

Taking a sense of place - and moving it

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BEIRUT: A concrete tower block stretches to the sky. Across floor after climbing floor, colorful fabrics flap off of external balconies. The expressionistic blue sky behind the building breaks between brushstrokes to reveal a support made not from primed canvas but from floral textiles, visually echoing the building's strung laundry and rebellious drapes.

Ayman Baalbaki's "Ciel charge des fleurs" is one of several paintings the 31-year-old artist has made based on the old Hilton hotel that once stood in Downtown Beirut. This latest version serves as the centerpiece for Baalbaki's first-ever solo show in Lebanon, on view at the Agial Art Gallery in Hamra through the end of the month.

Baalbaki was born in 1975 in Odeisse, a village that is located due south from the Beaufort Castle and lies almost on top of Lebanon's border with Israel. As a kid growing up during civil war and Israeli occupation, Baalbaki had to leave South Lebanon for Beirut.

He moved to the neighborhood of Wadi Abu Jamil, which he describes in retro-spect as "a cosmopolitan quarter by force," a crucible crammed full of people from all over and from different ethnic, national and religious backgrounds, all squeezed into a square of now highly prized downtown real estate. Baalbaki pauses on the memory. "Now

it's razed," he says quickly.

Having returned to Beirut only recently after a long stay in Paris, where he is pursuing a doctorate, Baalbaki says one hardly recognizes Wadi Abu Jamil today. The neighborhood is, after all, the upscale residential feather in the otherwise commercial cap of Solidere, the real-estate giant handling the ongoing redevelopment of Beirut's city center.

All these points in Baalbaki's personal history - forced from home, a refugee in Beirut, an observer of the city's bewildering urban change - figure heavily into the art he has been making for the past 10 years.

"The Lebanese don't want to address the issue of the war," he says, "but at the same time it's everywhere. I am part of a generation of artists and writers who lived 20 years of it and don't have anything to say but about the war."

Several of the paintings on view at Agial address the reconstruction era head on - muddy, grey, expressive works on the rebuilding of Parliament and Cite Sportive, for example. But as if his output were running backward against time, those are the earliest of Baalbaki's canvases. His more recent works deal with the refugee condition he lived through earlier, such as that massive painting of the Hilton (which lost its luster when it became a refugee squat) and the canvas-and-installation-combo that is "Cretonne Maara" and "Bonjour Wadi Abu Jamil."

"Bonjour Wadi Abu Jamil" is a life-size, sculptural installation of all the belongings a family of refugees might pack on top of their car to flee from home - including bundles wrapped in fabrics and rugs and tied down with rope, utensils for cooking, random household appliances, all topped with a taxidermal chicken.

(Baalbaki ordered the chicken from a friend with a farm. To the artist's horror, the friend called him on the phone to clarify - What color chicken do you want? Big? Small? - to the sound of doomed, but at that point still living, chickens clucking in the background, and Baalbaki knowing whatever he chose would be slaughtered on site.)

At Agial, the installation stands in front of a multi-paneled canvas that replicates the patterns on each piece of cloth in the installation's bundles.

"This is the paradox," he explains, with Agial's owner Saleh Baraket taking

turns with a visiting artist to pitch in and translate Baalbaki's French and Arabic to English. "The people of the South, poor people, they have a miserable life but there are flowers everywhere." These textiles, he adds, are quintessentially post-colonial, most of them manufactured in China, which upends the logic that the residents of rural villages are the most remote from the forces of globalization.

For all the biographical content of Baalbaki's paintings, what makes his current exhibition work - and work well - is the extent to which he goes beyond himself in his art. His studies of the kaffiyeh, the army helmet and the hood (now synonymous with the torture of Iraqis at the hands of US soldiers at Abu Ghraib) are both probing and relevant. His depictions of the Tower of Babel place him squarely in the art historical lineage of Pieter Brueghel the Elder.

Baalbaki's show is named after an influential but relatively obscure film by Jean-Luc Godard, "Ici et Ailleurs" ("Here and Elsewhere"), which is deemed to be the French director's most radically political work.

"Ici et Ailleurs" began as another film entirely, titled "Until Victory." Godard and his then-collaborators, Jean-Pierre Gorin and Anne-Maie Mieville, traveled in 1970 to Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan to make a movie about the resistance movement, commissioned by the resistance movement.

When the filmmakers returned to France, Black September happened, many of the people who had been filmed were massacred in Jordan, and then came the Olympic Games in Munich. Gorin fell out of the equation and Godard shelved his Middle East footage until 1974, when he and Mieville completed the project as "Ici et Ailleurs."

Thought-provoking and reflective, the film dissects the resistance and explores how images and sounds are used to construct realities. Delving into revolutionary history, political propaganda, the production of capital

and the consumption of images, it juxtaposes the footage of Palestinian refugees and fedayeens with scenes of a family in France, the former being "elsewhere" and the latter being "here." But that "and" between "here" and "elsewhere" is a key, perhaps the key, element in Godard's film.

Baalbaki's show, however, is titled "Ici est Ailleurs" ("Here is Elsewhere"), his argument being that after the attacks of September 11, there is no longer a clear distinction between all the opposites at play in Godard's work - here and elsewhere, victory and defeat, space and time, order and disorder, interior and exterior, black and white, dreams and realities. It is a tentative argument, to be sure, but it provides a lot more food for thought than your average exhibition of paintings.

Ayman Baalbaki's "Ici est Ailleurs" is on view at the Agial Art Gallery on Abdel-Aziz Street in Hamra through July 1. For more information, please call +961 1 345 213