

# ARTFORUM

## "The Road to Peace: Paintings in Times of War, 1975–1991"

BEIRUT ART CENTER

Jisr El Wati, Building 13, Street 97, Zone 66

June 17, 2009–July 14, 2009

Through the works of artists such as Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, and Rabih Mroué, the contemporary art scene in Beirut has become known for grappling with history, violence, memory, and lived experience in relation to Lebanon's civil war, a fifteen-year conflict that ended two decades ago. These critical and conceptual practices, however, date back only so far as the postwar period. Less visible are the more visceral and emotionally piercing practices of a previous generation of Lebanese artists who worked, quite literally, under the bombs and believed, however fitfully, in art's capacity, even duty, to capture the horrors of war as a warning to subsequent generations not to repeat them.



Abdel Hamid Baalbaki, *Untitled*, 1976, oil on canvas, 82 x 146".

Curated by Saleh Barakat, hosted by the Beirut Art Center, and named for a 1979 book of harrowing, diary-style charcoal drawings by the late artist Aref al-Rayess, "The Road to Peace" includes paintings, drawings, artists' books, photographs, and sculptures made between 1975 and 1990. Many of the works were culled from artists' studios, estates, and private collections. Some have never been shown before, and several were never intended for public exhibition.

The exhibition features a few overt and relatively unsuccessful attempts to do for Lebanon's civil war what *Guernica* did for Spain's. More interesting are Laure Ghorayeb's obsessive, intricate drawings and Fouad Elkoury's photographs, which capture scenes at once crushing and whimsical. Conceived as a time capsule and billed as the first initiative of its kind, the show has provoked thorny questions, a number of which were raised at a voluble and occasionally volatile panel discussion that followed a week after the opening: Does the timing of the exhibition reflect real political anxieties, or is it more symptomatic of competition within the art scene and, more baldly, of concern for market share? Do such exhibitions contribute to the field of art history, or do they reduce complex narratives to streamlined stories that are inevitably false? These are both painful and productive queries.

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

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