

# The National

## Brushing up

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**The rising tide of the art market is buoying the careers of Beirut's young painters. *Kaelen Wilson-Goldie* looks at the perils of prominence.**

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Art critics all over the world love to declare the death of painting, in cycles that probably follow financial fluctuations more closely than anything else. When the art market is strong, paintings are popular because they are commercially viable as objects of trade. When the market is weak, potential buyers retreat from the galleries and auction houses that peddle pigments on canvas more readily than art in any other media, and paintings fall into decline. However paradoxical it seems, the diminishing of financial opportunities –combined with the tensions created by economies in free fall, attendant socio-political frictions and the rise of international grant-making foundations –may give artists more freedom to improvise and experiment with new and less explicitly tactile forms of art-making. In Beirut, the videos, installations and relatively immaterial urban interventions that have earned the city an international reputation for critical and creative vitality were born of a wrecked economy and a derelict infrastructure for cultural expression. It is tempting, therefore, to regard the current contemporary art scene in Lebanon as an entity that emerged fully formed and from nothing.

"I used to hate it. Now I love it, this chaos we have here": Zena Assi, *El Karem* (2008). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Alwane

When the conceptually-minded artists Ziad Abillama, Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari and Walid Sadek began working more than 15 years ago –assembling installations from rubbish, merging documentary practices with aesthetic forms, circulating poetic texts as artworks in and of themselves –there were virtually no collectors, galleries or institutions willing to support their efforts. They and their peers established their own channels for the production and presentation of their art. Many critics and scholars have since argued that it was both the indifference of the commercial gallery system and an overwhelming desire to break with past traditions of art-making in Lebanon that allowed these artists to develop bodies of work that were, and remain, worlds apart from the paintings, drawings and sculptures that traditionally

predominated. But this perspective on Lebanon's very recent art history is something of a fiction. Painting did not die in the badlands of post-war, reconstruction-era Beirut. Plenty of young artists in the last two decades followed in the footsteps of their teachers, mentors and predecessors and filled local galleries with paintings. Today there are a number of Lebanese artists in their twenties and thirties who are deeply devoted to the application of pigment on canvas. They are mining figurative and abstract terrain. They are intimately concerned with formalist techniques, but equally committed to social criticism and political relevance. They are painting their lives, their times and their experiences in styles that are stripped bare of nostalgia. For Tamara al Samerraei, *Water Guns* (2008). Courtesy of the artist, local critics often deride them for turning away from idyllic or prosaic landscapes toward depictions of Lebanon's dark, ugly realities. Like their peers working in other media, they see themselves creating works in an atmosphere of isolation, in dialogue only among themselves. But unlike their contemporaries, these young painters, who have the backing of some of Beirut's best galleries, face local, regional and international market forces that are stronger now than they were in the 1990s, and potentially more damaging to their careers. Interest in Arab art has skyrocketed over the past few years, and if the results of auctions and art fairs are anything to go by, then painters are poised to benefit handsomely from this seemingly sudden turn of events. But there are risks involved: while a lively market may give young artists the possibility of supporting themselves solely through sales, it may also compromise their independence and integrity if they find themselves, consciously or unconsciously, making work to satisfy an economy rather than to express an image or an urgent idea. Zena Assi, who is 34, held her first solo exhibition at Beirut's Galerie Alwane in July. *Cité et Citadins* (City and Citizens), as the show was called, featured 25 paintings in mixed media on canvas that sustained remarkable stylistic consistency. Assi's roughly chiselled portraits of rakish figures –lanky young men sucking down coffee and cigarettes, despondent young women sinking stubborn chins into thin, bony hands –jostled for attention alongside her paintings of dystonic cityscapes cluttered with electrical wires, television antennae and buildings stacked precariously on top of one another. Assi earned a degree in advertising at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) in 1997 and spent two years working for the Beirut branch of the ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi. But she left her job in 1998, returned to ALBA as a teacher, and then stopped working altogether in 2004 to concentrate on painting. These days, she heads down to her studio just before 8am every morning. "It's a habit," she says. "I cannot start my day otherwise." She never makes preparatory sketches and begins instead by priming her canvases directly. She creates base layers with acrylic paints and then starts adding different textures, using tissue paper, cloth, broken brushes, whatever she finds in her studio to suit her mood. The final layer is painted with oils, which give Assi's canvasses their peculiar, compelling luminosity. Assi joined Galerie Alwane in 2006. Odile Mazloum, who is an artist as well as Galerie Alwane's owner and director, has been selling art since 1964, when she founded her first gallery, L'Amateur, on Hamra Street. During Lebanon's civil war, L'Amateur closed down, and Mazloum established Galerie Alwane in the northern suburb of Kaslik in 1987. Four years ago, she opened a second branch of Alwane in Saifi Village, a newly revamped high-end mixed-use residential and retail district on the eastern edge of Downtown Beirut. Detail from *Dislocated Doll* (2005), by Taghrid Darghouth. Though Mazloum is better known for representing an older generation of Lebanese painters, she says "all the big names begin by being young. Because I am an artist, I feel what the artists feel. For every 1,000 young artists who come to see me, I accept only one or two. I am very severe with representation. It is very important to me that the artists are credible," she says. Raising an eyebrow toward Assi, she offers a roundabout nod of approval. "Zena is very shy," she says. "She won't tell you about her success." In the past six months, Assi's work has appeared in the venerable Salon d'Automne, Beirut's annual, invitational exhibition hosted





