

Hanibal Srouji Painting fire, water, earth and air

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I. 1997

“Through incendiary gestures, Hanibal Srouji seeks to sublimate violence”

Hanibal Srouji is hanging his first one-man show in Beirut at the Galerie Janine Rubeiz. Other than Nadine Begdache, the gallery owner, the first person to see his paintings is the cleaning lady.

She is washing the floor energetically when she suddenly stops, turns to the artist and lashes out: — What ? What ? You are bringing the war back to us on the walls

! Her reaction is merciless, visceral and final. — But what was it she sees?

— Particles.

Burnt and painted canvases, covered with small particles. These particles have, as Joseph Tarrab perceptively wrote, “something of a swarm of bees in a nuptial flight, or of the flight of birds in migration, something of a cloud of flies, like those which raged in Thebes in the time of Oedipus or, more disturbing and closer to us, something of the shrapnel and machine gunfire that still riddle our walls.”¹

Srouji’s paintings, however, do not represent scenes of war or violence. Nor do they seek as in the documentary and, at the same time, fictional project of Walid Raad, to identify and index the impact of bullets and shells of buildings, and classify the origins and sources of projectiles². Belonging to what for the last century has been commonly accepted as abstract inclination, Srouji’s paintings relate more to sensory experience, to a path, to reflection. The “shrapnel and machine gunfire that still riddle our walls” are the result of interpretation, not observation. The cleaning lady and the art critic saw that. I admit, for my part, to have seen only fire (literally and figuratively). When I was asked to consider this work for a publication dedicated to a larger collection, I evoked “a flower bed or the excrement of crushed flies on windshield of a bus, sacred halos or cigarette burns³ ?” A fly’s excrement does not have the impact of exploding shrapnel.

¹ Tarrab, 1997.

² Walid Raad / The Atlas Group, Let’s Be Honest, the Weather Helped (Finland, Germany, Greece, Egypt, Belgium), set of printed images, 1984-2007.

³ In *Pièces choisies*, Audi Bank collection, Beirut 2007, p. 59.

The year before, in 1995, Srouji participated in the Triangle Workshop in Marseille⁴. Inspired by the rust that permeates the large metal skeletons of ships, Srouji applied the oxidation process to his painting. Rust Rush, created in this context, represents more than the beginning of the Particles series. In it is already evident what will become a Srouji signature of sorts: the diptych, in two square canvases. It was long believed that Srouji's Particles were created with cigarettes. In fact, canvas does not burn easily. Placed on the canvas as a point on a map, each element is burnt with a torch at 3000 degrees.

H.S. — I painted in the 1990s diptychs with on the one hand, a bomb, and the other, the impact, tearing and penetration of the explosion. S.T. — There was, at certain period, in Hanibal's work something that precedes the explosion. It is a kind of sifted violence, whose residue falls on the canvas. H.S. — In (Samir) Khaddaje's work, violence is in its initial state. In mine, it's as if I arrived 3,000 years later.

S.T. — Hanibal paints the big bang.

Through incendiary gestures, Hanibal Srouji seeks to sublimate violence. Yet by using fire directly on the canvas as a marker, he uses metaphor to suggest that with the same tool, the same energy, one can create or destroy. As fire is certainly destructive, it also purifies.

⁴ Triangle Workshop is an organization founded by the sculptor Sir Anthony Caro and the collector Robert Loder. The 1995 edition took place at l'École supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Marseille, Luminy.

II. 1976

“ In Saïda, I could still see the sea from the hills of Ain al-Hilweh, three kilometres away... and the horizon’s line always present.”

Hanibal Srouji was born in Beirut, on Mohammad El Hout Street⁵, and raised in Saïda. His father Charles worked for Tapline, in network communications, at the Zahrani refinery⁶. This oil terminal saw a major boost, because of the closure of the Suez Canal, a consequence of successive Arab Israeli wars. Black gold was nevertheless supposed to continually quench the thirst of the west. So this pipeline was its outlet across the Arabian Desert to the ports of Lebanon, and from there, across the Mediterranean, to markets in Europe and America.

