

# Breakfast at Baalbaki's

November 29, 2017



**During the bustling week of the Beirut Art Fair (21-24 September 2017), I had the pleasure of finally meeting in person contemporary Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki, after discovering his unparalleled painterly talent in a Christie's Dubai sale in 2009. With his striking cat-like light blue eyes and his shy character tainted with his charming smile, he answered my questions with such humility and honesty and with a flawless French, as recorded in the below interview translated into English. *By Valerie Didier-Hess***

Ayman Baalbaki. MEA, 2014-2015. Mixed media on canvas, 200 x 400cm. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery/Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut

*You come from a family of artists as your dad Fawzi was an artist, your brother Said and your cousins Oussama and Hoda are also artists. Why did you decide to study art in 1995?*

**Yes I come from a family of not only artists but also musicians and craftsmen. With my brother Saïd, we finished school together in 1994 and we had been immersed in the art world since we were children. When my father was studying at the Institut des Beaux-Arts in Beirut, he used to bring back home his artworks but also art material that my brother and I could also use.**

*Like your father, you studied at the Institut des Beaux-Arts of Beirut from 1994 to 1998 and later pursued your studies in Paris from 2000 to 2002. Why did you chose Paris, where did you live and what do you remember from your time in France?*

**After graduating from the Institut des Beaux-Arts of Beirut in 1998, I did my military service before moving to Paris for three years. I spoke French, having lived in Paris for two years as a young child, and Paris was a logical choice considering my father had also studied there. I lived at the 'Cité U' [Cité Universitaire] in the 14th arrondissement near the Parc Mont-Souris and studied at the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD) in Paris. This experience enabled me to be more open-minded following my studies in Beirut although it was a difficult time especially after the 9/11 events, the atmosphere was tense everywhere and my subject matters were quite delicate given the circumstances. My professors and fellow students used to call me the 'mujahed', like my 'fedayeen' figures wearing the 'keffiyeh', especially since I had a long beard at that time! I missed out on a lot of things in Paris because I tended to hang around with fellow Lebanese students at the Maison du Liban of the 'Cité U', rather than venturing out to meet new people. However, I had the opportunity to meet and chat with Chinese painter Yan Pei-Ming (b. 1960) who had been living in Dijon (France) since 1982 during an exhibition he took part in Mulhouse<sup>1</sup> in 2002. I think he may have influenced me in some ways but I can't pin it down.**

*Have you returned to Paris since you completed your studies at ENSAD ?*

**I regularly go back to Paris, it is my second home and I was there last week.**

*Let's talk about your painterly and very physical technique, of which I got a glimpse in a YouTube video<sup>2</sup> I found online that films you 'in the making' in a large studio – is it close to here?*

**Yes, I've now had this studio in Hamra for almost four years – indeed, In the Youtube video it seems that I work with my hands more than I usually actually do. I sometimes use my own hands but most of the times I use paint brushes.**

*So when you begin working on a painting, you go straight to painting the canvas, i.e. you don't do any preparatory sketches?*

**That's right and I think it might be a flaw to not produce any preparatory sketches as I actually really like drawings and artist's sketchbooks. It has been a long time that I haven't done any as I usually work from images I have and go straight into the painting stage.**

*Describe to me your technique – part of it is reminiscent of Pollock's 'dripping' technique or are there other artists who influenced you?*

**Well, there are several phases to my technique. First I paint the structure and produce clean painterly lines which I then I start to deconstruct it in a more chaotic way and later on I pull the work back together again. In that way, the surface obtained is the result of several layers of paint, laid with different tools as mentioned earlier. I was more influenced by Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, and by some of the 'Tachistes'<sup>3</sup> artists, than by Jackson Pollock but I definitively like American Abstract Expressionist, especially Joan**

**Mitchell.**

*Your technique involves such a physical effort that you must be exhausted when you finish painting especially since your canvases are often so large!*

**Yes, that's true but the real challenge is to always ensure that the composition is balanced. I usually work fast but I never finish a painting in a single painting session – I go back to the same painting over and over again, and over a period of weeks, months and sometimes years – that's why you'll find that some of my works are dated 2009-2011 for example.**

