

Beirut Art Fair's eighth edition highlights collectors' choices | Samar Kadi | AW

Beirut - The eighth Beirut Art Fair focused on the "unknown soldiers" of the art world — art collectors — through its central exhibition "Ourouba: The Eye of Lebanon," curated by London-based Rose Issa, who is an expert on the Arab world.

The exhibition, which took place September 20-24, featured a selection of 70 works by more than 40 artists borrowed from 20 public and private collections in Lebanon, and focused on artistic productions and acquisitions of the 21st century.

The selected works, which included paintings, photographs, sculptures, installations and videos, reflected on how artists respond to personal, national and regional issues the Arab world underwent during recent upheavals, Issa said.

"I was interested in what collectors have bought in the last ten years," she said. "I also wanted to see how all the turbulences and events that happened in the last decade starting from Tunis to Egypt to the wars in Syria, Iraq and Libya have affected the artists and how they expressed that situation."

Issa said she was interested to see how much money collectors put into acquiring works that are politically or aesthetically relevant to our period. "I wanted to get the pulse of the country. When we say the eye of Lebanon it is actually the eye of all the collectors," she said.

Works by artists from Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinian territories, Iraq and many other nations are found in collections in Lebanon.

"Our history, heritage and background are destroyed. I wanted to know to what extent the artists are bringing it back," Issa said. "The most powerful (works of artwork) are definitely by the artists who have suffered the most." The exhibition's title "Ourouba," which translates to "Arabism" or

"Arabicity," speaks for itself, said Issa. "It explores what is Arab identity, to what extent it has been damaged and to what extent we want to restore it. These are issues that are constantly coming to the forefront from different angles by different artists," she said.

Ayman Baalbaki's painting "Barakat Building," renamed as "Beit Beirut," depicts the pockmarked building on Beirut's old green line, symbolising what the Lebanese did to their own country and how much of it they destroyed.

Tagreed Darghouth's "Shall You See Me Better Now?" depicting a large surveillance camera, reflects the security scare that emerged from terrorism.

"Today, there are security cameras everywhere. Even in Europe you cannot go unwatched but it is not ordinary to be watched all the time," said Issa.

Iraq's Mahmoud Shobbar's mixed media on aluminium-street sign

"Welcome to Baghdad" is a poignant reflection on the insecurity that is part of daily life for residents of the Iraqi capital.

"Chic Point, Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints" a video by Palestinian visual artist Sharif Waked, is a humorous reflection on politics, power, aesthetics, humiliation and surveillance.

"I wanted to bring humour to the exhibition because people here (Middle East) have humour," Issa said. "The way the (Middle) East is represented is that we are all veiled, crying and our fathers are beating us, et cetera. I wanted to show that no, that is not true. We are interested in fashion. We are interested in love, in reconstruction, in our identity and also in fun things."

In addition to the exhibition, the eighth Beirut Art Fair featured 1,400 works by 230 international artists from 51 participating galleries and 23 countries, including 29 first-time participants.

Contini Art UK gallery displayed works by established artists such as Fernando Botero and young talents such as Egyptian painter Omar Hassan.

"Since it is the first time that we participate in Beirut's art fair we wanted to show a little bit of our work and give an idea of what Contini Art UK is. We show the work of both established and emerging artists, who are working together and learning from each other," said gallery representative Andrea

Maffioli.

Fatma al-Shebani, a Qatari visual artist and founder of Artistique Design gallery in Doha, is also a first-time participant in Beirut Art Fair. She exhibited her own work, along with those of two young artists, Karim Tamerji from Lebanon and Syrian calligrapher Akil Ahmad, whom she is promoting. Her pieces, "Rays of Glory" and "Hamadein," a neon work about the rulers of Qatar, carried messages inspired by the Gulf crisis and the embargo on Qatar. "I sought to soften politics through art. It is an aesthetic exercise of reflecting on politics in an artistic way," Shebani said.

The fair included space dedicated to renowned Lebanese writer and visual artist Gibran Khalil Gibran. Gibran's illustrations for the first English edition of "The Prophet" in 1923 were showcased alongside Algerian artist Rachid Koraichi's latest interpretation consisting of 49 drawings as a message of hope and peace.