





galerie
sfeir-semmler
there and back again

Having trained as an artist before leaving Lebanon to pursue film studies in Germany, and after opening galleries in Kiel and Hamburg, Andrée Sfeir-Semmler opened one in Beirut in 2005. Amidst political turmoil in her beloved Lebanon and a surge of interest in art from the Middle East and Arab world, Sfeir-Semmler is driven by a devoted belief in her stable of regional artists. Her mission is to “defend and represent” these artists on the global art circuit.



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 IMAGES COURTESY OF GALERIE SFEIR-SEMLER.
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Some things simply do not interest Andrée Sfeir-Semler, and some do. The world of sports does not, whereas exquisitely tailored and playfully lined Paul Smith pantsuits do. Art Basel Miami Beach does not, but Frieze does. Israeli artists on the whole, do not, whereas Palestinian artists most certainly do. And what interests Sfeir-Semler matters, because her space in Beirut was one of the first, and is one of the best, Contemporary art galleries in the Middle East.

Located in the grotty, desolate district of Karantina, Galerie Sfeir-Semler is on the fourth floor of a former steel factory. Local *starchitect* Bernard Khoury has offices on the floor below and the Lebanese Red Cross occupies the far end of the building. The nearest commercial enterprises are Sleep Comfort, a mattress showroom, and Sukleen, the municipal dump. Arriving from the nearby highway on a slightly rainy

winter day, one stomps through muddy puddles studded with refuse, past a number of ambulances, before arriving at the barely marked entrance. “This is the only area of the city which does not belong to anybody. No political party, no religious party, can claim it as theirs, right?” asks Sfeir-Semler. “Karantina is the place where people have to stay before they are allowed in a city, or if they have some kind of a disease which contaminates others,” she says playfully, referring to the anglicised version of Karantina – quarantine – and the meanings it evokes. Perhaps, more symbolically, like the art shows and the collectors she attracts, the space itself is something apart.

From Lebanon to Germany and Back

Sfeir-Semler opened the Beirut arm of her gallery in April 2005, after running a blue-chip gallery by the same name in

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Kiel and subsequently Hamburg, where it remains today. Lebanese by birth and trained in fine arts and filmmaking at the American University of Beirut, she left Lebanon to continue her film studies in Germany in 1975, as her home country slid into its 15-year-long civil war. Like many gifted artists of her generation, Sfeir-Semler says the war forced her to abandon her artistic practice, because “during a war, you cannot focus on making art. You have to fear for your own body and see that you survive.”

In Germany, she met and married her husband and founded the first Galerie Sfeir-Semler in Kiel in 1985. Running her gallery in Germany, where her roster includes heavyweights such as Michelangelo Pistoletto and Elger Esser, she continued to keep close ties with Lebanon, returning every year and taking stock of the art scene. For more than a decade, nothing in the Lebanese art scene interested her. Until about 1995, she says, most of the artists she saw were working in a borrowed

Western style. “There were no Arab artists that would have been able to hold with the Western level, so this is why I didn’t have artists from this part of the world before then. I didn’t meet with anybody who would have fitted in the gallery programme, or who would have been interested in what we were doing.”

In 1999, her perseverance was rewarded. An encounter with the work of Walid Raad’s Atlas Group (see page 150) at Berlin’s Kunst-Werke sparked a renewed interest in the region’s artists. “At that time, he used the Atlas Group brand. I looked at the work and thought ‘how funny, this is Beirut’. Then I took a closer look at the work, and went to New York and visited him.”

Previous pages: Andrée Sfeir-Semler at Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut.

Facing page: Clockwise from top left: Timo Nasser. *Fajr*. 2007. Wood and aluminum sheet. 148 x 95 x 22 cm; Michelangelo Pistoletto. *Mediterranean Flag (red)*. 2005. Print on aluminium. 102 x 183 x 2 cm; Richard Artschwager. *Four Approximate Objects*, Edition 30. 1970-1991. Mahogany, formica, brass and chrome plate. 8.9 x 37.2 x 34.6 cm.

Above: Clockwise from top left: Felix Schramm. *Untitled*. 2007. Overview of site specific installation. Gipsion board and paint on wood. 400 x 950 x 600 cm; Elger Esser. *39 Fecamp II*. 2007. C-print, hand coloured, unique. 186 x 287 cm.







“I hate the term ‘art from Islamic countries’. You don’t talk about Western art as ‘art from the Christian world.’ You’re talking about a cultural region. And I don’t think that Afghanistan and Pakistan, even though they are Muslim [nations], connect with this part of the world. Although Iran does, whereas Turkey doesn’t.”

Through Raad, she met several others who form the core of her Beirut stable – Walid Sadek, Rabih Mroué, and Akram Zaatari, who, like Raad, is a member of the Arab Image Foundation. Now all in their early forties, they produce work that often deals obliquely with the civil war, in a way that effectively blends the conceptual, political, and poetical. “I think that all these people had to live the war, had to digest the war, before they started talking about their experiences. And that is why the artwork they do is a conceptual work talking about the crisis, about sociological and political problems in this part of the world,” says Sfeir-Semler.

