



THE RISE & RISE OF BEIRUT

CANVAS ROUND TRIP

In our journey and exploration of Beirut's art scene, *Canvas* creates this travelogue to show where Beirut and its artists are today. We wanted to know what excites and obsesses them, what they are concerned with – and what they stay away from. We found that there has been a distinct shift in artistic practice and that the Lebanese war is no longer the grand narrative. Many of the younger artists show that they're actively engaged in the shaping of space and place. The city's urban fabric serves as their main source of inspiration, as they draw from the ever-changing, chaotic, resilient and energetic character of contemporary Beirut. And in this section, *Canvas* presents *our* Beirut, through the eyes of its art-makers. These are artistic portraits and glimpses of a city and its often wild juxtapositions.

Our first stop was at **Saleh Barakat's** anonymous gallery, where editor-in-chief **Ali Khadra** and deputy editor **Nadine Khalil** spoke with Barakat (see p.68) – who has indefatigably championed Lebanese modern and contemporary artists for almost three decades – about his last exhibition, *Beirut, The City of the World's Desire: The Chronicles of Waddah Faris (1960-1975)*. The show, which ended on 29 July, was a visual treatise on pre-war Beirut, its heroes (sung and unsung), and the artists, intellectuals and writers that made up the cultural scene of those times.

Next, **Nadine Khalil** interviewed a selection of 15 artists, who we feel best represent the rise of Beirut. We found five themes emerged from the different generations. Some are interested in the quality of light and how it colours the essence of the city and its buildings (see **Lara Tabet**, **Caroline Tabet** and **Ziad Antar** on pp.72-85), whilst others focus on the materiality of Beirut and use its raw materials (**Stéphanie Saadé**, **Pascal Hachem** and **Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige** on pp.86-99). Some concentrate on mapping and the territorial aspects of the city (**Marwan Rechmaoui**, **Hiba Kalache** and **Daniele Genadry** on pp.100-113), with others zooming in more on architectural elements and geometric forms (**Serge Najjar**, **Mohammad Rawas** and **Oussama Baalbaki** on pp.114-127). Finally, we found artists who continue the postwar generation's concern with violence and the archive, the war and its fictions (see **Ayman Baalbaki**, **Alfred Tarazi** and **Katya Traboulsi** on pp.128-141) and asked them how they see themselves today.

Collectively these artists form a vibrant and colourful snapshot of the creative energy of today's Beirut, how it is moving on from traditional artistic preoccupations and what future directions might be developing in this most dynamic and exciting of creative hubs.



CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Dealing with the war's aftermath is both deeply private and public. In grappling with its daily impact, Alfred, Katya and Ayman look to the archive, shells as messages of peace, ideas for memorials, and bombed-out buildings as symbols that can be recaptured and transformed creatively.

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Katya in her studio, working on *Daydream*. Image courtesy of the artist



KATYA TRABOULSI

Self-taught painter and increasingly turning to sculpture. Despite the violent connotations of her current series, she says that peace and universal connections between different cultures are what drives her. Her studio is a vibrant and colourful expansive space, hidden in a tiny Bourj Hammoud alley, in one of the most crowded ghettos in Beirut.

When did you begin painting?

I began in 1986, though it takes a long time to become an artist – it's hard work. I was working for a printing press in Lebanon but then I left in 1989, got married and went to Dubai. There, I showed my art to the only gallery

that existed at the time, in Al Bastakiya (the historical district). My paintings were less developed – this was 30 years ago – and they weren't the same scale but smaller in size. Before that I had done two exhibitions in Lebanon at Épreuve d'Artistes with Amal

Traboulsi. She was the one who discovered me.

What was it like for you being in Dubai as an artist?

I saw the art world explode. I had three or four shows at the Green Art gallery and other galleries

that began to pop up everywhere.

How did you find this space in Bourj Hammoud?

Before having my own place, I used to rent Marwan Sahmarani's studio every summer, when he would go to Canada. But I wanted

my own place. Then I had one in Mar Mikhail, but I moved here because it's so much bigger. I've been here for five or six years and I was very lucky to find it.

You are working mostly on sculptures now.

