

Cover:

Study for an Art installation by Nadim Karam
The fisherman and the cloud, 2010

Inside cover:

Hanibal Srouji
Fire IV, 1997

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The **Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL)**¹ is a non-profit organization dedicated to showcasing and encouraging Lebanese artists by projecting their artwork beyond conventional borders and onto a larger screen. One of APEAL's goals is to create a common platform and magnet for creativity by presenting eclectic collections gathered from a universe of gifted visual artists. APEAL strives to be a point of connection in this vital cultural conversation. Composed of Lebanese and American citizens, the group envisions launching exchange programs between artists, granting scholarships to promising talent, and contributing to the formation of trained curators and professionals on the Lebanese art scene. By creating this window, APEAL is sowing the seeds for true understanding and growth of Lebanon's artistic potential.

1- APEAL is duly registered in Lebanon under License no. 531/2009.

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Convergence

Contemporary art is a journey without a map. As viewers, we can research traditions and use culture as our mirror, but these techniques only help us look at where we've been, not tell us where we are or where we are going. Artists, in contrast, are moving forward, cutting a trail. We can look over their shoulders to catch a glimpse of what is to come.

Contemporary art in a country as diverse and multi-layered as Lebanon offers challenges to the most gifted tracker. Civilizations and their armies have continually converged there over the past two millennia and created a rich and beautiful tapestry that violence periodically threatens to unravel. The twists and turns of Lebanon's past are complex and confusing. If artists are able to synthesize this convergence of influences, perspectives, and conflicts in their work, then our act of interpretation, of listening to their stories, may offer a path to understanding Lebanon's present and future.

In 2008 I was invited to visit Lebanon and select an exhibition of contemporary art to bring back to the United States. I asked for a guide and collaborator and was provided with the best. Amal Traboulsi is perhaps the most informed and engaged curator in Lebanon. I could not have done better, and the proof is in the work we have jointly selected for this exhibition. We had many discussions, and Amal was always tolerant of my ignorance and enlightening in her corrections. I brought a Pollyannaish optimism to the table, and Amal brought the pain of personal experience. We got along fine.

The exhibition features amazing artists whose depth and diversity begin to convey the richness that is Lebanon. For me, it coalesces around three artists whose work most clearly offers a way forward: Nadim Karam, Chawki Chamoun, and Ayman Baalbaki.

Nadim Karam is an artist and architect who understands both the conflict at hand and the importance of dreaming:

What is the difference between destroying and creating? A terrorist act devastates. It takes a life, makes it cease to exist, cease to create. A creative act cannot replace a life, but enriches the experience of life. An accumulation of creative acts enriches humanity. This is not good versus bad; destruction and creativity

are never equal. Both work from the void; one using nihilism to eradicate freedom of thought, the other using absurdity as the starting place of story-telling. (Karam 2006)

Karam's "study" for his Cloud proposal to be built in Dubai is at once completely and absurdly outlandish and immanently practical, a floating metaphor, a nomadic dream rooted in the desert sands by steel and structural engineers and oil profits. As we imagine the future, we should construct our dreams.

In the urban landscape paintings of Chawki Chamoun, the geometry of contemporary cities merges with the ancestral desert. Here, there is a perfect synthesis between his graphic vocabulary, shifting transparencies and golden opacities. Chamoun creates Arabic dreams of transcendent beauty, where human action is represented by timeless friezes and traditions co-exist in timeless perfection.

While Karam and Chamoun dream of a future clad in post-modern aspirations, Ayman Baalbaki takes a very hard look at the present. He uses the kaffiyeh to conjure up a vision of the Arab male as the resistance to a modernity that would crush aspirations. Yet, his powerful, threatening (to my Americanized eyes) images of wrapped heads are presented in the form of beautifully painted religious icons or altarpieces. References to the language of Christian martyrdom are hard to miss. If we can allow ourselves to feel that most necessary emotion, empathy, it is a not inconceivable journey to a place where Muslims, Christians, Jews, and all the incredible variety of sects and factions that live in and around Lebanon, can find a way to live together. Not to try would be heartbreaking.

I want to thank the Committee for the Promotion of the Arts in Lebanon for their support of this project, and I am most grateful for the leadership and friendship of Nicole Chedid and Rita Nammour. They gave me the opportunity to make a life-changing trip to Lebanon and witness firsthand the creativity and resilience of the Lebanese people.

Jack Rasmussen

Director and Curator

American University Museum

New Art in Lebanon

In the seventies, American philosopher Nelson Goodman replaced the question: "What is art?" by another: "Where is there art?" which raises another pressing question "What are the criteria for aesthetic appreciation in today's art world?"

The so-called "contemporary art" is a term so complex and vast, that it often leads to misunderstanding, confusion, even exasperation. Some artists claim that painting should relinquish all emotional purpose, and that art should exist uniquely as art per se. They hold for Art for Art's Sake, to the exclusion of anything decorative or entertaining.

One is under the impression that art, at present, is setting itself up in this strange paradox that sets beauty against itself, and any reference to beauty or ugliness is no longer pertinent.

Lebanese art today has not escaped this need to join the wide-ranging debate on art versus non-art. Modern communication has allowed them to glean from a variety of visual responses to interpret artistically their own society and times.

This new generation of artists questions, rebels and denounces, bringing to the forefront such concerns as "concept versus emotion"; it also invites the viewer to question the artistic act itself rather than the outcome, and to focus only on the nature of the experience, facing the public openly.

Their works are no fiction, they speak for today's reality: their own; this reality has wounded them deeply.

The ongoing questioning of new Art and the exploration of art as a means to relate to the world is, if anything, subjective. Rather than attempting to form a new theory of art with its varied discourses, it is best to establish a connection with the art work and to respond to its energy and vibrations.

It is a great challenge to present to the American public, in a Museum of Contemporary Art, a true image of new art from Lebanon. The question we constantly ask ourselves about art stems from subjective criteria. This dilemma is persistent, difficult to settle! It is perhaps best to let one self submit to visual reflexes or to feel what a work of art conveys.

Fortunately, the visit of Dr. Rasmussen to Lebanon contributed to a great extent in putting together the best possible selection of art works, both harmonious and representative, though, alas, not an exhaustive one; but how could a selection ever be so?

It is thanks to Dr. Rasmussen's fresh and open view to this extremely complex Middle East, coupled with our lifetime intense experience of events and developments that we were able to assemble this exhibition.

Our sincere wish is that this exhibition will provide the American public with an exciting image of the Lebanese art scene, and also demonstrate how it has assumed a contemporary orientation in recent years, all while preserving its true identity.

Amal Traboulsi

Curator of the exhibition

Convergence: New Art from Lebanon is a group show of original expression by contemporary Lebanese artists created and honed within the context of their experiences. This body of work aims at introducing the American public to the creative talents and recent trajectory of Lebanese artists who believe in the vernacular of art and in its universal message. It bears the impulses, through color and form, of human connection and consciousness. It transcends boundaries across civilizations by bringing people closer to one another.

Acknowledgments

The planning of this exhibit has attracted a whole cast of dynamic and committed individuals. Our new organization, APEAL, Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon, has been blessed with the active support and generosity of many friends and colleagues. They empowered and enabled us to put together an exhibit of Lebanese contemporary art, the first of its kind, in an American museum.

Our deepest gratitude goes to Jack Rasmussen, director and curator of the Katzen Center (American University Museum) and to his team, Stephanie Fedor, Bruce Wick and Anne Miller Lee. We feel fortunate to have been given this unique space to display our artists' work. Jack's guidance and critical sensitivity were instrumental and essential in the choice of the theme which lies at the heart of this project. His involvement and enthusiasm were total from the get go and throughout the process.

We are greatly indebted to Amal Traboulsi, the tireless curator of the exhibition, who guided us with patience and skill through the thicket of planning that goes into such an endeavor. Her invaluable expertise, professional instincts, contacts on the Lebanese art scene, and trained eye in overseeing the selection of the works of art were central to the evolution of the exhibit. She worked closely and selflessly with designers, writers and editors involved in the production of publications for the show.

We are also indebted to Marie Claude Saradar, president of Fondation Saradar in Beirut for giving us full use of the group's offices

and services. Tania Helou, the foundation's general manager, kept us on our toes by serving as our indispensable coordinator and meticulous administrator of minute details, schedules, logistics and supervisor of roles. She kept the clocks ticking and kept us all informed of every development and requirement, with firm grace, unflinching dedication and good humor.

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Appreciation is also in order for the countless hours put in by legal counsel Choucri Khoury and his team, namely Amal Hachem in the handling of all of APEAL's contracts and status.

We wish to offer our thanks to all contributing artists for their readiness to share their art for the duration of this exhibit and for their willingness to accommodate us in its preparation phase. Also, gallery owners Nadine Begdache of the Janine Rubeiz Gallery and Saleh Barakat, of Agial made pieces from their art collections available to us, allowing us to complete our selection.

Other individuals have given of their time and energy in countless ways. The staff of the Lebanese Embassy in Washington, DC, was extremely helpful, especially Raed Al Khadem and Christine Deleon.

We also thank Habib Keyrouz, Adla Massoud, Rima Mouawad and Joumana Tager of SEAL (Social and Economic Action for Lebanon, USA), for partnering our project.

For our film section, we relied on the professional and organizational talents of Aimée Boulos and Gabriel Sehnaoui of Fondation Liban Cinema. Their persistence and eagerness enabled us

to pick and gather the best of the latest Lebanese films to screen at the exhibit.

We reserve our deepest appreciation and gratitude to our sponsors for their tremendous support which made our vision of this exhibition a reality:

- Mario Saradar, chairman and chief CEO of Saradar Group, Marius Saradar Holding S.A.L. and Sandra Abou Nader, vice-president, deputy general manager for their contributions which enabled us to launch and sustain the project.
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Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every committee member in Washington and Beirut for their commitment and dedication to the project.

Nicole Chedid
Chairman

Lebanese Artists in Troubled Times

Lebanon today is at a fateful crossroads in its socio-cultural and political history. At the risk of some oversimplification, the country continues to be imperiled by a set of overwhelming predicaments and unsettling transformations. At least three stand out by virtue of the ominous implications they have for the prospects for forging a viable political culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

First, Lebanon is in the throes of postwar reconstruction and rehabilitation. Postwar interludes, even under normal circumstances, are usually cumbersome. In Lebanon, they are bound to be more problematic because of the distinctive residues of collective terror and strife the country was besieged with for nearly two decades of protracted, displaced and futile violence. Despite the intensity and magnitude of damage and injury, the fighting went on. More menacing, as the hostility degenerated into communal and in-group turf wars. The displaced character of hostility was also manifest in the surrogate victimization of innocent bystanders. Finally, and equally disparaging, the war was futile since the resort to violence neither redressed the internal gaps and imbalances nor ushered the country into a more civil and peaceful form of pluralism or guarded co-existence. One concrete implication of those three aberrant features of collective strife is painfully apparent: though the outward manifestations of fighting and belligerency have ceased, hostility, fear, suspicions still prevail. This is visible in the occasional outbursts of violent clashes between fractious groups which only serve to compound the fragmented character of society.

Second, Lebanon is also trapped in a turbulent region suffused with residues of unresolved rivalries. There is hardly an internal problem which is unrelated to persisting regional and global rivalries. Finally, and as of late, the country is also embroiled, in all the unsettling forces of postmodernity and globalism: a magnified importance of mass media, popular arts and entertainment in the framing of everyday life; an intensification of consumerism, commodification and the allures of kitsch; the demise of political participation and collective consciousness of public issues and their replacement by local and parochial concerns for heritage and nostalgia.

The disheartening consequences of such a postwar setting are grievous. Three socio-cultural realities are particularly poignant and relevant to the stature and role of artistic expressions of the kind celebrated in this volume. First, the salient symptoms of retribalization apparent in reawakened communal identities and the urge to seek shelter in cloistered spatial communities. Second, a pervasive mood of lethargy, indifference, weariness which borders at times on collective amnesia. These two seemingly dissonant realities coexist today in Lebanon. The longing to obliterate, mystify, and distance oneself from the fearsome recollections of an ugly and unfinished war, or efforts to preserve or commemorate them are, after all, an expression of two opposed forms of self-preservation: The need to remember and the need to forget. The former is increasingly sought in efforts to anchor oneself in one's community or in reviving and reinventing its communal solidarities and threatened heritage. The latter is more likely to assume escapist and nostalgic predispositions to return to a past imbued with questionable authenticity. Third, another unusual reaction is becoming ascendant lately; one which could threaten to undermine the cherished cultural and artistic legacy of the country. Normally, postwar interludes generate moods of restraint and sobriety. People are more inclined to curb their conventional impulses and become more self-controlled and introspective in the interest of reappraising and redirecting their future options. Rather than freeing individuals from the prewar excesses, the war in Lebanon has paradoxically induced the opposite reactions. In such a setting, public and private events – even the most intimate and personal celebrations – are transformed into objects of curiosity and display. The intention is to dazzle and trap the masses into a simulated mass culture. Today, Lebanon is a living and vivid example of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995), where the obsession with appearance and image-making become forms of false consciousness and public distraction. Objects, scenes, events even the cherished icons of Lebanon's archeological, artistic and culinary legacies become no more than a sensational marvel or curiosity.

How can artists, presumably the mavericks, gadflies and free-souls sparked by aesthetic and creative sensibilities, find meaning

and coherence (let alone sources of inspiration) in a society which has not only lost its moorings and direction but is also out of control? Their existential angst is more compelling because they are trapped in a political culture which has been obsessively focused on issues exclusively concerned with peace accords, conflict resolution, electoral and constitutional reforms, political succession. Hence, the seemingly more elusive but vital problems associated with the aesthetic and cultural products and the artistic heritage of Lebanon and how one can be nurtured and enriched are either trivialized or overlooked. This is regrettable. But in here lies the challenge.

Our contemporary artists, much like their pioneering mentors, are still gripped by the same set of fears and hope. Except for the two Baalbakis who were born early during the war and may not directly recollect its horrors, for the rest the war years were a lived reality and not a vicarious experience. The overwhelming majority, in other words, discovered and nurtured their artistic skills during the war. They are, though, relatively more privileged by virtue of the resources and opportunities they have at their disposal to hone, validate and market their professional skills and output. With rare exception, they all have had either formal schooling or extended periods of study in prominent universities and art centers; particularly France (Ecole Supérieure, Sorbonne, Aix en-Provence, Ecole de Beaux Arts). US: (Arizona, Syracuse, Boston, New York), London, Japan, Montreal, Australia and Russia. Quite a few have been recipients of National Endowments for the arts and other prestigious fellowships and awards. Since they are on the whole in their mid or late 40s presumably the height of their mid careers, they can still enrich or redirect their creative energies. They are also faced with the challenge of mounting competition from a growing pool of equally spirited artists. More supportive, they have a much larger supply of patrons, sponsors and art galleries and a coterie of art critics. Finally, it should be noted that about one-third of the group are currently enjoying the benefit of university appointments.

The pre-war years were almost a "wilderness" when compared to the venues and institutional supports available today. Bourgeoning artists at the time, much like other groups with leanings to

experiment with new ideas, life-styles or to let off steam against injustices in society, had to create their own venues for self-expression, conviviality and camaraderie. In the absence of sanctioned outlets, virtually any space – a private office or shop, a discarded portion of a house, an atelier or workshop, let alone the coffee house, the restaurant and the hotel lobby – were readily converted into proxy meeting places.

The proliferation of such surrogate public spheres, which often assumed the form of an "arrière boutique" approximating Erving Goffman's (1959) "backstage", were legion, particularly during the 1930s and the 1940s. Typically, such places would first emerge on a tentative, casual basis, involving no more than a small core of devoted friends consumed by a common passion or interest. One graphic example of such "arrière boutique" is worth noting. At the back of the Baaklini drugstore in down-town Beirut, one of Lebanon's most prominent painters and sculptor, César Gemayel, established his first makeshift art studio. Partitioned by a portable wooden screen, at night the studio became a spirited meeting place for political, intellectual and artistic debates. In one incident César Gemayel and three colleagues launched on 13 January 1925 a public protest in support of the demand for the appointment of a national governor. Emerging from the atelier, the demonstration gathered momentum as it met with the already agitated crowds gathered at Ahwet al-Azaz, another popular haunt. Interestingly, by the time César Gemayel established his more substantial professional studio for figurative arts at the Sagesse School, it too became an inventive setting for some unintended and formidable transformations. The Sagesse was headed at the time by Mgr. Jean Maroun, known for his progressive and futuristic visions regarding the role of the performing and applied arts in higher education. Gemayel's atelier became a meeting place for prominent public figures. It was then that the formative plans and guidelines for the establishment of ALBA (Academic Libanaise des Beaux Arts) were formulated (see Khalaf, 2006).