Spotlight on the Middle East

And just around that time, “this part of the world” began finding itself in the international spotlight, due to a series of geopolitical catastrophes that began in September 2001, and have yet to end. Sfeir-Semler never defines where “this part” ends and begins, admitting that it is “really hard” to put one’s finger on it. “I hate the term ‘art from Islamic countries’. You don’t talk about Western art as ‘art from the Christian world.’ You’re talking about a cultural region. And I don’t think that Afghanistan and Pakistan, even though they are Muslim [nations], connect with this part of the world. Although Iran does, whereas Turkey doesn’t,” she muses.

What she did know was that art from “this part of the world” was not making it out into the other parts of the world, nor was art travelling in the other direction either. “Whenever I visited Lebanon a few years ago, I would try to find things, and there was nothing really professional at that time in terms of representation of Contemporary artists,” she says. Sfeir-Semler decided to step in and create a commercial Contemporary art gallery that, in her words, “would represent artists I believe in, defend them worldwide, and represent them worldwide. My

hope was, and still is, to create international attention for these people.” And so it was that, in 2005, for the 20th birthday of the gallery in Hamburg, Sfeir-Semler opened her Beirut branch. Despite coming two months after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the gallery’s opening drew more than 2000 people. Drinks ran dry half an hour after the doors opened. Opening a gallery in Beirut, says Sfeir-Semler, was a conscious decision “to give a gift to my country, or to go back to my roots.”

Since she opened, Lebanon has witnessed a stream of high-profile political assassinations, a long-term sit-in, a war with Israel, and several flare-ups of civil conflict, events which have stifled Lebanon’s potential economic growth. In spite of all this, business has been good, with clients, mainly Lebanese and Arabs living abroad, buying from her at art fairs.

She notes that this surge in buying came only after she opened her branch in Beirut, illustrating, she says, a “commitment to the work we are doing.” Furthermore, the current craze for Arab art – following on the heels of the international boom that has been experienced

by both Indian and Chinese Contemporary artists – has led to more and more institutional interest in the gallery, with customers like Tate Modern, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Germany’s Hamburger Bahnhof, Jordan’s Darat Al-Funun, and the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage lining up to buy. Charles Saatchi has also taken a few pieces for the *Unveiled: New Art From the Middle East* show in London (see page 178). “You can’t believe how many people contact us – curators, museum directors – every single day in

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Previous Pages: Wafa Hourani. *Qalandia 2047* (detail). 2006-2008. Installation in five parts. Mixed media, photographs, slides, drawings, electrical light and wire. 400 x 700 cm.

Facing page: Marwan Rechmaoui. *Spectre (The Yacoubian Building, Beirut)*. 2006-2008. Non-shrinking grout, aluminium, glass, fabric. 420 x 225 x 80 cm. Edition of five.



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the Hamburg gallery, not asking about our German artists, but about the artists we represent from here. Every single day!” she exclaims. “The trend came to this part of the world, and now everyone wants us to make shows on artists from the Arab world. So what do they do? They call us.”

Museum Proportions

With only three shows per year, the gallery’s considerations are often less commercial, and more curatorial, than traditional galleries. Top personalities like renowned international Contemporary art curator Catherine David and William Wells of Cairo’s Townhouse Gallery are brought in to assemble group shows that would not be out of place in a museum. “By making exhibitions as we make them, they are not like gallery exhibitions. We are like the ‘in-between’. We are a private

gallery, but we have a space which is a museum space, that can hold with many Kunsthallen and public spaces in Europe and the USA: quality-wise, level-wise, space-wise,” says Sfeir-Semler. “By making these high-level exhibitions, we educate the eye of the public. The shows we make are very often complicated, conceptual exhibitions, so on this level it’s a public educational project.” On the other hand, of course, everything is for sale, although Sfeir-Semler briefly considered running her space on a non-profit basis. Instead, she says, “our clients are our sponsors. But we never make any compromises for sale or for commercial reasons. The compromise we may make is

Above: Tarek Zaki. *Helmet* from the *Time Machine: Remembering Tomorrow* installation. 2004. Cast stone in vitrine. 172 x 60 x 60 cm.


Facing page: Michelangelo Pistoletto. *Up Side Down*. 1976. Wood and mirror, unique. 160 x 80 x 65 cm.



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against commerciality, and for a high quality. The commerce will follow anyway, because it’s so good that people will buy,” she says confidently. After almost four years of exhibiting these challenging shows and having a strong presence at art fairs, Sfeir-Semler has already started to see her market grow, especially from collectors based in the region. She sees this as a result of consistent, direct exposure to the challenging works that she shows. “The more [collectors] look at Contemporary art that is not easy, simple paint on canvas, but more difficult, more complicated art pieces which are not only decoration, but more conceptual – the more those people buy from us. Little by little, you develop the eye of a new generation of collectors who used to buy the work of Gormley and Hirst and are now starting to look at Zaatari or Raad.”

And while Beirut’s historically stable banks are having

a boom year, the art scene is struggling. The economic crisis has hit the gallery hard in recent months, with a “dull” trip to Miami and a bad autumn season. “You don’t need art,” Sfeir-Semler reasons. “The last thing you would buy if you have economic problems would be art, and it’s the first thing you would stop buying.” Nonetheless, the long-term future looks bright. The museums currently under construction in the Gulf will sooner or later have to fill their walls and a new, young generation of Arab collectors, well-educated and interested in their heritage, are coming of age. The hardest part, she says, is not meeting demand, but finding artists she believes in. “There are many artists I know I could sell,” she says, “but we are really selective.” 

For more info visit www.sfeir-semler.com