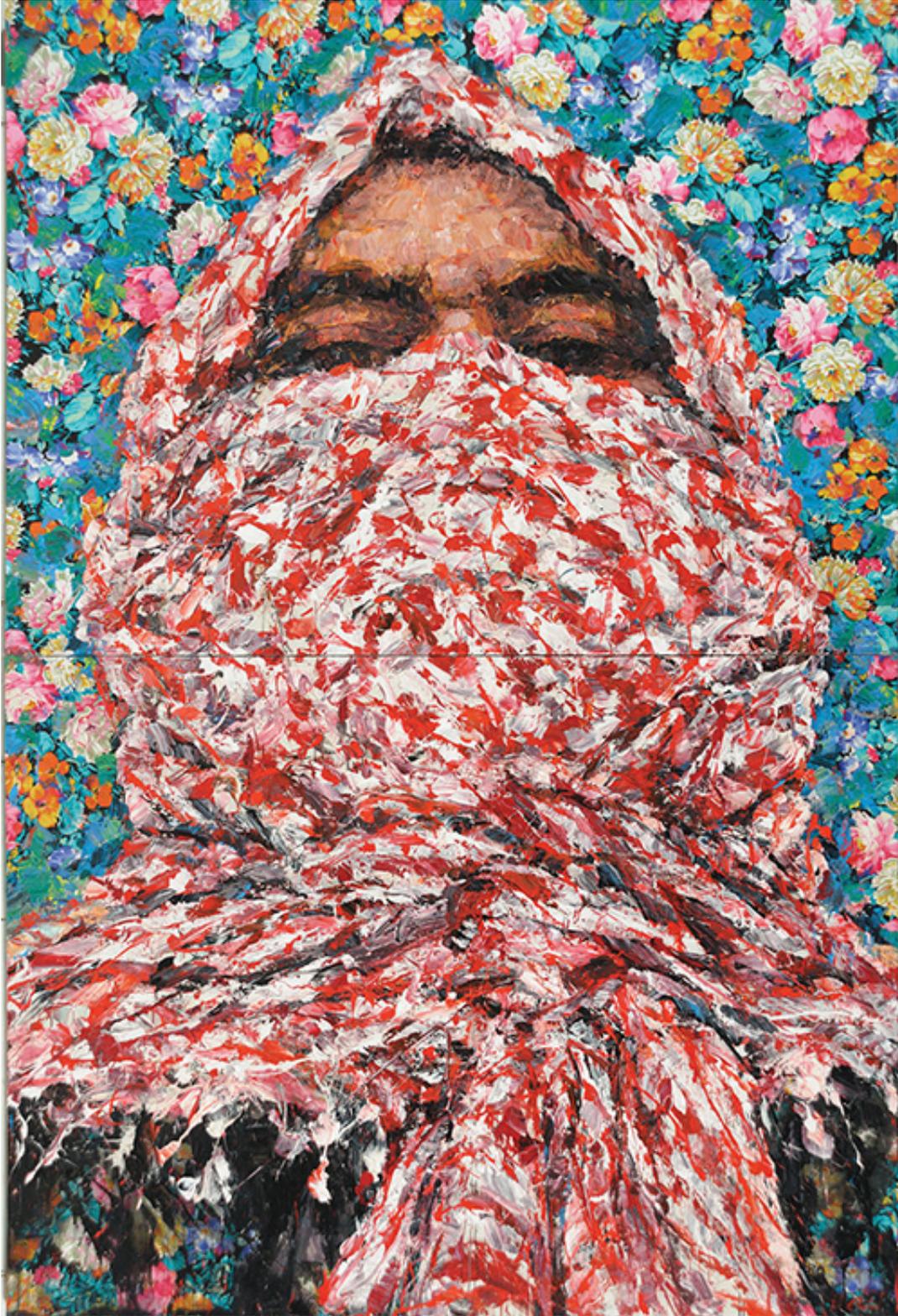
*You are internationally renowned for this extraordinary painterly technique that you have just described to me yet you also produced several well acclaimed installations. How did you switch from painting to installations?*

**My first installations were the projects that I worked on at school in Paris, during which I had opted for a specialization entitled 'Art et Espace' ['Art and Space']. It was a rather vague class and most attendees were some type of architect – I was the only painter. However, this training opened my eyes, inciting me to depart from the two-dimensional medium of painting and experiment three-dimensionality. I recall a discussion I had with my architecture teacher, who was fond of the bundles featured in my installations, and he told me I needed to go a step further to attain with my installations the same strength I have with my paintings. Even if I speak with two very different languages, painting and installations, I always use the same sources and the challenge is also to link the two media. That's why I have just taken a sabbatical year and I've been thinking of how reconciling three-dimensionality with painting – I have many ideas, I just need to throw myself back into it!**

*Let's look at the icon you created in your 'Al-Mulatham' paintings or portraits of 'freedom fighters'. What does this character represent for*

*you? Is he a symbol of peace, resistance, hope ?*

**He incarnates both hope and despair. Just like my images of buildings, I was looking for symbolic images that stand for my country, for the region, for the Arab peoples. My father was a leftist, defending the Palestinian cause so I also see my father in Al-Mulatham. The first one I ever painted actually looks a lot like him and for some of the others, I used photographs of myself. Yet in every portrait, I seek to give a different interpretation and a new way of reading what this character represents, that's why some have flowers, others are painted with a monochrome palette. I first painted the flowery patterns but then painted directly on textiles with floral motifs – I used to live in.**



Ayman Baalbaki. Al Maw3oud, 2011. Acrylic on printed fabric & canvas, 300 x 200cm. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery/Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut

*Looking at another subject in your oeuvre, the Babel Tower, what is the meaning of this image for you?*

**I am very fond of archaeology and mythology – I had initially chosen**

**this subject for the 'Jeux de la Francophonie' in Niger<sup>4</sup> as the theme given obviously had to be linked to language considering this event concerns mainly countries where French is spoken. The studios we were given were almost in the open air and I could see ants swarming around their anthill, the shape of which reminded me of the Babel Tower. I also use it as a reference to the ongoing war in Iraq and the destruction of Baghdad, and preserve its mythological dimension whilst hinting to Brueghel's version of it.**

