additional day at the Cairo airport trying to secure a flight to Istanbul. With the help of a stranger, she bought a plane ticket that cost all the money she had brought along for her first few months of living expenses. By the time she arrived in Turkey, she had lost one academic year.

She ended up studying political science at Istanbul Aydin University. In Turkey, living with a sense of freedom such as she had never tasted before was so intense that she often felt anxious and alienated. She continued painting, sharing her work on social media, and noted, “My paintings have more freedom of movement than me.” Because of the Israeli-Egyptian siege, she could not take the risk of returning to Gaza to see her family because she might not have been allowed out again, and might subsequently lose her scholarship. In a later, hopeful moment, she did return, via Egypt, in March 2021. But this long-awaited reunion with her family compounded her trauma, for in May 2021, Israel commenced an industrial-scale bombardment of Gaza once again. Imagine, she says, how your relation to home can be distorted by this nightmare that is the siege and the bombings. It turns your love into a “toxic love,” for home becomes “your first pain and your biggest pain.”

Mattar knows of nineteen families in Gaza that have been wiped out between May 10 and the tenuous ceasefire of May 21, 2021. Mattar has been documenting their deaths through sketches in her notebooks and through paintings on canvas. She sketches while the bombings continue, knowing that her own survival is not guaranteed. As she sketches, she recognizes how odd it is to be doing “the most peaceful thing in the most dangerous situation in the world.” As a survivor of four bombardments, she says, even though she is not a military expert, that she has come to recognize the sounds and intensity of the weapons in fine detail: “I know when they bomb in a different way. I get the feeling of the pilots: there is revenge, anger in the way they fire and bomb. Like they want to murder as many people as they can.” When the bombing pauses, she dwells on her sketches, learning the stories of her dead neighbors, and composing paintings that tell their stories. “It takes Israel only a few seconds to wipe out a family,” but it is a slow and painstaking effort for her to imagine their last moments. It is a silent way to honor her neighbors and also to process her own experiences. In Gaza, where everyone is a survivor, it makes no sense to go to anyone and weep about her own trauma. She works in a temporary studio that she has set up in the old apartment she grew up in, inside the building built by her paternal grandfather. It houses the families of her father and his three brothers. They live in western Gaza, near the sea, which she can see from the window. She says her studio is a huge mess.

Published here are sketches from the pages of Malak Mattar's notebook. They are attempts to depict some of the families killed in her neighborhood. The line drawing in green pen was drawn while thinking of the Talabani family. The young mother Rima, who was pregnant at the time, her three-year-old and her five-year-old, and her husband Mohammad were killed together during the attack. Mattar attempts to piece together what it was like for this mother to face her last moments with her children. Working from these sketches, Mattar is now creating complete compositions in paint. She says it is very important to her that when she grows old, the sketches in her notebook will not be people she has forgotten.

The first oil painting she has finished from this series depicts her own family, sheltering in the arms of her mother. It is titled *My Mother*. This is the artist's statement:

My Mother is an oil painting I started during the attack of 2021. I depicted my family and the fear of my siblings when there was no shelter but my mum's embrace. The worst part that damages the psychology of those living under attack is feeling unprotected. Gaza has no shelters or safe places and that's the reason nineteen families were wiped out when they were staying in their homes. Yet the most scary part is facing the heaviest and most complex weapons in the world with my own body, which is very vulnerable and weak under attack. The fires in the painting are the bombings that were happening too close. Once the bombs are fired, they have the same effect as a huge fire with its color and reflections in the sky.

Mattar envisions an exhibition of her finished paintings of this 2021 attack alongside installations of the videos and recordings she has made from her own home as the bombings take place. She records audio as her own mother tries to calm her younger siblings. She collects rubble from the street near her high school. She learns the stories of her neighbors' deaths. She wants Palestinians to be more than a mounting count of the dead and injured in the eyes of the world's media, a small number that keeps increasing little by little but whose individual stories are rarely told. Her efforts are ceaseless and ongoing. Just before this current attack, she completed work on a children's book, with stories and illustrations of the 2014 attack. But its significance has already been eclipsed by this one.

