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In the line of fire

By Rachel Spence

Frieze Art Fair's young galleries section Frame this year includes the Sfeir-Semler gallery from Beirut. Discover the realities of making and selling art in a troubled and war-torn land



A video still from Mounira Al Solh's 'Double Burger and Two Metamorphoses' (2010)

On a humid September morning, I am standing on the east Beirut rooftop of 31-year-old Lebanese artist Mounira Al Solh, trying to get my bearings.

“So over there are the mountains where my grandmother hid out during the revolution,” says Al Solh, casting her arm eastwards towards a range of smog-veiled humps. Although her family are from a Muslim background, her grandmother took refuge in a Christian village after objecting to that community’s persecution in the 1950s. She remained there throughout the civil war that devastated Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, although the rest of the family stayed in west Beirut. As Al Solh explains bluntly: “If you leave your home during a war it gets squatted by the militia.”

East, west, Christian, Muslim, revolution, civil war – few cities boast permutations of history, politics, religion and geography more complex than Beirut. Colonised by successive empires before a spell under French mandate after the first world war, Beirut is host to many religious sects and is also home to the American University.

Mostly, however, Beirut is famous for war. Just as the city started to regenerate after the civil war, the 2005 assassination of premier Rafiq Hariri and Israeli bombing raids a year later threatened more instability. Right now, however, the country is peaceful. Indeed, should the unrest elsewhere in the region lead to a more democratic Middle East, the prospects for Lebanon – so often the ground for other nations' battles – look rosy.

Lebanon's tortured history has provided inspiration for an extraordinary flowering of art. Confronting their past with courage, sensitivity and a notable attention to craft, Lebanese artists are among the most sophisticated in the Middle East. Best known, perhaps, are the generation of artists that includes Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari and Lamia Joreige, who make art out of a hybrid of history, archival material and reportage.



'Six days and we will be back, Inshallah' by Abdul Rahman Katanani

"There were no trials after the civil war," observes filmmaker Joreige as we sip sweetened coffee in the café in the Beirut Art Centre, where she is co-director. "It's not like Yugoslavia or Rwanda. You could find someone highly accepted by society who has been washed of all his crimes. Artists haven't replaced the historians but they have taken [the responsibility] of providing an alternative discourse."

Joreige and her peers are now winning international recognition. Her video documentary of testimonials to the civil war, *Objects of War*, has been bought by Tate Modern. Raad, who troubles the notion of a simple historical chronicle through the invention of a fictional collective, the Atlas Group, had a retrospective at London's Whitechapel Gallery last year. Zaatari is one of a clutch of Lebanese artists to shine at this year's Istanbul Biennial.

The talent of this generation, now in their 40s and 50s, has been crucial to the vibrancy of the art scene within Beirut itself. Raad and Zaatari, for example, were founder members of the Arab Image Foundation, an archive of more than 300,000 photographs drawn from across the Arab world.

Opened in January 2009, the Beirut Art Centre, whose other director is former gallerist Sandra Dagher, is the city's first not-for-profit contemporary showcase.

Located in a former furniture factory in east Beirut, its clean, uncluttered spaces are hosting work by Franco-Lebanese photographer Fouad Elkoury when I visit. As my eyes roam his images of the civil war – a sniper slumped in an armchair on a bridge, a bombed street spilling its stony innards – it is difficult to reconcile such destruction with the dynamism of the present day.

Home Works Academy, Lebanon's first contemporary art school, has just opened with leading Palestinian artist Emily Jacir on the teaching staff. The Sursock Museum, a semi-private modern art institution, is due to open in early 2013 with a new, more contemporary profile.

Meanwhile, a non-profit, Beirut-based organisation, the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL), is producing shows of Lebanese artists in the west. Having presided over one successful venture in Washington, it is now launching a three-day show, "Subtitled: With Narratives from Lebanon", at London's Royal College of Art in November with exhibitors including top-selling painter Ayman Baalbaki, Mounira Al Solh and Fouad Elkoury.

