

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Print

Screaming heads cry out for war memorial that speaks to people



May. 23, 2009 | 12:00 AM

Matthew Mosley

BEIRUT: Have you seen the faces? Bald and pale with hooting, agonized mouths, crinkled eyes and dented scalps, they present a disturbing vista for Beirut errand-runners. A series of 12 images in stark black-and-white, interspersed with recent political slogans from both ends of Lebanon's political spectrum, are pasted up around town. As quickly as the walls are papered over with posters for the latest hipster gathering, the faces reappear, their persistent agony demanding attention.

Attention is precisely what artist Alfred Tarazi is after. "Our biggest problem in Lebanon is apathy," he says, surrounded by screaming clay heads in his studio, which are photographed, collaged and photocopied to achieve the grainy, crowded effect of the posters. "Two hundred thousand died in the civil war and yet all the same people are in power."

For three years, 27 year-old Tarazi has been working on "Silent Square," a project aiming to tackle this apathy head-on. Together with a fluid collection of associates who call themselves "The Feel Collective," Tarazi is campaigning to erect a temporary memorial on Martyrs' Square which will bring home the scale of the tragedy and, he hopes, shock people from their attitude of placid acceptance.

If Tarazi gets his way, downtown will be filled with two hundred thousand freestanding metal poles, each a distance of one meter from its neighbor. These numbers mean the thicket of poles will extend into all streets and open spaces within striking distance of Martyrs' Square, including Place de l'Etoile and Riad al-Solh Square.

"The entire area will be made silent," Tarazi says. "Cars won't be able to get near and people will have to navigate through the sticks."

Only one area will be pole-free: A thirty six meter square adjacent to the statue. A four meter-deep hole will be dug, accessible by a ramp descending from ground level. The detritus resulting from the excavations will be used to bury the statue.

Inside the hole, the viewer will find themselves in a central space, confronted by more than two thousand of Tarazi's tortured busts. Apparently floating, the heads are mounted on rods, stuck in a state of perpetual agony. This is the Silent Square.

Tarazi's aim is to blur the boundary between spectator and actor. "In this memory driven trip, the people do not contemplate but engage themselves with the structure," he says on the project's website. "They can decide not to go down the ramp, they can decide not to step in the arena, but this decision is a very active one, the interaction with the structure has happened."

This distinction between contemplation and engagement, between a monument and a memorial, is key to Tarazi's project. In particular, Tarazi believes that the statue currently standing in Martyrs Square is unable to bear the load it carries as representative of Lebanon's sufferings.

"The statue is beginning to have the characteristics of a monument rather than a memorial," he says. "It has whatever meaning people place on it rather than representing a specific event."

Originally built to commemorate citizens killed during a revolt against the Ottomans in World War I, the Martyrs' Square statue became a symbol of the civil war after its battered, bullet-pitted remains were the only remaining feature of a decimated downtown.

In recent years, the statue and the square were rallying points for the 2006 "Cedar Revolution" and the 2007 opposition protests.

"Whenever anything bad happens, such as an assassination, we make a celebration out of it," says Tarazi, pointing to an image of flag-waving revelers around the Martyrs' Square statue. "We never confront the horror of what has occurred."

Tarazi believes the statue is so overloaded with conflicting connotations that its presence is a hindrance to any unifying memorial. In his design the statue is utterly absent, buried under soil and rubble. "In the absence of this symbol, the whole square becomes a large anti-monument to which any Lebanese could relate," he says.

Some might dismiss this as a hair-brained scheme, but Tarazi is perfectly serious. Plans have been drawn up with the help of an architect, and a thorough costing done by contractors. The price tag of implementing the Silent Square project comes in at around \$2 million.

"The money is not a problem," says Tarazi. "There is lots of money around. The problem is a general unwillingness to confront these issues."

Critics have also raised aesthetic objections. "Many people say that we shouldn't be doing this because art should be beautiful," says Tarazi. "But the ugliness is the whole point. The war was ugly."

Tarazi has a history of artistic urban interventions. He works with Atelier Hapsitus, the urban art collective headed by Tarazi's former teacher at the American University of Beirut, Nadim Karam. Atelier Hapsitus is famous for the "Archaic Procession," a series of giant symbolic figures which sprung up around downtown as post-war reconstruction efforts took place, and which have since been seen in cities around the world.

The Silent Square project is of a very different nature. Since there is no commercial aspect, Tarazi and his associates have developed a number of side projects to fund its development. In 2008, the group exhibited at the Creek Art Fair, a fringe event to Art Dubai.

The event operates outside the normal gallery structure: participating artists find themselves a space and curate their own shows. In a blind alley, Tarazi strung up banners taken from the streets of Beirut, displaying political slogans. At the end of the

alley was a series of 40 drawings of screaming faces.

The exhibition caused a bit of a stir. Tarazi was forced to consult with festival organizers over the choice of political slogans that he would be allowed to display. "It was interesting to encounter the local resistance to anything with political content," he says. Anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiment caused particular discomfort.

This year the event was re-named the Bastakiya Art Fair. Tarazi and The Feel Collective participated with an exhibition called "The Sky Ever So Blue." Using hand-colored pre-war postcards of Beirut, Tarazi overlaid black and white images from the civil war: Children with guns, screaming civilians and malnourished refugees. The saccharine, hyper-real colors of the postcards make a jarring contrast to the violence and pain in the foreground.

The resulting images were blown up into giant posters, almost the size of billboards, and exhibited in a number of outdoor locations. Again, there was trouble with censorship: An unidentified authority ordered that the artworks be removed from their prominent positions.

Tarazi is happy to be developing his project outside of the conventional gallery structure. "This is a process of experimentation," he says. "We're trying to push the discourse as far as it will go.

"The prevailing aesthetic in the art world is to be clever. This project isn't clever. It comes from a place of emotion. My hope is that it could lead to a moment of truth."

For further information, visit www.silentsquare.org.

Copyrights 2019, The Daily Star - All Rights Reserved
23/05/2009
