

## Territory, space and body: Historical issues in Contemporary Lebanese Art Gregory Buchakjian

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The “Lebanese war” ended in the early nineties. The country stepped out of a 15 years period of trouble, violence and existential threats with a lacerated infrastructure, public institutions in ruins, and a bombed out Beirut city center. The government set reconstruction as a main priority. It emphasized Lebanon’s newfound opportunity to rebuild and thrive again. Many Lebanese, however, did not share the “official” and unquestioning optimism of the times. Something was missing. What about those fifteen years? Should they be forgotten, erased from history books? If no lessons were extracted from the past<sup>1</sup>, how could anyone assume that war would not break out again? Could a nation be resurrected and people reunited if collective memory was buried along with the casualties and detritus of war?

While physical traces of war were gradually being cleansed from the visual scope, new entities were being created. Ashkal Alwan, Atelier de Recherche ALBA (Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts), Ayloul, Shams, Umam Documentation & Research and 111101 Memory and Creation came into being. They provided inter-disciplinary platforms for comprehending what had happened to the city, the scarring dividing lines, the wanton destruction, the brutality and all the traumas that followed. Artists and scholars from different fields channeled that experience into prolific writing, film and theater production as well as into the visual arts.

This essay focuses on a body of paintings, photographs and installations selected for the exhibition entitled *Convergence: New Art from Lebanon* through three angles: Territory, in the artwork by Chaouki Chamoun and Nabil Nahas; space in the probing pieces by Hanibal Srouji and Nada Sehnaoui; and body by examining the creations of Ayman Baalbaki, Marwan Sahmarani, Jean-Marc Nahas, Jocelyne Saab and Mohammad Al Rawas.

### 1. Territory, Threats and National Symbols

*On A Spring Day 1975* by Chaouki Chamoun is a grand vista of green hills dotted with white, blue, red and yellow spots. It revisits a path of 20th century Lebanese art that has

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<sup>1</sup> Titian’s *Allegory of Prudence* (London, National Gallery) is a Renaissance masterpiece which is based on this principle and bears the following inscription: “*From the past, Present acts prudently lest it spoil future action*”.

traditionally been rooted in soil, nature and picturesque scenery<sup>2</sup>. Omar Onsi, Moustapha Farroukh, Cesar Gemayel and, later on, Saliba Douaihy 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 to confront the horrendous reality on the ground and took refuge either in abstraction or through the recreation of Mediterranean shores, a bright sun, charming flowers and traditional old “Lebanese” houses. Theirs was the idealized image of a space that no longer was what it used to be. The Lebanon of postcards once perceived as The Switzerland of the Middle East had definitely died. However, it remained in the hearts of many Lebanese who wanted to believe in a hypothetical return of the golden era<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike the earlier landscapes, *On a Spring Day 1975* is seen from afar and way above. It has a very high horizon line and a flattened relief. While romanticism indulges the viewer allowing him or her to breathe deeply in facing the sublime<sup>4</sup>, Chamoun forces us to plunge towards earth, as did Anselm Kiefer in the seventies and eighties with large scale field paintings conjuring the dark episodes of German history<sup>5</sup>. Kiefer operated as an archeologist/historian digging up mud, dust and ashes from a troubled past. Chamoun takes us back through a time machine, transporting us into the past before events unfold.

Chamoun invites us into the charming green Lebanon of yesteryear, as it was on a spring day in 1975. A beautiful panorama is visible through the precision lens trained on a target. Instead of the *vedute* wide format, the whole composition is square and is seen through the sight of a gun. The spectator is not watching the forthcoming events as an innocent civilian but as an anonymous and invisible aggressor, a pilot in the cockpit of a military jet or a gunman, perhaps, perched on top of a cliff. Whoever looks at this painting will be disarmingly drawn to assume some kind of responsibility in the destruction of the country.

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<sup>3</sup> This idealistic representation of the mountain and the 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.

<sup>4</sup> “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 1790-1900*, exhibition catalogue, Edinburgh, London and Munich 1994, p.140.

<sup>5</sup> “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”, Mathew Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, Cambridge 1998, p. 49.