The relatively early preponderance of painting in Lebanon and its popular appeal is doubtlessly a byproduct of the three primary prerequisites germane to the success of any creative venture,

namely: a potential pool of talent, a receptive public, and private patronage. All three, to varying degrees, were evident in Lebanon long before formal instruction and schooling in art became available. It was after all not until 1937 that ALBA was established under the leadership of Alexis Boutros. For about two decades, this was the only venue for art instruction. Given its Francophile leanings, much of the output of the pioneering generations of local artists remained within the fold of such French cultural traditions.

The other direct impetus that spurred a public enthusiasm for art did not appear until the mid 1950s, when the American University of Beirut (AUB) established its Department of Fine Arts. Two innovative and spirited young American artists – Maryette Charlton and George Buehr – were recruited to spearhead the program. Schooled at the renowned Art Institute of Chicago, they brought with them many of its pedagogical precepts, some of which were rooted in the legacy of Bauhaus. Among other things, this meant that instructors had to be active, practicing, and exhibiting artists. More important, art was taught in a formalistic and not a stylistic manner. The art workshop introduced by engaging teachers, soon caught on. Largely because of the open, democratic character of instructors, they drew a large audience from outside the university community. The public program of lectures, hands-on demonstrations and instruction engendered an enabling sentiment that allowed untapped, creative inner sources to be unleashed.

As in other dimensions of cultural and intellectual life, Lebanon was also the beneficiary of a lively French-American rivalry to gain a measure of hegemony over the country's cosmopolitan cultural setting. As the French embassy stepped up its cultural exchange program by inviting renowned French avant-garde expressionists, the John Kennedy Center responded by launching a series of itinerant exhibits of high-profile American artists. One, in particular, John Ferren a leading abstract expressionist who took residence in Beirut in 1964, had a captivating impact on a string of young Lebanese artists. His studio at Manara became a refuge for debate and free experimentation. In fact, many trace their self-discovery and artistic sensibilities to such sessions.

This momentum for art was abetted by the establishment of art galleries and studios. During the 1950's and 60's such outlets, modest as they were, became successful business ventures which doubtless played a part in the commercialization of art and, hence, the associated threats of debasing its standards. The quality of exhibitions in the burgeoning art galleries did not always meet the desired critical standards of high art. In most, in fact, the line between decorative interior design and serious art was blurred. There were a few noted exceptions, however, which made efforts to safeguard the threatened standards of high art. Gallery One, founded by the late poet Yusif al-Khal and his gifted Lebanese-American wife Helen, was very influential in this regard. So was Contact, established by César Nammour and Waddah Fares, an Iraqi dissident artist who was instrumental in opening up exhibitions to artists elsewhere in the Arab World.

Another encouraging feature was the emergence of art criticism. Special literary supplements of leading newspapers started to devote portions of their weekly editions to art and art criticism. L'Orient, a leader french lebanese newspaper itself hosted a series of avant-garde exhibitions in its premises in downtown Beirut. The annual Lebanese "Salon", most likely modeled after its European counterparts, sponsored public exhibitions. The Sursok Museum, a privately endowed foundation, was more selective and discriminating in its exhibitions. In the late 60's and early 70's it hosted a series of thematic exhibitions (e.g. on iconography and Islamic art) alongside scholarly essays by reputable art historians of the calibre of Endré Grabar, Basil Grey and Jules Leroy (Carswell, 1989: 19).

Another compelling indigenous initiative was the founding of Dar Al-Fan in 1967 by a group of largely decentered public intellectuals under the leadership of Janine Rubeiz. Judiciously run by Rubeiz, followed by Nicole Harfouche and Samia Tutunji it evolved as a vibrant site for intellectual camaraderie and free-spirited discussion. It drew together intellectuals, artists eager to reinvent the liberalizing encounters some of them enjoyed in comparable settings in Europe and the US.

One serendipitous but auspicious byproduct of this upsurge in art was the unprecedented participation of women, both as artists and enterprising patrons. They did so, judging by empirical evidence, in comparatively large numbers. Until the mid 70's Lebanon had the largest number of women artists in the Arab world (around 40 compared to 10 or less in each of the adjacent countries). More significant, the proportion of professionally active women (1/4) and those accorded a prominent status (1/3) among the leading artists of the country, is perhaps unmatched elsewhere in the world (see Khal, 1989: 15 for these and other features).

It is not too difficult, to trace answers to such striking realities in both the socio-cultural milieu of Lebanon at the time and the biographies of the artists themselves coming into their own during that spirited period. If Lebanon ever enjoyed a "Belle Epoque", its harbingers were beginning to surface at the time. These were times of opportunity, exuberance, experimentation in life styles and exposure (limited as they were) to the novelties of art galleries, exhibits and the commercialization of cultural products. But these were also times of strife (the civil war already raging for more than a decade) and uncertainty, marked by discordant societal transformations and asymmetry in gender expectations and, hence, ambivalence and tensions in personal options.

I am invoking Helen Khal's seminal work because her poignant message resonates with the existential and career predicaments contemporary Lebanese artists are facing today. In short, how do threatened and marginalized groups find outlets for enhancing their esteem and self-worth without threatening the authenticity of their socio-cultural milieu or the refined precepts of their craft? The inference one can extract from her collective profile is very instructive. While women artists at the time recognized the enabling role that art came to play in their lives, they had no illusions about it. In other words, while it offered them an effective medium for self-expression and autonomy, art did little by way of transforming the lives of other women. They painted, as it were, much like their mothers embroidered poems to their beloved on a soft, silk handkerchief, with care and fine taste for *zakhrafah* (decoration) as

well as for depth of emotion. For the gifted and fortunate few among them, it became their path for liberation. Khal ends her book with a touching profile of "Mariam, Doyen of Nudes," perhaps Lebanon's first and, for many years, the only nude model in the Arab world. Mariam's induction into this rare feminine trade delivers an equally gripping message: Just as throngs of Arab women are now seeking shelter and identity in the veil, over seventy years ago Mariam had the daring to disrobe and, in doing so, enriched the creative lives of others.

The experience of some of the earlier pioneers is informative and illuminating. It behooves our current crop of artists to heed it judiciously. From the mid 1950s till the mid 1970s Beirut witnessed an upsurge not only in the popular arts but also in photography, music, folklore, theatre and the creative ventures. As in other interludes of free-expression and excessive experimentation, there was a great deal of mindless (often compulsive) borrowing alongside efforts to preserve and embellish local traditions and vernacular. Beirut, incidentally, was far from a cultural *tabula rasa* awaiting the infusion of foreign incursions. If and when the cultural scene was sparked by foreign artists, it would be met by a pool of gifted local talent and an equally receptive audience and sponsors. The ebullience of art and painting owes much to such inventive symbiosis.

This "inventive symbiosis" and the rich variety of genres – ranging from conventional painting to plastic art, sculpture, installation, art deco works, screen writing and video-clips – is very visible among the thirty artists represented here. A few admirable features stand out. They are, foremost, an impassioned group precisely because of the ardent and fervent intensity they feel about their work. Nabil Nahas, for example, (moved to the US when he was 18, educated at Yale in Fine Arts, exhibits world-wide and shuttles between New York and Beirut). Jean Marc Nahas admits that the defining attribute of his work is not the aesthetic but the intensity and reality of everyday life. Though temperamentally a misanthrope, crowds are always present in his work as an antidote, he says, to loneliness.

The few who admit their penchant for "dabbling", do so out of modesty, or perhaps to disclose their amateurish or dilettante leanings. They are not though averse to the subtleties or ironies of experimenting with new modes of expression. To varying degrees, they all do; some in more daring ways than others. For example, Huguette El-Khoury Caland's early work (Lebanon's veteran artist) acquired an explicit sensual quality and she spoke about it as a means to explore the erotic possibilities of the human body. Color, to her, became a form of "quiet seduction". Later on she moved to "dabble" with book illustration, sculpting and screen-writing. Hala Dabaji, perhaps Lebanon's youngest artist, still in her twenties "dabbles" in exhibitions on line, art deco work, and graphic design in addition to her painting and sculpting. Caland and Dabaji, half a century apart, are both driven by the same irresistible and restless impulse to find redemption and grace in art.

Some show no restraint to dip into – even if seemingly bizarre and outlandish – the latest digital technologies, visual artifacts and public sites, to express their private anguish or collective malaise. This is true of Mario Saba, Marwan Sahmarani, and Jocelyne Saab, to mention a few. Nada Sehnaoui's paintings and installations often staged in the open spaces of down-town Beirut, deal with "war, personal memory, collective amnesia, identity and the recording of history".

Though impassioned about their craft, they are daring and versatile in experimenting with different vocations and avocations. The harrowing events or recollections of the war did not impair or blunt their creative energies. Quite admirably, they managed to skirt all the disabling pathologies so rampant in post-war Lebanon. They did not "freeze" or take shelter in the reassuring comforts of cloistered bubbles or narrow-minded and elitist concerns. Nor did they mystify, apologize or distance themselves from the hideous memories of the war. Most admirably they were not seduced to "market", commodify or kitsch-up their art. They are mavericks who went against the grain.

Perhaps most enabling, there is a social-consciousness and advocacy edge to their art. This is most visible in the urban

installations of Nadim Karam and Nada Sehnaoui. The participatory and performing elements, particularly those which draw upon the involvement of the audience will most certainly serve to revive the sense of urbanity and city life. In doing so, they help to allay the geography of fear and the existing psychological barriers between furtive groups, while enhancing the general sense of community and solidarity. To Marwan Nahle this effusive feeling of social consciousness takes on explicit forms. Nahle is planning some works on "Cleaning up" projects in villages, transforming rubble into recycled art.

One parting thought, I wish to extend my heart-felt thanks to those who spearheaded this most timely and edifying venture. While our beleaguered republic is being maligned by yet another political impasse, the celebration of Lebanon's artistic legacy is not an act of vainglory. Nor should it be belittled or trivialized. As Nietzsche was keen on reminding us, an aesthetic solution through artistic creation goes a long way to being a source of hope and redemption. Indeed, it can serve as a powerful expression for releasing individuals from the constraints of nihilism, fear and resentment.

Samir Khalaf

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Lebanon and Art 1975-1985

Some said that I came to the right place at the wrong time. My first working week at the American University of Beirut (AUB) ended with an Israeli air strike of the radar installation in the mountains above Hazmieh, a suburb east of Beirut on the main road to Damascus. A day before the attack, my wife and our firstborn had moved into a pretty garden apartment in Hazmieh. That was in October 1973. We stayed in Beirut until 1985.

The contemporary art world did not take much notice of this regional happening. For almost a generation, art had become pretty much immune to events dictated by politics, economy or power. Art suffered paralysis as a result of what I like to call the Greenberg Flu. For young readers, Clement Greenberg was an American critic of the 1960's who had proclaimed that art represented a realm of purity above and beyond ordinary existence. His mantra was quickly accepted as dogma and for more than a decade the mainstream of contemporary Western art voluntarily entered a comatose state. Monitors were geared to only register signs related to formal information. They did not register narrative. They were triggered by arguments as to how flat color needed to be so as not to provide a hint of illusion of relief. They would trigger alarm bells just before the composition diluted (or concentrated) to the degree that it broke the sacred confines of self-reference. Looking back at this makes me smile at how easily we were all hoodwinked into following the pied pipers of abstract expressionism.

That was 1973. Paris, exhausted from a generation of fast moving style changes and a student revolution, had surrendered to the New York School. It was the time when young Arab artists in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut, emboldened by the promise of pan-Arab empowerment, had mastered the liberating lessons of the Ecole de Paris or Italian art academies and eagerly looked for what came across the Atlantic. It was the time when cubism, surrealism and *pittura metafisica* had been impatiently absorbed and were being applied to the regional experience.

Lebanon was well placed and ready to exploit the wealth that oil was bringing to the Middle East. New faculty hired to teach fine arts at the American University of Beirut brought the excitement of Cooper Union, pop art, op art, and action painting to Lebanese students trained in the holy modern classicism of Matisse and Dali. Peter Smith

introduced photography as a serious discipline of fine arts. Gordon Olson made your retina go dizzy with his op-art constructions suggestive of Islamic patterns, and later, Jay Randle teaching architecture, showed spiky minimalist white gypsum sculptures at the Kennedy Center on Rue Abdel Aziz. The now defunct center was the cultural arm of the United States Information Service in Beirut before it was fully incorporated into the State Department.

Ras Beirut, between 1975 and 1985, was the fulcrum of metropolitan life in Lebanon. The Commodore Hotel served as headquarters for the international press. The Daily Star gained international prominence. The British Broadcasting Corporation reported what happened in your own neighborhood and foreign correspondents showed up for dinner. The souks of downtown, lost to the war, were revived on the seafront Raouche Corniche. The Russian Institute, the Goethe Institut, the British Council and The French Cultural Center all competed in activities. The first proper theatrical event, after the war had pretty much expropriated live drama, was the world premiere of Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi's *Marchioness of Saden-Saden*, a tongue-in-cheek operetta staged at the American University of Beirut with participation of British diplomats, to the enthusiastic applause of an entertainment-deprived audience. It was covered by Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times*.

The German director Volker Schlöndorff filmed *Circle of Deceit* in the ruins of Souk Tawileh, employing a Ras Beirut cast of extras he had gathered on AUB campus, Hamra Street, and at the restaurant of art-collector owner George Zeani's *Smuggler's Inn*. Zeani was incensed after one raid on his restaurant, when thugs lifted cash and jewelry from his customers: "The fools. The fools. They did not realize that the real value was on the walls".

Other contrarian acts followed. The late choir master Afif Bulos and the Orpheus Choir staged *The Mikado*. The ART Theatre Group, a collection of drama enthusiasts, enjoyed a flourishing run of productions including *A Man for All Seasons* (which included an unscheduled dash by a US diplomat who was in the production during the interval to investigate a nearby explosion in doublet and hose), *Goethe's Faust* and *The Mad Woman of Chaillot*. During my stay in Beirut when times were tough amateur theatre blossomed, only to quickly wilt once peace was restored.

The art galleries that stayed open during the troubles did astoundingly well. One might have expected that political uncertainty would hit art first, but Lebanon's urban elite had always prided itself of a sophisticated joie de vivre that included art as a matter of course. With curfews, roaming militias, and road blocks slowing down night life, private entertainment took up the slack. Presenting newly acquired art in the dining room as part of a carefully designed tableau provided just the right conversation piece. I think it should be said loud and clear: the Lebanese have treated their artists well, even in bad times. Unfortunately, the private enthusiasm for art was never matched by corresponding public responsibility, but that is a topic best left to a Lebanese commentator.

The decade of war was not without moments of hope or opportunity. When some galleries closed, new ones took their places. In 1979 Galerie Epreuve d'Artiste on Rue Clemenceau had its inaugural exhibition during a power black-out by candle light. I mention it by name not only because I knew it well – having served as its exhibition advisor – but because it reflected so much of the resilient spirit of Lebanon. In one decade of war the gallery was forced to relocate three times responding to the shifting frontiers of the conflict. It stayed open for most of the time and Beirutis kept attending exhibits of young art from Europe and emerging and established art from Lebanon and the region.

The gallery also introduced rigorous rules practicing a first-come-first-served-system that did not allow preview reservations and kept the gallery closed on the morning before a vernissage. This was unheard of in Beirut where everyone, regardless of status in the social hierarchy, could cite some reason why exceptional treatment was warranted. Exceptional circumstance seems to be a Lebanese birth right. But the word about the new rule quickly spread and I remember the day when the gallery's clerk politely refused entry to a known collector who arrived two hours before a scheduled opening to make his selection. Nonplussed, the collector requested the gallery's employee to furnish him with a chair, went to purchase a newspaper and a coffee, and in full view of the slow moving cars of normal Beirut traffic, waited patiently for the gallery's door to open. He was the first one in when the doors opened and he did get the piece he had wanted.