The rise of not-for-profit initiatives maps an increasingly healthy market. Probably the most illustrious newcomer is Galerie Sfeir-Semler, a primarily conceptual gallery that opened in 2005, after the owner Andrée Sfeir-Semler – born in Lebanon but based for many years in Hamburg – realised there was no "White Cube in the Middle East". Sfeir-Semler built up a stable that numbers not only Raad, Zaatari and Marwan Rechmaoui, who specialises in puzzle-like maps that highlight the sociopolitical origins of topography, but also younger artists such as Al Solh, whose work she will be showing at Frieze this month.

These cerebral conceptualists exist in fruitful tension with accomplished painters. Here, the mecca is Agial gallery in west Beirut, which was started "in a cellar" in 1989, when the violence was at its peak, according to owner Saleh Barakat. He represents superb painters, from overlooked modernist talents such as Saloua Raouda Choucair, now in her 90s, to Ayman Baalbaki, 36, who marries *impasto* technique to potent political sentiment. (His 2011 painting of a Palestinian fighter, a highlight of this year's Venice Biennale, sold at Christie's for \$206,500, nearly three times its estimate.)

Lebanon's complex rapport with the Palestinian people is pivotal to its artistic wealth. Two other fine artists at Agial include Saba Innab, whose semi-abstract paintings, gesturing yet never clarifying into any defined landscape, conjure the longing of the dispossessed camp dwellers, and Abdul Rahman Katanani, who grew up in a refugee camp and now produces chilling barbed wire installations.

Such diversity promises rich pickings for collectors. Guests entering the lobby of Le Gray, a

five-star beacon of luxury in the downtown Solidere district, cannot but be cheered by the multicoloured elephant sculpture by Nadim Karam. The hotel's creator Gordon Campbell Gray, an enthusiastic collector of art from Ethiopia, Cuba and Syria, is excited by the possibilities of his newly adopted city: "From what I have seen, there is huge potential here."

More established is the collection of Maya Rasamny. Born in Beirut but now based in London, Rasamny is co-chairman of Tate Modern's Middle East and North African Acquisitions committee. So omnipresent is the art in her Kensington apartment – there is work by, among others, Glenn Ligon, Rebecca Warren and Thomas Struth – that only the sofas and tables set with bowls of sweets betray that this is a family home rather than a small museum.



Ayman Baalbaki's 'Destination X'

Most moving is a salon that sets "Ich Bin der Ich Bin" (I Am that I Am), a typically rugged, apocalyptic statement by Anselm Kiefer, opposite one of Rechmaoui's maps of the Middle East, while at the end of the room hangs a triangular cascade of leather thongs by young Irish sculptor Eva Rothschild.

Rasamny reveals that, as with many Lebanese, it is a moving personal story that inspired her passion for art. Her father, a political journalist – "one of those who said what he thought" – was kidnapped and killed during the civil war. That experience, she says, was fundamental to her journey towards the collection she has today. "Art is a language. It allows you to discuss things. I realised, for example, the connections between postwar Germans such as Kiefer and [Georg] Baselitz and Lebanese contemporary artists. Art can make you think, it can make you go back."

It can also help you go forwards. In Beirut, Al Solh ushers me downstairs to her studio. Under a ceiling that still bears the crack left by a shelling raid, she shows me a clip from her latest video cycle, *Double Burger and Two Metamorphoses*.

With her face painted to resemble a cat, Al Solh engages in a dialogue with her feline alter ego about their failure to read certain philosophical texts. An apparently abstract piece about intellectual fantasies, nothing betrays its inspiration in the struggle of Lebanese citizens to acquire a second passport. "All Lebanese are always trying to get another passport," Al Solh tells me with a grin. "You think it will make you feel safe but my question here is: if the process is so difficult, perhaps it makes us less free." Whether Al Solh chooses to stay or leave, it is hard to think of another country besides Lebanon that could have

given birth to such an original vision.

‘Subtitled: With Narratives from Lebanon’, Royal College of Art, London, November 3-6;
www.apcal-lb.org

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