The young Hanibal studied at the National Evangelical American School in Ain al- Hilweh, where he rubbed shoulders with children of all faiths and of all social backgrounds who came mainly from regions of southern Lebanon, as well as from abroad. It was a time of tolerance. Dotted with trips to the capital city where the main squares glittered with neon advertising signs, this peaceful and carefree life would soon be clouded over with worry. First came the Six Day War in 1967, during which the emergency measures dictated to paint light bulbs (Yves) Klein blue to blend with the colour of the night. A few years later, a rumbling arose from the depths of Srouji’s adopted city: the wrath of fishermen. If Tapline’s bargemen worked in very difficult conditions, the fishermen of Saïda faced a worst threat: that of an industrial fishing company that put their jobs and their lives at risk. Maarouf Saad, a deputy whose legitimate popularity had become undeniable, became the man to beat. A fatal bullet shot him during the well-known protest of March 7, 1975. Saïda, a city known for its peaceful life which had never known but the tremors of the waves of the Mediterranean at its coast, was gradually sinking in fire and blood.

Even before these events occurred, when he turned sixteen Srouji joined the volunteer rescue team of the Red Cross. For him, as for the people of southern Lebanon, the war had begun well before the official date of the beginning of the Lebanese War... One day while he was studying at home, he saw, suddenly, through a window, a column of smoke rising mushrooming in the sky: “it was like that of Hiroshima”. After the defeat of 1967, and especially after the events of Black September in Jordan, the

⁵ This street is located along the line that split the Lebanese capital, was also the address of Dar el Fan, a space for art and culture with Janine Rubeiz was the leading figure. See: *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan, Regard vers un patrimoine culturel*, Beirut 2003.

⁶ Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline) pipeline from Saudi Arabia to Zahrani, south of Saïda. Operated until the mid- 1970s, it was completely closed in 1990. Documentation on Tapline Zahrani refinery and is available at Al Mashriq [<http://almashriq.hiof.no/lebanon/300/380/388/tapline/>]. In 2013, Rayyane Tabet produced The Shortest Distance Between Two Point, an installation based on the Tapline Archive. [<http://www.sfeir-semmler.com/beirut/exhibitions-beirut/2013/2013-04-04-rayyane-tabet.html>], accessed October 28, 2016.

Palestinian organizations increased their presence in Lebanon. With 40,000 refugees, the Ain al-Hilweh camp had become the «hub» of the PLO's activities, as well as those of George Habash. This part of the country became a regular target of random Israeli raids. Nobody, or very few, cared about the fate of the locals and the refugees living in a world of fear and misery completely alienated from the seeming normalcy of the capital city. Srouji became a first-aid rescuer without giving it any thought. One day in the plains of Marjeyoun, there was an Israeli bombing following a Fedayeen attack. Srouji and his team were there with the helpless from bombed villages. There were 200 Lebanese in distress and very little means with which to help them. «I lost my innocence very young,» Srouji said when he recalled those moments of desolation and pain.

While at the beginning of 1975 Saïda saw moments of rare violence, the first months of civil war were rather quiet, especially with respect to Beirut - until that day in 1976 when a contingent of tanks arrived, and drove through the city to Zahrani before turning back. The armoured column was trapped by young fighters, armed kids. It was a massacre. For several days the destroyed tanks remained with bodies of charred soldiers visible inside. Shortly thereafter, the Syrian army would take position on the hills around the city and begin bombing. Snipers went into action and started shooting at people. Saïda was besieged for three months. In July 1976, a ship with a cargo of flour was allowed to unload its goods without actually entering the port. The flour was unloaded onto other smaller rowboats and brought to shore. It was onto one of these rowboats that the Srouji family climbed aboard, reaching Cyprus and leaving Lebanon behind for good.

The departure by sea, from a land on fire, was a decisive moment that marked Hanibal Srouji forever. Three decades later, he discovered, during the inaugural exhibition of the Beirut Art Centre, a large hybrid composition of Akram Zaatari⁷. In it are depicted the hills around the town bombed by war planes, the day the Israeli army invaded southern Lebanon. Srouji, who did not live through this particular event nonetheless recognized in this work, the places of his childhood, and the bruises that have not ceased to tear them apart.

References

Tarrab, Joseph, "Hanibal Srouji: Particles. Water and fire", in *L'Orient-Le Jour*, January 15, 1997.

⁷ Akram Zaatari, *Saïda*, June 6, 1982 (2002-2006), composite digital image, Lamda print, 127 x 250 cm.