*You have also integrated in some of your works colourful neon – why?*

**The media I use almost always come from the streets, whether it be concrete blocks, floral fabrics, or neon that blink on the signage of shops – the neon words also create a link between installation and painting that I am always looking for. For example, when I exhibited the neon 'Ceci n'est pas la Suisse' (which was also the title of the solo show hosted by Rose Issa in 2009), I sought to incorporate in my work the textual aspect omnipresent in Arab culture, as well as hinting to the fact that Lebanon was considered as the 'the Switzerland of the East' for a long time. If you look at the West, the culture of which is much more visual, everyone knows of Picasso, but in this part of the world, people will remember texts or verses of poems rather than images.**

*With regards to this textual element in your oeuvre, would you say that the 'Al-Mu'allaqat' pre-Islamic poems were a source of inspiration for you?*

**It is not the content of the text that inspired me but rather its structure, as discussed with Michel Fani. We saw a parallel between the three main themes of the 'Al-Mu'allaqat' poems, which reoccur in many other examples of Arab poetry, as described in a book by Salam Al-Kindy entitled 'Le voyageur sans Orient, poésie et philosophie des Arabes de l'ère préislamique' (1999) and which are as follows: 1/ the protagonist is looking for his beloved one in the remnants (Atlal); 2/**

**not finding the beloved one, he roams around in a desert environment in harsh conditions; 3/ the despair enables him to question and unravel his identity. It is more of a coincidence that the central themes in my oeuvre precisely revolve around the ones here mentioned although my child memories seem to also have played a role. When we were young children and we couldn't attend school, my father had returned from Paris and was appalled by the way we spoke Arabic so poorly. He therefore tried to teach us proper Arabic again by making us learn off by heart ten verses per day of the Al-Mu'allaqat poems, before we could go off to play.**

*Would you say that there is a political or autobiographical dimension in your paintings?*

**Both – of course, my paintings comprise of autobiographical references but at the same time I seek to give them a local and universal dimension. Everything is political nowadays and although my works force viewers to confront past or contemporary realities, I am not trying to teach a moral lesson here as what I depict are the events that are imbedded in my memories.**

*You cannot be labelled as an artist and it is difficult to say that your work belongs to a specific art trend or school.*

**Indeed, I am doing my own thing but I still feel very connected to the vast community of artists, such as the ones I mentioned earlier on, but also the German Expressionist Frank Auerbach but also Marwan, with whom I had done a few workshops – he didn't only influence my work but he was also a close friend. Furthermore, I was also inspired by art schools in third world countries, such as Latin America, namely Mexican mural painting (Diego Riviera and Frida Kahlo for example), which was an art trend that still flourished despite being far removed from the main artistic centres of Paris and New York. I was influenced by these artists' quest of forging their own identity, their political**

**commitment and their combination of history and reality, past and present.**

*Apart from the end of studies exhibition you did in Paris, your first official solo show was with Saleh Barakat at Agial Gallery in Beirut in 2006 – what was your reaction to such a pivotal show?*

**This exhibition changed my status in that it was held when I had just stopped working on my thesis on the aesthetics of art at Paris 8 (Sorbonne). I was really lost at that time, torn between theoretical analysis and pursuing painting although I learned a lot from my thesis, I lost four years writing it and I realised that it was not for me in the final phases of the thesis. At that point I told Saleh I was ready to exhibit my works and the 2006 exhibition felt as if I had turned the page over and I never wrote anything since!**

*Your works now feature in some of the world's leading institutions amongst which the British Museum and the Tate Modern in London, Mathaf in Doha and the National Museum of Niger in Niamey – where else would you want your works to be prominently exhibited?*

**Just as I am happy to have my works here in Lebanon, I would like my works also to be in Paris, since it is somehow a second city to me, and anywhere else around the world where it would be appreciated.**



Ayman Baalbaki, *Destination X*, Mercedes Car and blue neon and mixed media, Variable size, 2010  
 Courtesy Agial Art Gallery/Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut.

*Many of your works have now come up at auction, reaching some very high prices, the record price being sold by Christie's Dubai in 2015 for \$485,000 – how does this success affect you or your work?*

**I keep my feet on the ground but of course this success definitely helped me with my artistic career and at the same time, it gives me more responsibilities and also more pressure.**

*Project yourself in fifty years – how do you want your work to be remembered?*

**I think that is very personal, in that it depends of every person – I just want my paintings to trigger a dialogue with the viewers but I have no clear vision of what I will produce in the next few years, I also get lost**

**in my own painting and I really need to go back to my work after this sabbatical year!**

*I understand that you are currently working on a book with Saleh [Barakat] – is it a monograph?*

**I think it is too early for me to do a monograph! But yes, we are working on a book that will include essays of around ten pages each written by Thierry Savatier, Philippe Dagen, Paul Ardenne, and most probably the contributions of two Lebanese art critics. The book won't be about a specific theme but rather an anthology of how these writers perceive my work.**

Photo: Ayman Baalbaki

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