

# Mocking the museum, and other tales

BEIRUT: Appreciating Walid Raad's recent work is a bit like watching the ruddy glow rise on the face of a favorite aunt or uncle who's holding court. It's eye-catching, entertaining and a clear symptom of something invisible at first glance.

It's unnerving too, working out whether the colorful display reflects underlying good health or some malignant pathology.

Anyway, that's one impression arising from walking through "Better Be Watching the Clouds," the artist's third Beirut solo, now up at Sfeir-Semler Gallery.

The exhibition samples new work from three of Raad's ongoing projects – "The Atlas Group," "Sweet Talk" and "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow."

The Atlas Group is a fictive research collective interested in Lebanon's contemporary history. Dating from the late '90s, the work ascribed to the group purports to document that history. Commencing in the 1987, "Sweet Talk" is composed of photographic studies of Beirut landscapes. Raad's most ambitious series, "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow" takes its inspiration from the history of modern and contemporary art in the Arab world, drawing on the writing of Beirut-based theoretician Jalal Toufic and often addressing the MENA's burgeoning art market.

The Atlas Group pieces tend to be the most amusing of Raad's narrative-driven work. The group's latest "findings" are a series of photographic plates donated in 1992 by retired (fictive) Lebanese Army officer and botanist Fadwa Hassoun.

Throughout the '70s and '80s, the story goes, Lebanon's Deuxième Bureau (military intelligence) tasked Hassoun with assigning code names to local and international political and military officials – all derived from local plants.

The plates reproduce the logbook Hassoun used to keep track of these code names – in which the leaders' faces were collaged onto flowers and trees. The Deuxième Bureau knew Kamal Jumblatt as "Pink Sorrell," for instance, and Mikhail Gorbachev as "Purple Carline." Hosni Mubarak was "Queen Mallow," whose characteristics include "dark pink veins; peduncle longer than leaf, central column with circular lamella."

The names and floral descriptions, the artist assured The Daily Star, are derived from published literature on Lebanese flora. The portraits superimposed over the plant life date from the figures' period of influence.

"I'd been wanting to do portraits of these figures," Raad smiled. "They helped shape me in the '70s, '80s, early '90s [and] have been so pervasive in our lives that they've affected not only history and economy but nature itself. Even if you're looking at a flower, they just pop up out of nowhere."

The pieces from Raad's "Sweet Talk" series (dating 1987-2008) include collages on the theme of Lebanese monuments – digital composites Raad has equated to "stacks" of photos. Deploying the images taken by the artist and archival photos, each picture takes the shape of one monument and the materiality of another, carefully conflating the two to deface both.

"Sweet Talk" also includes a series of highly aestheticized streetscapes, comprising images taken between 1993 and 2003. Using Photoshop or some other dark wizardry, Raad has altered these images to resemble a cross between urban landscape and those Rorschach (inkblots-on-

folded-paper) tests psychologists use to evaluate how unhinged we are.

"It's a mirroring," Raad observed, "but not a perfect mirroring, because sometimes I play around with it a little. ... [These works reflect upon] the labyrinthine aspect of certain neighborhoods, that feeling of, 'Oh have I just been here?' When you walk here, everything feels like a miniature model, a film set."

"Sweet Talk" began as an exercise to see how far the artist could go – walking around Beirut, taking photos – before someone stopped him. The area was quite confined in the militia-ruled feudal age of the '80s, he recalled, then expanded in the '90s before contracting again after 2005.

These works suggest a journey from figuration to abstraction.

"You know it's almost the other way around," he averred, "in the sense that it felt abstract when I started the project and it became more figurative as I played with it.

"I felt that this is the city I'm seeing," he gestured to a Rorschach street scene, "but it's not showing up in my frame. What's coming out [of the camera] is flat or not panoramic or curved enough, not labyrinthine or kaleidoscopic enough. So how can I make it show up?"

The greatest weight in the exhibition is devoted to works from the series "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow," reflecting on art history and exhibition. It's also the most formally varied, including photo-based work, objects, three short films and – in collaboration with architect Bernard Khoury – a series of sketches and a scale model derived from their joint proposal for a prospective Beirut museum.

The canvas series "Postface to the ninth edition: On Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934-2016)" is premised on the narrative of Beirut's (fictive) Museum of Modern Art. While it had never staged a solo exhibition for

Marwan, researchers did uncover 29 of the (not fictive) Syrian modernist's works in the museum's basement, all rendered on the backs of canvases by other artists.

More fanciful still is the premise of "Letters to the Reader," 2014, in which researchers discover that paintings from the Arab world hung in the museum cast no shadows.

"So what we need," Raad half-smiled, "are walls that function as shadow magnets. Arab artists should be producing those magnets before they start putting their paintings on them."

The artist told The Daily Star the shadows have been lost due to the works' having been affected, though not physically.

"They remain intact but they've been affected immaterially," he said.

"It's part of the 'withdrawal of tradition' thesis that Jalal Toufic has been working on. ... You can't just take that painting and put it up on the wall – like we're doing with all these emerging museums – and rush to say, 'We too had our modernists!' 'We too had our surrealists!' 'We too had our fantastic impressionists and cubists!'

"It's time we showed how it's just the damn corruption and turmoil that prevented us from doing so. What I think we're missing is that the painting, even when intact, has been affected [by] the lack of historical infrastructure. The lack of an art historical ecology prevents it from being seen, even when it's intact."

This theme is taken a step further in "Preface to the third edition: Acknowledgments," 2017, which takes up the impending opening of a new Louvre franchise in Abu Dhabi. In this narrative, the artist has suggested that the movement of some 300 Islamic art objects, on loan from the Paris Louvre to the Emirati capital, will have a material impact

upon these works – they will change faces.

“These works may not feel at home in France,” Raad suggests, “but they’re not sure that Abu Dhabi is a more hospitable host.”

“A Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum: Preface (2016-2026),” 2017, is composed of six plates and a maquette of the museum design Raad and Khoury (unsuccessfully) pitched as part of the architectural contest APEAL (the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon) staged for its Beirut Museum of Art (BeMA).

“Basically we proposed to build a hole, and to have tunnels coming out that would go to more interesting museums than the one we have,” Raad smiled. “We lost.”

“Better Be Watching the Clouds” is up at Sfeir-Semler Gallery through Dec. 30. For more, see: <http://www.sfeir-semmler.com/beirut/current-exhibition.html>.