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LEBANON

Tuning in to the off-white noise of the white cube *Sfeir-Semler exhibition falls short of curator's challenge, but offers some pleasures*

By Jim Quilty

Daily Star staff

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BEIRUT: The two pieces sit alongside one another, the same, yet different. Vartan Avakian's "Untitled Signs for Bourj Hammoud" (a and b) are a pair of classic red neon signs. Each lamp's glass tubing has been bent to form the name "Sfeir-Semler," the name of the gallery displaying them, one in Arabic, the other in Armenian.

It turns out the pieces are part of a triptych. The third "frame," the galley cheat notes assure you, also spells "Sfeir-Semler," this time in Devangari script – which Ubiqui-pedia tells you is used in writing Hindi, Marathi, and Nepali. Mounted on the south-facing exterior wall of the Tannous Building, the light-industrial structure that houses Karantina's Galerie Sfeir-Semler, this third piece faces Bourj Hammoud.

Historically known as the Armenian quarter, Bourj Hammoud has absorbed later waves of migrants as well, among them, apparently, a community of South Asians. Thanks to this sign, those Devangari-reading

residents of the quarter who frequent contemporary art galleries will be able to locate Sfeir-Semler with ease – a feat that, based on years of fieldwork conducted by this journalist, eludes the vast majority of Beirut taxi drivers.

But what does all this signage signify? There are innumerable narrative niches from which a spectator can perch to read Avakian's triptych. The furthest removed from the local, and all that implies about knowledge of place and artist – is the medium itself.

Red neon has been a cosmopolitan means of commercial communication, and so particularly burdened with meaning. Red lights are evocative of "red-light districts," of course, but it could hardly be Avakian's intention to suggest that artists, indeed any of those who sustain themselves in the international art industry, are somehow akin to prostitutes. More amiably, red neon is imbued with nostalgia, simply because, in the age of digitized images and high-definition video, it nowadays seems a dated means of illuminating the pitch.

Then there's the choice of languages. Though they reside in both Germany and Lebanon, whose residents putatively use different alphabets as well as languages, the graphic branding of the Sfeir-Semler galleries is staunchly Latin. In its graphic sensibilities, Avakian's branding triptych seems to speak to, or past, power. (It might be entertaining to survey the Beirut patrons of Galerie Sfeir-Semler to find out how many of them don't read Latin script, then compare that to the number who can't read Arabic or Armenian, let alone Devangari.)

Closer to home, there will be some familiar tropes in "Untitled Signs for Bourj Hammoud." Veterans of the 2007 edition of the traveling regional arts extravaganza Meeting Points (MP5) may recall the 33-year-old artist's obsession with obsolete commercial technologies. His contribution to "Unclassified," MP5's Beirut exhibition, was an interactive installation called "The Age of Heroes," a flipper (pinball) machine that he'd retooled with heroes and villains from Lebanon's political landscape.

So the impression that lingers after glowering at "Untitled Signs for Bourj Hammoud" – indeed many of the pieces among which it is hung – for a few minutes is one of nostalgia. This may be perplexing for some because it is part of an exhibition called "Noise," which has inhabited Sfeir-Semler since early December. This mixed-media group show features new and recent work by artists of (and not of) the Middle East, curated by Negar Azimi and Babak Radboy.

Azimi and Radboy are, in this instance, the faces of Bidoun Magazine, the hip, critically-minded journal of contemporary art and cultural practice in the Middle East (and, since this hack has contributed to that magazine a

couple of times, any readers out there will no doubt accept this assessment as unbiased).

In the curatorial remarks accompanying the gallery cheat notes, Azimi and Radboy confide that their show seeks to ask questions about art and location. "Bidoun attempts to close its eyes and tune its ears to the white noise of the white cube," the introduction reads, "wondering how much it matters which city, region, country, or peoples surround it."

The first phrase may be put to one side for the moment. The second speaks specifically to white-cube galleries like Sfeir-Semler that exist to display art, but it might as easily be applied to the art itself. Does meaning accrue to art from the context in which it is made (and, arguably, makes it), or displayed? Conversely, can art be displaced and retain meaning? To what extent is such work deracinated? Is uprooted art eviscerated, flensed, or epilated of meaning?

