

# Face of War Pervades New Beirut Art Center

By [PATRICK HEALY](#) JULY 6, 2009



The Beirut Art Center, in a former factory, opened in January. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

BEIRUT — Along the Beirut River just outside of the city center is an industrial neighborhood of small warehouses and factories, car dealerships and crumbling, squat buildings that bear the scars of bullets from [Lebanon](#)'s wars. It is a place, in other words, that would be the perfect home for the art galleries of Chelsea or the meatpacking district — and, indeed, where a cultural space that would be the envy of New York has come to life.

The Beirut Art Center, a 16,000-square-foot space occupying two floors of a former factory, opened on Jan. 15 with a gala that drew a thousand people, and it has quickly emerged as a popular destination for Beirutis, tourists and art critics at the city's newspapers and across Lebanon.

Through next Tuesday it is housing a provocative exhibition of work by 20 Lebanese artists titled “The Road to Peace: Paintings in Times of War, 1975-1991,” a collection of pieces that portray the trauma of the Lebanese civil war. Most of the work has not been shown publicly before, the exhibition organizers say, and reflects the art center’s ambitions to become a major cultural player in a modern, peaceful Lebanon.

Planning for the art center began in 2005. Lamia Joreige, a visual artist, and Sandra Dagher, previously the director of the gallery Espace SD in downtown Beirut, said that they thought that the city lacked the museums and cultural spaces worthy of a metropolis of its size and history. Specifically, they said in an e-mail interview, they saw a need for a contemporary art center that could mount solo and group shows of established and emerging Lebanese artists to complement the permanent exhibitions at government-supported museums in Beirut. The two scoured the city for months for an open space suitable for a large-scale gallery. Early on they found an appealing site but had not raised the money, and then had difficulty finding a location once funds were in hand.

The war between the Hezbollah paramilitary forces and Israel during the summer of 2006 slowed their search too, but eventually they agreed on the factory space in the Jisr el-Wati neighborhood, where construction of residential projects and a municipal school are also bringing new bustle to the streets.

“Although Beirut Art Center has not been open for a long time, it has very quickly become a cultural landmark in the city,” Ms. Dagher said, noting that both local residents and a steady stream of tourists have visited in the past six months.

“We are continuously working to widen and develop our audience,” she added, “by upkeeping our growing mailing list, ensuring press coverage of our events, placing posters for our activities in strategic points in the city and offering guided tours to schools and universities.”

The center, a stand-alone building of whitewashed cement, was designed by the Lebanese architect Raed Abillama and financed by a mix of donors, like the prominent philanthropist and businessman Marwan T. Assaf; corporate sponsors like Samsung; and various public and private institutions.



At the Beirut Art Center: A 1976 work by Abdel Hamid Baalbaki from "The Road to Peace," an exhibition of works made by Lebanese artists during that country's civil war, from 1975 to 1991. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

The design includes space for a small bookshop, a cafe, a small theater for lectures and films, and a "mediathèque" of computers where visitors can search the center's databases of paintings, photographs, audio clips of musical compositions and artists' biographies.

The title of the current exhibition comes from a series of print drawings by Aref Rayess that depict Lebanese survivors of war. In one drawing a family takes shelter with a gunman behind a brick wall as chaos ensues nearby; in another, shadowy faces with pained expressions are etched into city buildings.

The specter of death suffuses the exhibition. Theo Mansour's "Mass Grave"

blends red, crimson and other bloodlike colors in acrylic forms of corpses and writhing bodies, many with their mouths agape as if screaming. “Blind,” a series of oil drawings by Jean Khalifeh, shows people staring directly ahead with deadened black, blue and purple-colored eyes.

Childlike innocence marks Odile Mazloum’s painting “For Whom the Bell Tolls.” Young girls sit in two straight lines, reminiscent of the young Parisian girls in “Madeline,” as an older woman sits near them, looking forlorn; the work uses different hues of blue to create a strong sense of melancholy.

There are only a few images that easily resonate with American memories of Beirut in the 1980s but they are transfixing. In the work “The April the Lilies Died” by Mohammad Rawas, etchings and stencil drawings depicting destruction during 1983 include the bombed-out barracks where, in October of that year, 241 Americans who were part of a multinational peacekeeping force were killed. The canvas also features drawings of an American flag and two human hearts.

Nadia al-Issa, the director’s assistant at the art center, said that the title of Mr. Rawas’s work memorialized a close friend of his who died in April 1983. Ms. Issa also pointed out a brief statement by the artist that is posted near the artwork.

“When I came back to Beirut in 1981, I deliberately ignored and avoided working on the theme of war until 1983, when the war had its severe toll on me through the death of a very close friend,” Mr. Rawas said. “The war made me aware of the futility of art whose *raison d’être* was considered to simply please the eye.”

He went on to add that he wanted to capture that era through work that was blunt and without pleasing flourishes: a minimal visual composition, unsaturated hues, extensive use of transferred or collaged photographs, and the use of written phrases and text as an adjunct language of

expression.

Besides the paintings, four twisting wood sculptures — each broken into two pieces that fit together perfectly — represent the artist Saloua Raouda Choucair's evocation of fusing the war-torn sections of east and west Beirut back into a whole. Another artist, Ginane Makki Bacho, created several objects made of shrapnel recovered from battle during the civil war.

The most surprising piece of the exhibition is in a small, windowless room off the main gallery space. Three adult-size caskets are arranged on the floor; they are filled with small lighted candles that drip wax and with stacks of books about art and creation; on the top of one pile is a book whose cover simply reads, "Imagination" — a visual cue that stays in the mind of visitors to the art center as they pour back onto the streets of a newly vital Beirut neighborhood.

**© 2019 The New York Times Company**