MALAK MATTAR is a Palestinian artist based in Gaza and sometimes Istanbul. She is @malak_mattar_artist on Instagram at https://www.instagram.com/malak_mattar_artist/.

WINNIE WONG is a historian of contemporary art and visual culture. She teaches in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley.



FIGURE 1. Malak Mattar, *Sketches* (May–June 2021). Pen in notebook.

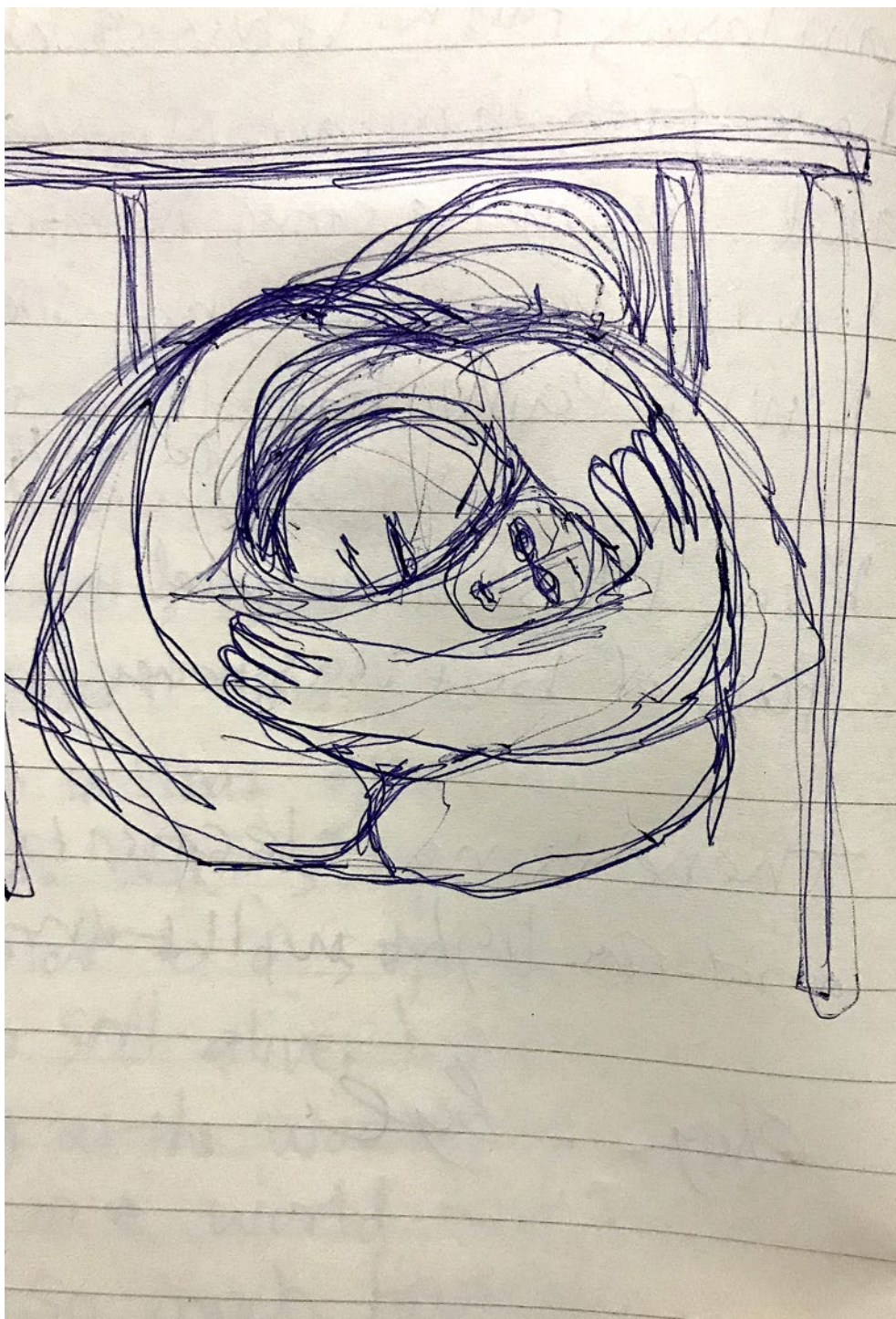


FIGURE 2. Malak Mattar, *Sketches* (May–June 2021). Pen in notebook.