I'm very productive normally and my work has moved from paintings to sculpture to installation and 3D pictures. I need to express whatever comes to my mind but my main reference point is painting.

Would you say the paintings reflect something that's inside you and the sculpture series *Perpetual Identity* is more about what's outside, or in your environment?

I guess every artist needs to express something related to the outside or inside, but it's an uncharted path, as your art grows with you. You can't remain where you were; you evolve with time, and with life. So when I went to Dubai to a very different environment, I was not talking about the war for a while, though I had lived through it. Now, when I look back at my paintings from that time, I realise I must have been very much immersed in my new life, my family, and as a mother. The impact of war was hiding somewhere within and it all came out when the situation in the Middle East started to collapse with the Arab Spring.

Is that when you started making these rockets?

It is when I started thinking about the useless purpose of war and how it impacts on our identity. Because we are forced to leave our countries to go somewhere else to survive. So what do we do with our identity? This question

Details from Katya's studio in Bourj Hammoud. Photography by Isaac Sullivan

IT'S AN OBJECT OF DESTRUCTION THAT I TRANSFORMED INTO AN OBJECT OF LIFE.





was the inspiration for this project, though it seemed impossible in the beginning. Initially I wanted to represent the world – more or less – in historical identities. For example, if you see Ming porcelain today, you know it's from China. So it's a cultural project translated into historic art that traces the visual symbols of different cultures from past to present. The title *Perpetual Identity* is meant to reflect how we appropriate history to represent our visual identities today.

Have you thought about why this symbol of the war, in the form of projectiles or bombs, has cropped up now?

Using the shell is related to my own story in Lebanon. There are some things you can never forget and sound of a rocket launching into the air, and of the ensuing explosion, are something I experienced for many years. In 1975, it was my birthday, and I was given an empty shell as a gift by some friends who were in the militia.

How come?

Because they couldn't buy anything else, so they brought me this shell. It was green and empty I remember, and they wrote on it: Happy Birthday Katya, 1975. At that time, it was considered a beautiful object, a symbol of victory, and it stayed in my home for many years. But regardless of this story, I think the message relayed by this form is very strong. It's an object of destruction that I transformed into an object of life.

What are you aiming to do with this ongoing series?

The main purpose of this project is not to separate the Arabs from the rest of the world. It is saying that we are all connected. So you have a Mayan urn from Mexico, the *mandous* from the UAE, that used to hold the bride's dowry, this is from the Amazon in Brazil, and this is a representation of the oldest mosque in Afghanistan's Turquoise Mountain. In Yemen,

Katya in her studio and details. Photography by Isaac Sullivan



Video still by Carl Halal of Katya with the shell representing Palestine

you have the *khanjar* (dagger), there's Cordoba leather from Spain, Aboriginal art from Australia. And the Lebanese version is made of cedarwood. In a country with not a single visual identity that we can consider our own, since we were occupied by the Greeks, Romans and Turks, I opted for the Phoenician seafarers. And there's more, Ukraine, Nigeria and the Philippines...

What about the one covered with barbed wired underneath you?

That's the occupied territories in Israel and the separation wall.

Do you have different versions for the same country?

About five or six.

And are they done using traditional craftspeople from those countries?

Definitely. And with every shell you have a piece of history.

So you are using an object that's very specific to the place where you grew up to in order to talk about the world.

Despite the intolerance in the world today, I believe we are all connected. We are all humans and we need each other. Yet we all live in fear of the other. It's something to think about.

And today, having come back, how do you see Beirut?

Despite everything that's wrong with it, Beirut is my love. Beirut is my friend, my family, my life, my war, my studio, my home, my husband, my everything. I cannot see myself anywhere else, because it gave me a purpose, an emotion and a sadness. It gave me a story – the story of my life. My family isn't originally from Beirut. They are immigrants who went from Italy to Aleppo, Cairo, and then to Lebanon.

In a way, that's the story of the modern Arab world.

I guess we all come from somewhere and from nowhere. That's the absurdity of the human condition. We all come from everywhere and nowhere, so why do we need to segregate?

Katya's works in progress for the *Perpetual Identity* series. Image courtesy of the artist

