

The Business of Culture

Profiles: Collecting Art in Lebanon at AUB Gallery, Lebanon

By Roy Dib

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The American University of Beirut has been participating actively in the Lebanese cultural scene following a donation by Dr. Samir Saleeby of a collection comprising of paintings by artists of different generations to the university. Dr. Saleeby had inherited his father's collection of paintings featuring artwork by his cousin Khalil Saleeby (1870-1928) and others such as Cesar Gemayal (1898-1958), Omar Onsi (1901-1969), Saliba Douaihy (1912-1994), Haidar Hamaoui (b. 1937), Chucrallah Fattouh (b. 1956), and Robert Khoury (b. 1923).

Dr Saleeby, who considers this body of work to be a part of Lebanese heritage, was not interested in selling the collection, but rather insisted on donating it to an institution that would offer it a public display. In 1990, he was contacted by AUB, and a few years later, a deal was reached where the university would turn an entire floor in Post Hall into an art museum and inaugurated another gallery outside the AUB grounds. In June 2012, the paintings were on display in an off-campus gallery on Sidani Street, with free open access to the public.

Octavian Esanu, artist, curator and founding director of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Chisinau, Moldova, was appointed to curate the university's art programming, which presents modern and contemporary art exhibitions in two newly inaugurated galleries.

The first exhibit, *Khalil Saleeby (1870 - 1928)*, presented works by Khalil Saleeby and opened in the summer of 2012 at the AUB art gallery in Sidani Street. The second exhibition, *Profiles: Collecting Art in Lebanon* (from 5 April to 24 August 2013) examines practices of art collection and art patronage in Lebanon today, running in parallel with another exhibition

Art In Labor Skill/ Deskillig / Reskillig (until 27 July 2013) at the AUB Byblos Bank Gallery, ADA Dodge Hall, AUB Campus.

Profiles: Collecting Art in Lebanon starts with eight screens, each displaying a video interview with a different Lebanese art collector. The collectors come from different social and economic backgrounds and employ varying approaches when it comes to building their collections. In the gallery's lower level, the setting resembles the home of an art collector; inspired by the house of Samir Saleeby and exhibiting part of his collection in addition to works from Saleh Barakat's collection, which showcases classical, modern and contemporary Lebanese art.

On the top floor of the gallery, Tony Salame, the chairman and CEO of Tony Salame group, and CEO of Aishti, a Lebanese high-end clothing retail company, talks on screen about a collection he started in 1989. Then, then he talks about the subsequent establishment of the Aishti Foundation, dedicated to forming a body of international artwork in Lebanon, and has recently been investing in Lebanese work. On another screen, Ramzi Saidi and Afaf Osseiran Saidi discuss their journey collecting Lebanese art, which started in the early 1980's with a concern for preserving local art heritage. Today, they lend pieces from their collection to various cultural events.

The exhibition also showcases collectors who have inherited their collections [1], like George Corm who inherited his grandfather Daoud Corm's paintings and Anachar Basbous, whose sculpture collection is displayed in an open-air park in Rachana. Basbous inherited her father Michel Basbous's drawings and sculptures. Another collector depicted on a screen in this exhibition was the banker, Raymond Audi, who has been collecting artworks since the 1980s. Today, the Bank Audi collection of modern and contemporary art is regarded as the largest in Lebanon.

A screen is also dedicated to the gallery collector, Saleh Barakat, who launched Agial art gallery on Abdul Aziz Street in Hamra in 1990, which prides itself on a comprehensive inventory of modern and contemporary Arab art. Meanwhile, another monitor is assigned to the ministry of culture, as yet another type of institutional collector, featuring Dima Raad, the head of the ministry's department of exhibitions, talking about its attempts to acquire works by Lebanese artists in order to create a body of local work that would be exhibited in a museum for Lebanese arts in the future.

Amidst all these interviews, two screens are dedicated to an intellectual discourse on art patronage, one featuring art critic and publisher Cesar Nammour, offering an insight on the practice of acquiring work, and the other featuring Zeina Arida Director of the Arab Image Foundation, speaking about how collecting can be utilised as an artistic strategy. This could be the first time in Lebanon that the notion of 'collecting' is discussed publicly. As the politics of the Lebanese art market is usually kept hidden, the exhibition observes the main buyers of art in Beirut; somehow the active catalysts and safeguards of the continuity of local art production.

Yet, having relayed generous information regarding the art market, the exhibition remains limited to profiling the said art collectors and showcasing how private collectors are filling the gaps of the Lebanese Ministry of Culture in investing in local arts scene. Even as Dima Raad explains, the plans of the Ministry to involve itself actively in local art investments remain somehow too far-fetched, since the Ministry is already having a hard time preserving more traditional facets of local cultural heritage.

The art market and its clandestine mechanics were not revealed or discussed in *Profiles: Collecting Art in Lebanon*, knowing that the drastic increase of art galleries in Beirut in the past few years is a clear indicator of

an upsurge of collectors who seem to have realized that Lebanese art is now in the international art market, and therefore worth the investment. Collectors who have been buying contemporary Lebanese art since the 1990s for mere hundreds of dollars, for example, are now owners of works worth thousands, and the respective artists represented in their collections have gained international repute with participation in prestigious gallery and museum shows worldwide like Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, Ayman Baalbaki and others.

With that in mind, it is noteworthy to ask whether Lebanese art collectors are really interested in filling the gaps in the country's artistic scene left by the Ministry of Culture, or if this question was one the exhibition decided not to tackle. What remains worth exploring is the influence of these collectors on the quality, form and content of art production and the artists they buy from.



View from the exhibition.
Photo by Octavian Esanu.

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