

# Remembering Amine El Bacha: 'Even when he drew ruins, he infused them in jungles of colours'

Mahita El Bacha, daughter of Lebanese artist Amine El Bacha, tells Myrna Ayad about his resolute optimism. This first-person account is based on their interview



A photo of Mahita El Bacha as a child with her father Amine El Bacha in Beirut in 1983. Mahita El Bacha



Myrna Ayad  
May 19, 2020

I remember creating joint drawings with my father. The theory was that I would draw a line and he would draw a line, then a point, and then the works became a series of unplanned drawings created over many years. It was a conversation of lines, dots, shapes and colours. My sisters and I posed for him a lot, as did our mother. He would encourage and sometimes force us to sit down and draw. That way, he taught us to look and see, really learn to see.

Our household was always colourful. No matter what day it was, we had breakfast altogether and talked about everything. We did not do small talk. We never did.

**What had always mattered to him most was his work, integrity and freedom**

**Mahita El Bacha**

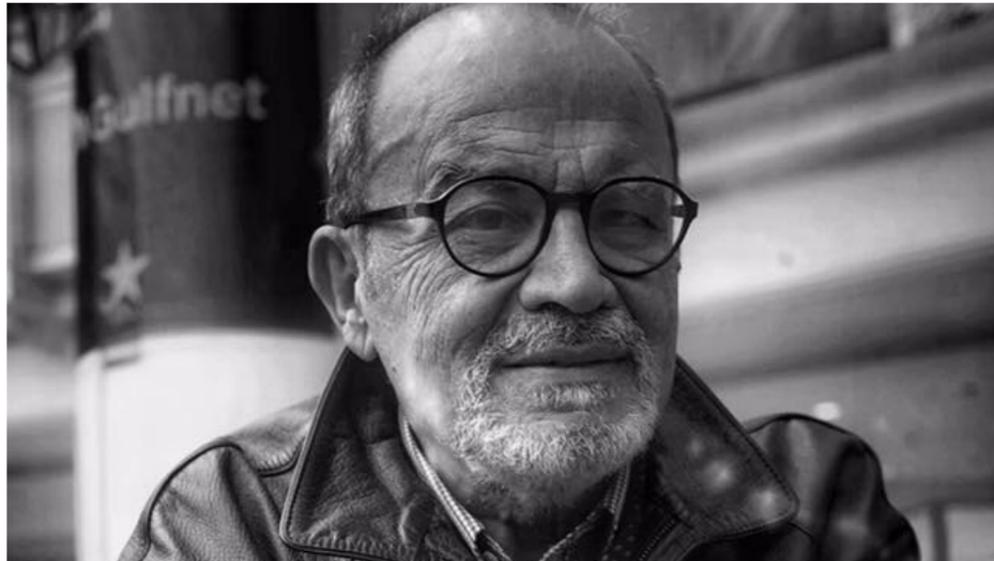
Our household was a social house that hosted lots of big dinners with an eclectic and international crowd of academics, artists and intellectuals. They talked politics, philosophy, human rights and told plenty of jokes. Mom loved cooking and made the most amazing food.

In 2017, Agial Art Gallery in Beirut staged an exhibition of photographs

by Waddah Faris that he had taken of the art and culture scene from

the 1960s through to the 1970s in Lebanon. All of those people were regulars in our home.

My parents met during a street festival in 1965 when they were students in Paris. In 2018, they celebrated their 53rd wedding anniversary. My mother is very intelligent, fun and fascinating and my father was very optimistic and was either really serious or really hilarious. He believed the good will win, and was always positive, just like his work.



Portrait of late Lebanese artist Amine El Bacha. Mahita El Bacha

My sisters and I were given names that resonate with both our maternal Spanish and paternal Arab roots – Fatima, Amaya and Mahita. After Fatima was born in Paris, the plan was to move to Ibiza, where my father was invited on an artist residency project, but his mother became ill, so they moved to Lebanon in 1970 to be close to her.

