

Arabcity signals a bright future for Beirut's art

The Beirut iteration of Arabcity unwittingly reveals a conflicted relationship between creative endeavour and corporate ambition. But its glossy professionalism also signals a bright future for the city's exhibition culture



Detail of We.



Kaelen Wilson-Goldie
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A beaten-up red Mercedes serves as the surprising centrepiece for Arabicity, an exhibition of contemporary art from the Arab world, which opened last week in Beirut. Rusted, dented and stripped of its hood ornament, the car nearly creaks under the weight of a towering stack of household belongings piled high onto its roof. There are bedrolls, suitcases, plastic buckets, kitchen appliances, tables, chairs, a ladder, a toolbox, a bicycle, and lumps of even more stuff bundled into bright floral fabrics - all of which bring to mind a sadly ordinary sight, particularly in South Lebanon, of a family fleeing some known or unknown calamity. Crisscrossing strands of colourful twine hold everything together. On top of this comical and exaggerated assemblage, there is a painting, held in a crude wooden frame, of a young boy with eyes full of sorrow, possibly fear. And then, the whole thing starts to spin: the car sits on a platform ringed in neon that rotates at regular intervals, periodically turning on its axis a few times before coming back to rest.

Ayman Baalbaki's *Destination X*, from 2010, is one of more than 40 artworks included in the exhibition, curated by Rose Issa for the Beirut Exhibition Center. At once a monumental sculpture, a motorised spectacle and an audacious take on the readymade, Baalbaki's installation marks the latest step in the development of a young artist who was trained primarily as a painter but who has been experimenting more and more with mixed media and three-dimensional forms. Arabicity features six of his works, and together they track this progression - from acrylic paintings on fabric and canvas to the integration of lights, gold leaf and everyday objects (a street vendor's cart, a storefront shutter) to the execution of enormous, eye-popping installations. The major themes Baalbaki has been exploring for the past seven years or so - ruins, refugees and the iconography of political violence as expressed through the keffiyeh, the army-issue helmet and the Abu Ghraib hood - are also in evidence.

To cover the full range of an artist's practice in such a tight selection of works, and in the context of a show that is equally generous to the oeuvre of eight other artists, is a sign of incisive curating. In this regard Arabicity is both similar to and entirely different from other recent exhibitions of contemporary art from the Middle East - similar, in that the show is ultimately just a regional sampler; different, in that it exudes an easy familiarity with the formal and conceptual concerns of the works themselves, and an intuitive sense of how they fit together.

With key pieces by Baalbaki, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, Buthayna Ali, Chant Avedissian, Hassan Hajjaj, Susan Hefuna, Fathi Hassan and Raeda Saadeh, Arabicity privileges crisp formalism and a decorative sensibility. All of the works on view are big and bold. They hinge, for the most part, on pattern and repetition. They deliver a strong shot of visual pleasure, while the more subversive or disruptive aspects of each work rumble quietly in the background.

Chant Avedissian's installation *Icons of the Nile*, from 1991-2004, for example, consists of 120 stencils in pigment and gum Arabic on recycled cardboard, all arranged in a neat grid that spreads across three walls. At first glance, the work appears to be a grand celebration of colourful Egyptian kitsch, all princes, pop stars and politicians. But the most familiar iconography - the faces of Umm Kulthoum, Gamal Abdel Nasser and King Farouk, for example - jostles alongside images of the Egyptian feminist Doria Shafik and the modernist thinker Jamal al Din al Afghani, of young men and women working, voting, spending leisure time with their families, of the Nefertiti sewing machine and an Egyptian rocket soaring past the moon. This is not straightforward replication but a sustained rumination on the circulation of images, and the various purposes they serve.

Hassan Hajjaj's vibrant colour-saturated photographs of stylish, street-savvy young men and women in Marrakech, surrounded by wooden frames filled with soft drink cans and matchboxes, would seem to commemorate the slick surfaces of consumer culture. But these works also probe a subculture of counterfeit goods, fearless appropriation and endlessly recycled fashion. Likewise, Raeda Saadeh's photographs emulate famous paintings. But her *Mona Lisa* - after Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece - is poised before a landscape of Israeli settlements, her *milkmaid* - after Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* - in a house robbed of its roof.

