

ReBirth

Lebanon's Art of War & Peace of Art BY MAHA MAJZOUB



Zena Assi, *Ya Beirut Ya Set Eldouniah*, 2011 © Photo: Zena Assi
Photographer: Hagop Kalondjian. (Courtesy Janine Maamari)



Zena Assi and Issam Barhouch, *Beirut One by One*, Cardboard, bullets
and artificial lawn on wood and wheels © (Courtesy Janine Maamari)

To see a bunch of Lebanese of different backgrounds united behind a single banner is a rarity. But that's the magic of art; it can do the seemingly unimaginable. And it was the magic wand of Janine Maamari that made that possible this summer in Beirut. The veteran collector and curator brought together 49 Lebanese artists of diverse ages and backgrounds and who are dispersed across the spacious universe to cheer behind one theme: Rebirth. Any Lebanese -- by birth, upbringing, or choice -- would know the loaded meaning in those seven letters.

"They responded with great enthusiasm to my invitation: I asked them to create a new work or submit a recent one around the theme of rebirth," explains Maamari who collaborated with Danièle Guiraudy, the general secretary of French museums, to bring to life "Rebirth: Lebanon XXIst Century Art" from June 16 to July 31 at Beirut Exhibition Center (BEC) in the heart of the capital. "Most of the works are exhibited here for the first time," Maamari adds.

In fact, many of the artists were first timers in Lebanon. For instance, the show witnessed the unveiling of the photographs of Christina Anid, and it is only her second or third time exhibiting altogether. This pleased those who were tired of seeing the same names splattered across the nation's galleries again and again. And this vexed those who would have liked to see more heavyweights interpret such a fat subject.

But Lebanese history was not necessarily on the organizers' mind when choosing the theme for one of the very uncommon shows on contemporary Lebanese art taking place at home. "Rebirth is a theme open to many different interpretations, on the social, political, and historical level, but also on the personal or artistic one," points out the show's co-curator and art historian Marie Tomb. "Many artists indeed saw it as an invitation to renew their artistic expression regardless of the historical connotations of the theme for the Lebanese nation."

And as Beirut has been missing group shows that tackle a



Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, One Hand Alone Can't Clap, from the series Libanisation-2007-2010 © (Courtesy Janine Maamari)

broad theme, seeing this roster of artists play around with one subject across so many trajectories was very easy on the eye. The common thread between the artwork of these artists, the vast majority of whom presented one piece each, was their individuality. "Each artist interpreted the theme in his or her own vocabulary, involving intimate experiences, colored by social, environmental, and political connotations," according to Maamari. "They expressed themselves through painting, sculpture, photography, mixed media installations, and video." While talk was rife that some names effortlessly stole the thunder of others by their mere presence in the same room (Huguette Caland, Raouf Rifai), Tomb dismissed such claims. "The works were judged on their quality", Tomb asserts, "regardless of the artist's name or fame."

The quality of Mohamad-Said Baalbaki's presentation was numbing. "One Hand Alone Can't Clap" is a bronze sculpture that recreates the dismembered arm of a monument on Martyrs Square in Downtown Beirut. Exhibited as a museum object, the arresting work is a powerful emblem of the 15 years

of infighting that gripped Lebanon beginning 1975. Through his title of choice, the multidisciplinary artist makes a cross reference to a renowned Lebanese adage that stresses the essence of unity in a nation as multiconfessional as Lebanon.

Unsurprisingly, war (pre, post, and during), weighed heavily on many of the artists' minds when exploring "rebirth". Alfred Tarazi, one of the younger artists on show, engages in what is known as the hotel wars -- another ugly depiction of civil strife where gunmen would set up in luxury hotels to attack the opposing party. Through "Tunnels" and "Wishful Beginnings" -- a pair of 150x150cm digital prints mounted on aluminum -- Tarazi enters the infamously dilapidated Holiday Inn hotel. He writes the story an ill-fated young girl of dazzling beauty who with her lover takes shelter inside the hotel.