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by the Musée Sursock. One of her paintings graced the cover of the French-language listings magazine L'Agenda Culturel, and another was featured on the cover of the English-language literary journal Banipal. Within the context of Beirut, this is a considerable level of exposure for artworks that portray the city as broken and occasionally deranged. "I used to hate it," says Assi. "Now I love it, this chaos we have here." When Taghrid Darghouth's latest solo exhibition opened on July 10 at the Agial Art Gallery, across town on Hamra's Abdel Aziz Street, she was reprimanded by a local journalist, who said: "You insist on talking about very dark issues." Indeed, Darghouth's show, which is still on view, delves into the penchant of Lebanese women for plastic surgery –all nose jobs, liposuctioned torsos and reconfigured breasts strewn across 36 canvases. "I feel art should be related to our social lives," says Darghouth, who is 29. "I wanted to speak about a Lebanese social issue. Plastic surgery has become a fashion but it is sharp and excessive. Lebanon is not a paradise. All we've seen is war, love of money, and distorted relations between men and women, and between people and religion." Before joining Agial, Darghouth staged an earlier solo exhibition at the Goethe Institute in Beirut. That show, entitled *Falling Parts*, featured 50 highly skilled but unabashedly sinister oil and acrylic portraits of dolls. It was accompanied by a visceral text about how these toys –dumb, dull and fragile –invite destruction. Darghouth's current exhibition at Agial, entitled *Mirror, Mirror*, extends this theme to consider fantasies of beauty set against the realities of ageing. Darghouth studied painting at the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts. She did another year of art school in France and participated in two summer workshops at the Jordanian arts foundation Darat al-Funun, both led by the Syrian-German painter Marwan Kassab Bachi. "He encouraged me to think about and deal with social issues," says Darghouth, "and to trust my own work."

Though Darghouth admits that she learnt from her former teachers, many of whom were prominent Lebanese painters, she says that as an artist living and working in Beirut today, she is only in dialogue with a handful of her peers. "We are

