

Second Prize Winner at the “Lebanese Diaspora” International Art Exhibition, Alfred Tarazi speaks with LERC

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Interviewed by Elie Nabhan

A former student at the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Department of Architecture and Design, at the American University of Beirut, Alfred Tarazi has exhibited several times in Beirut including most recently *The Sky Ever So Blue* at the Sursock Museum, 2008, *Memoires of the War for the New Middle East*, 2008, *Silent Square Intervention*, 2009, and *Blank to Basics* at the Running Horse Gallery, Beirut, 2009.

Alfred’s exhibitions abroad have taken place notably in Dubai, on several occasions, the most recent being *The Sky Ever So Blue* at Bastakiya Art Fair, Dubai, 2009. He has also recently exhibited *The Quixote Project*, Dar Al Funoon, 2009, in Kuwait, and *Spiritual Promises from Lost Prophets* at Cordy House, London, 2008.

Alfred has also exhibited in Lisbon, 2009, at the University of Copenhagen, 2007, and in Rotterdam, 2002. Alfred has also been involved in various publications

Alfred is a member of *Atelier Hapsitus*, a multi-disciplinary group founded and led by Nadim Karam. *Atelier Hapsitus* is a think-tank focused on the creation of an original urban vocabulary. Based in Beirut, members have created large scale temporary and permanent projects for various cities.

In 2009, Alfred instigated *The Feel Collective*, a group of cultural activists operating from Beirut who aim to provoke and infuse their social environment with new thinking patterns. They are working to bring contemporary art and design to the heart of Arab capitals.



Alfred Tarazi's prize winning collage *Hijra 1* (2009).

E.N: Both Hijra 1 and Hijra 2 were exhibited at the Lebanese Diaspora art exhibition. What gave you the idea for these pieces of art?

A.F: Both those artworks are part of a series called *The Sky Ever So Blue*. It is a collection of about fifty images that consist of collages combining pre-war images of Lebanon with the most known images of the war.

E.N: Hijra 1 won second prize at the exhibition. Were you expecting it to do so well?

A.F: A prize is encouraging; I was participating in the Art Fair in Dubai when it happened, and my sister called me.

E.N: Both pieces show planes, airports and passengers at an airport. Why did you feel that these were important to the theme of migration?

A.F: Those images are based on postcards that were produced in the '60s. What is peculiar is that we had produced those images in the first place as souvenirs of Lebanon. Images of the airport, and, yes, throughout the past fifty years, we did have quite an intense relation with that airport.



Alfred Tarazi's second collage *Hijra 2* (2009).

E.N: Both pieces portray the passengers in black and white; is there a reason for this?

A.F: The passengers were all taken out from war images, mainly from books and newspapers. Those were mainly printed in black and white. What is interesting is that the images in black and white are much more recent than the ones in color.

E.N: When did you prepare the two pieces?

A.F: They were made in 2009 as digital collages.

E.N: Had they been exhibited anywhere before? Where?

A.F: Some images of the series *The Sky Ever So Blue* had been exhibited in Dubai at the Bastakiya Art Fair in 2009. It is still a work in progress, so those two images have not been shown before.

E.N: Can you tell us the story behind the two pieces?

A.F: For the past five years I have been producing diverse images that deal with the Lebanese civil war. Some of the work produced was very dark, monochromatic, using only black and white. I had also been using images of the war incorporating those images in drawings in order to lay claim to them. I was taking most of those images out of books and publications that belonged to my father. I also found a red photo album that contained a lot of postcards of Lebanon of the '50s and '60s; this one belonged to my grandfather. All these images represented two realities of the same country, neither belonged to me, and I felt that I needed to re appropriate them.

E.N: As a cultural activist, concerned with “social environment and new thinking patterns”, in what way were you encouraged or inspired by this when it came to creating Hijra 1 and Hijra 2.

A.F: When it comes to the history of the war and to the images we have of that period, it always shocks me to see the general amnesia and the resilience people have in dealing with that past today. In the work presented we are showing the postcards that can be defined as the Lebanese dream but these postcards have been injected with the Lebanese nightmare: the war. You then have two layers, one that people cherish and always refer to and one that people would like to forget. These images work like time capsules where everything went wrong. They were created to fight the lingering amnesia about the civil war, and we will hopefully start exhibiting them in unexpected places in the city.

E.N: Would you like to mention something about your group, The Feel Collective?

A.F: With The Feel Collective we are working on a project with a larger scope: a memorial to commemorate all the people who have been killed because of the war in Lebanon. The people working on this project come from various disciplines and we are all bringing our knowhow and expertise to allow the project to grow. The structure of the group is quite flexible and we are always looking for new people to work with.