The answers to such questions may seem a self-evident, if vastly disparate depending on which criteria are used – particularly nowadays, when art from this region (ever-expanding, since someone decided to splice South Asia to the MENA, to confect a beast called "MENASA") is still regarded as sexy and worthy of exhibition and purchase.

Some may have left "Noise" feeling that these works don't necessarily address the curators' challenge in the most aesthetically original or critically satisfying manner. But there is some pleasure to be found in "Noise," particularly in those pieces that, like Avakian's signs, meet an inquiring spectator with simplicity.

Anyway, it's nice to see that the curators have enough at stake in this curatorial exercise to contribute to the "Noise," via a taped conversation with gallerist Andrée Sfeir.

Radboy has contributed a couple of other pieces as well. The first is an overlong exhibition introduction. This wall-full of text – the overweening presence greeting you upon entering Sfeir-Semler – evaporates with the knowledge (provided by the gallery's cheat notes) that it isn't really "a description of the show" at all but "a programmatic collage composed entirely out of sentences from the press releases of every preceding show at Sfeir-Semler."

The 27-year-old co-curator's other contribution to his show is framed as an afterthought: "And Babak Radboy has installed a section of gallery wall on loan from Tony Sharfrazi Gallery in New York, along with a photograph of the corresponding hole left by its removal, 2009, Glass, three ink jet prints, wall clock. Dimensions variable."

This exercise in regression began with a tattered hole in an off-white wall, meant to represent the damage done to Sharfrazi's gallery when "the work" was displaced, and rubble that fell to the ground before it. The artist took a portrait of this tableau of hole with traces of rubble, and another of rubble with traces of hole. This pair of photos was also shot, and their issue were also photographed, each time from a somewhat different angle.

Here, the overlapping images of hole and rubble are hung in appropriate proximity to one another near the corner of one exhibition room. The third ink jet print features a pair of laptop computers (one black, the other silver), whose screens are occupied by promotional information from Sfeir-Semler's website. Actually it's an ad-within-an-ad, since both laptops are obviously made by a company called Macintosh.

It's the more effective of Radboy's contributions, if only because it evinces a sense of humor about the process and the question the co-curators have posed. When art is made to migrate from space to space, is the work itself less evident than the gaping holes its absence leaves in the host space? Never mind. There's no structural damage, and the mobile advertising hoardings represented in the laptop computer screens are distant enough to remain undamaged.

Not all the pieces interface with whimsy quite this effectively, of course. The walls in the corner of one exhibition room are cluttered with works from Sfeir-Semler's previous exhibitions – most of which are impossible to appreciate because of the large white cube that's been erected in the same corner, leaving only a narrow alley for spectators to navigate. Nice pun, you nod.

And it does seem odd that a show called "Noise" – whose curatorial mind wanted to "close its eyes and tune its ears to the white noise of the white cube" – found no space in Sfeir-Semler for sound art.

There are other shortcomings but most of these can be forgot thanks to the work of 30-year-old Berlin-based Cypriot artist Haris Epaminonda.

In "Noise," her oeuvre is mostly the Polaroid photograph. The cheat notes inform you these are photos of images found in "obscure and antiquated books and magazines ... Scattered throughout the gallery alongside the works of the other artists, their presence[,] like the process that made them [, undermines] the authority of authorship and the propriety of intellectual (and here spa[t]ial) property."

Sure, but the content of Epaminonda's small-scale, quaintly antiquated, images tend to feature halcyon scenes and, or, squads of tourists enjoying

them – making the pieces amusingly understated remarks upon the performance practice of audiences. Then there is the stork.

A Marabou stork, apparently, he (she?) is the featured performer in a minute-long film-to-video loop Epaminonda has contrived to put spectators like you in your place. You approach the projection and, finding the stork standing immobile, pause to gaze back. After a few seconds, the bird yawns expansively, and returns to staring straight ahead, at yourself, it seems. The Marabou then stuffs its prodigious beak under its wing and begins to preen energetically.

You enjoy this Zen-like reflection for a few moments, yawn, contemplate your armpit for a moment, and leave.

"Noise" closes at Galerie Sfeir-Semler on February 6. For more information, ring +961 1 566 550.