Looking back, the Lebanese civil war started in 1974, a year before the acknowledged date. Of course no one called it a civil war then, but the art fibers that play a role in securing society were soon responding to threats of normalcy. At the American University of Beirut, the major in fine arts, only recently strengthened with new faculty hires, was cancelled by action of the Board of Trustees effective Fall 1975. Students majoring in art were advised to change their major or transfer to other universities. Fine arts facilities, including the well equipped printmaking studio, fell into benign neglect but continued to serve ad hoc art groups.

Most fighting during the decade of the Lebanese war was sporadic. Days of intense artillery alternated with weeks, even months of quiet. But uncertainty impacted demographics. Many with the need to plan their lives long-term, such as entrepreneurs, contractors and traders, shifted their operations to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Students on course to complete a degree, left the country to safeguard their educational objectives. Expatriates on time-limited contracts made use of evacuation opportunities and the second-hand furniture bazaar in Basta experienced a virtual boom before it was forced to relocate to the southern suburbs.

Just about the time that the war in Lebanon ended – more from exhaustion than due to a decisive power shift – the Western mainstream of abstraction in art was slowly replaced by stylistic pluralism embracing diversity and spanning time and space. Coined postmodernist, the decade celebrated eclectic derivations of all kinds, offered respectability to earth art, craft art, feminist and queer art. It fostered the rejection of the Western Canon, began to include indigenous, even exotic cultures, and mistrusted anything that might be considered pretty in art. Finally, in an act of near suicidal self-denial, art critics borrowed deconstructivism (from linguistics) to explain its conversion to semiotics. This new cult claimed that it is not the image (the text) but the sub-image (the sub-text), which really mattered. Do you hear the pied piper's tune?

Between 1975 and 1985 Lebanese artists showed little appetite to participate in postmodernist discourse of meta-life or meta-art. The impact of the war was too immediate to allow clever distinctions. Consequently, one might have expected Lebanese artists to grasp the foil presented by the war to shape their narrative. Think Again! Work

Territory, space and body: Historical matters in Contemporary Lebanese Art

produced and exhibited in Lebanon between 1975 and 1985 hardly treated the war. Art that dealt with the conflict, did so in marginal activities. Like the German art professor who, donning a straw hat, recorded war hit Beirut landmarks such as the Green Line in downtown Bourj or the Souk Franjeh in watercolors. Lebanese artists treated the war from a metaphorical distance, more in the language of Picasso's "Guernica": clothed in abstractions, veiled in quotations, surrealist analogies, mythological allusions, with more reference to Baudelaire than the Mourabitoun (the local Sunni Moslem militia).

Now that Lebanon has survived the turn of the century, it is easier to include the past in the artistic agenda. This exhibition of work produced in the last decade in Lebanon shows the freedom that distance provides. The longer perspective, the wider angle, the broader domain have lifted Lebanese art from the dinner table conversation to the public realm.

Often the 9-11 "Tribute in Light", first published in November 2001, is cited to support the claim that art's most noble function is in the public realm. And what happened on 9-11 may indeed be the wretched cause that brought this exhibition of Lebanese art to fruition, nine years hence. But one public artwork that forces all of us to see ourselves in the context of history is much closer at hand.

After viewing the art from Lebanon, I recommend you take a stroll to the Mall and revisit the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial . Even if you know none of those who perished in that war, whose names are listed in chronological order of their sacrifice, the reflection in the polished granite will include you in the art and in the history of that monument. That is what art does if you allow it to do its work.

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The "Lebanese War" ended in the early 1990's, letting the country emerge from a 15 years period of trouble and violence that had threatened its own existence. Infrastructures, public institutions and Beirut's city center were derelict, so that the authorities designated reconstruction as the main priority. Turning its back to conflicts and terror, Lebanon had a unique opportunity to build a bright and prosperous future. However, many Lebanese, who felt there was a missing link, did not share the official enthusiasm of the times. What about this 15 years gap? Shall it be forgotten and erased from history books? How could anyone assume there will be war no more if no lesson is retained from the past¹? How could a nation be built and a people united if collective memory is buried?

While physical traces of war were progressively cleaned from the visual scope, newly born structures such as Ashkal Alwan, Atelier de Recherche ALBA, Ayloul, Shams, Umam Documentation & Research and 111101 Memory & Creation offered transdisciplinary platforms aiming to apprehend the city, dividing lines, ruins, violence, trauma and other related problematics. Artists and scholars from different fields initiated an important amount of works in writing, film, theater and visual arts. The present essay focuses on a corpus of paintings, photographs and installations selected in the New Art from Lebanon exhibition through three grids of reading: Territory (Chaouki Chamoun, Nabil Nahas), space (Hanibal Srouji, Nada Sehnaoui) and body (Ayman Baalbaki, Marwan Sahmarani, Jean-Marc Nahas, Jocelyne Saab, Mohammad al Rawas).

1. Territory. Menaces on the National symbols

Green hills (or mountains), covered by small colored (white, blue, red and yellow) spots: *On a spring day 1975* by Chaouki Chamoun is a grand vista, revisiting a path of 20th century Lebanese art that has traditionally been rooted in soil, nature and picturesque sceneries². Omar Ounsi, Moustapha Farroukh, Cesar Gemayel and, later on,

¹ A Renaissance masterpiece, Titian's *Allegory of Prudence* (London, National Gallery) is based on this principle and bears the following inscription: "From the past, Present acts prudently lest it spoil future action".

² "Les premiers jeux de couleurs ont été permis avec l'avènement de la peinture de paysage, un genre permettant au début du XXe siècle de contourner les contraintes religieuses que sont les sujets sacrés pour les chrétiens et l'interdiction de la figure dans l'Islam", Gregory Buchakjian in *Pièces choisies, collection Bank Audi*, Beirut 2007, p. 57.

Saliba Douaihy, have immortalized their homeland through post-romantic acclaimed canvases and watercolors. At the breakout of the 1975 war, landscape enjoyed a revival as many painters were reluctant in confronting the horrendous facts that were taking place in the country and took refuge, either in abstraction, or in the re-creation of Mediterranean shores, shining sun, joyful flowers and traditional "Lebanese" houses. An ideal image of a space that was not anymore what it used to be. The postcard Lebanon consisting of peaceful green hills, "Switzerland of the Middle East", definitely died, but remained in the heart of many Lebanese people who still wanted to believe in an hypothetical return of the golden era³.

On a spring day 1975 doesn't share with earlier landscapes proximity and viewpoint. Land is seen from far and above, with a very high horizon line, almost no opening to the sky and a flattening of the relief. While romanticism indulged the viewer a wide breath facing the sublime⁴, Chamoun forces us to plunge towards earth, as did Anselm Kiefer in 1970-80s large-scale field paintings related to the dark pages of German History⁵. Kiefer behaved as an historian / archeologist, bringing back mud, dust and ashes from a troubled past. Chamoun acts as if he handled a time machine, transporting us to the past, before it started. He invites us to see charming green Lebanon, as it was on a spring day of the year 1975. A beautiful panorama widely offered through a target. The whole composition being square - instead of the traditional *vedute* wide format - is due to be seen in a gun sight. The viewer is not watching the forthcoming events from the side of the innocent civilians, but as an anonymous and invisible aggressor. A hidden enemy, seated in the cockpit of a military aircraft, or perhaps a gunman positioned on the top of a high cliff. Whoever looks at this painting has to confront his / her responsibilities in the destruction of the country⁶.

3 This idealistic representation of the Mountain and village as a paradise lost can also be found in posters related to the exile of some communities during the war. See Zeina Maasri, *Off the wall, Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*, London 2009, p. 113 and fig. 5.24.

4 "In confronting the abyss of incomprehension, the observer (in Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*, 1819) gains a heightened understanding of human potential and of the power of human rationality to overcome the chaos of creation and the intractability of nature", Hilmar Frank, "The Sublime", in *The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790-1990*, exhibition catalogue, Edinburgh, London and Munich 1994, p. 140.

5 "As one regards these works, one gets the sense of standing bent slightly forward on the painting's "ground" and of swinging one's gaze back and forth from the foreground to the horizon", Matthew Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, Cambridge 1998, p. 49.

6 Interestingly enough, Israeli cinema recently produced films engaging the Lebanese war through the eyes of Israeli soldiers such as *Watz with Bachir* (2008), where they are depicted as victims of the conflict.

Then remains the question: What are the little colored spots supposed to mean?

Four potential answers lie in four individual frames. Frame 1; the peaceful unspoiled countryside: The little colored spots lovely fit as flowered candy box Monet reminiscence. Frame 2; the territory bound into a war zone: The little colored spots point forthcoming impact and explosion sites (are all these shells supposed to fall simultaneously ore during a 15 year timeline would be another question). Frame 3; considering the painting as a multi-layered surface (the gun sight / the land): The little colored spots could just be traces of dirt on the optical device. Frame 4; Recalibrating the painting as a single item, as if it was an archive document: The little colored spots attest the deterioration of the material and therefore its historical authenticity. Grayish accidents of that kind can be seen on a work by Walid Raad⁷ based on black and white photographs⁸ from the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Raad chose to consider the war (in one of its most dramatic round) with irony, as a *spectacle*: people are watching aircrafts in the sky heavily bombing Beirut from a safe viewpoint, while Chamoun, according to his title, relates a war en *devenir*. Colored (Chamoun) and gray (Raad) little spots act as a multiplicity of scars, stitches and points of impact threatening the image as a representation an as a support.

The burning of space and soil as a metaphor to the destruction of the country has been reinterpreted by Nabil Nahas. Using the Nation's symbol that is visible on its flag, its currency, the logo of its airline and in the imagery of many (mainly right wing) political parties, Nahas plays with ambiguity. His recent *Cedars* are almost abstractions, totally detached from their natural and physical environment⁹.

7 Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say, "we are convinced" twice, A project from The Atlas Group Archive by Marwan Hanna*, 2005.

8 Post-war Lebanese artists frequently appropriated archive material. "What is significant about the works contemporary artists are producing in Lebanon now are the ways in which they treat the material traces of the war as symptoms, as scraps of visual information that slide around fixed meaning, constantly negotiated, readjusted and assimilated into larger networks of signs and symbols", Kaelen Wilson-Goodie, "Contemporary Practices in Post-war Lebanon: An Introduction", in *Out of Beirut*, exhibition catalogue, Modern Art Oxford, 2006, p. 89.

9 "Although he zooms in just a segment of the egregious tree, the massive presence of the dark trunk, branches and foliage is such as that the mountain is implicitly and metaphorically included in it", Joseph Tarrab in *Landscapes. Cityscapes.1.*, exhibition catalogue, Maqam Gallery, Beirut 2009, p. 10.

Tightened in a narrow close up, the monumental trees are perceived as an anonymous geological fragment:¹⁰ *Cedar 1* as a "normal" specimen, *Cedar 2* as a burned one. And that's almost all, the usual life v/s death, good v/s evil, peace v/s war oppositions. Oppositions that could be supported by the difference of treatment of the two trees: Precise, almost geometric tracing for *Cedar 1*, deep colored Bazelitiquesque tachism for *Cedar 2*, including large red dashes (fire? / blood?) and the only external element of the series: Electric wire. Four decades earlier, Rafic Charaf painted dark and lugubrious landscapes composed of dead trees, barbed wires and blood. These somber visions were inspired by the miseries of life in neglected rural Lebanon and somehow premonitory of the catastrophe that was preparing itself in an irreversible process. Post-apocalyptic Nahas *Cedars* remain organic bodies, not plainly living and not completely dead. Isolated, fragmented and deprived from their roots and branches, "*bodies without organs*"¹¹ but still populated by flux, intensities and generating energy. As witnesses and remains of history (we mean the grand History, back to the Babylonians, the Pharaohs and Alexander the Great), these bodies are charged of magical power¹².

2. Space. An archeology of the void

Burning in the painting / Burning the painting. Destruction and deterioration as an artistic practice has been widely seen in the contemporary scene. In 1961, Niki de Saint Phalle performed a 22 long rifle shooting on bags full of paint, making them "*bleed*"¹³. Related to her despair and incomprehension during and after World War II, the action was a catharsis: Pointing out on the pain to trigger a recovery process. Post-war Lebanon cultural scene witnessed violent and cruel gestures towards artifacts: A seat from a theater being cut in two pieces during a month period¹⁴, mechanized

10 "he (Nahas) encourages a reading of his paintings as landscapes for a time of which our concept of "landscape" has been expanded to include not only scientific, macro and micro visions and non-optically-based "imaging", but also new ideas about how the brain sees and processes visual information", Nathan Kernan, *Nabil Nahas: Opium and Candy*, exhibition catalogue, Sperone Westwater, New York, 2005.

11 As defined by Deleuze and Guattari. "Un CsO est fait de telle manière qu'il ne peut être occupé, peuplé, que par des intensités. Seules les intensités passent et circulent. (...) Le CsO fait passer des intensités, il les produit et les distribue dans un spatium lui-même intensif, inétendu", Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2. Mille Plateaux*, Paris 1980, p. 189.

12 "Totemic Idol", Joseph Tarrab, op. cit.

13 See *L'Ordre Sauvage, Violence, Dépense et Sacré dans l'Art des Années 1950-1960*, Laurence Bertrand Dorleac, Paris 2004, pp. 212-227.

14 *1 Acte / 2 Pièces*, installation by Atelier de Recherche ALBA, Théâtre de Beyrouth, 2001.

hammers hitting the walls of a building scheduled to be demolished¹⁵ and canvases burned by Hanibal Srouji. Srouji spent most of his life outside Lebanon, after having fled Saida by boat in 1976. During the first wartime year, while helping at the Red Cross, he was abundantly served in wounded and dead casualties. He later described this experience as "a reality that transcends horror movies"¹⁶, affecting his mind in a long-term trauma. In the artistic practice he developed two decades later, it is understood that applying fire on the immaculate surface of the canvas is not crime but redemption of the atrocities he witnessed, brutality leading to serenity. It is the Srouji paradox. Seen as a whole, Srouji's corpus of diptychs evokes irradiant luminescence and precise harmony. Reversing Chamoun's process, the ashes of war transform into a delicate garden. *Feu IV* inherits a violence splash of Jackson Pollock canalized by the pen of a Chinese calligraphy master. *Feu IV* exploits the beauty and emotion that traces of violence can produce on the viewer.

Historical relics and archeological remains fascinate human beings. Millions of visitors yearly accomplish pilgrimages to the Acropolis, the Pyramids, Rome and other prestigious destinations, meditating on the fate of civilizations as did 18th century Romantic poets or just passing, as in Martin Parr's photographs. The development of modern warfare has provided state armies and military organization the possibility of transforming urban space into fields of ruins within a very short lapse of time. Airborne operations conducted by the allies over Germany and Japan provoked spectacular results. Bombed cities, not completely erased, as traces remained even in Hiroshima, were driven back to a primitive state as can be contemplated in *Germania Anno Zero*, directed by Roberto Rossellini in 1947 Berlin. The days following the end of the July 2006 war in Lebanon, thousands of people rushed to Haret Hreik and Ghobeiry in Beirut's Southern suburb, to discover the result of 33 days of ferocious assaults. Discovering might not be the right word, as everybody in Lebanon and elsewhere in the world had the opportunity of watching the Hollywoodesque amount of destruction. Discovering was not the right word. These people wanted to see, by their own eyes, what they had already seen on TV. They needed the confirmation that the nightmare was factual reality. In an acclaimed

15 *I'll race you*, installation by Pascal Hachem in the Dome, Beirut City Center, 2008.

16 Quoted in *Offerings. Hanibal Srouji*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, 2009.

press photo shot on August 15th, 2006¹⁷, five trendy chic youngsters visit the smoky ruins in a posh red cabriolet, more annoyed than horrified. Most visitors in post-July 2006 Beirut Southern Suburbs were equipped with cameras, taking the same pictures they had already seen in newspapers. A similar phenomenon occurs when an individual takes snapshots of a celebrity he or she happens to meet. The snapshot, often captured with a mobile phone, will be of a lesser quality than the official magazine portraits. Whatever. The lambda individual wants to have his or her own picture of the superstar, his or her own picture of the tragedy. Capturing an image of what has been shown through images is a way of appropriating the story, so that no one could say "*Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima!*"¹⁸.