FIGURE 3. Malak Mattar, *Sketches* (May–June 2021). Pen in notebook.

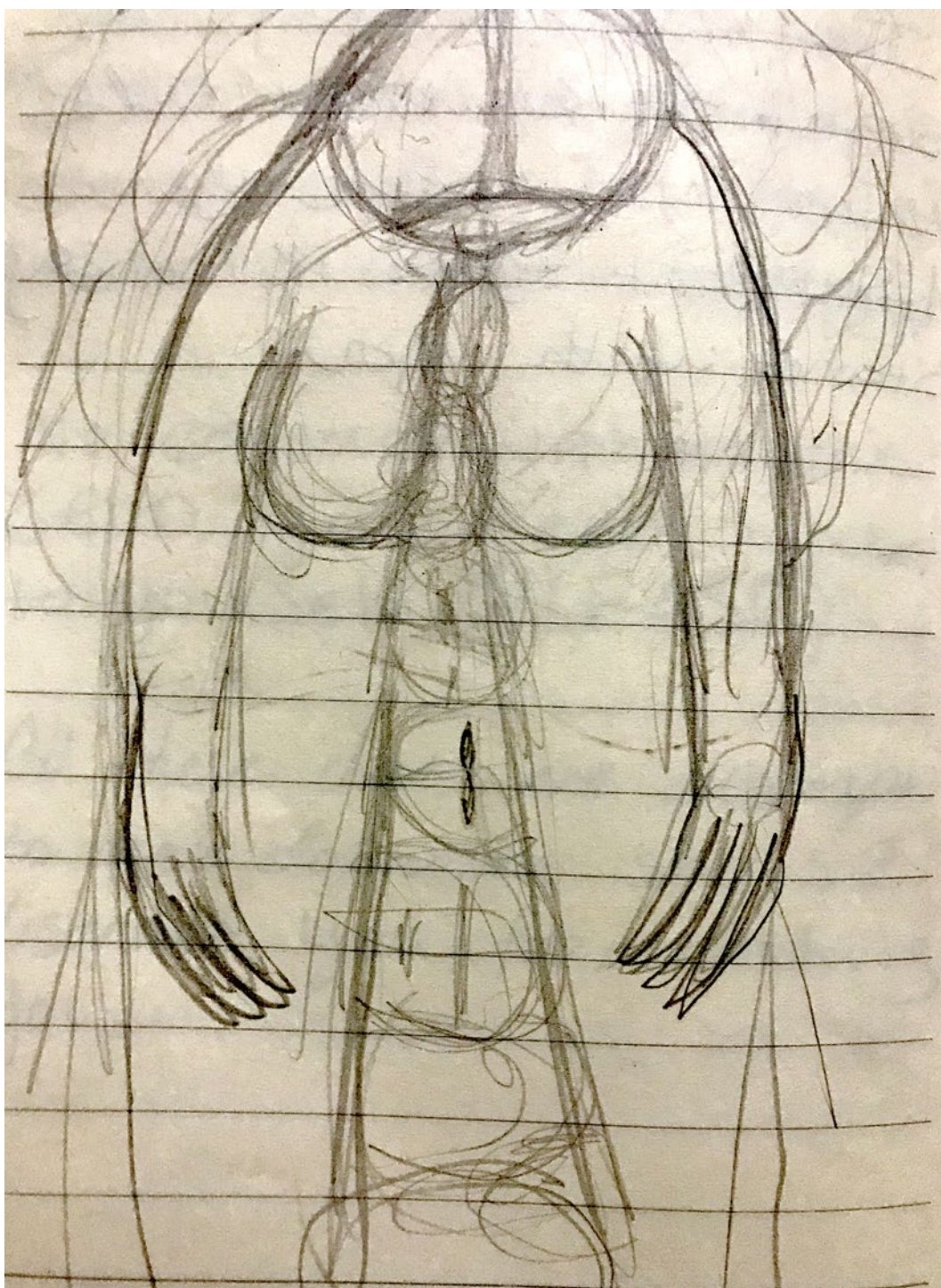


FIGURE 4. Malak Mattar, *Sketches* (May–June 2021). Pen in notebook.



