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Art protesting petrol and poverty



(The Daily Star/Courtesy of Saleh Barakat Gallery)

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BEIRUT: At a time when Lebanon's on-going protests have acted as a melting-pot for creative thought and hope for change, Saleh Barakat Gallery's latest immersive installation by Palestinian artist Abdul Rahman Katanani seeks to analyze how past events are still effecting today. "Brainstorm" offers an exhibition in four parts, telling a story of Palestinian refugee camps, poverty and how petrol lies at the heart of the region's recent strife. Born in the Sabra refugee camp in Beirut in 1983, Katanani worked with his father to fit the metal of oil barrels onto the makeshift camp homes.

"The first [section] is about children playing in poverty, where I created the silhouette [of children] made out of oil barrels, showing how these children are trying to live normal lives," Katanani told The Daily Star. "I wanted to draw attention to people living in poverty, like the Palestinians who have been living in camps for 70 years and no one talks about our plight. We're invisible."

The creations show some children making the shape of a dove with their hands. Another is holding a flower or making a paper airplane, all made out of bits of bright oil drum metal and corrugated steel.

"The second idea is to do with the people who cause poverty, the people who had a hand in petrol as far back as the first petrol agreement in Saudi Arabia in 1945," he said, "which began the thought process of profiting on and using petrol for certain agendas. It might be for a revolution in the region but at the same time was against change.

"I put the main players who were working in this way - the first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazarga in Iran after the [1979] revolution, who was chosen because he was trying to secure petrol and [former Iraqi President] Saddam Hussein, who had a role in supporting

Palestinian involvement in petrol.”

Katanani has lined up nine oil barrel lids on a wall with the facial profiles of these key people cut out of the metal, rendering them faceless. Details like clothing, head-wear or glasses have been etched on to make them identifiable nonetheless.

The last two sections are complementary and take on a much more interactive element for the viewer. One half consists of a three meter high camp, stitched together from the same bright metal, scrap wood and window shutters, for the viewer to wander into.

“Palestinians used to use the metal of the barrels to cover the tops of tents in the camps in the '60s and '70s, as a material of protection, despite the fact that petrol was one of the main reasons they were living in these condition in the first place,” Katanani said, noting the ironic nature of his installation. “I’ve created a small camp, with a maze-like set of alleyways, so that when you walk in, you live the experience of being in camp and can’t see anything beyond the structures, cut off from the rest of the world.

“One of the alleyways is lined with mirrors so all you see is the repetition of your reflection and the endless structures of the camps, where people have lost hope ask themselves the same questions every day, without answer,” he added. “It’s also about how refugees in the region are increasing all the time and the experience is forever repeating.”

As visitors exit the make-shift camp, they’re confronted by a massive, looming wave of barbed wire sitting over three meters high.

“You feel the wave is going to attack you and it’s about how because of the play of petrol in the region - wars and Palestine and never ending cycles - [there are] ever-increasing boundaries between us, borders of barbed wire,” Katanani said. “At the same time this wave of wire can be seen negatively, or as a wave of change, sweeping away these camps for a new way forward.

“The title ‘Brainstorm’ is about a revolution of the mind, as a way to come and think together, live and feel this experience, and try to think with me about a resolution,” he added. “What is happening in Lebanon now is just a continuation of the region’s problems that have been going on for decades.

“What gave hope to Palestinians was the movement of Lebanese and Iraqi people, because they’re very similar and the demands of the new generation are very self-aware,” he said. “They’re speaking a new language that the previous generation isn’t able to keep up with - they’re calling out these people on their lies.”

“Brainstorm” runs at Saleh Barakat Gallery until Jan. 4, 2020.

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