

amine
el-bachcha

observing life

From the street cafés of downtown Beirut to the museums of Paris and the ateliers of Italy, El-Bacha has derived inspiration from every nook and cranny of life. His works reflect a deep fascination not only with the human form, but with the very heart of nature itself. No matter the medium, El-Bacha surrenders to the vibrancy of colour with a childlike naivety that is strangely blended with the mature eye of experience.



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Previous pages: (Detail) 'Lumiere Nocturne'. 1999. Oil on canvas. 105 x 210 cm.

Facing page: 'Le Baiser'. 2006. Oil on canvas. 70 x 70 cm. Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris. Private collection, Dubai.

amine El-Bacha spends his mornings in one or other of Ras Beirut's many cafés, sipping decaffeinated coffee and sketching the people and situations that take his fancy. Two men in deep armchairs lean towards one another in earnest conversation, coffee cups and croissants on a table before them; a woman peers anxiously over the top of her copy of the *An-Nahar* newspaper feeling apparently ambivalent about being sketched by one of Lebanon's foremost artists; a bespectacled man sits on his own, writing pad in one hand and pen in the other, his thoughts drawn on the unlined paper in clear, bold letters, and his manner that of someone unaware of his surroundings.

The drawings, in black ink often filled in with soft watercolour, are quirky and wonderful with a twist of seriousness, and are indicative not only of El-Bacha's eye and skill but also of his ability to blend into his environment while being a keen observer of it. This is Beirut at its most revealing, and its people at their most poignant. This is El-Bacha at his most incisive; an artist who understands that form and content in artistic endeavour are inextricably entwined, and who sees the irony in human circumstance and does not hesitate to depict it.

Café Culture

"When I first began to paint at 15, I felt an urgent need to draw people's faces, so my most important teachers were the cafés of the Bourj in Beirut," El-Bacha says. "The wonderful thing about the downtown cafés in the 1940s and 1950s was that all types of people frequented them; ex-convicts, gamblers, manual labourers and suchlike, alongside men from the professional

and upper classes. There was one particular place I went to that they called Abou Afif's café. It was on the first floor of an old building and its veranda had an excellent view of the main street. I would go there at five in the afternoon and waiting for the people to come out of the cinemas and draw them without even looking down at the paper I was using."

The inspiration for El-Bacha's partly abstract, partly figurative work now comes largely from nature, he says; birds, trees and expanses of blue sea and wide, open skies. However, his fascination with the human form continues. "I like faces.

Features are symbols of form, the shape of an eye or a nose, all these are very beautiful," he says. "Whatever one observes in nature is there in people too. The horizontal line formed by the sea is similar to that of a man's shoulders, for instance,

and a tree's upright stand is his height. Stars are a woman's eyes and the soft roundness of the sun is in the contours of her face."

Born in 1932, El-Bacha studied at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux Arts (ALBA) and then the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris. He went on to gain prizes for his work from both the Lebanese and French governments. After receiving the Citta Eterna Prize in Rome in 1976, El-Bacha was invited to spend several years working in Italy.

Eyes of the World

In Europe, El-Bacha acquired a solid classical training which helped him hone his technique while exposing him to a culture of art in the West that had yet to be realised in Lebanon. El-Bacha went on to become one of an important generation

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of Lebanese painters who helped define the country's artistic journey during the second half of the 20th century. His work did not stoop to mere imitation of Western art; nor did it attempt to reflect the angst experienced by European artists who, during the post-colonial era, struggled to find themselves in a changed world. Rather, El-Bacha's work successfully mirrored his own background and heritage and at its core was a sophisticated vehicle for self-expression.

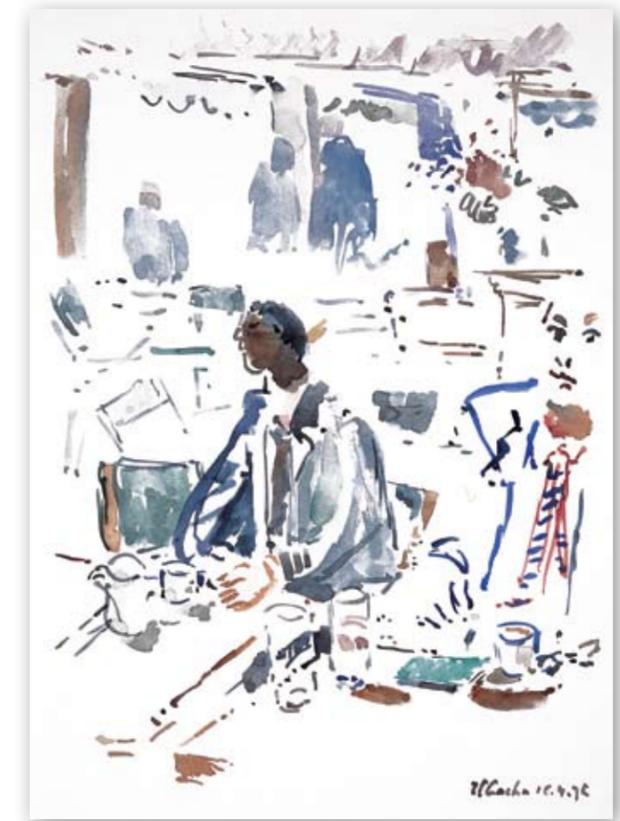
A composed and deeply intuitive man, for whom drawing and painting make up the steady routine of his existence, El-Bacha follows his morning sessions of sketching with afternoons in his studio in Saifi Village in downtown Beirut. He explains that despite his many travels he has never seen himself - even in the early days of his career - as an artist from the developing world for whom the West is a kind of cultural ideal. “My life is divided between Beirut, Paris and Barcelona,” he says. “I have always tried to keep myself informed about what is going on in the world around me and what other artists are working on and

