

## **Close Encounters with Lebanese Art: Memories, family and other stories**

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One of my earlier memorable encounters with Lebanese modern art was a visit at the 1982 Salon d'Automne. In the late seventies and early eighties, my parents used to bring me at exhibition openings, but this one was very special. It was special because we had to cross the "Ring" from West Beirut to East Beirut, always a thrilling adventure. It was also special, as the venue was the Sursock Museum, and a museum had something much more exciting than the Ministry of Tourism's glass hall, the Soviet Cultural Center or the Goethe Institute. It was finally special in its timing, taking place a few months after the Israeli invasion that brought to us the highest level of misery and devastation. Two things remain in my mind from that evening: The illuminated neo-venetian façade and one of the exhibited works. It was a beach view with a fleet of vessels bearing US flags. Any 11 years old boy would have been attracted by such a deployment of power, especially that a multinational force was at these times in Beirut and that we could see, live from our windows, a collection of US, French, British and Italian warships. My dad explained that the painter was depicting events that took place in 1958 (of which I had been totally unaware). In 2009, film director Ghassan Salhab was telling me about a film he was about to release, relating his impressions of what happened in 1958.

- There is a painting... I said
- I know! he answered. You'll see.

The night we attended the premiere at the Metropolis cinema, a few steps away of the Sursock Museum, I must admit I was more motivated about the painting (I hadn't seen it since the 1982 Salon) than the movie itself. The painting appeared for the first seconds of 1958, shot in a blurred and ghostly atmosphere and then disappeared.

When I was asked to write an essay to for a comprehensive book devoted to modern art in Lebanon, many questions came. Which artists, subjects, medias and / or periods shall be discussed? What approach should be preferred: The scholar analysis of the art historian, the inspirations of the art practitioner or the subjective nostalgia of someone who grew up in Beirut during the civil war? The first step was the selection of artworks in the mood of André Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire*. And the first image to enter this folder was a 1958 seascape painted by an artist whose name was, at these times, totally unknown to me, Khalil Zgaib. Seen from an academic point of view, this choice might be intriguing, as Zgaib is neither in the canon of modernism, as could be Saliba Douaihy, Shafic Abboud and Yvette Achkar, nor a socially or politically engaged figure such as Rafic Charaf, Paul Guiragossian and Aref Rayess. Zgaib belongs to what is called in French "Art Naïf", a lower subcategory in art history. What made the painting so fascinating was its narrative but totally unrealistic buildup. The landscape is duplicated and folded so that the foreground is a sandy beach (Dbayeh? Ouzaï? Khaldeh?) seen from the land, while the background is an alignment of buildings and a lighthouse (Ras Beirut? Saïda?), set on the water as if it were in Venice. Local civilians are at the windows and the roofs of the buildings, watching the scene, and some are even navigating in small embarkations. GIs are installing military positions on the shore. Most of them wear swimsuits (!), baring a nudity that removes the seriousness of their task (we are at the antipodes of the naked heroic figures in David's *Sabines*). Many are drinking beer and some are completely drunk. This "Naïve" accumulation of un-serious, un-heroic details is contradictory with a subject of such gravity. What happened in 1958

was a civil war. Its violence didn't find a peak comparable to the one to come in 1975, but it was far from being a joke. A "heavy drinker" who "died penniless and starving in Beirut" in 1975<sup>1</sup>, Zgaib was definitely a marginal. His depiction of historical events was totally different from what generations of people watched at the movies (WWII, Vietnam) and what other painters did about war.

At the time I discovered the 1958 vista, one artwork related to the Lebanese Civil war was known to me: a hospital scene by Seta Manoukian. The small watercolor didn't show anything "military" or "political", but its presence in our family apartment was far from being unnoticed. Manoukian, who happens to be my father's cousin, had never hidden her political views and it was alleged that the people being treated were Palestinian or National Movement militiamen wounded during combats<sup>2</sup>. The most noticeable detail to my eyes was the fact that Manoukian used to sign in Arabic, and it was clearly a statement as Lebanese from Armenian ascent usually preferred, if not their mother tongue, French or English, to express themselves. In 1984, she presented her second solo exhibition at the Planula Elissar Visual Art Center, a gallery located on Bliss Street and run by George Zeenny. There were large-scale pictures with vivid colors. The artist offered to the family *Dimanche Matin*, a group portrait of her Grandmother (my grand-grandmother), aunt (my grandmother) and cousin (my uncle), all three painted over an urban background. The painting used to be hanged in the "formal" reception room at my grandparents home, the one we were not allowed to play in, when we had the traditional Sunday lunch. The whole setting, the room and the painting with hieratic representations of relatives, evoked a sense of monumentality and anguish. After my grandparents' death, *Dimanche Matin*, was transferred to our place. As it was extremely difficult to find a wall where it could fit, it laid on the floor for many months, at the end of a corridor, framed by a narrow perspective. In that way, the figures seemed to have gone out of the composition, and were actually grounded on the floor or floating in the air, as if they were specters. At the end, it was hanged at this place, and became "Le Tableau", the main attraction of the Buchakjian residence.

