ArabAd | Alfred Tarazi: Disruption and Transmission

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The work of Lebanese artist Alfred Tarazi is informed by nostalgia. He talks to ArabAd about the importance of engaging with the past.

"Nostalgia is what drives a lot of Lebanese art," says Alfred Tarazi, "and for a good reason. It's because you're talking of a people and of a country that have been dispossessed by war."

Tarazi has just returned from Abu Dhabi Art when we talk. His face is tired but friendly as we discuss the work of Walid Raad, arguably the most prominent of Lebanese contemporary artists. You can view Raad's art as an exploration of memory and narrative within the context of conflict and the construction of histories, or, as Tarazi believes, as the work of deep, deep nostalgia.

"It's like the work of a guy who left the country with two newspapers and a few rolls of film and then – when he was in exile – just wanted to recreate something out of them," says Tarazi of Raad's long-term project The Atlas

Group. "So he ended up creating a fictitious history and fictitious historians, which historically is highly problematic, but if you look at them through the prism of nostalgia – and Walid would kill me for saying this – it makes total sense."

Tarazi is a man accustomed to the past and to the concept of nostalgia. His work is shaped and moulded by the Lebanese Civil War and the imagery that surrounds it. Indeed, his most prominent work is an ongoing project dedicated to the creation of a memorial for the victims of the civil war, while his art as a whole attempts to map out and understand specific key events of that war.

"I grew up in a space which is caught in limbo between a past that I have never experienced and a future that is not fundamentally mine," says Tarazi, who argues that 'disruption' is the key word to describe Lebanon's past. "I grew up in Beirut, but I have not lived the pre-war Lebanon – images of a city and a country (and experiences of a city and a country) that I will never have. And there's a whole future for that city that has also escaped me. So there are two realities of the same place which were not fundamentally mine and which I needed to appropriate; to understand first of all. Because it's already difficult to hold a post-card of Downtown Beirut and to walk in Downtown Beirut and have the two experiences relate."

Tarazi's art is as much an examination of the role of the past (as both origin and destination) as it is a complex historical investigation into the Lebanese Civil War. And although he may not be a designer or follower of retro trends, his insights into the role played by nostalgia in the psyche of the Lebanese people is instructive.

> *"I don't believe in a future without a past, so for me nostalgia is not a problem. We need to engage with the past in a much more active way."*

Writing in The Guardian early last year, Jonathan Jones described Tarazi's art as "sharp like an inconvenient truth", while his provocative digital collages have challenged viewers to re-evaluate their relationship with history. They have also proved subversive.

"There are two things that are very evocatively nostalgic for the Lebanese – postcards of pre-war Lebanon and pre-inflation Lebanese money bills," says Tarazi, who won the first MENA edition of The Sovereign Art Foundation's coveted Art Prize in October. "I've invested my practice with both of those images, but through different strategies. With the currency I use the geographical locations that are present on the bills as a backdrop for the historical events that took place in those very geographies. Because if you want the secrets of the Lebanese wars or the secrets of Lebanese society, at the end of the day you will find them in geography. If you really want to understand, the geography itself will tell you what's happening.

"Pre-inflation Lebanese money bills were designed in an effort to try and build a country, to try and build geographies together and bring them together under one roof, which is the roof of a nation. But in the process of the civil war each one of those geographies reaffirmed its independence, its separation from the rest, its resistance to the greater scheme of this nation, as small as that nation is."

Why does this fascinate or intrigue Tarazi? Why does the Lebanese Civil War loom so large? What is he even trying to achieve by opening old wounds?

"The key word would be 'transmission'. Because what war does is it creates a discontinuity in what would otherwise be a normal transmission process," he replies. "How one generation informs another generation. What war creates is a disruption in that process, which means that there is so much that one generation does not pass on to the next, and for a lot of

various reasons. So my work as an artist is to try and investigate and understand what got lost in that process of transmission and what was passed on.

"I also belong to those who believe that the civil war never ended and that Lebanon is still in what they would describe as a protracted civil war. The country – depending on what's happening in the region – can burst into episodes of violence, and it has. But we put the latest episodes of violence behind us and try to pretend that it's a great party place. For me, war is technically like a behaviour pattern, and as long as that behaviour pattern is accepted and justified by different political discourses it can happen at any time."

But is nostalgia not self-destructive?

"I don't believe in a future without a past, so for me nostalgia is not a problem. We need to engage with the past in a much more active way. In Lebanon there is a tendency not to want to deal with the past under the pretext that, you know, 'let's not waste time on nostalgic feelings'. But for me it's not about feelings. It's about knowledge, and that knowledge is not always accessible. So maybe the initial impulse is nostalgic, but to deal with the past in a proactive way goes far beyond nostalgia."

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