

Dial 911 for the new Middle East: a promenade

By marietomb
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2011

Protagonists: Ranine, Marie

Occasion: The Feel Collective, *Dial 911 for the new Middle East*, [The Running Horse Contemporary art Space](#)

Date and time: Thursday 15 September, 3 PM (Exhibition is on til 24 September)

Too bad we missed the opening on 9/11. Or, let us rephrase it, too bad we missed the performances by Paed Conca , Stéphane Rives and Fadi Tabbal from ‘under the carpet’, and then the Incompetents...

We came to the Running Horse the following Thursday, exhausted by three hours of driving around looking for cupcakes (by the way, we still don’t know where the best in town can be found. Marie still claims she can beat any bakery, but I’m skeptical.... Anyway, back on track)

Us being Ranine and Marie, we *had* to start our visit by the end. With the office at the back of the room. To all our museum studies professors: YES WE BROKE SOCIETY’S ARBITRARY RULES AND THE DICTATORSHIP OF EXHIBITION SPACES AS PROCESSIONAL TEMPLES! Now shoot us or applaud, whatever you prefer.

Out of the gallery’s offices, we stumble upon the design corner. Kind of like when you visit a museum and you can leave with a mug printed with a famous painting, except edgier and 100 percent local production. There are t-shirts, scarves, ipad cases in a variety of colours, all decorated with patterns derived from the exhibition’s artwork, such as airplanes or Kalashnikov AK-47 guns (we guess this was it). We say thumbs up to the nicely designed, locally-made, clever products, to art as fashion and art as

design as fashion. The prices? More art-collector-friendly...

We promise we're starting with the proper exhibition review. Only, the wrong way around and back again. Sorry.

To our right, behold Penguin Cube's neon installation. Blue, red and white: we're in the States, in case you had not already identified the plane crashing in two towers, all rendered in a rather naïve manner, reminiscent of comic books and these wavy and curvaceous erasers that were popular with back-to-schoolers in the late nineties (don't see which ones we're talking about)? One can't avoid the glaring lights, the in-your-faceness of the work, which we've interpreted as a denunciation of the way the commercialization of the 9/11 tragedy of 9/11, through the representation of the fatal moment in a medium associated with cheap store signs. (Not sure this is what the Beirut-based design collective Penguin Cube intended, we unfortunately have not yet had a chance to meet them) In any case, artists have been using light-shape and light-words to denounce everything and its opposite since forever, but the medium has recently made quite a comeback, something we venture to attribute to the inherent visual appeal and the legibility of light.

A bit further to the right, we transition to two hundred black sketches printed on aluminium boards of identical (roughly A4) size, neatly organized on 5 rows and 8 columns. Multidisciplinary artist Nadim Karam shows reproductions of sketches originally produced during the month of July 2006, when the war in Lebanon forced him to flee Beirut for London. The assemblage of scribbles only makes sense after ten minutes of intense staring. A plane, a human figure and bullets recur often. Rather, a menacing plane, a frail human being, and a dangerous phallic bullet. All printed on cold, grey, shiny aluminium. Free associations? war, exile, danger, fear, fear, fear, blame of politics more generally, global warming, death, what has our planet come to, human vulnerability. All expressed in a really candid, almost naïve, poetic, way, and enhanced by the metallic

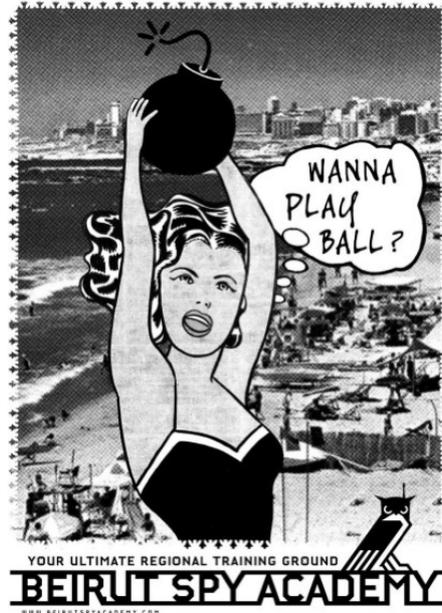
background. Karam succeeded in being touching, and flirting with cheesy without falling in the trap.



New York, September 11 2001, Alfred Tarazi, giclee print, 100 x 100 cm

Alfred Tarazi, giclee print, 100 x 100 cm, 2011. (c) the artist.