Manoukian's contribution to Lebanese painting lies in her overlapping of figures (anonymous, relatives or even politicians) on the war torn Beirut city. In *La fête rose*, one of her more remarkable works she merges her own flesh with the streets of the deserted Lazarieh area, in the central district. Mohammad Rawas, an artist from the same generation (they both had their debut solo shows at the Galerie Rencontre in 1979), was producing at this time amazing etchings bringing a close association of bodies with dramatic historical events. *The Dream of Wartime* is one of his most complex compositions, articulated over a series of textured and dotted patterns. On the top is a fragmented photograph of a Syrian Army soldier. On the bottom, the artist inserted female figures from various provenances: On left, two veiled women are crossing the "Museum" passage of Beirut's demarcation line, from a book on the Lebanese War, *Harb Lubnan*<sup>3</sup>. In the middle, towards left, two seated women come from a newspaper photograph related to a Lebanese theater play staged in Paris. And, on right, partly shadowed, naked figures from a 19<sup>th</sup> century photograph have been extracted of an exhibition catalogue related on the influence of painting on early photography<sup>4</sup>. In many of his works, Rawas confronts virile brutality to female sensuality and delicateness. In *Play*, 1981, a woman in an erotic gesture, touching her breast is overlaid over the photograph of a devastated hotel in Beirut. In the deepest miserable situation of war,

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<sup>1</sup> *Lebanon - The artist's view*, London, Barbican Centre, 1989, exhibition catalogue p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> A similar scene by the artist was part of *Lebanon - The artist's view*, Op. cit., cat. 175, color plate no.44, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Information provided by the artist, interview with the author, October 12, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *The two ways of life* by Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813-1875)

only eroticism rises as a suitable counterbalance, says Rawas. What makes the *Dream of Wartime* outstanding, apart from its composition, is the subtle discourse introduced in the confrontation of Oriental v/s Western imagery of women, knowing that the 19<sup>th</sup> century nudes can be associated with Orientalism, the women from the theater play incarnate emancipation from the traditions of which the veil is reminiscent.

Another serious runner up in my *Musée Imaginaire* is *Women at an Exhibition* by Omar Onsi. This picture was featured on the cover of *Lebanon – The artist's view*, the catalogue of the exhibition held in 1989 at the Barbican Centre, London before traveling to the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris. After a chaotic year of endless war, I landed in France and joined an Art History and Archeology major at the Sorbonne. At that time, I was much more absorbed by Caravaggio and Manet than Onsi's rural landscapes. But, I must admit *Women at an Exhibition* drew my attention, when I visited the show. Opposite to smartly dressed people, a group of rural women, wearing traditional black dresses and headdresses are looking to a painting that shows two naked women at a beach. The scene offers an amusing confrontation between social classes: Poor/rural/Traditional versus Rich/Urban/Modern (and Westernized). What can be even more amusing is to imagine how and why this group of women arrived to this so chic place, and what are they saying to each other. The painting's duality is part of a stereotype of images frequently associated to late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Lebanon, especially in Western media, where films show successively sexy and almost naked women dancing and drinking champagne in posh beaches and nightclubs opposed to other women, veiled in black from top to bottom, incarnating a dreadful return of the dark times. Back to Onsi, we must acknowledge that for ages the only figures that could be seen painted, in this part of the world, were saints and clerics. Years ago, I visited a friend belonging to a prominent Maronite family. He had an ancient copy of Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*, but only the right half of the picture, where a naked beauty is visible. I asked him what happened to the other half. He told me that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a member of the clan brought from Italy paintings as a donation to the "Waqf". The lot included a replica of *Sacred and Profane Love*. There were, as in Titian's original, two female figures, one naked, one dressed. They decided to cut the painting in two pieces, took the dressed element and left the nude. The funny part of the story is that the (rejected) naked girl incarnates sacred love while the dressed is profane...