Nada Sehnaoui's *Rubble* is a collection of photographs taken on the site of the disaster, three days after the end of hostilities. While most photographic accounts of this space share a frontal vision displaying crushed façades and political posters, Sehnaoui kneels down towards ground, where mapping the former urban network became an impossibility. Public (street, sidewalk) space and private (residential) space have melted into mountains of rubble, composed of heterogeneous relics: construction material (stone, cement, metal, pipes, road signs) and personnel belongings (furniture, books, households, toys, luggage, food...), all lying here and there. From the monstrous accumulation of carbonized structures emerge few intact devices: An airline ticket, a student notebook for a French grammar course, a red velvet couch: Properties related to individual stories. Focused in such a narrow vision, these pictures could have been taken anywhere else. It could be in South Lebanon (Bint Jbeil), it could also be another war in another country at another time, it could also be the result of a natural cataclysm such as an earthquake or a tsunami. But it **is** not. *Rubble is a meditation on the ongoing capacity of human beings to reduce other human being's lives to rubble* acknowledges the disaster and the life of people prior to it¹⁹. With the visual disappearance of inhabitants and the destruction of the material belongings, *Rubble* expresses the void, as does *Spectre* (*The*

Yacoubian Building, Beirut), by Marwan Rechamoui, a ghostly, immense building emptied during the 2006 war. War is a brutal interruption of normality through the dismantlement of daily course of life including *habitus* and *habitat*. Also inspired by the 2006 war, Ayman Baalbaki's *Tammouz* series of dark collapsed constructions proceed in the continuity of previous works related to ruins. His *Ciel chargé de fleurs* portrays the former Hilton hotel²⁰ while inhabited by families that took refuge in it²¹. At the time of execution of the painting (2004), the premise had been evacuated and demolished by implosion to be replaced by a newer and more adequate landmark. Life before the war / War / Reconstruction, a vicious circle: *You destroy, I construct, you destroy again, I reconstruct...*²²

3. Body. Martyrdom, crime and gender.

Apart from Tower of Babel like buildings, Ayman Baalbaki's account of Middle Eastern History encompasses effigies of "*keffieh*" warriors and probable authors of suicide bomb attacks. These figures play one of the most complex iconographic problems in Contemporary imagery: the war of good against evil. Seen in an American and European context, they are associated with blind terrorism. Their actions have been threatening Western interests in the Middle East and they incarnate the absolute nightmare of barbarism. From the Arab, Muslim (and to some extent, Third World) popular point of view, the "*keffieh*" *guerilleros* are heroes. They are the last shields against Israeli (and furthermore, Western) oppression over Palestinian and Arab populations at a time most Arab governments have contracted alliances with the Western camp. The Good v/s Evil contradiction in Baalbaki's work operates a matter of context. Martyr representations have been subjects of an abundant imagery, mainly in posters commissioned by the parties they belonged to, honoring "the nobility of a cause"²³, and filling the streets of neighborhoods under their control. Obituaries and propaganda icons at the same time, these were by no means intentioned to the Lebanese bourgeoisie, and nevertheless to the Western audience. By introducing "*keffieh*" guys into art works supposed to be hanged in art galleries and private

17 Photography by Spencer Platt; winner of the World Press Photo 2006.

18 Marguerite Duras "You saw nothing in Hiroshima!", in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959)

19 *Collecting "Dahyieh"* a project in progress by Umam Documentation & Research is recollecting memories through ancient photographs of sights and people, showing ordinary lives. A photo exhibition took place in May 2007.

20 Constructed in 1975, the Beirut Hilton never opened to public due to the war. It was demolished in 2002.

21 See *Can One Man Save The (Art) World?*, G. H. Rabbath, Beirut 2009, pp. 57-62 and the introductory essay by Nayla Tamraz, pp. 15-24.

22 Joseph Tarrab, "ça suffit!", in *Ayman Baalbaki Transfiguration Apocalyptique* exhibition catalogue, Agial Gallery, Beirut 2008.

23 Zeina Maasri, op. cit., pp. 87-99.

residences, Ayman Baalbaki confronts his spectator / collector about a specific aspect of violence in the recent History of the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Merkaba is a devotional shrine mounted on a pushcart used by merchants to sell fruits and vegetables. It refers to a chariot carrying the throne of God²⁴ and conducted by four "Chayot" angels. In order to obtain a triptych, the artist added two lateral panels besides of the central element. If Baalbaki was to be read literally, the four figures on the lateral panels (one with a helmet, one with a balaclava, one with a "keffieh" and one entirely covered by a white veil, à la Magritte) could be ironic interpretations of the "Chayot". The central "keffieh" warrior is painted over a gilded background filled by flowers. Both gold and flowers are references to paradise, the first in Byzantine iconography, and the second in Islamic culture. The *shaheed* (martyr) is perceived through a mix of spiritual monumentality and street cheap pop culture²⁵.

History is burlesque and kitsch, far from the times where Jacques Louis David could paint Ancient Rome epics with handsome naked men and elegant women, all virtuous. David's heroic symbols are pure utopia though history is an accumulation of atrocities. A frightening crime scene example can be seen in Marwan Sahmarani's *Night's Hunters*. The body of an anonymous victim is laying on the ground, surrounded by four armed men, his probable murderers. This crudely painted war misery reminds astonishingly Jean-Luc Godard's *Je vous salue, Sarajevo* (Hail, Sarajevo), a 2 minutes short reacting to the horrors in former Yugoslavia. The film is a succession of close-ups on a single photograph. Two armed men standing, a third one, holding his gun on one hand and a cigarette on the other, shoots (or has already shot, or will shoot in a near future) three unarmed civilians (it is not clear whether they are already dead or not). Sahmarani's white washed face deceased is, as Maurice Blanchot writes, "no longer of this world; he has left it behind. But behind there is, precisely, this cadaver, which is not of the world either, even though it is here. Rather, it is behind the world."²⁶

24 "Merkabah" in Hebrew, Ezekiel (1:4-26). This celestial vehicle gave its name to the "Merkava" Israel military tank and abundantly used during the 1982 and 2006 wars.

25 In another composition based on a Biblical subject, *An Eye for An Eye*, Baalbaki incorporates 12 "keffieh" figures on a gilded store metallic shutter.

26 in *Space of Literature*, (English translation), Lincoln and London 1982.

"I've seen so many people live so badly, and so many die so well", says Godard. In the 1980's Jean-Marc Nahas experienced war as a personal tragedy. Involved in a militia at a very young age, he was "faced with witnessing torture and rape in the streets. Massacres... not massacres, but huge battles in which enormous things take place."²⁷ Nahas became an artist by necessity, for mental survival. His art is not an escape from reality, rather an interior constructed world "a little autistic like that of my work where I saw myself differently than I was"²⁸. It's a world of drawing; spontaneous, nervous and tenebrous ink drawing that surely reveres to Goya. It's a world populated by bodies; thousands of bodies; millions, maybe, if we try to count all the bodies that have been painted for the last decades. Bodies not beautiful (according to any accepted criteria), not fashionable, not sexy, not healthy, not intellectual, not minimalist, not politically correct²⁹. Bodies bearing wounds, bodies bitten by wolves, dogs and birds, bodies hit by cars, busses and military vehicles, bodies being mutilated and raped. Humans behaving as animals, reduced to a primary condition. Nahas wonders how "we avoid letting a child see nudity or kissing on TV" while violence and vulgarity are accessible for all everywhere: News, Movies, Video games and real life. So, for a conservative mind, Jean-Marc Nahas might be obscene or even disgusting. Of course: These hideous unclean men must be saying injurious insanities and this reclining woman elevating her buttock is irrelevant. After all, this infinity of small drawings covering immense panels is like an unfolded illustrated book, retelling the history of mankind: Life, sex, crime, death, the eternal fight between the instinct of life (Eros) and the instinct of death (Thanatos).

The story of these bodies is not only about wartime. Jean-Marc Nahas confronts taboos, censorship and other medieval beliefs in Lebanon and the Arab World at times religious rigor took over on secularism in public space and private sphere. In her 2008 Beirut debut photography exhibition, film director Jocelyne Saab staged

27 Jean-Marc Nahas, interview with Monika Borgmann, in *Catastrophe* exhibition catalogue, Zico House, Beirut 2006.

28 Ibidem.

29 See *Jean-Marc Nahas, Jets d'encre*, Elie Pierre Sabbag, Beirut 2005, p. 18.

Barbie dolls in post-orientalist still lives. "*How women were received in the Arab world was my starting point. You can eat them in a bite*"³⁰ admits the artist about one of her compositions. In other words, female characters are inanimate smiling but speechless objects of desire. Whatever one can think of these *mises en scènes*, they definitely evoke a regression of modernity in contemporary societies. The breakdown is obvious when we look back to *A Suspended Life*, a feature film Jocelyne Saab directed in 1984. An anthology sequence takes place inside the ruins of Beirut's sports city. Two young women, whose freshness contrast with the apocalyptic setting, are there, talking about men, love, sex. In the turmoil of the catastrophe, these two women still have their dignity, their will to resist, their independence, their liberty to love, and moreover, their right to speak. Twenty years later, women have been reduced to crappy pieces of plastic. It could just be a Pop culture kitsch trend discussed earlier. Ironically enough, during the same decade, Mohammad el Rawas began to use Manga kinky figurines in his delicately constructed three-dimensional paintings. Coincidence?

Antoine Boulad might be exaggerating a little bit when affirms that "*The Woman appears in every single painting of Rawas's*"³¹, but he surely is not far from reality. Rawas dedicated his oeuvre to "*The Woman*", implementing her in his etchings and paintings from numerous sources: Portraits of relatives, media (*Paris Match*, adult magazines, press images of the Lebanese war), old masters (Botticelli, Michelangelo, Vermeer), modern art and cinema (Marcel Duchamp, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Peter Blake) and popular culture (cartoon, Manga, as mentioned above). "*The Woman*" can be considered as a single character of Rawas's enterprise, playing all situations: Heroism, maternity, martyrdom, muse, and seduction. In November 2007, Rawas presented *Sit Down, Please!* This video installation is inspired by "*Wouqouf 'al Al Atlal*" (standing on the remains), the poet's lamentation on his beloved's departure with her (Bedouin) tribe, celebrated in Early Arab culture. Facing a wooden chair, on which we are invited to be seated, a video loop shows people reciting a verse by 8th Century poet Abu Nuwas in sign language.

Silence. The screen is flanked by six (almost identical) panels, three on each side. On every panel appears a fragment of the Abu Nuwas text written in Arabic calligraphy, two small pictures of a nude woman, her sexual attributes covered by a white stripe, and a large close-up on the same woman's face having a very explicit attitude: Orgasm. *Sit Down, Please!* is, in the artist's words, "*a critical reaction to those who are regressing into practices and beliefs, which prevailed in the past and are no longer applicable to modern age*". Rawas replies, as does Jean-Marc Nahas, to fundamentalism and ultra-conservative blind ideologies. Although pursuing totally different paths, they both can be considered as "*artistes engagés*" in a struggle for human dignity and the right, for men and women to earthly delights. The body has become a battlefield.

In spite of the limited number of works discussed in these pages, historical subjects in Lebanese contemporary art encounter a multiplicity of issues: Crime, desire, exodus, liberty, martyrdom, memory, national identity, oppression, resistance, reconstruction, terrorism, trauma, war. The present essay doesn't pretend to be a comprehensive study, or even an "introduction", to a cultural experience that is yet to be re-examined and analyzed as a whole and through its different components and antagonisms, especially that recent political and warfare events added new layers of complexity. Trying to establish theoretical conclusions at the time being would be hazardous.

30 Quoted in *Jocelyne Saab. Sense, Icons and Sensitivity*, exhibition catalogue, Planet Discovery and Agial Gallery, Beirut 2008.

31 In *Rawas, recent works 2005-2007*, exhibition catalogue, Aida Cherfan Fine Art, Beirut 2007.

If according to André Malraux, art is born out of the fascination with the unreachable, art installations are the privileged and concrete expression of what is about to fade away. Nada Sehnaoui and Mohammad El Rawas present art installations among other artists in this exhibit. While the two artists have chosen the same medium, one would wonder if they share the same idea of this artform.

It is known to us that for Sehnaoui, art installation is a matter of preference.

She has mounted a number of great shows in Beirut and abroad, namely the Fragments of Memory in downtown Beirut, where Beirutis were invited to write down personal memories of this place as they had known it before the war, a subject that has sunk in the collective memory. Though a first attempt by Rawas, his was yet another masterpiece that won him the prize of the 24th Biennale of Alexandria for Mediterranean countries, in 2007.



For Sehnaoui what matters is to fill a public space with citizenship dynamics. The big dimensions in her work are in correlation with the impact she wants to imprint on our collective consciousness. For Rawas, who displays in a confined space, the intention is to target the individual perception of the exhibition visitors.

Rubble was born in the aftermath of the Israeli war against Lebanon in 2006. Three days after a ceasefire took hold, Nada Sehnaoui, armed with her camera, visited the places that were targeted particularly in the southern suburbs. Pictures of destruction, somber scenes and blocks of masonry that her camera captured attest not only to the brutality of men, but more specifically to the dismantling and fragmentation of lives. It is this contemplative look at objects of life that the artist is restating visually and putting forward.

Dislocated objects, ejected from their routine, plucked out of a usual context that once gave them meaning, are now obsolete, voided, diminished to nothingness, and can only arouse feelings of absurdity.

Strangely enough, the ground on which Rawas moves is not far away from Sehnaoui's .

In the middle of six panels, a screen projects a video. A whicker chair is placed in front of the mounted screen. Each of the six panels represents the same woman figure, on crutches and presumed naked. A famous verse by an Arab poet of the 8th century, Abou Nawwas, stretches over the six panels. Rawas appears to be browbeating his contemporaries, in an outcry for modernity, and casting an ironic look at dated practices anchored in the past instead of reaching forward. The verses of Abou Nawwas sarcastically question the holy grail of classical Arabic literature which began with long ballads, or lamentations of nomadic poets discovering that their beloved and her tribe have decamped with their tents, leaving behind nothing but traces and castoffs in the desert sands.

It is the same criticism that the artist is addressing to the obsolete ideology that prevails in most Arab societies where women are denied their fundamental rights.



The video shows a group of men and young women, often veiled, repeating over and again the same verse of Abou Nawwas in sign language. This is a metaphor of the dangers posed to these societies which are stifled and muzzled by a growing dominance of fundamentalist ideologies and strict teachings.

It is striking to see how Nada Sehnaoui puts the accent on the external pressures that weigh on Arab society, while Mohammad El Rawas extracts internal forces undermining that same society. Nada plants her camera in the rubble of thousands of lives destroyed. Mohammad denounces the obscurantism imposed by a society that destroys from within the potential and integrity of its individuals.

One would wonder whether the two powers of destruction are in fact feeding on one another.

It is equally interesting to note the disparity between the artistic approaches in the two installations by Sehnaoui and Rawas: immediacy for the one versus complexity for the other. Whereas all

falls under sensual perception in Sehnaoui's work, conceptualization takes over in Mohammad's work.

To note few paradoxes: While works of Rawas usually vibrate with a great number of visual elements, his present installation offers here an unusual sobriety. In contrast, the rigorous order and great economy of visual means that Sehnaoui has maintained in her past work gives way here to a large palette of colors and forms.

By going off the beaten path onto the one less traveled, both artists are offering up new shades in their artistic vocabulary, and going beyond their established modes of expression. The willingness of both artists to take new risks leads me to venture and dream further of a blended, a nuanced and combined approach leading to radical changes in our societies.

Antoine Boulad

P L A T E S

Art is a blade in my throat.



Anita Toutikian

"Cookies and Blades"
Art Installation, video



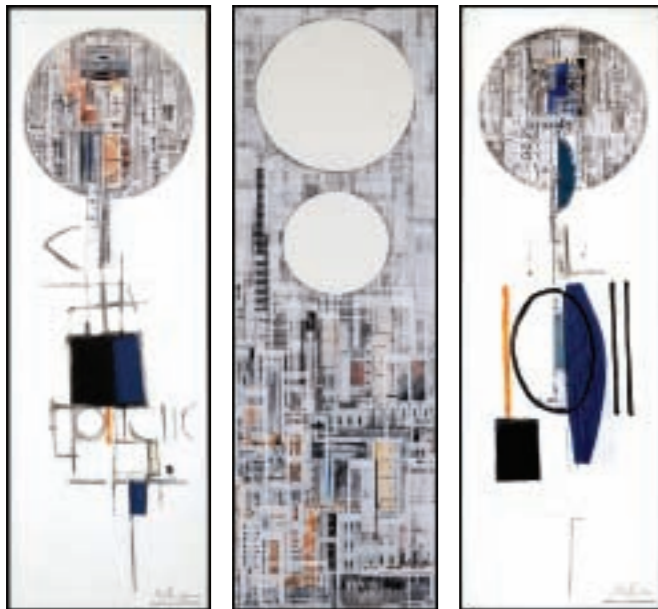
Sometimes, just accepting to live with the gray...
can lead to amazing perspectives.