There's also blazing hot shrapnel of war in artist Zena Assi and architect Issam Barhouch's installation "Beirut One by One", which is about "coring a piece of Beirut's soil". The sample of virtual cubic drilling that is put on wheels for all to see is "a core



Nada Sehnaoui, *To Sweep* © Photographer: Hagop Kalondjia (courtesy Janine Maamari)

of Lebanon, containing the seeds of a country relentlessly determined to be reborn and defy time," Assi says. "This city has been through so many changes over the past 100 years, so many uneven periods of peace and war, of silence and tumult... up to a point where its story is written through the layers of its own grounds, its history is translated in a factor of accumulation and compression, visualized by layers of silent passive cardboards stuck on top of each other, interrupted by random lines of round bullets, ending by a thin, fragile but hopeful green line of natural grass."

Beirut and her babies

Assi had another metaphor of Beirut up her sleeve, "Beirut Ya Sit Al Donya" (Beirut oh mother of the world), a mixed media painting that the artist says required 38 years to complete - the two numbers that denote her age. "I am a mother of three, and I know how delicate and disturbing the act of giving birth is. And I've always noticed how we treat Beirut in the feminine form," she says. Assi portrays a pregnant Beirut about to pop, trying to give birth over and over again to this chaotic body of matter called identity.

Canada-based artist Joseph Chahfé treats one of the causes of war in his riveting "Bar Code"-- a collage of a bunch of people's hair, which carries the DNA or the individual human code of all of us. "This collage becomes a metaphor which expresses a world dying of identity and belonging, a world where religious or political differences are seen as a threat, not as social wealth," Chahfé argues. "This leads to a scared society that is powered by fanatic ideology, which is the source of many conflicts throughout the world."

Neda Sehnaoui preferred to brush aside every piece of war and suffering in a series of brooms in "To Sweep". "Sweeping to me is one of the common acts in our lives -- from the simple daily chore of cleaning one's home to the more painful attempt to sweep after bombardment and wars of all sorts to sweeping after a peaceful revolution," says Sehnaoui, who is known for her thought-provoking installations.

Randa Ali Ahmad also sweeps away sad memories of the war through a peace offering -- "Peaceful Shield", tens of jute bags filled with red clay. The artist paints a colorful image of the sandbag forts where quarreling militias took cover and throws in some fragrant jasmines to overcome and replace the stench of death.

Freedom riders

The idea of rebirth also manifested itself in other ways and the artists sent out very diverse messages. For Abdul Rahman Katanani, the only Palestinian, Lebanon-based artist to take the stage, it is hope. Using zinc, barbed wire, and soda bottle caps, Katanani, also the youngest in the house, produces a wall sculpture he simply calls "Rebirth". "I was inspired by little kids in the Chatila refugee camp who jump rope and dance in the small rows and are unaffected by bad circumstances, just creating a new world with their imagination," Katanani says. The artist found this approach to be liberating in that "through this feeling we can achieve our goal to return to our homeland by believing in freedom and living it."

Talar Aghbashian used her freedom to read "rebirth" in the context of memory and reincarnation. Her "At the Square"



Abdulrahman Katanani, After Six Days and We Will Be Back Inshallah © Photo: Katanani/ Agial Art Gallery. Photographer: Hagop Kalondjian

diptych is worked from two photographs: a black and white photograph of the 1940s that shows two sisters, and a more recent colored photograph of the 1980s of three children, a bear, and a rabbit. One of the kids in the more recent photograph is the daughter of a girl in the vintage photograph. The kids were wearing similar clothes and were standing in the exact same place. "The painting is a reflection or a reincarnation of the same setting almost theatrically presented, literally re-imagining, reliving and in artistic interpretation re-deciphering life, situations, and memories. Mixed with the nostalgia they carry an in-between-ness that is presented to show that the new is not 'new' yet it is not also repeated but is just uncanny," Aghbashian explains. Sex, death, time, change, and violence were among the other directions the artists took to awaken the spirit of rebirth.



Above: Talar Aghbashian At The Square. © (Courtesy Janine Maamari)
Below: Jean-Marc Nahas Renouvellement. © (Courtesy Janine Maamari)

"Rebirth" had no production budget. The artists themselves and/or their galleries covered the work production costs, Tomb notes, which says a great deal about the artists and their sponsors. The co-curator also explained the organizers' choice behind BEC as a venue for a project coproduced by Solidere, the Lebanese company for the development and reconstruction of Downtown Beirut: "The BEC is one of the very few large exhibition spaces in Beirut and could thus accommodate a number of large works." Not everyone was happy about the setting. Regardless, the show was extremely well received by audiences in Lebanon for good reasons and could see the chance of being reborn in an international art space.

