

Crying For The Art of Beirut!

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YOUR GATEWAY TO THE MIDDLE EAST



This combination of pictures created on August 11, 2020 shows (L) an Iraqi protester gesturing the middle finger at riot police during an anti-government demonstration in the Shiite shrine city of Karbala, south of Iraq's capital Baghdad on October 27, 2019; and a Lebanese protester gesturing the middle finger at security forces amid clashes in downtown Beirut on August 8, 2020. Since October, Iraqi and Lebanese protesters have been sharing the hope of sweeping out a system they say is broken and often unable to provide even basic services. Joseph EID, Mohammed SAWAF / AFP

Highlights

The underground floors are doing well

“This morning I woke up crying and angry and my anger’s been growing ever since,” said Zeina Arida, director of Nicolas Sursock Museum.

“What the state failed to build over the past 30 years, we built. Now the state was able to destroy that.”

It was three days after the port explosion of Aug. 4 and Arida and her small team were arrayed at the outdoor seating of the museum’s gutted gift shop and restaurant.

“You see what I mean,” she gestured to the museum’s emptied window frames. “How many times are we gonna rebuild. Come on. Are we stupid?”

Sursock Museum is a legacy of Lebanon’s pre-Civil War era. Situated in the former palace of a family of Ottoman merchant princes, the institution was shut in 2008, retooled as a state-of-the-art space and re-launched in 2015. Though it’s suffered from the long economic decline that anticipated Lebanon’s current crisis, it remains one of the city’s most high-profile exhibitors of modern and contemporary art.

On the day of the explosion, Arida recalls stumbling down the museum staircase, determined to rescue the birds she’d hung in her window earlier that day, and meeting a young woman in a wedding dress. She’d come with her fiancé to have photos taken alongside the photogenic historic architecture.

Like many structures located near Beirut Port, the museum has lost all its doors and windows and the interior walls are impressively damaged but Arida says the structure remains solid.

“The underground floors are doing well,” she said. “The two storage rooms – the cold storage area for paper and photographs, the other for art works – are both intact.

“A number of art works are damaged. Maybe two or three are totally lost – two ceramics, two or three works on paper. We have a number of damaged paintings and drawings, a sculpture.

“Most of damaged paintings may be easily repaired, but some works, two paintings by Guiragossian, for instance, have [multiple] holes. A portrait of [museum donor] Nicolas Sursock by Kees Van Dongen is very badly damaged, torn at the level of his eyes. A sculpture by Saloua Raouda Choucair, a fragile metallic piece that dates back to ’58, has been slightly damaged.”

She said she’s been amazed by the squads of volunteers that materialized to help with the clean-up.

“The first day here we had a team of 15, which continuously grew, young people 15 years old, 17 years old,” she recalled. “I didn’t receive one phone call from the Ministry of Culture. The DGA [Directorate General of Antiquities] did call. Other museums, we’re in contact as a matter of course.”

The volunteers help fill the vacuum of the absentee state, Arida said, as do promises of support from overseas institutions.

“The only thing that gives me strength to even think about what we’re gonna do is the overwhelming international solidarity expressed.” She gestures to team members scrutinising laptop screens nearby. “They’ve spent the whole morning compiling the emails, whatsapps and instagrams – all the messages of support we’ve got from people, institutions, museums that want to help the rebuilding. This is all international.”

Arida says those offering support include Sheikh Sultan al-Qasimi – the leader of Sharjah, an art patron who sponsors the emirate’s renowned contemporary art foundation and biennial – the British Library, Centre Pompidou, the Prince Claus Cultural Emergency Response Fund, the Mellon Foundation, the Getty Conservation Institute, as well as a handful of local donors whom she counts among the museum’s very important supporters.

Several of the museum’s overseas institutional partners have volunteered to help restore any of Sursock’s damaged pieces. If the funding is made available, she said, a staged reopening of the museum can commence in months, not years.

“The restoration and reopening will take place in phases,” she said. “We will probably open the outdoor areas first – the boutique, the restaurant, we’ll stage some events here, then the main building’s ground floor and underground. Later, the upper floors.

“If you have funding you can be quick and efficient. If not, then you have to fundraise, and do everything in more gradual stages.”

Even with expert foreign support, she noted, Lebanon’s facts on the ground will make restoration challenging.

“Just to make things simpler is Lebanon’s banking situation,” she remarked with pointed irony. “Are we gonna give Lebanese banks the money we need ourselves? Are we gonna open accounts outside? Are we gonna ask donors to cover directly invoices of things we need to import? There are many different possibilities. I think we’re gonna have to juggle all these.

“There are things we’ll have to buy here, so we will need fresh dollars. We have to find ways.”

She recalled again tottering out of the museum with a birdcage in each hand, and how strange it must have looked to the neighbourhood residents, bewildered and bloodied, who staggered through the broken glass beyond the museum gate.

“I was asked what I think is gonna happen to the art scene now,” she reflected. “For me, of course there’s a financial issue that’s been there for the past year or two years that’s becoming harder and harder for everyone to sustain.

“For me, the big risk is that most of [Beirut’s art] projects are individual initiatives. We are tired. We’ve been fighting for ...,” she sighed. “Are we gonna continue? Of course institutions are gonna continue, but individuals who lead them ...”

She shrugged.

“I’m not in my 20s anymore. I’ve been asking myself so many questions already for the past six months. I have to secure my daughter’s studies. How do I do that with a salary in Lebanese lira?”

This article has been adapted from its original source.

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