The temple

From the concept utopia/ the Babylon syndrome

Five elements are the main composers of this or the new temple

- 1- Projected Symbols and (language) reflecting ideas and illusions
- 2- New tree of knowledge (assembled from a vast variety of our time production, from usual to the finest high-tech), this tree project symbols and languages on the wall and different kinds of sounds and speeches
- 3- New icons (rectangles made from collage of prints and mixed media)
- 4- The ruins of dreams and ambitions



Mario Saba

"The Temple", 2009
Art Installation, 4x4m

"Its only through the arts that people can
speak to each other.
That's why we're more dangerous than soldiers."

Robert Rauschenberg



Joumana Jamhuri

"Sky is the limit", 2005
Photography, C-Print, 73x110cm

I enjoy connecting different materials and ideas together to create a multilayered work of art. The tension and resonance between the perceptual and conceptual is at the essence of the aesthetic experience in my art.

This work is a critical reaction to those who are regressing into practices and beliefs, which prevailed in the past and are no longer applicable to the modern age.

In this work, I deride a specific aspect of such practices, namely considering the female body a taboo. I display on six panels pictures of a nude female on crutches, her breasts and pelvis deliberately masked. The panels also feature repeated blown-up portraits of the same nude model. Ironically, the expression on her face is more seductive than her censored nude body.

The three-dimensional model of a traditional artisanal chair constitutes the pivotal theme of this work, the act of "sitting down". The satire embodied in the invitation to sit down, meaning "relax and take it easy", is inspired by a verse of the 8th Century Arab poet Abu Nuwas. The verse, is inscribed in Arabic along the six panels, translates as follows:

"Tell him, he who stands weeping over vanished traces, no harm done had he sat down."

Most Arabs in pre-Islamic times were Bedouins constantly on the move; when a poet returned to where he had left his beloved and would find nothing but the traces of her tribe's tents, he would stand there weeping over these ruins, and lament his departed love. These sad memories would stimulate his emotions, spur his imagination and constitute the introduction to the poem; the poet would then move to the next subject in his poem. This order of themes set the structure of classical pre-Islamic Arab poetry, it also influenced future poets who no longer lived the Bedouin way, and weeping over traces became symbolic of the attitude of looking back rather than forward in life.

Abu Nuwas was an innovator who severely criticized those poets who imitated and lingered in a past they no longer lived in, sarcastically asking them what difference it made whether one was standing or sitting down while weeping.

The looping video features a group of ordinary Arabs reciting the verse by Abu Nuwas in sign language. They are not necessarily deaf or dumb, much as the nude model is not crippled. These 'handicaps' are a metaphor for the bigoted ideology of fundamentalist groups.

Mohammad El Rawas

"Sit down, please"

Art Installation, 6 lithographs, video, 1,65x5m



"Tell him, he who stands weeping over vanished traces, no harm done had he sat down"



My artistic expression is a creation of a reality, which represents fundamental views of man's behavior forewarning the future about the suffering of the past so that it will never be forgotten.



Katya Assouad

"It's a game", 2008
Acrylic on canvas, 2x2m

"I tell you: one must have chaos within oneself to give birth to a dancing star"

Nietzsche

"In Dreams" is a project about deep intimacy and the outside world, as well as the symbolism of Dreams. Dyptics are made of pictures of sheets tracing a body facing an image of an aquatic element: water in all its states, moving, whirling or freezing.



Kris Seraphin

"In Dream 1", "In Dream 2", 2002
Dyptich, photos on aluminium, 60x160cm

Nature has always been my major source of inspiration. From the most familiar to awe inspiring observations, from the infinitely large... a tiny sea shell picked up on the beach, the structure of a palm tree trunk, the depth of the ocean or a spangled night sky.



Nabil Nahas

"Cedar II", 2009
Acrylic on canvas, 100x180cm

My dream is turning all my work
into an aquarium :
in its moving motion, the speed of the water, its
reflexion, the shapes and colors.

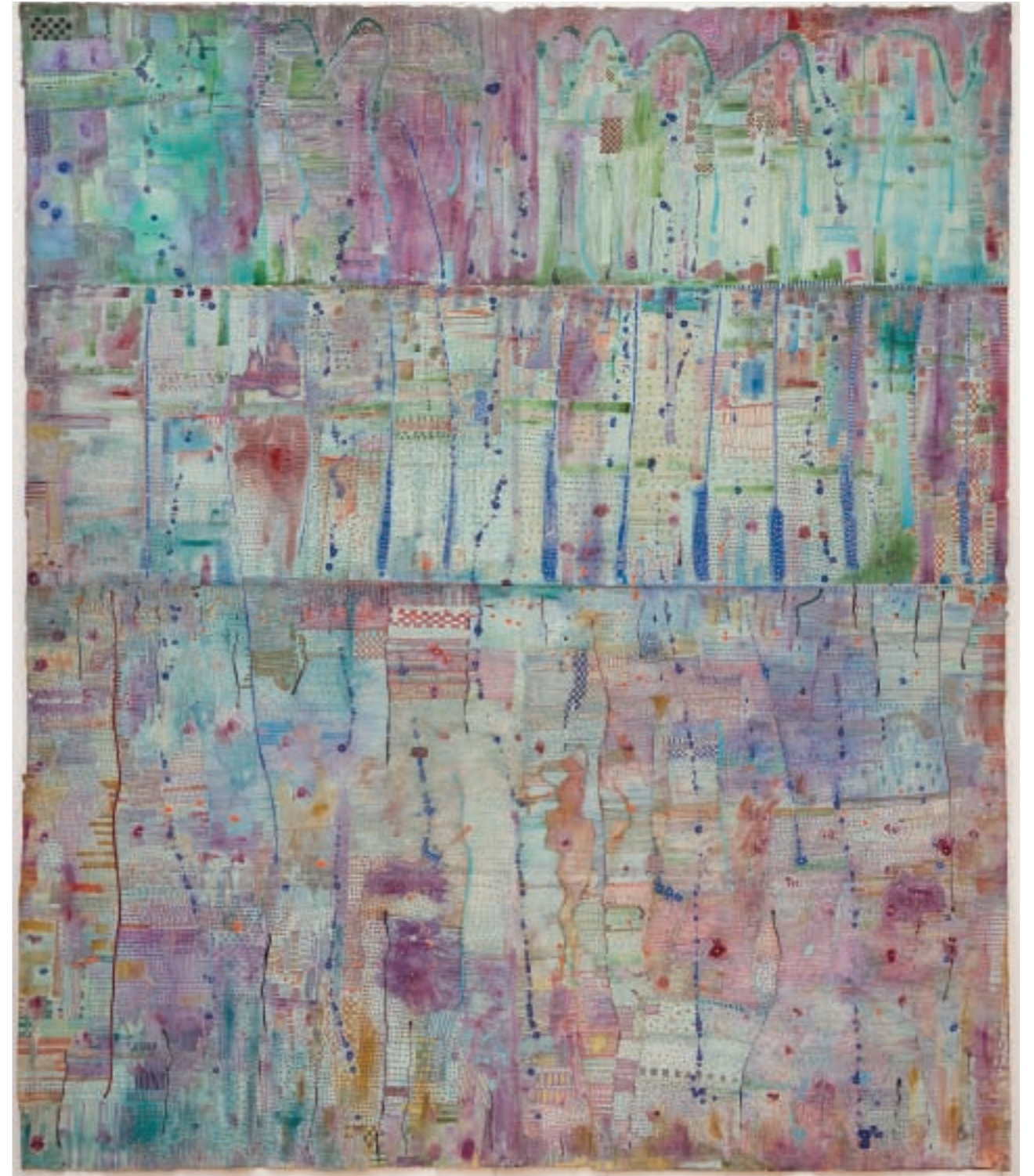


Joseph Harb

"Aquarium", 2008
Acrylic on canvas, 135x260cm

" Happy he who like Ulysses has
returned successful from his travels...."

Joachim du Bellay



Huguette Caland

"The Sea II", 2007

Mixed media on canvas, 220x190cm

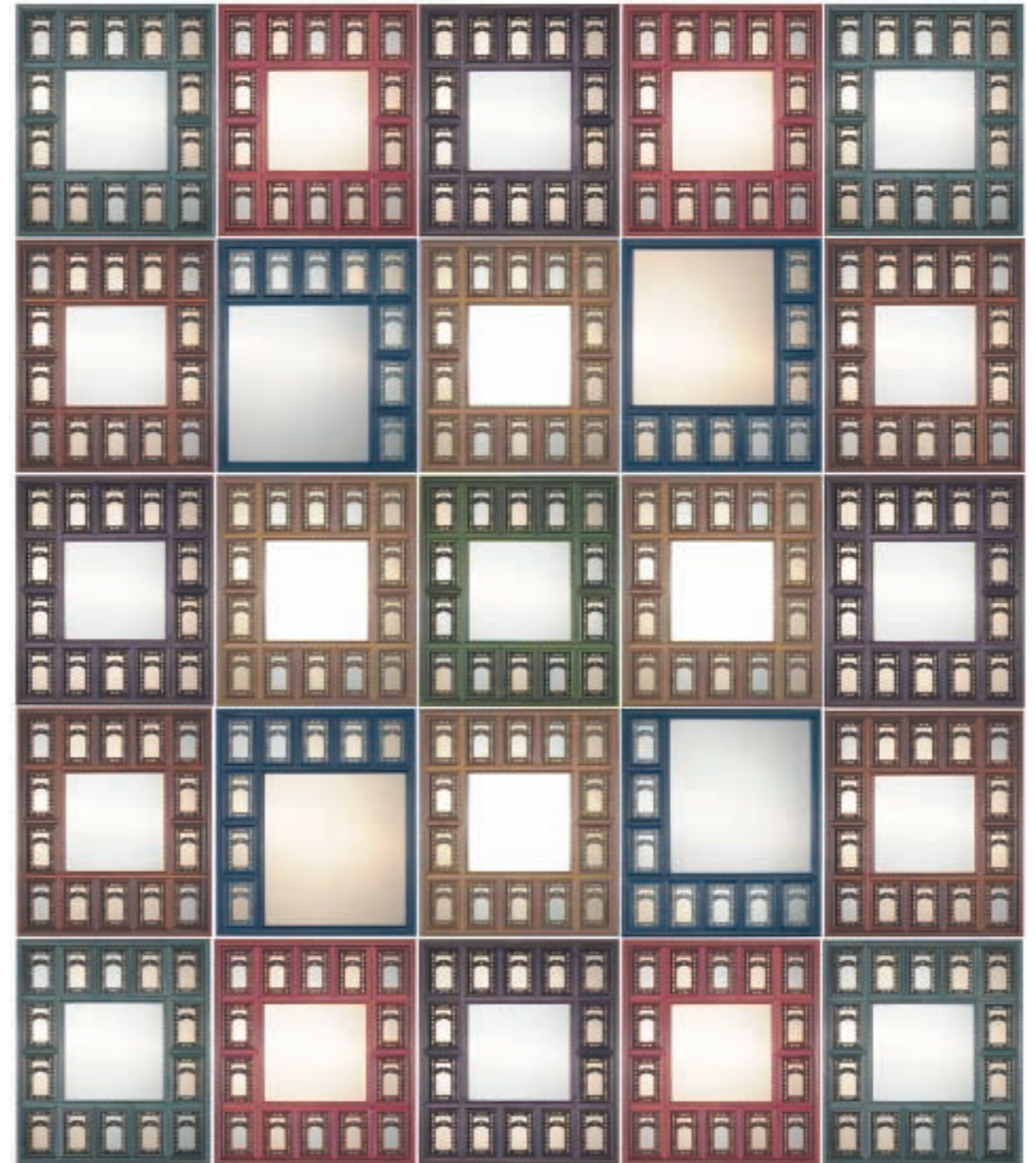
I multiply places, points and forms so as to capture time in an attempt to escape "falling".



Paul Wakim

"The four elements of Bachelard", 2002
From the series Painting and Writing, acrylic on canvas, 2x2m

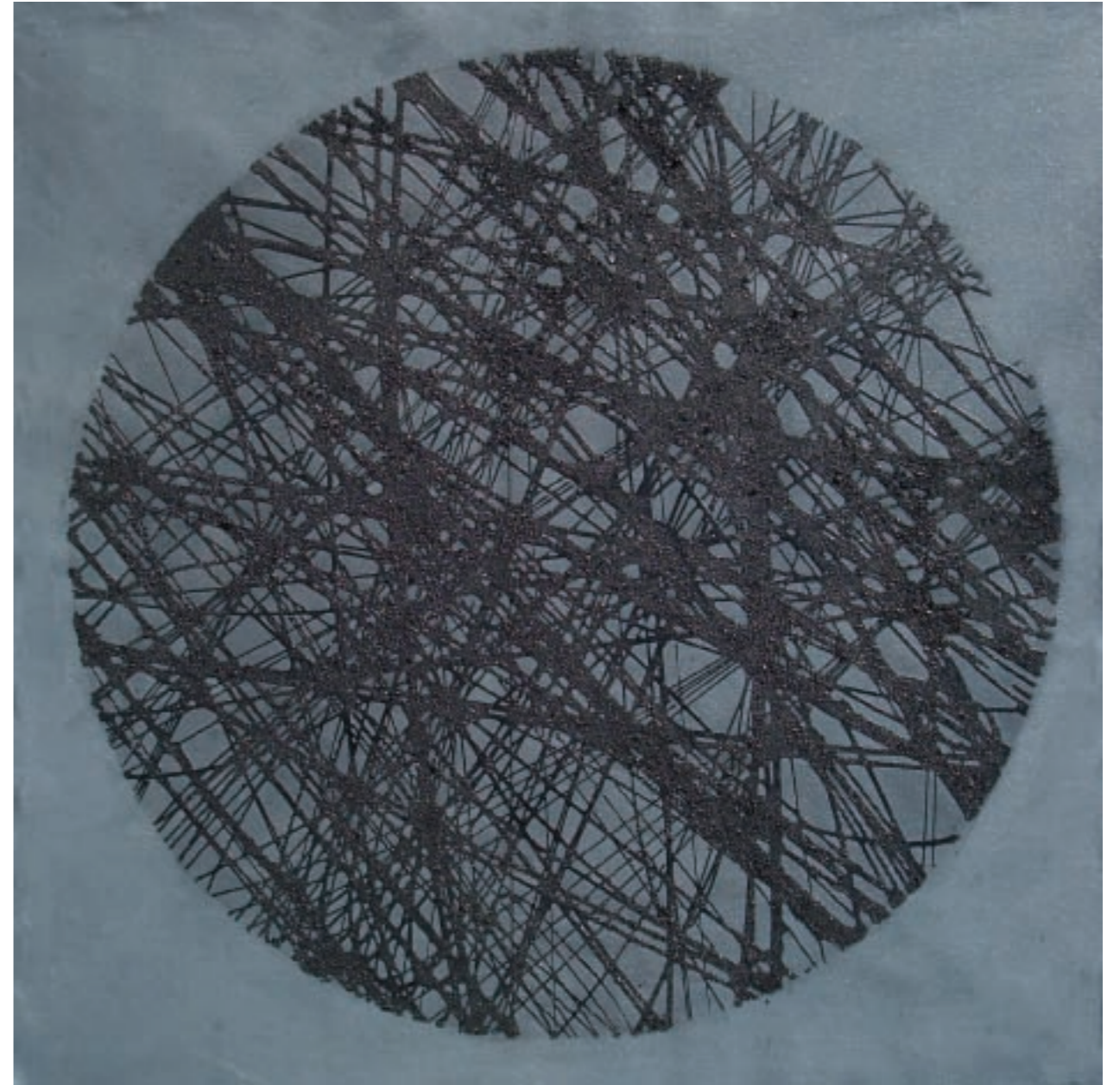
International contemporary art is mainly occidental.
I have chosen to reveal in literature and painting our
oriental identity.



