

## When reality haunts works of art | Arts & Ent , Culture | THE DAILY STAR

BEIRUT: There is a renascent nostalgia at play in Oussama Baalbaki's "Spectres of the Real," an exhibition of acrylics now on show at Agial Gallery. At first glimpse, the landscapes, still lifes and portraits in this show live up to its name in that what we see and what we have forgotten are both blurred. Baalbaki's depictions are true to the current state of Lebanon.

Elite cafes are erected around the corner from run-down parking lots, where a bouquet of red flowers is left on the windshield of a derelict 1980s automobile, one headlight torn out, tires flat upon the gravel.

Baalbaki's work embraces reality, brush strokes weaving modern urban landscapes from country lanes, hilly fields and caves. Beirut's skyline is adorned with traffic-free highways bereft of ads and burnt-out lampposts.

A thoughtfulness is evident in these works, one so palpable that it quietly inflects your perceptions of them.

One of the more well-worn metaphors for Lebanon is that of a phoenix rising from the ashes, with people's determination to rebuild overcoming war, poverty, economic setbacks and political division.

Baalbaki's paintings seem reminiscent of that unfaltering spirit, stirring memories that are at times difficult to place, but nearly always jolt the onlooker back to her senses once the image formulates in the mind.

The artist's acrylic-on-canvas works embody a near-monochromatic style of expressionist realism, anchored by nature and human figures. His pieces allude to an almost dreamlike impression of the world – soft, subtle and dynamic. They resemble visual poems.

"Goodnight Beirut" appears to depict the city's seaport at sunset, with warm hues of orange, yellow and red, undeniably tinged with the overpopulated city's grayish-brown clouds. The shapes and placement of the clouds themselves almost remind one of a map of Europe, teasing the eye in the absence of coherent detail or boundaries. The crane stands as an artifact of technology in the midst of a natural background, as the sun's rays reflect from the Mediterranean, invisible just left of the frame.

"A Precipitous Sky," too, radiates a thoughtful quality. With its navy blue sky and tempestuous cloud cover expansively illuminated by the moon, the artist reminds viewers of nocturnal family road trips.

Eyes are drawn toward what looks like a solitary billboard on the highway linking Sidon and Beirut. It is a scene of pensive, vague substance, where few details are revealed, one that creates vast opportunities to imagine the painter's intentions. "An Efficient Moon," on the other hand, depicts a sphere suspended in the night, with pillows of clouds surrounding it. The satellite overhangs the brightly lit city, as man teases nature with its own self-sufficiency.

Baalbaki does an admirable job balancing urban and rural landscapes, but his depictions of villages suggest an unparalleled level of seclusion. On the surface, "The Lazy Lane" is devoid of life while successfully suggesting insects, birds perched in trees or garden snakes quietly slithering in the tall yellow grass. Still, he manages to remind onlookers that nature seldom comes without human interference.

The fence lining the dirt road, itself formed by constant car traffic, and the roof of the house in the distance delicately craft that perspective. Baalbaki takes everyday routines and places them at the forefront of his figurative depictions of nature.

Baalbaki's portraits seek to reinvent black-and-white photographic portraits of historical figures. The painting "To Baudelaire" (which takes a photo of poet Charles Baudelaire as its subject) is animated by something so simple, you might miss it without close inspection.

A small arrow is set upon Baudelaire's forehead and a yellow flower protrudes from behind his head. Both might simply allude to the technological mediation of a computer program like Photoshop. Yet the expression in the poet's eyes and in the contours of his face seem to ridicule and taunt spectators – as though he awaits the chance to blink or emerge, living, from the canvas.

The shadows that gather in "A Nocturnal Promenade" evoke an exemplary contradiction to the romantic atmosphere, a theme which is prominent in nearly all Baalbaki's work.

He is a contemporary artist with the profound ability to highlight his own skepticism of the changing architectural, cultural and social environment. He approaches it with ease and grace. You may be left wondering, are we witnessing reality or merely an illusion of the present day?

Oussama Baalbaki's "Spectres of the Real" is at Agial Art Gallery through Feb. 6. For more information, please visit [www.agialart.com/exhibitionnew.html](http://www.agialart.com/exhibitionnew.html)