The question remains: What are the little colored spots supposed to mean? Four potential answers lie in four individual frames. Frame 1: The peaceful, unspoiled countryside with the small colored spots reminiscent of Monet's flowered candy boxes. Frame 2: Territory as a war zone with the colored spots marking potential points of impact or explosion sites. Frame 3: The painting as a multi-layered surface consisting of the gun sight and the land and the little colored spots could just be traces of dirt on the optical device. Frame 4: The painting as a single item is as if it was an archival document. The little colored spots attest to the deterioration of the medium and therefore to its historical authenticity.

Grayish blemishes of that kind can be seen in a piece by Walid Raad<sup>6</sup> based on black and white photographs<sup>7</sup> shot during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Raad chose to consider the war with irony and as a spectacle. He has people watching warplanes carpet bomb Beirut from a safe vantage point. Chamoun, on the other hand, pictures a war in the making, according to his title. Chamoun's colored spots and Raad's gray spots come across as a multiplicity of scars, stitches and points of impact.

Nabil Nahas reinterprets the burning of space and soil as a metaphor for the destruction of Lebanon. Nahas uses the nation's symbol, the cedar, to play on ambiguities. The tree centers its flag, is visible on its currency as well as in the logo of its airline carrier. It is also a prominent element in the insignias of political parties (mainly right wing). His recent *Cedars* paintings are almost abstractions, totally detached from their natural and physical environment<sup>8</sup>. In a narrow close-up, the monumental trees are perceived as anonymous geological fragments<sup>9</sup>. *Cedar 1* is an untouched tree; *Cedar 2* is a burned one. And that is almost all: Life versus death, good versus evil, peace versus war. In *Cedar 1*, the tree is rendered in precise, almost geometric tracing. *Cedar 2* is blotched with Balitzesque tachism: splashes of red and electric wire, the only external element of the series.

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<sup>6</sup> Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say "we are convinced" twice. A project from The Atlas Group Archive by Marwan Hanna*, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> "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. I.*, exhibition catalogue, Maqam Gallery, Beirut 2009, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> "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 transformation", Nathan Kernan, *Nabil Nahas: Opium and Candy*, exhibition catalogue, Sperone Westwater, New York 2005.

Four decades earlier, Rafic Charaf painted dark and lugubrious landscapes composed of dead trees, barbed wire and blood. These somber visions were stirred by the miseries of life in neglected rural Lebanon and somehow forecast the catastrophe that was gathering steam with irreversible momentum. The post-apocalyptic Cedars of Nahas remain organic bodies, neither fully alive nor completely dead. Isolated, fragmented and disconnected from their roots and branches, “bodies without organs”<sup>10</sup> they are on the move with flux, replete with intensity and generate energy. As witnesses and remnants of ancient history, dating back to the Babylonians, the Pharaohs and Alexander the Great, these bodies are charged with magical powers<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. Space: Deconstructing Devastation

Burning in the painting / Burning the painting: Destruction and deterioration are widely seen in contemporary art as an artistic method. In 1961, Niki de Saint Phalle shot a 22 long rifle into bags full of paint, making them “bleed” in a live performance<sup>12</sup>. The action was a catharsis related to her despair and incomprehension of World War II. The infliction of a wound was aimed at triggering a process of recovery.

Artists in Lebanon also resorted to reenacting the ferocity of war as they had witnessed the degradation around them. In *1 Acte / 2 Pièces*<sup>13</sup>, a theater seat was cut in two over a one-month period. Seven years later mechanized hammers pounded at the wall of a building condemned to demolition<sup>14</sup>. And so it is with canvases burned by Hanibal Srouji. After fleeing the port city of Sidon by boat in 1976, Srouji spent most of his life outside Lebanon. During the first year of the war, he helped out at the Red Cross tending the wounded and the fallen. He later described that experience as “a reality that transcends horror movies”, affecting his mind in a long- term trauma<sup>15</sup>.

In the artistic method he developed two decades later, it is understood that applying fire on the immaculate surface of a canvas is not a crime but a kind of salvation for the atrocities he witnessed, with brutality converting to serenity. It is the Srouji paradox. Seen

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<sup>10</sup> As defined by Deleuze and Guattari, “A body without organs is made in such a way that it cannot be occupied, nor inhabited except by intensity. Only intensities pass and circulate (...) The body without organs facilitates passage of intensities, and it produces and distributes them in an intensive spatium that is not extended”, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2, Mille Plateaux*, Paris 1980, p. 189.