Gebran Tarazi

"Horizontal and vertical time", 1995
Art Installation, 3x3,50m

My art pieces are the result of self-realizable experiences. They are artistic propositions easily understood.



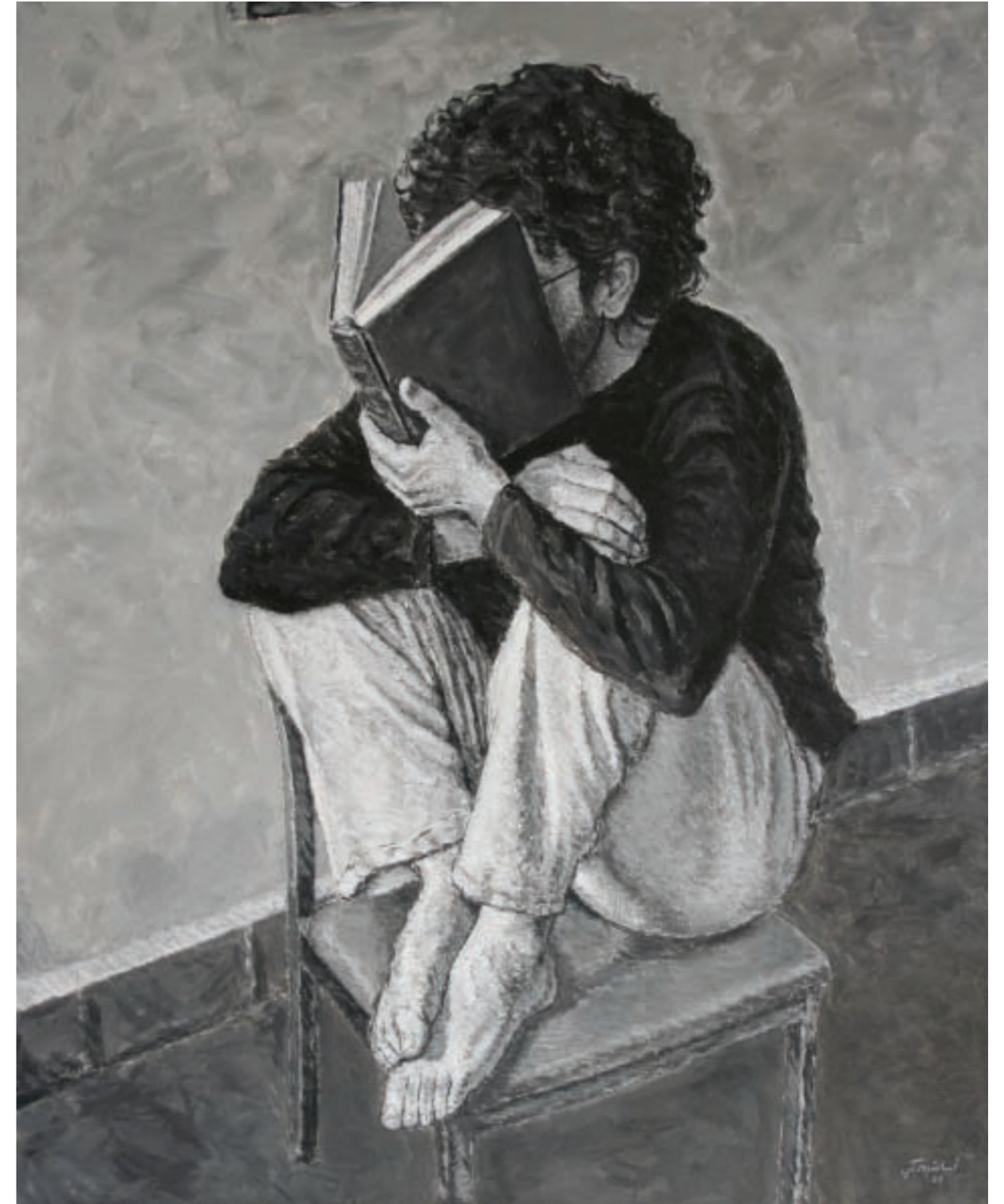
Bassam Geitani

"Untitled", 2008
Acrylic & collage on canvas, 140x140cm

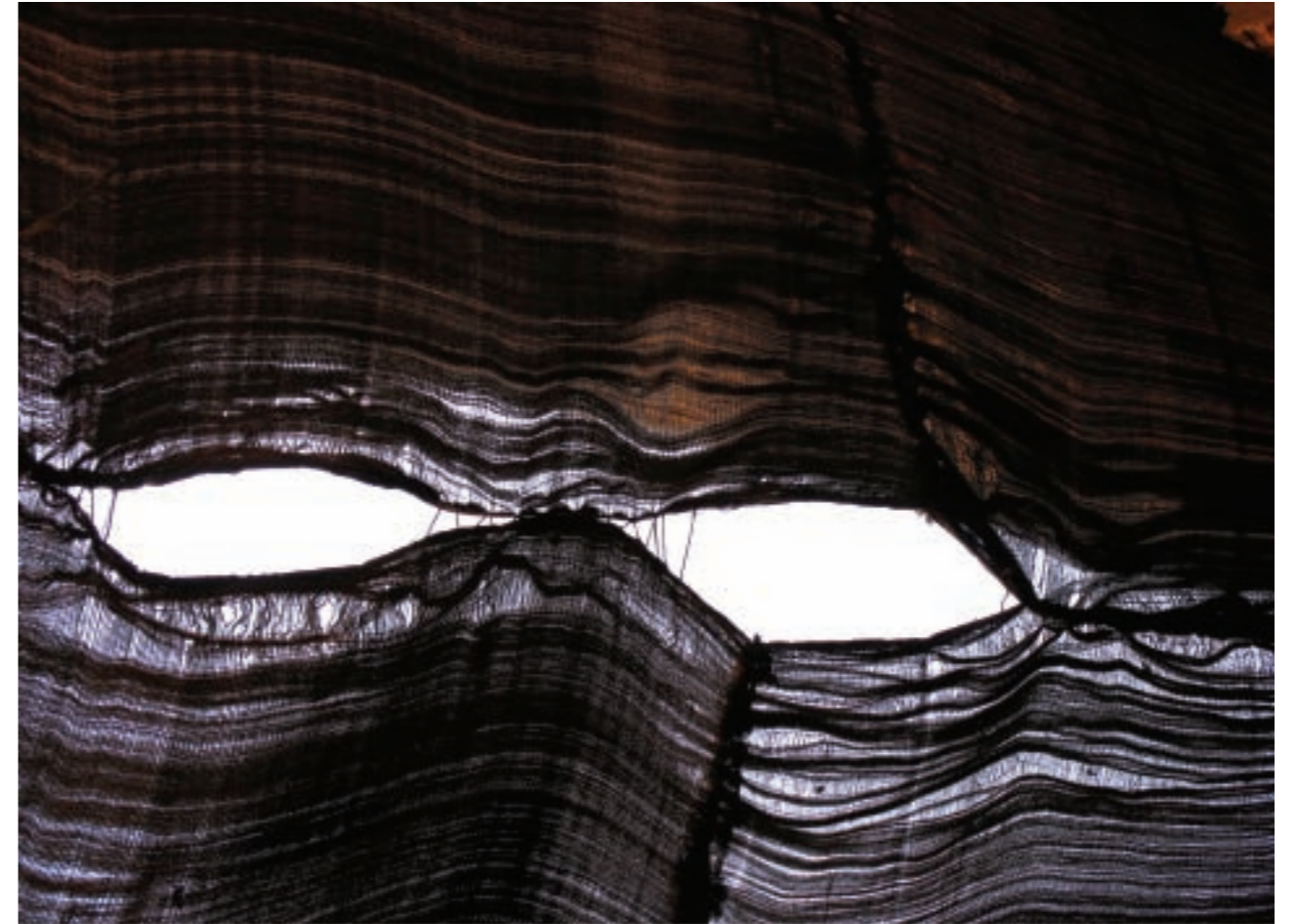
With an ungrateful eye,
I won't be tired from prospecting every source.
If the promise is tepid,
My heart, do what pleases a butterfly!

Oussama Baalbaki

"Thunder in the Room", 2009
Acrylic & collage on canvas, 180x150cm



In "Floating Architecture", the vernacular architecture of the desert and its inherent philosophy and spiritual inspiration is unveiled through shadow and light, the limit of which is defined by the tent: a perception of the body revisited, the deviation strays of which evoke a recollection of the Arab Erotic. Photography becomes for me a contemplative act of apertures, erotic interlacing and knots, the intimacy of sunlight filtering through woven fabrics.



Jocelyne Saab

"Duel look", 2008
Photography C-Print, 75x100cm

"What flows from you shall in the great circle of life eventually flow to you as well..."



Marwan Nahlé

"Madonnas", 2001-2006
Sculptures mixed media

"My works existed before me, but nobody had seen them because they were blindly obvious".

Raymond Hains (from his work out of torn public posters)



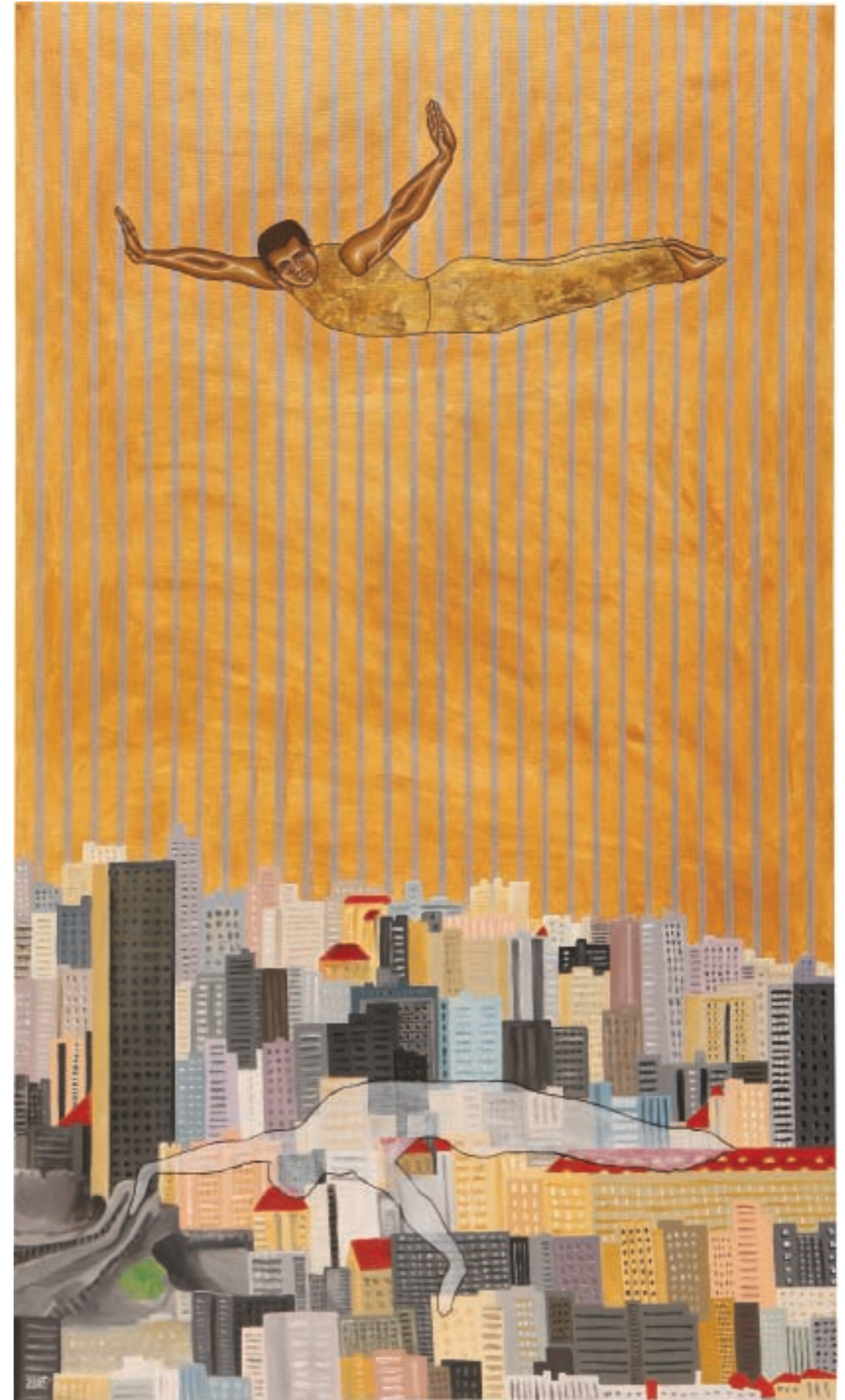
Hala Dabaji

"Self Portrait", 2007, Art Grandeur Nature Series
Photography, 80x62cm

Subject is only a pretext.
Painting is the playground, the place where secrets
are hidden.
Nothing is what it seems.

Rim El Jundi

"Beirut Sky", 2008
Mixed media on canvas, 170x100cm



Rubble is a meditation on the ongoing capacity of human beings to reduce other human being's lives to rubble.

Rubble is a meditation on the ongoing capacity of human beings to reduce other human being's lives to rubble.

Beirut, Southern Suburb / August 2006/ Three Days after the Cease Fire.



Nada Sehnaoui

"Rubble", 2008
Art Installation, photos, 3x5m

We carry a linear past within us.
Our present opens up windows, different time
spaces, that interact with the music of our lives.

After two months...

The jacket... the tragic part of young widows left to clear away the remnants of their dead husbands: long after someone dies his particular odor remains on the clothes in his closet.

In the death of their loved ones, women from all communities are brought together in the same gut rending sorrow.

The suitcase... how many times have we heard and repeated the phrase: after two months all will be well... Thus, in the middle of planning: to leave or not to leave?

Each of these two: jacket and blazer, open two windows each... the tangible and the intangible.

The painting... as the troubadour sings of things past: a prayer that indeed all the windows are just windows on the past and that they should just be a memory to remind all of us not to go down that path again...the politicians looking for solutions from abroad, the lovers that opt for life and love instead of death, the dead who had no choice, the destroyed homes and lives, as the apocalyptic horse went on a mad rampage and the only solace was to be found in the dredges of irrational cups of coffee... like the empty chair: Waiting.

Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui

"After two months...", 2008

Art Installation: Painting 200x110cm, Jacket 80x60cm, Suitcase 60x100cm, mixed media



" Only the present moment is real, powerful...
one becomes what one thinks and energy
follows thought"

Elsa Maillart



Amal Dagher

"Corridor", 2008

Photo on acetate with back lighting, technique Jean Paul Harlan, 142x128cm

Can you teach me how to fight?



Marwan Sahmarani

"Night Hunters", 2005
Oil on canvas, 197x204cm

Autobiographical, the "Fire Works" is a meditative act, a way of making peace with myself and the world.



Hannibal Srouji

"Fire IV", 1997

Mixed media on canvas, dyptich, 122x290cm

More and more I try to address communities and cities based on themes involving time, dreams and memories. I work to the scale of the city and cooperate with many of its people to realize a project. In the end, the work is not absolute, it moulds itself relative to the dynamics of the city. It is finished when it takes on its own life in the imagination of city dwellers.