Of Iranian and Lebanese origin, Rose Issa was born in Iran and moved to Lebanon at the age of 13. She graduated from the American University of Beirut with a degree in mathematics in 1972. Her first love was radio, her second film. To protest the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, she organised a festival of Arab filmmakers in Paris. A few years later, she helped to open a gallery in London specialising in modern masters from the Middle East. Since then, she has been one of the most active behind-the-scenes promoters of Arab culture on the international stage. A few years ago, she opened a space in London called *Rose Issa Projects*. Although open by appointment only, it offers an exhibition programme worthy of a gallery or a small arts institution (her 2009 presentation of the artist Khalil Rabah's installation *United States of Palestine Airlines, London Office*, made particularly good use of the space). Issa also curates exhibitions, produces works, acts as a *de facto* agent for artists, writes books, publishes monographs, collects and deals - though she insists that she only sells to people she knows, and from whom she can borrow later for shows.

Perhaps because she has been in the business for so long, she doesn't have quite the same public profile of the current generation of curators active in the field - curators who have either come lately to contemporary Arab art or who have developed their skills alongside the artists they show. Issa shrugs off some of the more ambitious of these players as thieves, which would seem to confirm her reputation for being difficult, and for not working especially well with others. (One source of scepticism about her work is the

way she blurs the line between commercial and non-commercial pursuits). But at a time when so many exhibitions of art from the region come off as awkward, reductive or simply mercenary, Issa deserves credit for always putting the works of the artists first. If she wears the robes of a cultural ambassador - as she did in 2008 when she organised Reorientations: Contemporary Arab Representations for the European Parliament's Arab Week in Brussels - then she does so lightly and with style.

A smaller version of the Arabicity exhibition was staged in Liverpool earlier this year, where it earned a few passionless, descriptive reviews. The Beirut iteration is the second show to fill the new Beirut Exhibition Center, which opened in June in a temporary venue designed by the New York-based architecture firm L.E.F.T. (its folded, mirrored façade, a luxurious take on the corrugated tin roofs of shantytowns worldwide, is still unfinished on the back side of the building).

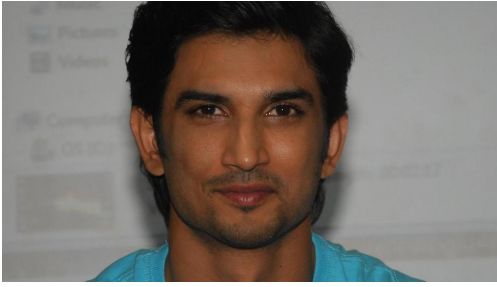
Located just inside the entrance to the new waterfront district, a stretch of reclaimed land that is still lodged in many people's minds as a civil war-era dumpsite, the Beirut Exhibition Center is owned and operated by Solidere, the private real-estate corporation in charge of redeveloping Beirut's downtown district. As such the art space is meant to serve as an early attractor, pulling people onto the site before it fills in with luxury apartments and conference centres (it is run by Solidere's public relations office, as a public relations initiative). With no artistic director, no curator, and little transparency about its programming, the space is a kunsthalle without an operating structure - an empty shell. And there is a sharp irony here. Ayman Baalbaki's work stems from his experience of being displaced three times: once by the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, again by the war in 2006, and in between by Solidere bulldozing his house in Wadi Abu Jamil. This is glossed over in the accompanying wall text and catalogue, with blame placed vaguely on "developers".

Yet if the exhibition is an accurate indication of what is to come, then the Beirut Exhibition Center may ultimately serve an admirable purpose, providing a well-equipped space for beautifully installed, meticulously lit shows in a city with few such venues. Until now, none but the National Museum were open on Sundays, when the majority of the city's population enjoys its leisure time. In itself, Arabicity is a conventional show. The fiercely critical, philosophically probing contemporary art projects that truly seek to alter the terms of political discourse in Lebanon and beyond are elsewhere. Yet it brings a new level of accomplishment and polish to Beirut's exhibition culture: a rotating neon platform, as it were, for what remains a heavily loaded and chaotic vehicle.

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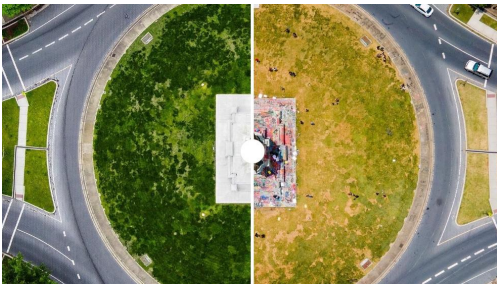
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