<sup>11</sup> “Totemic Idol”, Joseph Tarrab, op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> See *L’Ordre Sauvage, Violence, Dépense et Sacré dans L’Art des Années 1950-1960*, Laurence Bertrand Dorleac, Paris 2004, pp. 212-227.

<sup>13</sup> An installation by Atelier de Recherche ALBA at the Theatre de Beyrouth (2001).

<sup>14</sup> *I’ll Race You*, installation by Pascal Hachem in the Dome, Beirut City Center, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Offerings*, Hannibal Srouji, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, 2009.

as a whole, Srouji's diptychs evoke irradant luminescence *and precise harmony*. His is a reversal of Chamoun's process. The ashes of war are refined into a delicate garden. *Feu IV* calls to mind the wild splashes of Jackson Pollock applied with the mastery of a calligraphist. *Feu IV* exploits the beauty and emotion that traces of carnage can bring to a viewer.

Historical relics and archeological digs can fascinate. Millions make yearly pilgrimages to the Acropolis, the Pyramids, Rome and other destinations. Some meditate on the fate of civilizations, as 18th century romantic poets did. Others just take snapshots, as in Martin Parr's photographs. Modern day warfare provided state armies and military organization the possibility to reduce urban space into a wasteland of ruins in no time, as was the case with airborne strikes by the allies over Germany and Japan. Cities were pummeled into a primitive state where rubble remained and people were left behind to pick up the pieces. This was vividly illustrated in Roberto Rosellini's *Germania Anno Zero*, directed in 1947 Berlin. In the aftermath of the July war in Lebanon in 2006, thousands flocked to Beirut's southern suburbs of Haret Hreik and Ghobeiry to take measure of the outcome of 33 days of unrelenting bombing attacks. They had ventured out not to discover but to see with their own eyes the nightmare they had lived through and the horrors they had seen on television. In an acclaimed press photo shot on August 15, 2006<sup>16</sup>, five trendy youngsters visit the smoky ruins in a posh red cabriolet, seeming more annoyed than shocked. Most visitors in post-July 2006 Beirut wandering through the southern suburbs were equipped with cameras, taking the same pictures they had already seen in the press. A similar phenomenon occurs when an individual takes snapshots of a celebrity he or she happens to meet. The individual wants to have his or her picture of the superstar, his or her picture of the tragedy. Capturing an image of what has been shown in the media was a way of taking ownership of the story. No one would ever be able to reproach them "*Tu n'as rien vu a Hiroshima!*"<sup>17</sup>.

Nada Sehnaoui's *Rubble* is a collection of photographs taken on the site where disaster hit, three days after the end of hostilities. While most photographs showed the space frontally depicting crushed facades and freshly printed political posters, Sehnaoui looks down through her lens towards the ground. The outline of the urban network of structures as it had been was unrecognizable. Streets, sidewalks and homes, the public and private spaces had crumbled into mounds of debris. They were composed of the heterogeneous relics of stone, cement, metal, pipes and road signs and the personal belongings of furniture, books, household goods, toys, luggage and food items scattered here and there.

A few items emerge intact from the monstrous mass of carbonized living spaces. An airline ticket, a student's French grammar notebook, a red velvet couch. They each told individual stories. Focused into narrow vision, these pictures could have been taken

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<sup>16</sup> Photograph by Spencer Platt; winner of the World Press Photo 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Marguerite Duras "You saw nothing in Hiroshima!" in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959)

anywhere else. These scenes could have been in the South Lebanese village of Bint Jbeil, and they could also have been from another war, another place, at another time. They could also have been the result of natural disasters such as earthquakes or tsunamis. But they are not. “*Rubble is a meditation on the ongoing capacity of human beings to reduce other human beings’ lives to rubble,*” is Sehanoui’s take on that disaster and the lives of people prior to it<sup>18</sup>.

With the visual disappearance of inhabitants and the destruction of material belongings, *Rubble* expresses the void. So 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 life: habitus and habitat. Also inspired by the 2006 war, Ayman Baalbaki’s *Tammouz* (Arabic for July), is a series of dark collapsed constructions and a continuation of his previous work on ruins. His *Ciel Chargé de Fleurs* portrays the former Hilton Hotel<sup>19</sup> while inhabited by refugee families<sup>20</sup>. At the time of his execution of the painting in 2004, the landmark had been evacuated and demolished by implosion to be replaced by a newer building. Life before war/ War/ Reconstruction, It had become a vicious circle in Lebanon: “You destroy, I construct, you destroy again, I reconstruct...”<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Body: Martyrdom, Crime and Gender