FIGURE 5. Malak Mattar, *My Mother* (2021). Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm.

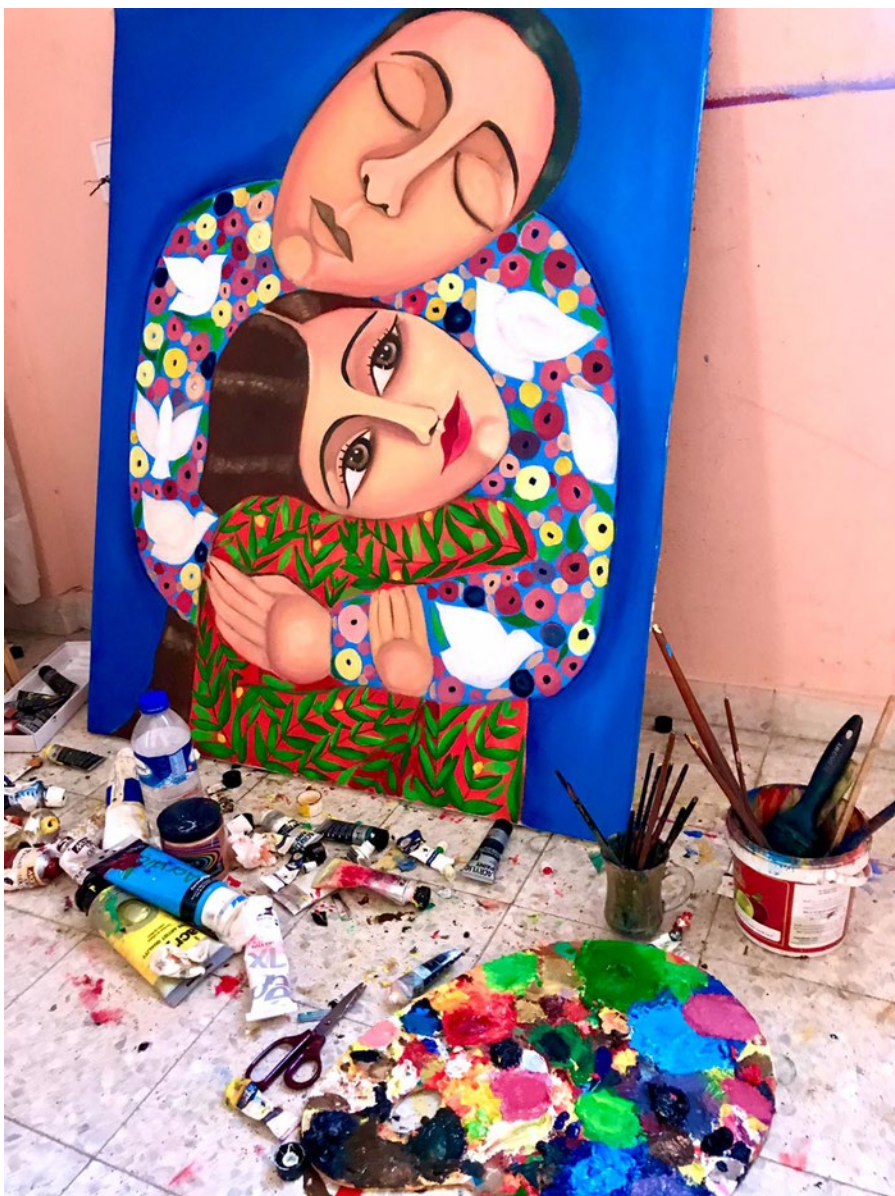


FIGURE 6. Malak Mattar, *Love in Palestine* (June 2021). Oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm. As seen in her studio in Gaza.



FIGURE 7. Malak Mattar, *You and I* (2021). Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm.