

Visual Arts**From war zone to haven: the view from Beirut**

Its relative freedoms have made the city attractive for Arab artists escaping turmoil in the Middle East



'Leap into the Void (aka the Pixelated Revolution)' by Rabih Mroué (2011)

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The dogs of war take terrifying shape in the expressionist paintings of Serwan Baran. In an untitled acrylic of 2014, the Iraqi artist depicts a striding general in a khaki greatcoat who is gripping the collar of a slavering hound as if poised to unleash both its savagery and his own.

It is a powerful image, born of personal experience. Baran's artistic awakening came as a conscript during the 1990-91 Gulf war, when he painted the conflict's casualties; later he fled his homeland after the 2003 US-led invasion. Talking to me in his studio in Beirut's Hamra district, he tells me that the dog in the picture is both mythological and mundane: dogs are a symbol of transition to the afterlife, he explains, but were also deployed against Iraqi civilians as instruments of fear.

Baran, 49, is one of many artists escaping turmoil in the Middle East who have settled in the Lebanese capital, joining others who returned after the civil war of 1975-90. Over two decades, relative freedom and lack of censorship have helped revive Beirut as a harbour for artists amid displacement. Yet the shock resignation — later suspended — of the Lebanese prime minister in Saudi Arabia last month, when geopolitical tensions spiked, has reawakened the spectres of proxy war and refugee flows. What gallerist Saleh Barakat describes to me as a vital “incubator” for Arab artists is never secure.

Christine Tohmé, founding director of Ashkal Alwan, a Beirut-based arts organisation, is curator of the 13th edition of the [Sharjah Biennial](#), whose two concluding exhibitions are now on in the city. Tohmé attributes Beirut’s allure for artists to a “combination of precariousness and relative stability”. Its openness makes it a place for critical discussions, “harder to hold anywhere else in the region”, given “increasing restraints on cultural and civic freedoms”. Its robust cultural network stems, she says, from the “urban fabric of postwar Beirut during the 1990s — fractured and frail but full of possibilities. The ruined city offered a playground for . . . pushing the boundaries.”



'Untitled' by Serwan Baran, depicting a general in a khaki coat holding on to the collar of a hound (2014) © Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation Collection

That the city remains a space in which to take risks was evident at this autumn's Beirut Art Fair, whose powerful centrepiece was *Ourouba: The Eye of Lebanon*. That exhibition "could not have happened anywhere else in the Arab world", according to Laure d'Hauteville, founding director of Beirut's and Abu Dhabi's art fairs. Globally feted artists such as Kader Attia, Walid Raad and [Mona Hatoum](#) were among 39 artists from the Arab world and its diaspora showing 60 works, including Baran's.

Curated by the Lebanese-Iranian Rose Issa to reflect concerns across the Arab world since 2001, *Ourouba* ("Arabicity") evoked loss, trauma and humiliation, but also beauty and resilience. Its irony and experimentation pushed artistic frontiers.

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In a delightfully quixotic, if ominous, work made during the Arab uprisings of 2011, “Leap into the Void (aka the Pixelated Revolution)”, Lebanese artist and performer Rabih Mroué superimposed his flying body on an aerial shot of a sea of demonstrators. (By contrast, surreal still-lives in Baran's studio portray the doomed “Arab spring” as chicken legs on a night-dark

background — as so much lurid flesh.)

Three oil paintings of multi-faceted heads like expressive landscapes were by Syrian artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi, who died in Berlin last year. His influence lives on in younger painters, such as Ayman Baalbaki, 42, who countered amnesia with a vibrant accretion of impasto and collage. The colourful cloth on his canvases alludes to women's costumes in southern Lebanon, from which his family was displaced. In a 2012 acrylic painting, a floral backdrop made the ubiquitous concrete security barrier into a tub of flowers — or a coffin. Meanwhile “Barakat Building” (2016) portrays a notorious snipers' nest on Beirut's Green Line, now preserved as a “Museum of Memory” but so mired in disputes that it is still not officially open.



'Barakat Building', by Ayman Baalbaki (2016) © Agjal Gallery, Beirut

Without state support for contemporary art — although a frenzy of museum-building is now under way — local collectors played a key role. *Ourouba* was drawn entirely from 12 private and public collections within Lebanon. Issa argues that the eye of these collectors of pan-Arab art contrasts with those building monumental collections in the Gulf amid censorship, and — like the new Louvre Abu Dhabi — “linked with European institutions”.

Lebanon's adventurous collectors have supported politically outspoken as well as artistically challenging work. Tagreed Darghouth's acrylic paintings of surveillance cameras and drones, for instance, were from a series entitled "Nowhere To Hide". Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi's "Between the Lines" (2010) had Arabic calligraphy more associated with the sacred carved on three jagged circular saws. For Issa, this work exposes religion's misuse as a "tool for exploiting the ignorant". In a similar vein, an untitled aerial photograph of 2012 by Saudi artist Ahmed Mater — whose solo show *Mecca Journeys* opened yesterday at the Brooklyn Museum — alluded to Mecca's Disneyfication. And "Door Mat", Beirut-born Hatoum's enduring 1996 work made of nails, swiped at Arab — and other — regimes' ambivalent welcome for refugees.

Such critiques are not always welcome. As a young caricaturist, Abdul Rahman Katanani riled the militias in Sabra, the Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut where he was born and still has a studio, where we met recently. But now the 34-year-old's international star is rising: his sculptures are sold at Christie's, and a solo show, *Hard Core*, opens in Paris this weekend.

On show at *Orouba*, "The Girl with a Rope" (2011), a corrugated-metal relief of a child skipping with barbed wire, was spurred by the "rich, grey and shining material" of everyday construction in the camps. In another barbed wire installation, "Wave" (2016), the Mediterranean is an impenetrable barrier that draws blood and snares lives. A friend from neighbouring Chatila attempting the passage from Turkey washed up, he told me, on a Greek shore.

Political preoccupations are inescapable. "Better Be Watching the Clouds", the title piece of a gallery show in Beirut of new work by Raad alludes to the country's predicament by portraying the politicians and militiamen who shaped his world as local flora in a natural history book. From Ronald Reagan to Yasser Arafat, their faces peep from the vegetation, as if their influence had seeped into the very soil of the region.



'Better Be Watching the Clouds' (detail) by Walid Raad © Courtesy of the artist & Sfeir-Semler Gallery

For other artists, the destruction of Arab cultural centres is a raw wound. Abed Al Kadiri, 33, a Lebanese artist who returned from Kuwait two years ago, depicts Isis destroying monuments in Mosul in a striking series of experimental paintings titled “Al-Maqama” (2014-17). The final works caused a stir at the Beirut Art Fair. Each canvas has black-and-white charcoal sketches of recent events at the top, with colourful scenes inspired by Yahya al-Wasiti, a 13th-century Iraqi artist, at the bottom.

In his studio on the outskirts of Beirut, Al Kadiri says he chanced upon a rare edition of Al-Wasiti’s illustrations for the 12th-century Iraqi stories *Maqamat al-Hariri*, and was dazzled. These 800-year-old scenes by the “first Arab artist to sign his paintings” were of “men and women listening to music together drinking alcohol, or a naked woman delivering her son. They brought back to me a feeling of honour.” In Al Kadiri’s mind, “the charcoal will vanish”, while his colourful homage will remain.



'At Sea' (2015-16) by Abed AlKadiri © Courtesy of the artist and AlBareh Art Gallery, Bahrain

'Hard Core', Galerie Magda Danysz, Paris, to January 13; 'Better Be Watching the Clouds', Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, to December 30; Sharjah Biennial 13's 'Fruit of Sleep', Sursock Museum, Beirut, to December 31; 'An Unpredictable Expression of Human Potential', Beirut Art Centre, to January 19

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Photographs: Agial Gallery, Beirut; Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation Collection, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg

This article has been amended since first publication to reflect the fact that Christine Toumé is curator of Sharjah Biennial 13, not director of the Sharjah Biennial

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