

TEMPLON



GEORGE SEGAL

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George Segal's Timeless Allegory of Human Discord

'To hold a pose for 40 minutes [...] the body reveals certain truths about itself,' sculptor George Segal once said of his models, whom he wrapped in plaster-saturated gauze. Their discomfort is palpable in *Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael* (1987) – currently on view at the Pérez Art Museum Miami following its recent restoration – though their expressions equally evoke stoicism in the face of inexpressible grief. In the Old Testament, Sarah, who had permitted her husband Abraham to father a son – Ishmael – with their servant Hagar, then demands that he banish the two into the wilderness. The divine providence of God would be lived through Sarah's son, Isaac; Ishmael would rule his own kingdom and become the patriarch of Islam. It's a tale of grief and spousal envy, as well as familial separation. In Segal's interpretation, four sombre grey figures huddle together. Hagar, a tone lighter than the other bodies, holds herself as if to keep warm. Sarah stands beside a tellurian wall, observing at a slight remove Abraham and Ishmael's ached embrace. Abraham's hands grip the flesh of Ishmael's back; Ishmael's lips press against his father's shoulder.



George Segal, *Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael*, 1987, painted plaster, 2.7 x 1.4 x 1.4 m. Courtesy: © Pérez Art Museum, Miami and The George and Helen Segal Foundation, Inc.; photograph: Oriol Tarridas

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In 1978, Segal was commissioned by Kent State University to memorialize the unarmed student protestors who had been shot and killed by the US National Guard during a demonstration against President Richard Nixon's bombing of Cambodia eight years prior. *Abraham and Isaac: In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State University (1978–79)* depicts Isaac, dressed casually in summer shorts yet bound at the wrists, kneeling before Abraham, who appears poised to strike him. University officials refused the sculpture, alleging that it ennobled the violence of Abraham's act. For Segal, the misreading was grave; the son of Eastern European Jews who had experienced anti-Semitism, he felt the story's themes – loss and grief, hope and empathy – were universal.

Many on the Israeli religious right have rendered the destructive violence of the occupation of Palestine as an ancient, mythical reckoning between two peoples. My paternal grandparents were held in concentration camps, and my grandmother later hospitalized in Israel – though she refused to become an Israeli national. I am supposed to resonate with Isaac, my Abrahamic blood curdling, but I do not. The roots of the occupation of Palestine are a century old, dating back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Today, the Israel Defense Forces have transformed much of the land into a kind of prison, stripping it agriculturally and economically, condemning Palestinians to political purgatory. In the Islamic rendition of the story of Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar are not banished but resettled; father and son go on to build what will become Mecca. Divine right and prophecy, here, belongs to Ishmael. There's no parable to support the occupation.



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It's possible Segal intended *Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael* to serve as a timeless allegory of human discord, much like its predecessor – although a didactic at the Pérez describes the sculpture as 'evoking the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of today'. The text further acknowledges that its restoration was funded by a grant from Bank of America. According to a February 2019 report by *In These Times* magazine, tax records show that Bank of America, along with various other corporations, gave US\$25,000 to non-profits that send money directly to settlements in the occupied West Bank.

I feel an ancestral kinship with Segal, so I fantasize accordingly: in his own ideology, he likely espoused *tikkun olam*, a Judaic concept that translates as 'to repair the world' or to rail against injustice. *Tikkun olam* doesn't square with Zionism. Make universal a story so specific, so tied to actual human grievance, and you run the risk of neutering it. I am certain that Segal would have agreed with me. I do not know whether the artist knew the Quranic version of this story, but his Abraham is plaintive, his Hagar defiant, his Ishmael brave.

Main image: George Segal, Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael, 1987, painted plaster, 2.7 x 1.4 x 1.4 m.

Courtesy: © Pérez Art Museum, Miami and The George and Helen Segal Foundation, Inc.; photograph:

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