For centuries, painting was limited, in Christian communities, to icons, "an expression fundamentally religious but also with a strong hieratic flavour"<sup>5</sup>. Daoud Corm and Habib Srouf are perhaps the first Lebanese painters to make use of values such as volume, shadow, movement, as if they were simultaneously acknowledging the renaissance and the advent of photography. A painting by Srouf depicts an unknown lady. Although she is veiled and her right hand tightly holds the covering, her gaze is directly towards the spectator. The woman doesn't attempt to hide or escape, she faces us with intensity. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century painting technique liberated itself from a rigid and hesitating classicism to a vibrant and sensitive touch. Moreover artists were, not only able to paint naked men and women as studio academies, but to build a socially engaged narration<sup>6</sup>. The transformations operated with the Onsi / Farrouk / Gemayel generation within painting are largely related to the apparition of art schools, the first being Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA), founded in 1937, followed by the Department of Fine Arts at the American University of Beirut (AUB). ALBA faculty, Cesar Gemayel produced an impressive number of nudes, from academic studies to exotic and

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<sup>5</sup> John Carswell, "The Lebanese Vision – A History of Painting", in *Lebanon – The artist's view*, London, Barbican Centre, pp. 15-19

<sup>6</sup> Nadia Nammur, *Hikayat Jasad*, Dar An Nahar, Beirut, 2000 evolves over testimonies of Lebanese artists related to their models, including Maryam, the first naked model at the ALBA.

post symbolic compositions involving sensual beauties dancing in lush landscapes. One of his models is seen reclining over a red sheet, in a pose reminiscent of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*. She places her forearm over her eyes, as if she hadn't seen the viewer, this latter wouldn't have seen her nudity. Her deep red lips remain visible and accessible.

The discovery of the human body was a major endeavor of modernity in Lebanon and in the Arab world<sup>7</sup>. Modernity can be seen as a breakthrough within social habitus, bringing issues related to aesthetics and narratives and introducing questions related to Arab identity. Should one speak of "Modern Arab Art" or of "Modern Art in the Arab World" or of "Arab Art in Modern Times"? Shall "Arab Art" be "Modern" or "Modern Art" be "Arab"? Across the Arab world, many artists, such as Samir Sayegh and Hussein Madi, developed practices attempting to conceal "Arabism" and "Modernity", transforming, for example, calligraphy into forcefully articulated compositions. Madi's name has always been familiar to me, as he was one of Samia Toutounji's artists and a very close friend to her. Daughter of writer and diplomat Toufic Youssef Aouad (and to whom I was related), Toutounji was a poet and art dealer. She was a member of Dar El Fan<sup>8</sup>, this cultural space of the pre-war era whose name remains associated with Janine Rubeiz. Later on, she ran Platform, a beautiful two level gallery in Achrafieh, till her tragic death in 1989<sup>9</sup>. Madi, who lives in Ras Beirut, happens to be the neighbor of Janet Ateshian, my aunt. In the early 1990s, just after the end of the civil war, she invited me at lunch with Madi and Assadour. What a cast! Both artists are famed for their drawing and graphic skills. Madi developed since the early 1970s his alphabets and other stylized bodies while Assadour constructed, at the same time, a post surrealist cerebral universe populated by articulated fragments. For a long time, I was convinced his work was associated with war, which is not the case. During the 1982 invasion, shrapnel perforated the frame of one of his paintings in my parent's collection. They kept it like this. After that memorable meal, we moved to Madi's studio. The place was clean and extremely well organized. Paintings, drawings and sculptures were carefully stored in shelves arranged according size and media in rooms of the apartment. It was efficient and professional.

