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Drawing out a competitive streak



"Toi et moi." Double self-portrait, 2009. Chi.a ini.: on cardboard. Sharif Sehnaoui collection.

Maghie Ghali

BEIRUT: Poet/artist Laure Ghorayeb and her artist/musician son Mazen Kerbaj have always had a running competitive streak when it comes to their artwork. Along the way, they found a no-mans-land that allowed them to create work together, responding to each other's triggers.

"Correspondence(s)," their latest show up at Surssock Museum, shows their most recent efforts, as well as older works that show the evolution of their collaborative practices.

It was during Lebanon's 2006 war with Israel that the duo began sharing ideas, armed with two sketchbooks and a blog, they began responding to the war with daily sketches of the country's upheaval.

The notebooks are on display, with digitized versions letting views flick through on a tablet.

"Before the 2006 notebooks it was a competition, especially because Mazen criticized everything I did until he was 18-20 years old," Ghorayeb said in a pre-prepared interview.

"Around 2006, there must have been an event, an exhibition, which sparked a new respect for my work.

"What I like about him is that he has many ideas. He scares me so much with his ideas," she added.

"I tweak, I polish, but I don't have ideas like him. He has ideas."

It was in 2009 that the pair began working on the same canvas, creating a double self-portrait for Sursock's Salon d'Automne competition, which won the Jury Prize.

The figures are exaggerated, the open nostrils betraying Kerjab's touch, while the eyes, hair, beard and clothing tunic echo the precision and careful detail of Ghorayeb's style.

"We were very polite," Ghorayeb said, admitting it took time to relinquish control. "Once we quarreled. We were arguing like crazy over a little thing, I don't remember on what.

"Mazen cried, I cried, we had shouted, I told him I don't want to work anymore and we tore the drawings," she continued.

"After, Mazen asked me: 'But why are we arguing?'"

The dispute is part of the creative process, she says. They rarely worked together - Ghorayeb day drawing, Kerjab working by night, one provoking, the other reacting.

Since 2017, the duo has found a new, constructive, way of arguing.

The exhibition's centerpiece, "Entre Nous," is made from 70 linear meters of correspondence in the form of paper rolls. Like an Instant Messenger feed, the artists create pictures, pose questions, send updates and wait for the other to respond.

The idea struck when Kerjab moved to Berlin.

One night, Kerjab called his mother while drunk saying, "tomorrow remind me of the word 'roll.'"

"The next day he said: 'what are you talking about?' At first he couldn't remember and then he phoned to explain his idea - of writing a correspondence on rolls," she shared. "I take the roll, unroll it, then I write, I draw, and I leave two meters empty. I roll out another side, and so on, I roll out maybe 15 meters left empty for Mazen.

"Mazen, smart as he is, tells me that every time I draw or write a reaction, I have to put the date because it's a correspondence," she added. "It is as if you're writing a letter, and you're waiting for a reply. One day, I asked Mazen 'when will we stop the rollers?' He answered: 'when one of us will die.' And we did not talk about the subject again."

In the 2018 Biennial of Ateliers de Rennes, the duo undertook a collective artistic residency.

With 10 meters of paper roll, multiple Chinese inks and brushes, the two artists worked for seven days to produce the "Roll of Lovers," now on display at Sursock.

It depicts lovers from history or literature, like Adam and Eve, Tristan and Isolde and Antar and Abla.

"In this work, we organized well ... we left notes, warning each other what we were going to do," Ghorayeb explained.

"Mazen said to me 'I will color again here.' I went to sleep and it was finished when I awoke.

"Till late, Mazen was adding colors, and I'm afraid of colors. I told him, 'You're going to destroy it all, it is better to stop,'" she added. "When I express myself, it's always with black but Mazen, he likes colors.

"[In 'Entre Nous'] there aren't too many colors because I was [around] but when he's alone, he tends to put them everywhere. It's his style."

"Correspondence(s)" is up at Sursock Museum until Aug. 26.

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