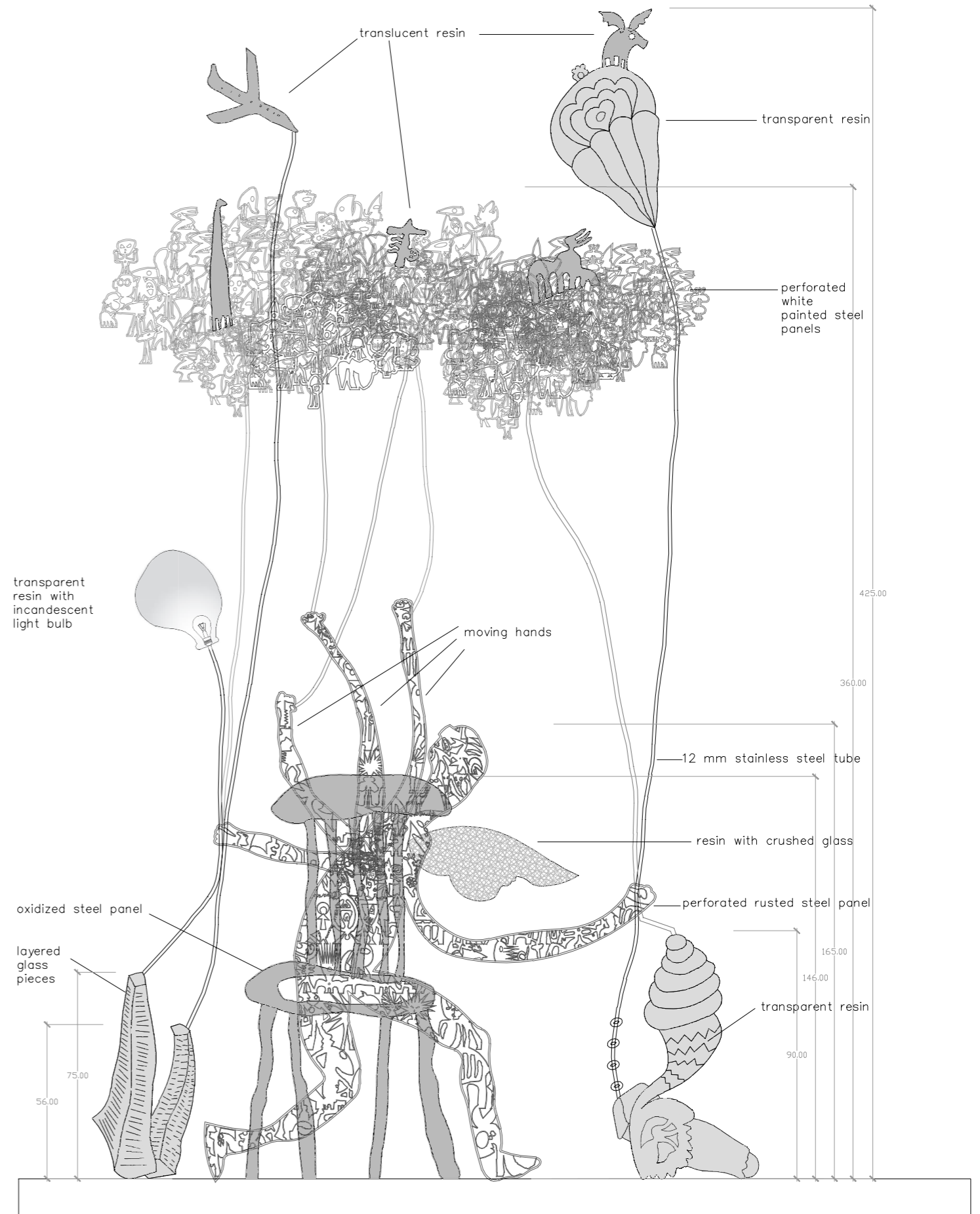
The Fisherman and the Cloud

This installation is part of a series of works based on a critical project created for the city of Dubai. The Cloud is a panacea to the sum of exclusive venues in the sky, an ode to the loss of human-scale.

The fisherman is usually found sitting on the Cloud, fishing high-rise buildings from the sky.

In this installation, the fisherman is sitting on a Chair and with his multitude of arms, plays with the Cloud.

I want to walk on a cloud.



Nadim Karam

"The Fisherman and the Cloud", 2010

Art Installation, metal (rusted, stainless, painted) and resins. Study

During the war in Lebanon, I stopped painting;
I never wanted anyone to live off my pain.



Chaouki Chamoun

"Waiting for the hero", 2008
Acrylic on canvas, 290x250cm

In my paintings, the medium is the witness of a process of an image construction in which memories, inquiries and emotions, create every time a new aesthetic experiment.



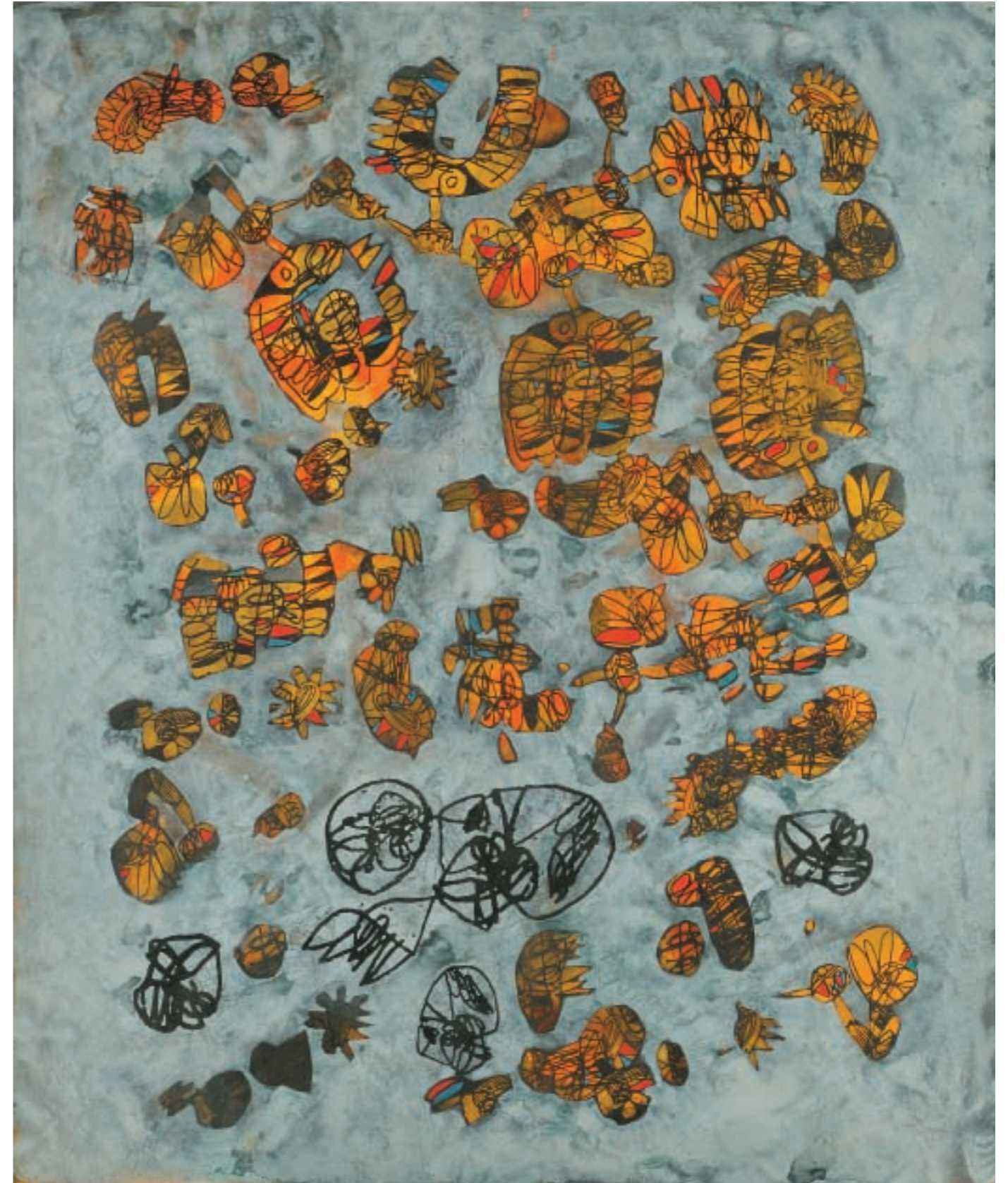
Joseph Chahfé

"Untitled", 2006
Mixed media on canvas, 152x142cm

I am working here on sketches made from memory without the "Golden Rule".

Mansour El Habre

"Thoughtful", 2008
Mixed media on canvas, 200x120cm



"The longer you look at an object, the more abstract it becomes, and, ironically, the more real"

Lucian Freud



Lulu Baassiri

"The Magic Woman", 1993

Oil on canvas, 150x150cm

My work is linked to the images and symbols of a troubled Middle East. It makes use of the media's approach and aesthetic research of a violent iconography. I believe my art work can be identified as "global", searching and seeking within the visual local culture and employing a plastic global language.



Ayman Baalbaki

"Merkaba", 2009

Art Installation, mixed media, wood, 234x128x88cm

...My life was an experience of "a paradox of clashing realities, a recognition of the need to seek" meanings amongst the chaos and absurdity. I witnessed people killed, sacrificed and terrorized in the name of God, of the Nation, of scared beliefs and basic rights.

Chawki Frenn

"Golgotha", 2006
Oil on panel, 122x92cm



All my life I have been working only on one painting and for me art will remain an expression of an unsatisfied phantasm.

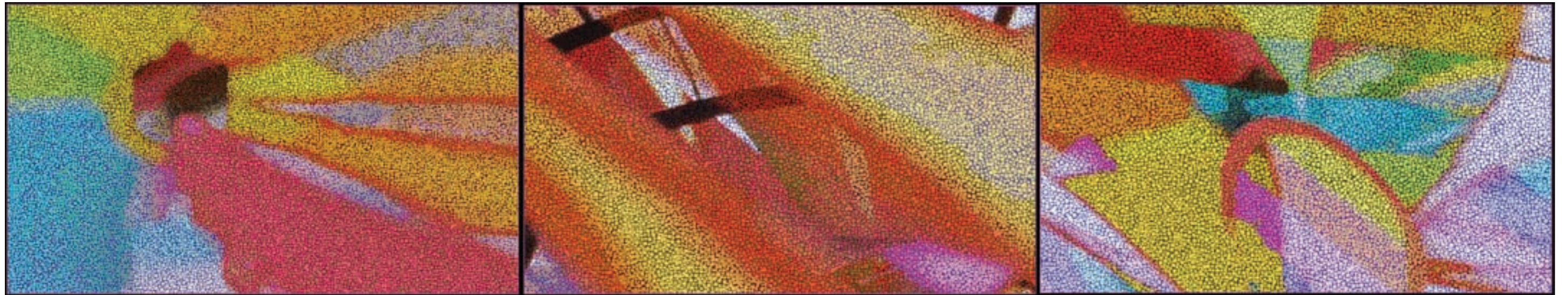
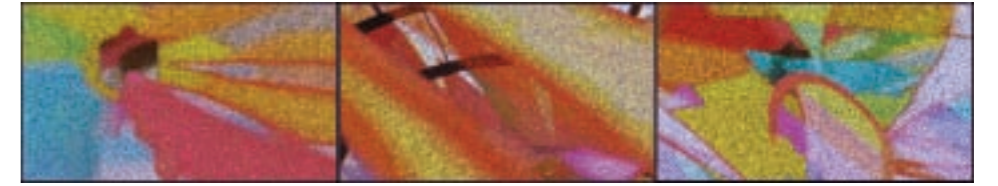
inspired by the great master Picasso...



Jean-Marc Nahas

"Graffitis", 2008
Mixed media on canvas, 3x5m

Sea, mountains, pine trees, crickets; my village



Jean-Pierre Watchi

Compostion 54 "Summer of 2009"

Digital animation (loop), triptych, 3 HDTV monitors and sound system, 2'x10'

B I O G R A P H I E S



Baalbaki, Ayman

Ayman Baalbaki was born in the village of Odeisse in South Lebanon in 1975. He graduated from the Lebanese University in Beirut in 1998. He went on to graduate work at L'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, France and obtained his doctorate in the Art of Images and Contemporary Art there. Baalbaki has held several exhibitions in Lebanon, France and the Arab World. He won first prize in a 1996 competition for the reconstruction of Beirut sponsored by Lebanon's ministry of culture.



Baalbaki, Ossama

Ossama Baalbaki was born in Lebanon in 1978. He attended the Lebanese University School of Fine Arts and has held numerous exhibitions in Lebanon at various cultural institutes and museums such as the Sursock Museum. Baalbaki also took part in the Lebanese Plastic Arts exhibit in Algeria.



Baassiri, Lulu

Lulu Baassiri was born in the port-city of Sidon in Lebanon in 1954. She studied plastic art at the Beirut University College. She was artistic director (for graphics) at the independent An Nahar newspaper in Lebanon and at Nahar Arabe et International for five years consecutively. She painted in the eighties while also working with Readers Digest. Her work, which has been widely exhibited in Beirut and abroad, explores the links between realism, symbolism and photography. She is a professor at the American University of Beirut and still paints.



Bassili Sehnaoui, Mouna

Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1945. Sehnaoui, a Lebanese citizen, first trained at the Silvio Bicca Art Academy in Egypt. After studying for two years at the American University of Beirut, she moved to the University of Arizona, Tucson, where she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. She has held 14 exhibitions in Beirut, Paris, Khobar and Dubai including one at the now defunct Beirut J.F. Kennedy Cultural Center (1973).

Her group exhibitions include: Saga in Paris and Arte at the Javits Center in New York. Her artwork has been part of Platform International at the Strassi Gallery in Washington. Art Multiple in Dusseldorf, Institut du Monde Arabe exhibits in Paris and shows at the Barbican Center in London and St'art in Strasbourg and others. Her work has won several prizes and is featured in the Alexandria Museum of Prints in Egypt, and the Sursock Museum in Beirut, as well as the American University of Beirut, and in other private collections around the world. Her publications include a book, "Professions and Callings" and "The Fifth Day".



Caland, Huguette

Huguette El Khoury Caland was born in Beirut in 1931. She studied art at the American University of Beirut for four years until 1968 and moved to Paris in 1970. She has lived alternately in Paris and New York and worked under Rumanian sculptor George Apostu. She resides in Los Angeles where she has lived since 1988. Her paintings have been exhibited at the Pacific Design Center and at the Atricultural Art Center, in Los Angeles. Since 1993, her work has been shown in Beirut, Rome, Tokyo, Paris, Monte Carlo, Barcelona and Italy. Caland's work hangs in collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain in Paris and is part of permanent exhibitions in Monaco and Beirut. Caland has dabbled in other fields of creativity in addition to her painting such as the illustration of books, sculpting, screen-writing and has designed a line of clothing for famed French designer Pierre Cardin.



Chahfé, Joseph

Joseph Chahfe was born in Lebanon in 1959. He studied Plastic Art at the University of Quebec in Montreal and currently resides in Canada. He has taken part in exhibitions in Switzerland, France, Great Britain, Colombia and Lebanon. Those have included Europ'Art in Geneva in 1999, Art Paris, Caroussel du Louvre (1999), Star't 2001 in Strasbourg, France as well as the Gallery in Cork Street in London in 2004. His work has been widely exhibited in Lebanon, Colombia and Canada in the last 15 years and he has taken part in modern art fairs in the United Arab Emirates in the Gulf. In 2006 he held an individual show in Santiago, California in the United States.



Chamoun, Chawki

Chawki Chamoun born in Lebanon in 1942 attended art and design night courses before entering the Fine Arts Institute at the Lebanese University in 1968. Graduating at the top of his class in 1972, he was awarded a full six year scholarship to pursue graduate studies in the United States. Majoring in Painting as well as Sculpture and Ceramics Studies, he obtained his graduate degree from Syracuse University in Fine Arts in 1975.

Concentrating on Aesthetics and Studio Art at New York University, NY, as a fulltime doctorate student at its Art Education Department he was given a Meritorious Commendations for High Scholastic Achievement. He has given over thirty solo shows since 1975 in Lebanon and around the world. He has taken part in art shows at the Rochester Memorial Museum, Lowe Art Center, the renowned historical Sursock Museum in Beirut and his artwork is part of a number of public and private art collections worldwide. Chamoun has been an Art/Design consultant to Design and retail firms in the USA, a member of the Lebanese Artistic Syndicate, President of the Lebanese Artists Association, and a member of ASK, Kingston, NY.



Dabaji, Hala

Hala Dabaji DABAJI Hala was born in Beirut in 1981. She studied at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux- Arts. She has exhibited her work at various museums and galleries in Lebanon, including the Sursock Museum. She has dabbled in exhibitions on line and art deco work and has worked as a graphic designer. She paints, sculpts and has done some fashion design. She has often wondered whether art has stripped our outlook on the world from its true nature.



Dagher, Amal

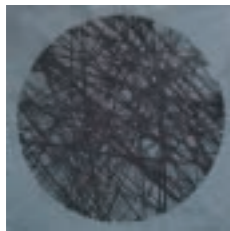
Amal Dagher was born in Lebanon in 1970. She studied at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris and at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts in Lebanon, where she now is a professor of visual arts. Her work now mainly consists of video clip production, short documentary films, promotional film and photography. As a French government grantee she went to Aix-en-Provence and later trained in photography and stage design in Paris. Her work has been exhibited in Lebanon, France, and several Middle Eastern and Gulf countries.



