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Published: 3/09/2013 04:48 PM | Updated: 9/09/2013 04:37 PM

Astral machines

In Beiteddine



"What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things... it is impossible for anyone to express anything essentially real by imitating its exterior surface."

- Constantin Brâncuși, Romanian sculptor

Among the 21 sculptures by **Anachar Basbous** currently on display at Art Lounge (silk factory) in Beiteddine-Maasser, *Poem* is one of the most evocative. Two steel elements are set apart. They embrace small, geometrical pieces which are mounted in between them, and which seem to

represent words, metaphors, or stanzas. Though static, these pieces look as if they are about to be released, like words falling off the tip of a tongue. This sculpture seems to embody poetry and its ability to, in Seamus Heaney's words, "entrance you for a moment above the pool of your own consciousness and your own possibilities."

Poem is part of *Balance & Light*, an exhibition Basbous has spent six months working on. During the Beiteddine Art Festival it was displayed partly at Beiteddine's palace, and partly at Art Lounge, but can now it be viewed in its entirety at the latter.

The exhibition consists of a number of metal sculptures that are massive in size. Although many of their surfaces are rusty, the forms have a certain delicacy.

A series of eight stelae - upright stones with an inscribed or sculptured surface - are each dedicated to a city of significance to Basbous. Their titles are like tickets, the artist reveals: *Beirut-Damascus*, *Beirut-Cairo*, *Beirut-Dubai*, *Beirut-Mecca*, *Beirut-Bagdad*, *Beirut-Paris*, *Beirut-Beirut* and *Beirut-Beiteddine*. Each individual stela is about 2m high and reflects some of its destination's flair, Paris being the most eccentric, along with reflecting the additional place's relationship with Beirut.

Speaking to NOW, Basbous explains: "I conceived the series of the cities for Beiteddine. It was my wish to exhibit these sculptures in a rather theatrical manner, I wanted to stage them. Indeed, all are on one line, same height, except for the one in the middle [*Beirut-Beiteddine*]. The titles I gave them were more like tickets or journeys than names of cities. I wanted to provide people with hints, relationships, similitudes, between my hometown and other cities I have visited or whose histories affected me."

Not surprisingly, Beirut-Damascus generated the strongest reactions. A symbol for the strong ties between the two cities and countries for some, others felt it evoked the power relations and the fatal influence Syrian governments have had on Lebanon. It consists of two columns connected by a cross beam, from which a long chain drops to the ground. The cross beam resembles a threatening guillotine, the chain evokes associations of bondage – symbols of a slave and master relationship. The many chain links are like the countless chapters of violence, counter-violence, and even kinship between the two countries.

For the artist, the power relationship between Beirut and Damascus is something that he himself has experienced. "Growing up during the war, dying nearly five or six times, finding myself on a boat to Cyprus that was being attacked, seeing people die – it's not easy to distance yourself from

that.” He brings it to the current chapter: “And then there is the current situation, what’s happening in Syria now, and the dictators in the Arab world, people being prisoners of regimes...” At this point, the charismatic sculptor stops, concerned about saying too much: “one shouldn’t explain too much, reduce the sculpture, the reaction it causes,” he said. “Everybody sees the chain in their way, as death or a bond.”

Basbous was born in 1969 into Lebanon’s sculpture dynasty. His father was the famous (stone) sculptor Michel Basbous, and his uncles, Alfred and Joseph, were also accomplished sculptors. His grandfather was a skilful mason and his mother, Thérèse Aouad Basbous, was a skilful poet, journalist, and writer. Rachana (Anachar is an anagram), his home village and place of residence near Batroun, overlooks the Mediterranean. It has been the residence and creative center for the Basbous family for decades. In 1997 UNESCO declared it an International Capital of Sculpture in Open Air, a title it will deserve all the more once the Michel Basbous Museum that Anachar is working on opens.

Anachar’s favored medium, since switching from architectural wall design to sculpture in the late 90s, has come to be steel and metal. He is drawn by the possibility it affords of building his sculptures and then adding to them.

The sculptor embraces aesthetics and denounces how art today is often used merely to shock audiences. He explains: “the sculpture must still touch you, speak to the eye, not only the spirit, the intellect. [...] Then don’t express yourself through sculpture, write, write poems, make movies, but sculptures must have a soul, express a feeling.”

In the exhibition catalogue, Basbous is quoted as saying: “if violent and aggressive elements are necessary in a sculpture, they may be expressed in beauty, for oneself and the public. Beauty is everywhere, and at times there is beauty in destruction, in war, in pain.”

Basbous is a master at creating sculptures that undergo astonishing transformations when seen from different vantage points. *Genesis* and *Iron Eruption*, for example, are both giant steel pods of sort. Both are smooth on one side, but when viewed from another angle fundamentally change, revealing another less even side. “If you see a shape – can you imagine the inside? In our imagination, the inside of a closed shape, I open it and break it in half, the outside is smooth, the inside is a medley of sticks, rhythms, dynamics. It can be our brain, our feelings, our dreams, thoughts... it’s true that it is disorderly but there is a certain order.”

The Midnight Sun is a giant round stainless steel sculpture with a few horizontal incisions. It

reflects and dissects its surroundings. The artist himself states that his forms “pierce space like big astral machines caught in a perpetual dialogue with the sun. Using a play of shadows, the eternal star creates their movements.”

The most tragic sculpture exhibited is *Lost Time*. It embodies a loss of innocence, lives, opportunities, and identity, and as such could be seen as symbolic of Lebanon. A circle is interrupted by a gaping hole - a disjointed piece seems to be dangling but is, like Lebanon, frozen in time, held hostage by amnesia. “We’re limping,” Basbous notes simply.

'Balance & Light' is on at the Art Lounge Silk Factory, Maasser-Beiteddine until Friday, September 14. For more information call 03 99 76 76.

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