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## Baalbaki on the sincerity of painting



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BEIRUT: On a recent weekday morning, when all of Beirut had been coated in a thin layer of seasonal, sandstone-colored grime, the painter Oussama Baalbaki was standing in the middle of an exhibition rendering the world in stark shades of black, white and grey.

"He's really a poet and a thinker," says his gallerist, Saleh Barakat, sounding more like a mother or a matchmaker. "He's a very interesting man. He's very deep in times when everything is superficial."

Baalbaki, meanwhile, winces ever so slightly and turns his head toward his shoes. His current show, titled "Rituals of Isolation," is his second at the Agial Art Gallery in Hamra, and his third in three years. It includes 11 paintings, nine of which are self-portraits.

Using mirrors, models and photographs, the artist sets himself in highly symbolic studio tableaux. His set pieces and props strike a curious balance between clamoring ideas and pensive, willful quietude.

What gives his work strength is not the technical dexterity with which he paints his own face and body but rather the tension he creates between himself, as a stand-in for the human condition, and a broad range of objects and gestures.

In "The Perfect Mood," the artist slumps in a chair holding a radio in one hand and its plug, pulled from its socket, in the other. His eyes are closed, his head tilted to one side. A woman or an impossibly tall child stands behind him. A hand curls around his face. Long fingers rest gently on Baalbaki's upper left cheek, covering an eye as if holding in or protecting half of his vision.

It's a gesture that triggers a rush of associations and meanings. Who are these people and what accounts for the tenderness tinged with exhaustion between them? What news of the world has just been summarily disconnected, or broken down? And what is the effect of so mysteriously evoking touch, sound, silence, sight and blindness in, of all things, a black-and-white acrylic on canvas dated 2011?

"I'm painting in a theatrical way what I consider to be mental moods," says Baalbaki. "The objects in my paintings, these are things that are in my studio. But I'm trying to make a spiritual connection, even with still lifes or inanimate objects in front of me. The objects always allude to a sense – sound, sight, smell, taste or touch."

One of Baalbaki's paintings, titled "A Persistent Midday," shows the artist seated at a dining room table, his head and torso nearly hidden behind an enormous bouquet of flowers in a bulbous glass vase. One hand rests on the table next to an eyeglass case. The other holds a mobile phone between thumb and forefinger, all of which are sunk in a pool of fluid – whether blood or ink is impossible to distinguish in such a radically restricted palette.

In "Harmonious Posture," the artist stands like a soldier, his face stern and his right hand raised to his temple. He could be saluting a superior or pointing a gun to his head. Instead, he is holding a hairdryer.

Another painter, titled "Enlightenment II," depicts the artist seated in front of a radiator, looking down at an egg crate he is holding in his hands, with a light bulb resting on top of it. Next to him, a friend or bother or colleague shouts in his ear through a makeshift megaphone. The artist appears unfazed by the aural assault.

One of only two paintings in color in the exhibition finds the artist in bed, his face washed in light and his head casting a shadow on the headboard behind him. He clutches four paintbrushes in one hand, which rests on bed sheets pulled tight around his chest. It is impossible to tell whether the light flooding in from just beyond the left hand side of the painting comes from a breaking dawn, a lamp, or a searchlight, but all of the possibilities spell anxiety and fear.

"Oussama is dealing with an extremely contemporary state of mind but through classical means," says gallerist Barakat.

"I'm interested in the idea of what is before and after in art," says Baalbaki, "but I'm mostly representing my own sensibility. In the severe, powerful institution of art, I want to have my own voice. Categorization exerts a pressure that I try to avoid. I'm not unaware but I try to be authentic to my own sensibility. I think we're all a combination of the past, present and future."

Among young and emerging artists in Lebanon, Baalbaki, 33, is lucky in that he was never discouraged from pursuing art as a way of life. His father, Abdel-Hamid Baalbaki, is a well-known painter who writes poems, novels and other literary texts tied to the rich language of South Lebanon.

His first cousins Ayman and Mohammad-Said Baalbaki are also prominent artists on the local scene. His sister is the singer Soumaya Baalbaki. Everyone in the family, both nuclear and extended, seems to work in a creative field. No one ever pressured Oussama to be a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer. Art was a given. He's been signing his name "The Painter Oussama Baalbaki" since he was 4.

Yet Barakat, in an attempt to place the artist in a narrative or give him a lineage and a genealogy, argues that Baalbaki belongs to a trajectory running through Lebanon's

recent art history that remains unexposed or at least underexplored. He's closer to social realism than abstract expressionism, Barakat says, more Ayloul Festival than Ashkal Alwan. His work is influenced by the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, and he is prone to painting Lenin, Trotsky or Marx into his compositions.

The surface implication that the Cold War split Beirut's contemporary art scene in two is intriguing but suspiciously neat.

The deeper implication that Baalbaki grew up in a leftist milieu that is currently rudderless if not entirely obsolete may have more traction.

Baalbaki, for his part, subtly turns the conversation around.

"One of the biggest problems of the art scene in Lebanon is that it's very small, like a club," he says. "For me, it's absolutely essential that art is accessible to all layers of society."

Anyway, he adds, not all of his political convictions end up in his artworks, be they existentialist, anarchist, nihilist or social realist.

"But I'm very sincere about the act of painting."

Oussama Baalbaki's "Rituals of Isolation" remains on view at the Agial Art Gallery in Hamra through May 31. For more information, please call 01-345-213 or visit [www.agialart.com](http://www.agialart.com).

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