feel I have an understanding of artistic culture. One of the first things I did when I went to France, for example, was to go to the Louvre. There, I saw works of art from Lebanon and other countries in the Middle East that clearly demonstrated how much our culture had contributed to the West.”

The Artist's Dilemma

During his early days in Paris, El-Bacha discovered that his fellow up-and-coming artists who acquired the patronage of gallery owners invariably ended up compromising their art for the sake of that relationship. He refused to allow himself to fall into that trap. “On the few occasions when I did have meetings with galleries - either because I thought they may be interested in my paintings or because someone wanted to introduce my work to them - I found I was wasting precious time in doing public relations instead of pursuing my art,” he says.

Once back in Beirut, El-Bacha was taken aback during the opening of an exhibition when a journalist asked him



whether he had felt intimidated by the quality of the art he had seen during his sojourn in France. “I told him that I didn't harbour a complex about European art,” he says. “Nor have I ever considered that I 'live' only in my own country. I experience the era we are living in just like any other artist anywhere in the world. I am affected by beauty, whatever or wherever it is. The only difference between here and the West is that over there artists are held in very high esteem and have thousands of museums and galleries where they can display their work. This, of course, is not the case here in Lebanon, where we still don't have a proper modern art museum.”

Tonal Harmony

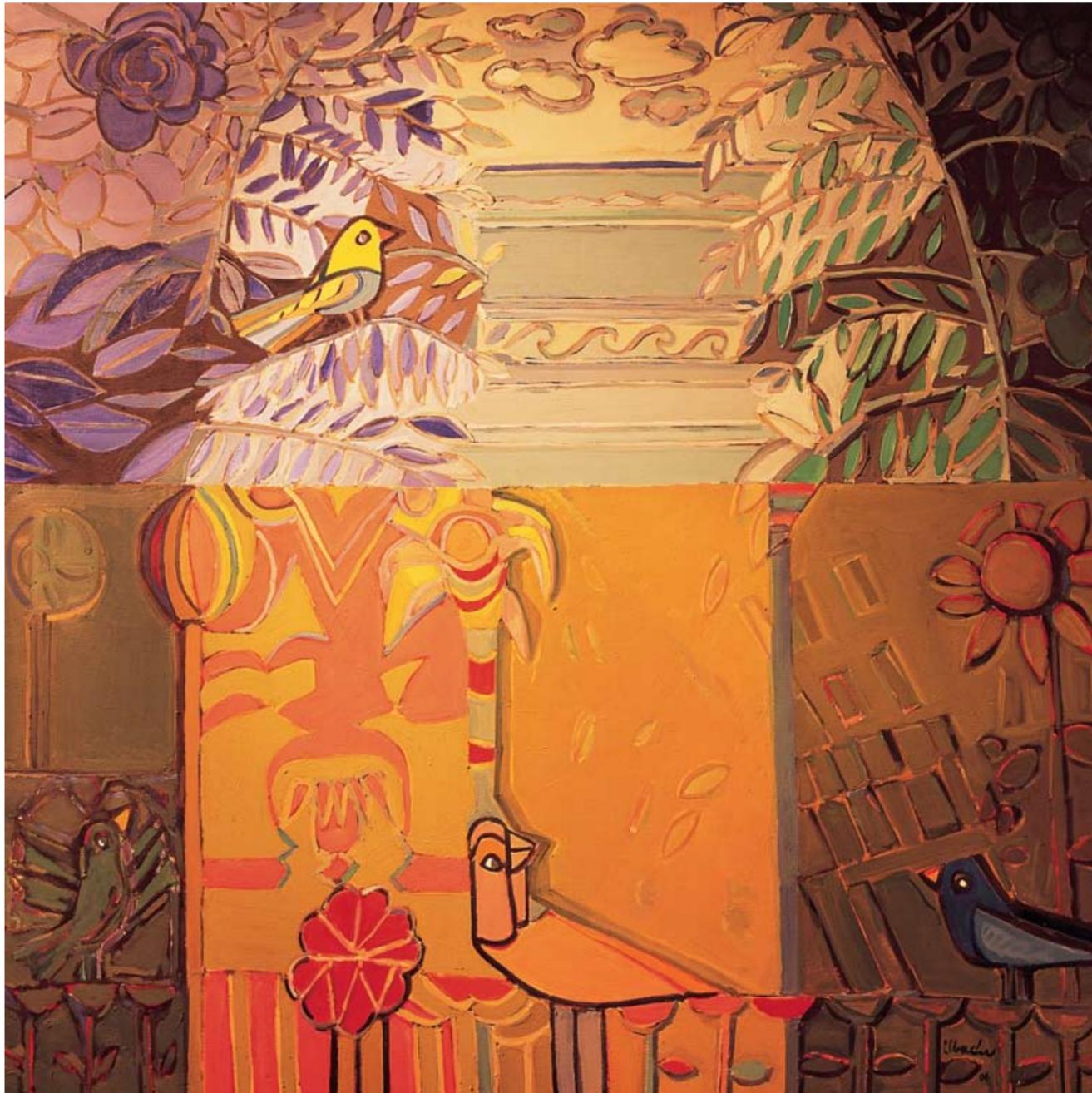
El-Bacha is known as a master of colour. His colours are vibrant, bold and often breathtaking whether in aquarelle, oils, pastels or gouache. They define the flowing and often childlike forms of the subjects he chooses to depict, and dictate the joyous spirit and serenity that permeates his work. “I begin many of my