Ayman Baalbaki’s account of Middle Eastern history deals with the likenesses of “*keffiyeh*” (Bedouin headdress) and plausible suicide bombers. They represent one of the most complex iconographic issues in contemporary imagery: the war of good against evil. Seen from an American or a European perspective they are associated with savage terrorism. Their actions have targeted Western interests in the Middle East. From an Arab, Muslim and to some extent Third World point of view, the “*keffiyeh*” guerrillas are heroes. They are perceived as the last shield against Israeli and Western injustice over Palestinian and Arab populations at a time during which most Arab governments have struck alliances with the West. The contradiction of good versus evil in Baalbaki’s work depends on context. Martyr representations are the subject of a profuse imagery, mainly in posters commissioned by parties they were members of to hold up “the nobility of a

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<sup>18</sup> Collecting Dahyieh” is one project by Umam Documentation & Research which collects memories through ancient photographs of sights and people to show ordinary lives. A photo exhibit took place in 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Constructed in 1975, the Beirut Hilton was never opened to the public due to the war. It was demolished in 2002.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Tarrab, “ça suffit!”, in *Ayman Baalbaki Transfiguration Apocalyptique* exhibition catalogue, Agial Gallery, Beirut 2008.

cause”<sup>22</sup> along streets and neighborhoods. They are visual elegies used to mobilize the local population and by no means are they intended for the Lebanese bourgeoisie and even less for Western audiences. By giving prominence to the “*keffiyeh*” artwork that is supposed to hang in galleries and private collections, Baalbaki confronts his spectator and collector about a specific aspect of violence in recent history.

*Merkaba* is a devotional shrine mounted on a pushcart used by street vendors to sell fruits and vegetables. The piece refers to a chariot carrying the throne of God<sup>23</sup> and pulled by four angels. In order to obtain a triptych, the artist added two lateral panels to the central one. If one were to read Baalbaki literally, the four figures on the lateral panels (one with a helmet, one with a hooded mask, one with a “*keffiyeh*” and one wrapped in a white shroud, *à la Magritte*) could be an ironic interpretation of the “*Chayot*” (angel mentioned in the Old Testament). The central “*keffiyeh*” warrior is painted on a gilded background with red flowers. Both are references to paradise, the first being in Byzantine iconography, and the second in Islamic culture. The shaheed (martyr) can be an object of worship in street pop culture<sup>24</sup>.

Contemporary history can be burlesque and kitsch, a far cry from the times where Jacques Louis David could paintings of Roman epics replete with appealing naked men and lithe women, all virtuous. David’s heroic symbols are pure utopia though history is an accumulation of atrocities. A frightening crime scene is the subject of Marwan Sahmarani’s *Night’s Hunters*. The body of an anonymous victim is lying on the ground surrounded by four armed men, his probable murderers. This crudely painted scene has a lot in common with Jean-Luc Godard’s *Je vous salue, Sarayevo* (Hail Sarayevo) a two minute short narrated by him on the horrors committed in the former Yugoslavia. The film is a succession of close-ups on a single photograph. It shows militiamen standing over lifeless corpses. Sahmarani’s ashen-faced dead man is as Maurice Blanchot once wrote, “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.”<sup>25</sup>

“I’ve seen so many people live so badly, and so many die so well”, said Godard in the narration of his film. In the eighties 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

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<sup>22</sup> Zeina Maasri, op. cit., pp. 87-99.

<sup>23</sup> “Merkabah” in Hebrew, Ezekiel (1:4-26). The Israeli military tank used during the 1982 and 2006 wars in Lebanon was named after this celestial vehicle.

<sup>24</sup> In another composition based on a Biblical subject, *An Eye for an Eye*, Baalbaki incorporates twelve “*keffiyeh*” figures on a gilded metallic store shutter.

<sup>25</sup> in *Space of Litterature*, (English translation), Lincoln and London 1982.

things took place.”<sup>26</sup> Nahas became an artist by necessity, for mental survival. His art is not an escape from reality; it is rather a constructed inner world “a little autistic like that of my work where I saw myself differently than I was.”<sup>27</sup> It’s a world of drawing, spontaneous, nervous and black drawing that pays a nod to Goya. The world of Nahas is populated by thousands, millions maybe if we try to count all those he has painted in the last three decades. They are not beautiful, not fashionable, not sexy, not healthy, not intellectual, not minimalist and not politically correct<sup>28</sup>. The bodies bear wounds, are bitten by wolves, dogs and birds. There are bodies hit by cars, buses and military vehicles, bodies that have been mutilated and raped.