Facing them, three images related to three different events: Pearl Harbor, the attacks on the American Embassy in Beirut in April 1983, September 11. All black and white photos, overlaid with a bright figure of superman, wonderwoman or both. Interestingly, the only collage where they are portrayed as weak, defeated figures, is the center one representing the Beirut attacks. Food for thought: are the United States never defeated, except in the Middle East?



Alfred Tarazi, giclee print, 100 x 70 cm, 2011. (c) the artist

Back at the end of the room, we're encouraged to 'Work as a spy, infiltrate as an artist!' Tempting. Tarazi, or beirutspyacademy, again recycles pop art icons, such as Roy Lichtenstein's comics. The famous pin-up playing with a balloon becomes a woman playing with a grenade, sixties backgrounds become old photographs of old oriental mansions and palm trees. Dialogues are twisted to contain obvious political charges, such as "Where were you on Valentine's day 2005?", a reference to the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic el Hariri on that date.

Pop art already reworked elements of consumer society to better criticize this society, so it might only be fitting to yet again recycle pop art itself to ounce again comment on contemporary society, especially that on some level, pop art itself has become a consumer product through endless applications in design and fashion (at least, that is how the greatest part of the general public consumes it). Tarazi's reutilization of pop, is not only adapted to time and place, but also more overtly political than its precursors. His adding of the "spy as artist" layer to his project further unlocks conceptual possibilities (spying as performance art, for instance) and again reminds the viewer that art can, and should have a political role to play.

As an aside, Marie's inner feminist ~~went on a rant~~ nicely remarked on Tarazi's use of female-as-a-victim/sex object imagery while not engaging enough with its critical implications.



Tarazi also presents a triptych starring himself, all dressed and made up to look like a Muslim cleric, standing between two veiled women. Does that mean he aspires to become a powerful Muslim cleric with submissive wives (as the work's title ironically suggests), or that he criticizes ideologies that relegate women to a secondary role while enjoying pornography (as evidenced by the old TV screens) behind closed doors? Ranine thought of Qaddafi and his female bodyguards, Marie was not a big fan of such an artistic concept – the allusion to and embodiment of a famous and controversial Lebanese politician, coupled with an easy denunciation of the physical and verbal silencing of women, with references to consumer society, the whole in tacky and fluorescent colors – and thought it lacked some substance beyond the humor of seeing Tarazi dressed up.

Last on our left (that would be first on your right, you normal people), a few other collages. In one of them, Saddam Hussein rides a zebra while the USA's stars eat away a map of the Middle East; a composition that efficiently emasculates Saddam and belittles the United States. A large horizontal one is a terribly crowded scene of commercial and political references having to do with the Middle East and the United States. The city's in ruins; the Michelin man runs for his life; Hassan Nasrallah boasts

‘vici vic ivici’; a statue of Liberty becomes a female sniper... It is visually impressive. It does cleverly poke fun at figures the artist (let’s face it) strongly disagree with. It is ambivalently pro and anti-West at once. It is unabashedly anti-extremist.

Finishing with the beginning, we start our reading of the exhibition’s introductory text, with insightful excerpts by General Clark, written in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. But! We! forgot! There! Was! A! video! Yet another war video with a nostalgic old-Arabic-pop soundtrack.... It’s only the American invasion of Iraq. In green.

Alfred Tarazi had announced, in the pamphlet we read... after our visit: right after 911, the United States had already put into action the plan to invade Afghanistan and Iraq (with no proof of WMDs) and to successively take down regimes in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia Sudan and Iran, all in five years.

“What is the new Middle East?” he asks. Is the glitz and glamour of Dubai? “A state where an American capitalistic consumerist template has been applied?” McArabia? To Tarazi, the new Middle East could be characterized by a confrontation between jihad extremists, on one side, and McWorld fanatics on the other. He seems only sure of impending doom and ends with a warning against the manipulation of History, our lack of sense of citizenship, unavoidable clashes between warring factions. Dial 911, indeed.

At the risk of sounding trite, we need, and deserve, politically minded and engaged artists to be not only active in Lebanon today, but also to engage local, regional and global history in a critical fashion that goes beyond simple archiving. The Feel Collective’s commemoration of 9/11 did go in that direction. And was strangely fun in its use of pop-irony, sobering in its geopolitical matter-of-factness, depressed and optimistic about the future, all at once.

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