

Artist challenges the silence of the civil war

Lana Captan 20/11/2001

On the walls are fragments of Beirut, shattered portraits of ash and wood dismantled and obscurely pieced together in a morbid silence.

Tanbak is the childhood nickname of Tanya Bakalian Safieddine, a well-traveled artist whose first solo exhibit, currently at the Dagher gallery, embraces the elements to express her impressions of the Lebanese civil war that, Tanbak says, “ate up half the city and half our lives.”

Her exhibit, Peinture, Guerre, Considerations (Painting, War, Considerations), is the result of a four-year project and is based on ash. She quit oil painting when it became “too decorative” and did not express what she wanted. Then she found solace in the earth.

“My sons used to come along with me to collect sand around Beirut, so it has been a collective effort really,” says the mother of two teenage boys.

“I collected bags of ash from friends’ barbecues in the summer and fireplaces in the winter. I actually got to know a lot more about them and their habits from the ashes ...”

Her exhibition is made up of more than a dozen pieces of earth-colored paintings. One piece, Sans Identite, is comprised of ashes and paint in earthy colors with fingers imprinted across a wooden slab in a slashing movement.

“Everything around is so smooth, this is a piece that is opposite to what is around us,” she explains. What looks like shattered pieces of human faces are supposed to represent the martyrs who died during the war, she adds.

“It represents the deconstruction of the lives of those who were affected by the war, and the change in lifestyle that occurred as a result of it. It mirrors the ‘structure of deconstruction.’”

The catalogue of the exhibit was designed by Tanbak, and is a self-portrait of her life and work. It includes cut-outs from material written by her and that reveals her thoughts and traces the evolution of the pieces in her exhibit and the concept she based it on. Excerpts included in the catalogue from a letter sent to Tanbak by the poet Adonis discuss one of the dominant themes in her exhibit the “silence about the war.”

Tanbak’s use of her nickname is intentional. “There are too many connotations in a name in this part of the world,” she explains, “people tend to ask you who your parents are, who your husband is, your grandparents, it’s good to be able to avoid this.”

When Tanbak lived in Paris, she worked with bright oil colors. But when she returned to Lebanon in 1994, she started painting in dark, earthy colors and using natural materials.

“People thought it was because I wasn’t happy to be back here, but that’s not it, it’s simply a different phase, a different phase of statement,” she says.

“This is life, you cannot live and breathe outside of life, and art is a translation of this.”

Peinture, Guerre, Considerations runs through Nov. 24 at the Dagher gallery in Gemaizeh. For more information, call: 01-563 333