Nahas wonders how “we avoid letting a child see nudity or kissing on TV”, while violence and vulgarity are accessible everywhere in news, movies, video games and real life. So for a conservative mind, Nahas can be obscene or offensive. Of course these unclean, unsightly men could be spewing out injurious profanities and these reclining women sticking out their buttocks are irreverent. This infinity of small drawings covering immense panels is like an unfolding book of illustrations retelling the story of mankind: Life, sex, crime, death, and 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. Nahas addresses taboos, censorship and other archaic beliefs in Lebanon and the Arab world taking issue with the regression of secularism in public spaces and private lives that is indicative of a growing religious trend. In her 2008 Beirut debut photo exhibit, film director Jocelyne Saab staged Barbie dolls in orientalist still lives. “How women were received in the Arab world was my starting point. You can eat them in a bite”<sup>29</sup> admits the artist in reference to the subjugation of women in discussing one of her compositions. In other words, female characters are inanimate, smiling but speechless objects of desire.

Whatever one thinks of these mises en scenes, they are suggestive of setbacks to modernity in contemporary (Arab) 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 contrasts with an apocalyptic setting talk about men, love and sex. In the turmoil of catastrophe, these two women still have their dignity, their will to resist, their independence as well as their liberty to love, and moreover, their right to speak. Twenty

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Marc Nahas, interview with Monika Borgmann, in *Catastrophe* exhibition catalogue, Zico House, Beirut 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> See *Jean-Marc Nahas, Jets d’encre*, Elie Pierre Sabbag, Beirut 2005, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in *Jocelyne Saab. Sense, Icons and Sensitivity*, exhibition catalogue, Planet Discovery and Agial Gallery, Beirut 2008.

years later, women are reduced to mute artifacts in plastic. It could just be another kitch trend. Ironically, during that same decade, Mohammed El Rawas began to use kinky Japanese Manga action figures in his delicately constructed three-dimensional paintings. Coincidence?

Antoine Boulad, a Lebanese writer and poet, might be exaggerating a bit when he affirms that “women appear in every single painting”<sup>30</sup> by Rawas, but this is not far from reality. Rawas dedicated his oeuvre to “The Woman”, transposing to his etchings and paintings portraits of relatives, from the media (Paris Match, adult magazines, press images of the Lebanese war) from old masters paintings (Botticelli, Michelangelo, Vermeer), from modern art and cinema (Marcel Duchamp, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Peter Blake) and popular culture (cartoons, Manga, as mentioned above). “The Woman” can be considered as one character in the Rawas enterprise seen in all kinds of roles, as heroine, mother, martyr, muse or seductress.

In November 2007, Rawas presented *Sit down Please!* The video installation is inspired by a school of ancient Arab odes known as “*Al Wouqouf ‘alal Atlal*” (Standing over the Ruins), a poet’s lamentation on his beloved’s seasonal migration with her (Bedouin) tribe. A wooden chair faces a video screen. We are invited to be seated and a video loop shows people reciting a verse by Abu Nawas, an eighth century poet, in sign language. The screen is flanked by six panels, three on each side. A fragment of the Abu Nuwas text appears in Arabic calligraphy, two small pictures of a nude woman with her private parts covered with a white strip and a large close-up of the woman’s face: *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 (the) modern age.”

In their art, both Rawas and Jean-Marc Nahas respond to the blind and ultra-conservative ideologies that have surfaced. Pursuing totally different paths, they can both be considered as “artistes engagés” in a fierce struggle for human dignity and the right of 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 come up against a multiplicity of issues: Crime, desire, exodus, liberty, martyrdom, memory, national identity, oppression, resistance, reconstruction, terrorism, trauma and war. The present essay does not pretend to be a comprehensive study, or even an “introduction to the cultural experience that is yet to be re-examined and analyzed as a whole. There are now new layers of complexity and prejudice. Trying to draw theoretical conclusions for the time being would be hazardous.

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<sup>30</sup> In *Rawas, recent works 2005-2007*, exhibition catalogue, Aida Cherfan Fine Art, Beirut 2007.