

Zena Assi captures her memories of Beirut in collage

BEIRUT: Memory is a slippery thing. Much as you labor to forget something, recollections do tend to percolate to the surface. Yet, whether the lived experience was positive, negative or traumatic, what you recall of it is almost certainly obscured to some degree by inaccuracy or selectivity.

Lebanese are no different. All generations of Lebanese share their own memories of the country's Civil War, even if some of them haven't lived or witnessed it firsthand. It is part of the Lebanese collective memory.

Memory is an integral part of "Omissions Selectives" (Selective omissions) an exhibition of 36 mixed media works, all created this year by Lebanese artist Zena Assi. The show, which opened earlier this week at Saifi's Alwane Gallery, confronts its viewers with the artist's intensely personal representation of Beirut.

Indeed, the selection process may be the most interesting aspect of this show – marked as it is by the artist's renderings of bouquets, portraits, the capital's cluttered urban landscape and trees.

Assi's colorful "Bouquet" (200x200 cm), is a case in point. "These bouquets," gallerist Odile Mazloum said of the reds, greens, yellows and whites that occupy the canvas, "are like giant fireworks."

Unlike a conventional rendering of a floral bouquet, Assi's composition appears to be a collage comprised of torn papers, with striped shards forming what appear to be the petals of daisies, while red painted blotches perhaps represent poppies. Onlookers will be able to discern scraps of correspondence and scripture on some bits, of the sort you could find in newspapers and magazines.

The spectacular thing about this work, though, is that the artist's mixed-media manipulation doesn't include collage. In a tour de force of detailed brushstrokes, the artist painted every single part of this work.

On both the front and back side of this canvas, a spray of colorful particles is visible around the arrangement, as though the bouquet had been shaken. The longer you gaze at the bouquet, the more it seems as if it has just shot up out of the pot, like a floral jack-in-the-box.

"My City" (135x105 cm) is a depiction of Beirut's dense urban fabric. This mixture of brushstrokes and collage on canvas portrays a city whose houses are literally piled atop one another, like an

immense house of cards. Assi's Beirut is a cramped and chaotic city, whose inhabitants are connected by lengths of telephone and electricity cables and clotheslines.

The suffocating aspect is emphasized by several words written in capital letters and by images that have been glued to the artwork. "War," "argument," "home," "magic" and "wand" punctuate the darkness of the piece. The last two words are glued between buildings, as if they were a means to express a sense of hope and freedom that only a "magical" event could make happen.

Several symbols are also integrated into the work. To the bottom right, painted grenades evidently represent the Civil War era. In the midst of this urban clutter, furthermore, the Martyrs Square statue is rendered, inexplicably, against a blue background.

In the show's press materials, Assi describes her artwork as a collection of memories. The artist writes of her cities as being composed of "permanent obsessions." Beirut is seen, and depicted, as a city possessed by war memories, debates and an unrealized wish for a "magical" future.

Assi's work also includes portraiture. These mixed media on canvas works (each 180x50 cm) all picture a person – though the gender of the subject, male or female, is uncertain. Each holds a cigarette, a soda can or is tying his or her shoelaces.

Particularly striking are the figure's clothing and her (or his) facial expression. He (or she) could be sad or nostalgic. The trousers and jacket are designed, again, with images of a cluttered urban landscape. Perhaps this is the artist's way of representing the performative nature of being Beiruti, how the city's residents literally wear their urban identity. – CL

Zena Assi's "Omissions Selectives" are on display at Saifi's Alwane Gallery until Nov. 25. For more information please call 01-975-250.

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