a group of friends who are all painters and theatre people,"she says. "We are on the same level of thinking. We are open to the outside world but we want to speak about our own issues."In terms of treatment and technique, Darghouth says she looks more to the work of western artists, from Lucian Freud to Richard Serra, than to the paintings of her elder Lebanese compatriots. (Likewise, Assi pays verbal tribute to the greatness of the Lebanese painter Chafic Abboud, but she named one of her paintings for Egon Schiele, the Austrian painter, and his influence is far more tangible in her work.) That sense of working in a wilful vacuum, and of forging an arts community among one's friends and colleagues, also colours the experience of Tamara al Samerraei, a Kuwaiti painter who is based in Beirut, where she shares a studio with the painter and book illustrator Najah Taher. Samerraei, who is 31, has developed an impressive body of work over the past eight years, including videos and site-specific installations as well as paintings that hover, in terms of substance and style, somewhere in between the work of Elizabeth Peyton (with her winsome, waiflike portraits of indie rockers and actors) and Marlene Dumas (with her smudgy lines, defiant nudes and emotionally charged combinations of sex and violence). Like Assi and Darghouth, Samerraei paints every day, and she seeks critical feedback from a small group of kindred artists like Taher, the mixed media artist Abdallah Kahil (who teaches at Samerraei's alma mater, the Lebanese American University) and the video artist and film theorist Jalal Toufic. Unlike Assi and Darghouth, however, she uses her canvasses to present ambiguous narratives that are wholly contained and untethered to Beirut as a specific locale. Almost all of Samerraei's paintings are variations on the same theme, a young girl on the edge of adolescence. Her latest works mark a significant development in her oeuvre, adding a palpable degree of playfulness and danger. Samerraei's subjects are now, more often than not, arranged in compositions that are complicated by the presence of light weapons, such as a slingshot or a dart, and populated by incongruous creatures such as a horse, a bull or a cat. "I find it more interesting to paint animals than men,"Samerraei says cryptically. There is ample sexual tension in her recent paintings, but the stories the artist is telling –about relationships, about power –remain intriguingly incomplete. What is striking about Samerraei's work is that until now she has produced it all without official representation. She has participated in several workshops and numerous group shows, such as *Shu Tabkha Ya Mara*, an exhibition organised by her fellow artist Zena al Khalil in 2006. She has used temporary or now-defunct venues to introduce particularly experimental pieces. Now Samerraei is preparing for her first gallery exhibition in Lebanon, which will open at Agial in December. Samerraei's timing appears to be auspicious, and her move to a gallery is another sign that painting is on the rise in Beirut. Consider the context: Agial's director, Saleh Barakat, is actively promoting a clutch of young painters, including the cousins Ayman and Hussein Baalbaki, as well as Darghouth and Samerraei. Mazloum at Alwane followed her exhibition of Assi's work with a show for another young painter named Issa Halloum. Nadine Begdache, the director of Beirut's Galerie Janine Rubeiz, has a fine-tuned system for introducing fresh talents, such as the painter and occasional video artist Mansour el Habre. The motivations for these exhibitions are many. Chief among them seems to be a wish to link Lebanon's modernist masters – such as Omar Onsi, Chafic Abboud, Hussein Madi and Mohamed Rawas, to name just a few –to their young contemporary counterparts for the sake of establishing a meaningful art historical lineage. But another factor is undeniably the rise of a regional art market.

The impact of the splashy recent sales of modern and contemporary Arab art at Christie's and Sotheby's has been noticeable, particularly since the work of young painters has begun to sell for astronomically high and unprecedented prices. The danger, of course, is that young artists will be drawn into the market too soon. They may have developed a practice on their own, and they may have built a milieu of their own volition, but they may soon be forced to protect themselves as well. The international art world is littered with the names of painters who no longer mean much, because bright young things crashed and burnt at auction or because they drowned in markets that were suddenly oversaturated by their dealers. Not for nothing do top-notch galleries in New York fight strenuously to keep young (or simply living) artists from appearing on the block at Sotheby's or Christie's. The American painters David Salle, Eric Fischl and Ross Bleckner seemed like gods in the 1980s. Where are they now? Only their colleague Julian Schnabel has been successfully rehabilitated, as a filmmaker. However cruel it may be, there is often an inversely proportional relationship between market success and critical acclaim, to say nothing of art historical endurance. Lebanon's young painters will have to pace themselves carefully if they want to continue making art on their own terms.

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