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Print

Making art from war – Take One: 1975-1991

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Jim Quilty

Review

BEIRUT: Anyone walking into the Beirut Art Center in the last month or so would be confronted by an image both new and familiar. A large canvas, 208x370cm, Abdel Hamid Baalbaki's 1976 untitled work is a tableau of tribal-feudal themes rendered in an almost cartoon-like surrealism.

The background is comprised of an urban skyline of burning buildings and smashed palm trees. Moving to the foreground, you find men and women, shrouded, striding toward the ruins. A pair of knights, pikes drawn, charge one another. A black-shrouded woman holds the corpse of a man in the manner of Michelangelo's "Pietà." A statue of a horned, Mesopotamian-style god presides over a mound of broken tablets. An owl glowers from atop a hatched egg, from which emerges a dragon-like rooster, spitting fire upon a clutch of cowering human victims.

A spectator gazing upon this scene would be forgiven for thinking, "Oh, a Lebanese 'Guernica.'" It's an apt summation, one that doesn't necessarily dismiss Baalbaki's work as a knock-off of Picasso. For a Lebanese artist in 1975, the Spanish Civil War – with its clash of parochial fascism and international socialism – provided a prototype for the current war. So "Guernica" suggested a model worth emulating. You can imagine an artist nodding, "That's one way to put it."

Baalbaki is one of 20 artists whose work was sampled for "The Road to Peace: Painting in Times of War – 1975-1991." Curated by the prominent Beirut gallerist Saleh Barakat, the show includes a smattering of sculpture and installation art as well as painting.

As he explains in his catalogue essay, Barakat undertook this exhibition in an act of historical revisionism. He wanted to redress the misapprehension that it was only after 1990, when the Lebanese Civil War was ended, that artists began to address the conflict in their work. In this, Lebanese art history has suffered the same setbacks as the country's history generally – pinioned between the neglect of a minimalist state and the vagaries of a 15-year-long conflict that was hostile to documentation.

Barakat's work also serves the invaluable function of providing some historical context for the work of contemporary artists like Akraam Zaatari, Walid Raad, Rabih Mroue and Lina Saneh, to name a few, whose media and conceptual concerns are quite distinct from those of the artists in this exhibition.

This generation of post-war artists isn't absent from the show, in fact, but has been given an opportunity to speak to it in the catalogue epilogue, an essay by artist Walid Sadek entitled "The Impregnated Witness: Notes on the Event." A rumination upon two medieval representations of the Apocalypse depicted in The Book of Revelations, the essay reworks the theoretical and practical conundrum that has challenged and sustained the work of Sadek and his colleagues for nearly two decades – the vacuity of the image in the face of apocalyptic disaster.

Baalbaki is only one artist here whose work is redolent of European influence. It's tempting to dismiss these works as derivative graftings of existing practices – sometimes composition – upon local experience. It's more useful to regard them as evidence of a struggle on the part of certain Lebanese artists (not all of them were able to take up the challenge) to find a visual language to depict the collapse of normalcy into ideologically charged brigandage.

The pen-and-ink drawings comprising Jamil Molaeb's "Notes from the civil war" (1978) provide but one good case in point. One of these drawings echoes "Guernica" too: Human figures, drawn without perspective, are locked in a conflagration of rocket-propelled grenades while, in the background, a pair of horses raise their heads in protest.

The same borrowings can be found in Aref Rayess' series of black-and-white prints entitled "Road to Peace." Some of these pieces – a metallic wolf baying at the moon; masses huddled within an arms factory – reiterate modernist renderings of the apocalyptic. Others – like one drawing that finds human faces staring out of the open maw of a gigantic beast while a machine gun-bearing angel guards them – reference the medieval ironically.

Not all the works are documents of interest to art historians alone. The stand-out works are impressive both for the strength of their language and the sheer variety of dialect at work – with some artists persevering in representation while others moved away from depiction into multimedia forms.

Among the most evocative of the latter are the eight multi-media collages of Mohamed Rawas, composed between 1978 and 1989. These works all draw upon the mediated detritus of place and conflict to create an art that makes use of politics without being explicitly partisan.

Evidently aware of the significance of Rawas' work for its war-driven transhumance from pre-war to post-war aesthetics, the exhibition includes a written interview with the artist – unfortunately not included in the exhibition catalogue – in which he recalls the process by which he returned to work after some months of silence and the confusion his work caused the critical community, whose criteria for success were either sanitized of politics or frankly partisan.

Ghada Jamal followed her own path from representation to something else. The exhibition gathers both large-scale oil-on-paper work and miniatures (pages from her artist book "To Everything There is a Season") all from 1989. Some of the large oils are more representational (and affecting) than others but her miniatures are consistently transfixing. Her media are the pages of the printed book, each of them manipulated so as to become near-palimpsests – in the same way that a shallow grave is a "near-burial."

At the other extreme is the work of Fouad al-Khoury, the lone photographer represented in "Paintings in times of War." This small cluster of black-and-white photos capture the range of experience that characterized Lebanon's civil wars. "Portemilio" (1983) finds four ladies sunbathing in a modernist fountain north of Beirut, where, at this point, there is little evidence of any conflict at all.

"East-West Crossing" (1982), on the other hand, finds a handful of people at what appears to be the Mathaf crossing. At the centre of the frame, a young woman, dressed completely in white, picks her way west over the smashed, gravel-shrouded pavement with her bags of groceries. Gazing at these images, you wonder whether Khoury was

the first artist to capture the visual incongruity that has since become the mainstay of photographic representations of this country.

It is impossible to spend time with this exhibition and not be reminded of Zeina Maasri's show "Signs of Conflict," a selection of Civil War-era political posters exhibited in Beirut during last year's HomeWorks Forum. Informed audiences would have recognised both the names of reputable artists who donated their talents to this politically engaged graphic art (especially in the revolutionary early months of the conflict) and the influence of international pop art trends upon their work.

The work Barakat has sampled in "Painting in Times of War" takes a step toward fleshing out the historical narrative Maasri commenced with "Off the Wall" (IB Taurus, 2009), her magisterial study that provided the material for "Signs of Conflict."

Both exhibitions share a number of artists in common but Barakat's curatorial criteria are completely different than those of Maasri. Far from being politically engaged, some of this work has never even been displayed. While other pieces were created for public consumption, none of them seem to have been composed with an eye to political utility. That isn't to say that when both shows do reference the same artist – Jamil Molaeb, for instance, or Paul Guiragossian – the work in Barakat's exhibition is necessarily more distinguished. Sometimes the opposite is true.

Differing curatorial agendas notwithstanding, Barakat's exhibition provides a candid document of individual artists who, confronted by a common trauma, fought to find a visual language with which to express it. "Painting in Times of War" makes a significant contribution to the history of a young country whose tribunes, while fixated on the past, have more use for genealogies than history. It has some fine art too.

Beirut Art Center's next exhibitions — "Earth of Endless Secrets: Writing for a Posterior Time" a solo exhibition by Akram Zaatari and "Prisoner of War," a solo show by Bernard Khoury — will open July 22. For more information call +961 1 397 018 or +961 70 26 21 12, or visit our website: www.beirutartcenter.org

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