

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie
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The art of war

Ayman Baalbaki's latest exhibition turns an elegiac lens on the devastation of his hometown of Beirut.



Ayman Baalbaki's *Mon Dieu!*, acrylic and mixed media, 2008.

For more than a decade, a deep rift has divided Lebanese artists into two mutually exclusive camps. On one side are the modern painters and sculptors whose concerns are largely formal. On the other side are the contemporary video and installation artists whose motivations are mostly critical.

While the former camp relishes landscape, still life, figuration, symbolism and abstraction and pursues vague yet enduring notions of beauty and the sublime, the latter camp appropriates documentary, archival and research-based practices for the production of politically relevant works on such subjects as war. Coming from different art-historical and political frames of reference, the two sides seem, almost painfully irreconcilable. But a new exhibition at the Agial Art Gallery in the Hamra district of Beirut might just bridge the gap.

Ayman Baalbaki's *Transfiguration Apocalyptique* features 13 large-scale works and a series of 35 diminutive canvasses. Incorporating painting, sculpture, installation, assemblage and a few novel embellishments in neon, the show pays tribute to Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Anselm Kiefer and the American minimalist Keith Sonnier all at once. Baalbaki, who made his gallery debut at Agial in 2006, has taken his signature technique - paint applied in expressive brushstrokes directly onto a field of garish floral fabric - and pushed it a step further. Several of the new works break the traditional picture plane and jut out into the gallery space. Paintings with sculptural aspirations, these canvasses appear to almost reach out to the related objects that are scattered across the floor in front of them.

One piece, titled *I Built My Home*, features a grid of small, rectangular, floral-painted canvasses with a car rack affixed to the centre, topped with luggage, sleeping bags, pots, pans and a neon sign reading "Home." Another, titled *Mon Dieu!* consists of a street merchant's vegetable cart tricked out in gold paint, a portrait and a set of small light bulbs arranged like the stars of the Big Dipper in the night sky. Yet another, titled *An Eye for an Eye*, involves a gold-painted security grate from a street-level storefront adorned with 15 portraits of men whose faces are obscured under ski masks, headscarves, helmets, army-issue gas masks or hoods reminiscent of Abu Ghraib.

But for all the bricolage and florid kitsch, Baalbaki's heavily assisted ready-mades go beyond the dizzyingly decorative. He skillfully mingles punchy, street-savvy pop with techniques borrowed from the rich history of religious iconography and illuminated manuscripts. "In Arabic and Islamic culture, we use a lot of gold," says Baalbaki. "It's tradition. The colour exists in dancers' costumes, on Christian icons and in Islamic texts."

The artist's underlying themes also dig into the dark corners of Lebanon's

collective psyche. Baalbaki's works reference the civil war, the economic inequities of the post-war reconstruction era and the devastation wrought by the conflict with Israel in the summer of 2006. They call attention to the vibrant visual culture of Lebanon's lower classes, which tend to be otherwise ignored by artists and political leaders alike. They also grapple with the consequences of the so-called war on terror on one hand, the rising tide of militant Islam on the other. (Several of Baalbaki's pieces in *Transfiguration Apocalyptique* were inspired by posters pasted around Beirut making various claims about a better future, either in this life or the next.)

Baalbaki, who is 33, was already considered a rising star, a dynamic young figure capable of breathing new life into Lebanon's long painterly tradition. Now he is both a critical and commercial success. Every work in *Transfiguration Apocalyptique* sold within two hours of the exhibition opening and the piece *Mon Dieu!* has already vanished from the gallery, having been selected by the curator Rose Issa for an exhibition at the European Parliament. Collectors previously more attuned to pretty paintings by the late Paul Guiragossian have begun buying into Baalbaki's tougher, bleaker vision.

The veteran art critic Joseph Tarrab - known for his support of Lebanon's modern masters and his indifference to the capital's contemporary conceptualists - even contributed an essay to Baalbaki's exhibition catalogue. *Transfiguration Apocalyptique* also foreshadows a significant shake-up in Beirut's gallery system. The Agial Art Gallery opened in 1990, which makes it one of the oldest art spaces in the city. (Few of the Beirut galleries that thrived in the 1960s outlived the civil war, which lasted from 1975 through 1990.)

Agial's owner and director Saleh Barakat has championed an older generation of painters and sculptors from across the Arab world for nearly two decades. But in the coming months, he is opening a new gallery in

Beirut's new art district, Saifi Village. The gallery, called Maqam, will take a more methodical approach to the history of modern art in the region with plans to organise an exhibition exploring the legacy of 19th-century landscape painting in Lebanon.

Agial, meanwhile, will concentrate more forcefully on the next generation. Barakat says he is committed to establishing a sense of continuity between the two galleries, but at the same time is clearly invigorated by the idea of carving out a space for more daring, experimental work. Later this week he is unveiling a new exhibition at Agial, featuring photographs by the filmmaker Jocelyne Saab, whose themes include the buried histories of obscure Arabic texts and the changing fortunes of Orientalism. In this regard, Baalbaki's exhibition is a promising practice run.

"There is a particular frenzy about Arab art today," says Barakat. "This is a strong show that satisfies people who are into painting and people who are into contemporary art." Worth noting, he adds, is the fact that Baalbaki's work sold "piece by piece" to a range of different collectors - it was not a matter of one buyer acquiring the whole lot, or family members supporting their own. Baalbaki was born in South Lebanon in 1975, the year the civil war began. His village, Odeisse, is just south of the Beaufort Castle, spitting distance from the Israeli border. His family fled the area when he was a few months old and moved to Wadi Abu Jamil, a neighbourhood in downtown Beirut that had once been a Jewish quarter. After the war ended, however, the real-estate giant Solidere transformed Wadi Abu Jamil into luxury villas and high-end apartment buildings. Baalbaki was displaced once again and moved to the southern suburb of Haret Hreik.

After completing a degree at Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts, Baalbaki left Beirut for Paris and continued his studies at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD). He is currently

enrolled in a PhD programme at the University of Paris 8. But, with his coursework finished, he returned to Beirut in 2006. There he set up his studio, a few floors below his family's apartment in Haret Hreik. The building, the apartment, the studio - all of them were destroyed in the war that broke out a few months later, reducing much of the southern suburbs to rubble.

One can read *Transfiguration Apocalyptique*, then, as a haunting autobiographical account of Baalbaki's experience. "Part of it is something I lived," he says. "But I don't want to show just what I have lived." Indeed, Baalbaki's ideas about human nature, his evocation of Sisyphus in three of the works in the show, his appropriation of pop culture and his art-historical references lend the exhibition a universal air.

At the same time, some of Baalbaki's visual tricks are more specific to Beirut than they initially appear. He describes his use of neon, for example, as a nod to the shabby glowing signage on Hamra Street. The fabrics he uses as supports come from specific shops in Ghobeiri and Sabra, popular areas known for their cheap markets, which have, in turn, transformed the fashion sensibilities of entire communities (replacing traditional embroidery, for example, with more affordable, less labour-intensive textiles manufactured in China - globalisation writ small).

As impressive as Baalbaki's large-scale works are, his smaller series of paintings, titled *Tamooz* (Arabic for the month of July), are perhaps his most moving. The series depicts buildings in various phases of demolition. They are powerful, poetic elegiac works. Taken together, they are also a tidy documentary record of a summer's singular sorrows. "It's like an archive," says Baalbaki with a quick shrug of his shoulders, but it's actually more than that. In this work Baalbaki has proven himself a mediator bringing the far-flung camps of the conceptualists and formalists together - creating probing conceptual work with a dash of formalist flair.

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