Frenn, Chawki

FRENN Chawki was born in the central Lebanese market town of Zahle in 1960. His formative years were spent in Lebanon, which he describes as a country of beauty, mysticism and conflict. The devastating images of the first six years of civil war he witnessed growing up had a powerful influence on his life and work. He moved to the United States in 1981, where he obtained his undergraduate and graduate degrees in Fine Arts, where he stayed to pursue his career as a professional artist and as a university professor. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Painting and Drawing at George Mason University in Fairfax.

Frenn's work has been recognized with numerous awards and he has exhibited extensively, both nationally and internationally. He has participated in several museum exhibits and has taken his artwork on a traveling show, ECCE HOMO. It has been hosted by Vanderbilt University, in Nashville (TEN), George Mason University in Fairfax (VAL), the Holy Institute of Fine Arts in New Castle (PA). The Houston Museum of Art in Bridgeport, (CT), The Erie Art Museum, in Erie, (PA) and St. Paul's School in Concord (NH). Frenn's work is part of the Houston Museum of Art collection, The Springfield Museum of Art, in Springfield (OH) and many other private collections.



Geitani, Bassam

Bassam Geitani was born in Lebanon in 1962. He returned to Lebanon in 2003 after spending 14 years in Paris where he studied at the University of Paris I- Sorbonne. His work has been exhibited at the Beirut Sursock Museum and at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and at the Palais de Chaillot. His work was part of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in the Grand Palais in Paris from 1992 to 1999. Geitani has also exhibited at the Gallery in Cork Street in London in 2004 and participated in the Sharjah Biennale of Arts in the United Arab Emirates, He has written screenplays for experimental films at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris. He obtained the Art and Science Prize for the "Chercheur d'Or" from the International Council for Film, Television and Audiovisual Communication, a non-governmental organization linked to UNESCO and part of the Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity.



Habre, Mansour

Mansour El Habre was born in Lebanon in 1970. He obtained a Higher Studies Diploma in Plastic Arts from the Lebanese University in 1994 and a Masters in Plastic Arts from Balamand University in northern Lebanon. He has participated in several exhibitions in Lebanon, Switzerland and London. The Lebanese Ministry of Culture has selected him to take part in an International Triennially of Engraving and Rodeos. His work can be found in various private collections in Lebanon and France.



Harb, Joseph

Joseph Harb was born in Beirut in 1964. He is a graduate of the Institut des Beaux-Arts at the Lebanese University and a recipient of a scholarship granted by the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts and the French Cultural Center in Beirut in 1996. Harb attended a workshop on sculpture in Cergy, France. He has exhibited regularly at the Sursock Museum in Beirut and has taken part in international art fairs in Paris, Geneva and the United Kingdom. He was professor of drawing at the University of the Holy Spirit, Kaslik, Balamand University and the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts. He left for the United States in 2000, where he now resides.



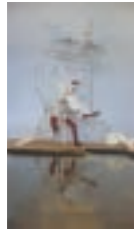
Jamhuri, Joumana

Joumana Jamhuri is a Lebanese-American. A graduate of the New York Institute of Photography, she has specialized in architectural, nature and documentary photography. She is a teacher of photography at the Collège Notre Dame de Jamhour Cultural Center in Lebanon. She is well published in magazines and has shot photographs for coffee table books which include "Independence '05, The Beirut Spring". Her first monograph "Le Liban et la Mer" was released in December 2008. She has had two major exhibitions at the Planet Discovery museum in Beirut and at the Paris-based Office du tourisme du Liban.



Jundi Rim

Rim El Jundi was born in Lebanon in 1965. She studied at the University of the Holy Spirit in Kaslik in Lebanon majoring in Sacred Art and at the Lebanese American University where she majored in Fine Arts. She has exhibited her work in Beirut, Lebanon, in Kuwait and at the Vermont Studio Center in the United States, the Triangle Arts Studio in New York, at the Cork Street Gallery in London and at the Alexandria Biennale in Alexandria, Egypt. She was awarded the Ford Foundation-sponsored Triangle Art Fellowship at the Vermont Center and is the recipient of other regional awards and in Egypt and the Gulf.



Karam, Nadim

Nadim Karam obtained his degree in architecture from the American University of Beirut and his doctorate in architecture from Tokyo University in 1989. He founded the Atelier Hapsitus, a multi-disciplinary company in Lebanon which has created large-scale urban city projects in Beirut, Kwangju, which is south of Seoul in Korea, Prague, Notting Hill, London, Tokyo and Nara, the capital of Honshu Island in Japan. Karam's work has been exhibited in the Liverpool, Kwangju Art and Venice Architecture Biennales and he curated Lebanon's participation in the first Rotterdam Biennale. He has taught at the Shibaura Institute of Technology in Tokyo and at the American University of Beirut. He has also served as Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Art and Design at Notre Dame University in Lebanon from 2000-2003. His 1997-2000 urban art projects for Beirut's downtown district was one of five worldwide, which were selected by the Van Alen Institute in New York in 2002 to highlight their contribution to the rejuvenation of city life and morale following disaster, in reference to Lebanon's war. He received three Australian awards for his commission by Victoria State in 2006 for The Travelers, a permanent installation of ten three storey-high sculptures which move across a bridge, telling the story of Australian immigrants and creating an urban clock for the city. A current project entitled The Cloud is inspired by the Gulf city of Dubai. It consists of a huge public garden resembling the shape of a cloud at 250 meters above ground level. It was conceived as a visual and social antithesis to the multitude of sky scrapers now typical of most rapidly growing cities in the Middle East. He has also undertaken interior design projects for a flagship fashion store in Qatar, a private residence and a museum in Lebanon. Booth-Clibborn Editions, London has published three books on his work entitled Voyage in 2000, Urban Toys in 2006 and The Cloud, the Desert and the Arabian Breeze in 2007.



Nahas, Jean-Marc

Jean Marc Nahas was born in Beirut in 1963. He studied at L'École des Beaux Arts in Paris. He returned to Beirut in 1988 where he has sought to create a dynamic art movement with fellow Lebanese artists. He does not go for the aesthetic but for the reality and intensity his work can evoke. He searches for color and inspiration from human beings though he considers himself a misanthrope. Crowds are always present in his work as an antidote to loneliness. He would like to be able to say as one big master said before him that all his life he has been working only on one painting.



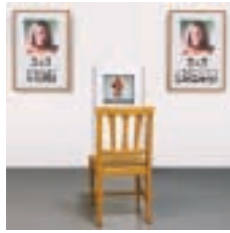
Nahas, Nabil

Nabil Nahas was born in Lebanon in 1949. He moved to the United States when he was 18 and now spends his time shuttling between Beirut and New York, where he works and lives. He obtained his graduate degree in Fine Arts from Yale University in 1973. His work has been successively represented by the Robert Miller Gallery, the Holly Solomon Gallery and the Sperone Westwater Gallery. In 1982 Nahas was given a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. Nahas has had solo exhibits, and has participated in several group shows in the United States, among them "Collection Memory, and Material Culture", the Museum Guild Hall NY, 1999, "Arte Americana; Ultimo Decennio" Museo d'Arte della Citta di Ravenna, April-June 2000, "American Fractals", Blandel Memorial Art Museum, Fort Dodge Iowa, and many others in France, Brazil, Switzerland, Italy and Lebanon.



Nahlé, Marwan

Marwan Nahle was born in Lebanon in 1965. He began exhibiting his work in Beirut, Lebanon in 1989 and in Mesa, Arizona in the United States. His work has been shown in Lebanon, France, Switzerland, the Canary Islands, Dubai, the United States, Jordan, Germany, and in the United Arab Emirates. His artwork is mainly of acrylic and mixed media. In 2007, he began working with and exhibiting recycled objects, mixed media and collage. His work has been shown at the Sursock Museum in Lebanon. He is working on a project that consists of "cleaning up" some villages in Lebanon by turning their rubble into recycled art.



Rawas, Mohammad

Mohammad El Rawas was born in Beirut in 1951. He studied painting at the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Art and received a 1975 scholarship to study abroad; the year civil war broke out in Lebanon. He stopped painting and left his country for Syria where he worked as a stage designer for Syrian television. He traveled to Morocco where he taught art and resumed painting. He returned home in 1979 and held his first show before joining the Slade School of Fine Art in London. He returned to Lebanon in 1981 with a graduate degree in printmaking and began his academic career at the Lebanese University and at the American University of Beirut which lasted until 2008. El Rawas served as secretary general of the Association of Lebanese Artists for nine years and is a founding member of the Syndicate of Lebanese Artists. Since 1979, he has held eight major exhibits in Beirut and London and has taken part in over 40 international art biennials and exhibitions in the United Kingdom, the United States, Norway, Tunis, Brazil, Japan, Kuwait, France, Holland, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Poland and China. He has won a total of five prizes and honorable mentions. In 2008 he was awarded the Alexandria Biennial for Art of the Mediterranean Countries Prize for his first installation including video art.



Saab, Jocelyne

Lebanese-born Jocelyne Saab has directed 20 documentaries featured on French and other European channels, NBC in the United States and NHK in Japan. As journalist and cineaste she has shot film in forsaken zones of conflict such as Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Kurdistan, the former Spanish Sahara and Vietnam. With the exception of one film entitled "Suspended Life", she has written all her scripts. "Beirut My City", "The Sahara Is Not For Sale" are among her celebrated films as is "Once Upon A Time In Beirut", an ARTE Strasbourg production which she directed. A mixed media installation about war titled "Strange Games and Bridges" was featured at the National Museum of Singapore. "Suspended Life" written by Gerard Brach was selected at The Directors Fortnight Cannes.



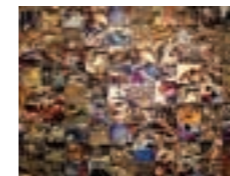
Saba Mario

Mario Saba was born in Tripoli, Lebanon in 1964. He studied decoration, architecture and then went to Russia to pursue his interest in painting. After his painting courses he returned to Lebanon and read psychology at the Lebanese University. He considers himself an experimental artist and has broached all kinds of techniques and explored various approaches in his artwork. Saba has tried his hand at mixed media, art installations, conceptual structures as well as photography among others. He has tried to adapt different approaches to his projects to better express through art what war memories and post-conflict is all about.



Sahmarani, Marwan

Marwan Sahmarani was born in Lebanon in 1970. He left Beirut in 1989 for Paris to study at the Ecole Supérieure d'Art Graphique. He now lives and works in Montreal. His work has been exhibited in Beirut, Montreal, Dubai, New York and Ireland. Sahmarani's artwork is wedded to his Middle Eastern origins. His oil paintings, drawings, ceramics and performed work is reflective of the mediums themselves and of sociopolitical issues. A mid-career retrospective in 2006 charting changing palettes but nagging political questions. In 2007 Dubai's The Third Line gallery showcased his series entitled "Can You Teach me how to Fight?" The paintings and drawings of this exhibit retraced battles occurring in the Middle East between the 10th and 14th centuries. Prophetic in depicting the cyclical patterns of violent history, the pieces serve as a cautionary reminder in a region where invasion has become a self-perpetuating reality.



Sehnaoui, Nada

Nada Sehnaoui was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1958. She studied at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the University of Paris IV Sorbonne, in Paris, where she read history. She attended Boston University for her graduate studies in film production after obtaining a graduate degree in Sociology at the University of Paris X Nanterre in Paris and a diploma in Cinematography at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris III. Her installations question the use of public spaces in relation to collective memory and democracy building. She is a visual artist whose work, paintings and installations deal with war, personal memory, collective amnesia, identity and the recording of history.



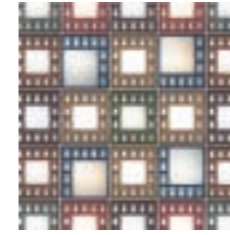
Seraphin, Kris

Kris Seraphim was born in Egypt, was raised in Lebanon and describes herself as being of French education and culture. She has been living in Paris since 1990. She has always been passionate about images and the emotions they can create. As a child she would cut out pictures out of magazines for her scrapbook until her parents gave her a Minolta X500, her first camera which became her instrument for self-expression. She worked as a graphic designer for seven years before working as a fulltime photographer. She contributed to the French magazines Paris Match, Studio and Psychologies and magazines in Lebanon and Australia. Her photographs depict of ghostly, falling bodies in motion, an exploration of sensual expression. She has held exhibitions in France, Lebanon and Belgium.



Srouji, Hannibal

Hannibal Srouji was born in Lebanon in 1957 and studied fine arts at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Nimes, France. He has taken part in numerous exhibitions around the world, namely, Europ'Art in Geneva in 1997, Art Paris, Caroussel du Louvre in 2000 and Star't 2000 in Strasbourg, France and The Gallery in Cork Street in London in 2004. Srouji's artwork is part of various private collections in Lebanon, Canada and Algeria. He is the recipient of several honors and awards, among them La Bourse de Recherche et Perfection from the Quebec Ministry of Culture for 1985 to 1987, the Grand Prix du 49ieme Salon de Saint Cloud from the Avelines Museum in France and the Merite et Devouement Francais' Arts Silver Medal.



Tarazi, Gebran

Gebran Tarazi was born in Damascus in 1944 but spent most of his childhood and adolescence in Morocco. At 18, he moved to Beirut, Lebanon where he studied law at the Jesuit Saint Joseph University. He worked as an antique dealer in Beirut and wrote a philosophical novel, titled The Olive Press in 1978, which was first published in 1996... For seven years and until 1987, he worked as an interior designer for his family-owned traditional artisan business which specialized in carved ceilings and molding. This inspired him to devote the next 15 years to paint geometrical abstractions, creations which have become his signature style. He devoted three years to produce a book about those paintings which spelled out his philosophy and his Manifesto for an Oriental Culture.



Toutikian, Anita

Born in Beirut in 1961, Anita Toutikian is an artist, writer, clinical psychologist, art therapist and an art instructor at Haigazian University and Notre Dame University, Lebanon. She is Armenian, Lebanese and Greek. Under the pseudonym "Artist Unknown" Toutikian has created Lebanon's very first post-war examples of alternative art with conceptual and contraceptive texts, artist objects, assemblages, fabricated stories, photo-performances, installations, interactive works and media. Her Art insists to break from the past and confront it at the same time. She has participated in more than 70 solo and collective exhibitions in Beirut, Yerevan, Paris, London, Amman, New York, Algiers, Toronto, and Nicosia. She won the Mention of Sursock Museum in 1997 and the first prize in 1998. She is the author of a book-installation titled "Counteractive Art from the Middle East"



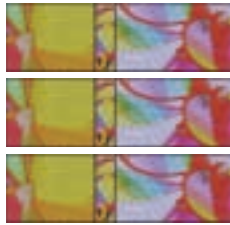
Trabloulsi Assouad, Katya

Katya Assouad Trabloulsi was born in Lebanon. The artist is based in Dubai and her stylistically diverse artwork has been shown at exhibits in the United Arab Emirates, Mexico, the United States, France, Algiers and Lebanon. Her art is part of private collections in Canada, the U.S., the United Kingdom, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and Lebanon. She has donated several of her works to events dedicated to charitable fund-raising auctions. She is now based in Dubai.



Wakim, Paul

Paul Wakim was born in 1949 in Lebanon and lived in New York and Beirut from 1979 to 1988 where he held several solo exhibitions. He moved to Paris in 1989 and took courses in philosophy and aesthetics in 1993 and 1994 to find ways to add texts to his conceptual creations. Remembrance, nostalgia, meditation and great violent eruptions are at the center of most of his paintings. He multiplies places, points and forms so as to capture time in an attempt to escape "falling". Wakim is a contemporary artist adept at blending the complexity of East and West. He is now working on what he calls his "atelier of creation" to realize something that is unique and complex, organized and composite.



Watchi, Jean-Pierre

Jean-Pierre Watchi is a Lebanese national who was born in Mali in 1952. He lives and works in France. He was schooled in Beirut and later studied and graduated from the London Film School in 1975. In 1977 he presented an audio-visual project on exterior walls at the XIV International Sao Paulo Biennale in Brazil. He took courses at L'Ecole de l'Image Paris les Gobelins in computer and digital art, an area he has focused on for the past ten years. He has held shows in Beirut, the Contemporary Art Fair in Paris and the Institut du Monde Arabe there.



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