The places we live in resemble to us, and that surely applies for artist's workspaces. Mohamad El Rawas has a stylish, sleek, modern, white space, with very few artworks hanged on the wall. One room is the studio itself, fitted with all material and equipment needed. A camera is fixed on the tripod, facing the canvas, so that the artist could shoot the painting in the making. There is the museum like studio, with paintings religiously hanged everywhere. This applies to Rafic Charaf. On one side, Charaf installed a modest sitting area, so that visitors wouldn't stay for ages, and, on the other, there was his wooden table with drawings and other material. My first encounter with Rafic Charaf was at his own condolences. It's a while after his death that I first visited him. The first piece that struck my attention was from the *Antar and Abla* series. There was for a joyful naivety, so different from the rest of his oeuvre, and perhaps, from mainstream painting, knowing that Charaf was, contrarily to Zgaib, an artist with an academic training and a profound knowledge of modernity. In 2010, when I was preparing the catalogue for the *De Lumière et de Sang* exhibition, my interest shifted towards the dark landscapes and sorrowful figures he painted in the early 1960s, after his stay in Spain. These memorable pictures are often considered as premonitory visions of the 'Naksa', the Arab Defeat in

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<sup>7</sup> *Le corps découvert*, Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe, 2012, was an exhibition (accompanied by an excellent catalogue) devoted to this theme, from the pioneers to young artists.

<sup>8</sup> On Dar El Fan and Janine Rubeiz, see *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan, Regard vers un patrimoine culturel*, Dar An Nahar, Beirut 2003

<sup>9</sup> See on this story Gregory Buchakjian, *De lumière et de sang. L'Espagne et le Liban, histoires partagées*, Alarm Editions, Beirut, 2010, p. 11 and 57.

1967. They haunt, on a daily basis, Raed Charaf, the artist's son. A very secret illustrator and visual artist, Raed Charaf works, on his late father's wooden table, reinventing apocalyptic and sarcastic visions inspired by our present time.

A series of artists' studios would be nonsense without at least one absolutely chaotic premise. Come meet Guvder! When I started teaching at ALBA, Guvder used to live on campus. He occupied a room that served for his drawing classes and his personal needs, including cooking and sleeping. It was an absolute mess with a accumulation of drawings by himself and by students, photocopies of drawings by Rembrandt and Picasso (Guvder loves using the photocopy as a tool, enlarging to a giant size tiny details of a master drawing), papers with sentences written by himself or by authors he cherished, and all kind of objects he could remove from the wilderness or from garbage and make of them fantasy sculptures<sup>10</sup>. Aged more than 90 years, this man still teaches, walks the stairs (no elevators!) and swims daily. His secret is a permanent fire of passion that lets him illuminated by anything: the face of a woman ("doesn't she look like an angel?"), a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci or just some dirt. "Gregoryyy! Would he say, look at that marvelous thing, its crystalline!". While Guvder's place is a universe for itself, there are the studios you love for their locations, such as Hassan Jouni's, in a decrepit house under Ras Beirut's lighthouse, Mohammad Kaddoura's that use to be on the shore in Ain el Mrayssé, and Yvette Achkar's that overlooked Sanayeh Garden.

The view is one of the few things I remember from Yvette Achkar's place. Also a cat, scent of tobacco and lush plants. And the gentle presence of this adorable little woman that seemed so contradictory with the forceful brushstrokes that irradiate from her paintings. It's a frustration to have visited her without any memory related to her work. Achkar is known as a pure abstract painter. There is neither, like with Saliba Douaihy, the transformation of the landscape into a purified shape. Nor, like with Abboud, the construction of something that can be the remembrance of a place (a beach, a garden, a room...). The only figurative painting I've ever seen from her is a portrait. In 1972, Ioana and Jean-Prosper Gay Para curated at Le Grenier des Artistes *Le portrait à travers la peinture libanaise*, a group exhibition of portraits by Lebanese artists and foreign artists living in Lebanon. Achkar, who accepted the invitation, commissioned a young amateur photographer, Hrant Ourgandjian, to shoot his two sisters Sona Aouad (my aunt) and Annie Buchakjian (my mum). Based on photographs, Achkar executed a double portrait of Annie Buchakjian. Both faces of the same figure emerge from vivid and dynamic strokes that characterize her abstract works, one, frontal, looking to the spectator, the other, in three quarters, more absent. Living with this painting since my earliest childhood, I've always wondered which face was more realist or accurate, coming sometimes to strange conclusions, such as "the three quarters one belongs to the early 1970s, when it was painted, while the frontal is today's, whenever is today...". But, at the end... who cares?

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<sup>10</sup> In his introduction to the artist's first monograph (Joseph El-Hourany and Laurice Jabbour, *Guvder*, ALBA, Beirut, 2012), El-Hourany admits the impossibility of a comprehensive survey of Guvder's works as these have never been dated nor classified (p. 10).