paintings with lots of black in them but then find with time that the black begins to disappear,” he says.

Light and shadow are pronounced elements in El-Bacha's paintings, acting as a kind of compensation for the relative absence of darkness and reinforcing a sense of wholeness and balance that would not otherwise be apparent. This phenomenon is also evident in the artist's penchant for working on wood; its peculiar texture allows him to repeat patterns in different tones and to divide his paintings into sections. The juxtaposition of light and shade conversely expresses the extent of the harmony between them.

As El-Bacha paints, he listens to classical music by Western masters such as Handel or Mozart, or their equivalents in the Arab world, including Abdel Wahab and the great Umm Kulthum. His love of music began in childhood, he explains, and led him to present a classical music

Facing page: 'Crépuscule'. 1999. Oil on canvas. 185 x 125 cm.
Above
Left: 'Cafés de Beyrouth'. 1991. Watercolour on paper. 32 x 26 cm.
Right: 'Cafés de Beyrouth'. 1996. Watercolour on paper. 32 x 26 cm.



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programme on radio in the early 1960s, which was the first of its kind in Lebanon.

El-Bacha has an equal passion for words and is a regular contributor to *An-Nahar's* cultural section as well as the Kuwaiti monthly *Al-Arabi*. One of the many projects he has worked on involved illustrating the written works of the French poet Alain Jouffroy, the Senegalese poet Leopold Sedar Senghor and Lebanon's Nadia Tueni. El-Bacha has also created posters for a variety of public campaigns both in Lebanon and abroad, including calls for the preservation of the environment and the protection of ancient sites. In other “interdisciplinary” ventures, he illustrated the annual reports of Lebanon's Banque Audi and collaborated with Lebanese photographer Ghassan Kittmite by “improvising” drawings around photographs printed on paper. Within more conventional realms, El-Bacha's work has been exhibited in numerous galleries in Lebanon as well as other countries in the Arab world, including Kuwait, Jordan and Algeria, to name but a few. He has also taken part in exhibitions in galleries and museums in France, Italy, the UK and Spain.

In January 2008, the Green Art Gallery in Dubai will host a solo exhibition of El-Bacha's latest works. He believes the efforts being made in the Gulf today to promote art and encourage Arab artists in general is “a dream come true.” Nevertheless, he cannot help but lament the fact that these kinds of initiatives are not taking place in his native Lebanon. “How can we even think about

and as passionately as he has always done, regardless of whether there is a venue to display his paintings or whether there are people to admire them. “I put my soul into my work. It is essentially a means for me to express myself,” he says. “If people like what I do then I am very happy, but I paint my paintings first and foremost for myself. That is why I am always at a loss to see them go.”



Facing page: 'Les Quatres Oiseaux'. 2007. Oil on canvas. 150 x 150 cm.

'Paravent Oriental'. 2005. Oil on wood, double face triptych. 162 x 150 cm.

having a Modern art museum when we don't have the right kind of people to run it?" In the meantime, El-Bacha will undoubtedly continue to work as hard

Amine El-Bacha will be exhibiting at Green Art Gallery, Dubai, from 14 to 28 January. For further information, visit www.gagallery.com