I was born four years later, but because I got very sick amid an escalating political climate, my mother took me to Spain to live with my aunt and put my sisters in boarding school. My parents stayed in Beirut, they never left, they never abandoned Lebanon. My mother worked with non-profits, supporting refugees, setting up emergency care units and looking after kids with amputated limbs.



Mahita El Bacha, daughter of Lebanese artist Amine El Bacha, says that her father's work illustrates who she is. Mahita El Bacha

I was brought back to Beirut in 1978, and remember, upon arrival, not wanting to put my feet on the ground as though I resisted the act of being away from home, which was then Spain for me. I was

traumatised by the entire ordeal – leaving Spain and coming to a war-torn country. I only spoke Spanish then, when everyone else spoke Arabic or French.

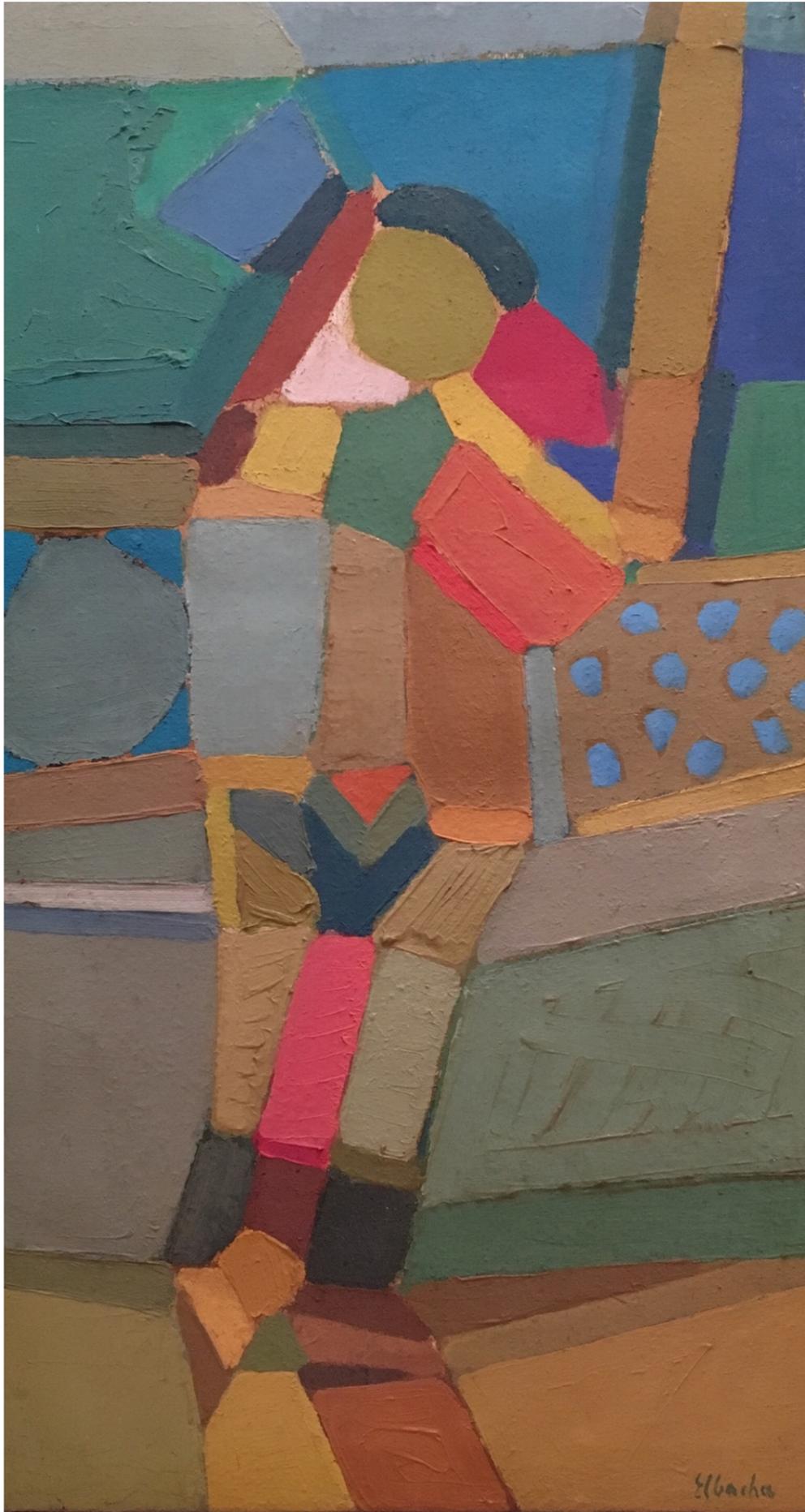
Of course, the war in Lebanon was a big part of our lives in the 1980s. In 1982, when I was 7 years old, I recall – very vividly – seeing a ball of fire from our kitchen balcony. I thought it was going to fall on me, but it fell elsewhere. It was in that instant that I suddenly became aware that terror exists. I realised there was danger and felt a real, tremendous fear, and something snapped in me. Once more, the political situation had escalated and my sisters and I were sent to our aunt's in Spain and returned to Beirut a year later.



'The Bird' (1977) by Amine El Bacha. Mahita El Bacha

Amazingly, we have incredible memories from our time during the war. When East and West Beirut were split, we would go on picnics with friends as a form of resistance. We would drive to the Green Line, park, cross the border, meet our friends in Achrafieh, drive up with them to the north and have a picnic. It was like there was no war. Time felt suspended. We would then cross the Green Line with a suntan, a few new paintings by Dad, a bunch of wildflowers and many great memories. There are a lot of "picnic drawings" that he made. Many years later, I had initially majored in archaeology and, ironically, ended up excavating the Green Line that divided my city. It was a sublime and surreal experience.

Even though the country was at war, Dad believed it would be OK. He dealt with the war in his own way; in his magical and fantastical manner that was always positive, and featured light, beauty and love even in the darkest of days. Even when he drew ruins, he infused them in jungles of colours.



'La Danseuse' (1964) by Amine El Bacha. Mahita El Bacha

He also did a great deal of writing. He was in love with music, and deeply entrenched in Egyptian legends Umm Kulthum and Mohammed Abdel Wahab. He actually wanted to be a violinist originally. His uncle was a musician and painter, and his brother Toufic was a celebrated composer and musician. I guess it is in the El Bacha DNA.

---

READ MORE

Dad was also involved in founding Alba, the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, where he taught, as well as the Lebanese Artists'



'Without galleries, there are no artists': Dubai's art spaces fear for their future

NYUAD Art Gallery traces history in newly launched digital archive

#PickAnyPicAndPaint: Dubai resident challenges artists to paint images taken from newspapers amid the pandemic

though a piece of me had been snatched and exhibited for everyone to look at. There are things that you see that are part of who you are; they are formative, and Dad's paintings illustrate who I am. I absolutely adore his work.

After working in the arts for 25 years, my concerns in relation to his work and estate naturally go beyond him being my father. Through the Amine El Bacha Foundation, we are inventorying, conserving and taking other steps to guarantee his works' longevity and exposure. We need to give him his place in the heritage of our country, the region, the world and history. He has a place there.

More information is at [www.amineelbacha.com](http://www.amineelbacha.com).

*Remembering the Artist is a monthly series that features artists from the region*

Updated: May 19, 2020 05:01 PM

#### Most Popular

As a first-gen Indian-Filipino, 'Never Have I Ever' made me sob

#### Television

Mall of the Emirates drive-in cinema to temporarily close

#### Film

Sharjah Art Foundation awards Dh735,000 worth of grants to 10 artists

#### Art

BTS's Jungkook makes US chart history with solo single 'Euphoria'

#### Music

#FlattenTheCurve to #TogetherAtHome: a guide to coronavirus hashtags

#### Arts&Culture