

Lebanon's 10 Best Contemporary Artists And Where To Find Them

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The [Lebanese](#) art scene is in a perpetual state of contradiction, midway between collapse and rebirth. Beirut's urban chaos and the continuous threats of violence appears to encourage richly dynamic artistic production. In the last 20 years, many galleries have opened in [Beirut](#), giving a vital platform to generations of artists experimenting beyond the conservative restrictions purported by Lebanese official education. We discover more about ten of the best contemporary artists working in Lebanon today.



Ali Cherri, *Pipe Dreams*, 2011 – 2-channel video installation | Courtesy the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

Ali Cherri

[Ali Cherri](#) is a visual artist and designer working with video, installation, performance, multimedia and print. His practice addresses the socio-political history and situation of contemporary Lebanon. *The Disquiet* (2013) won him the Best Short Film Director Award at the Dubai International Film Festival. The video explores 'the catastrophe in the making', through an investigation into Lebanon's seismic history. Geographically situated on several fault lines, the country has witnessed a series of violent earthquakes. *Pipe Dreams* (2012) is a video originally conceived as a two-channel video installation as part of *Bad, Bad Images* (2012) in Paris. Cherri mainly used footage found on YouTube, emerging from [Syria](#), as these were the only images getting out other than those

that had been officially sanctioned by the government. These images were juxtaposed with footage of a historic phone call between Syria's late President Hafez El Assad and the Syrian astronaut Mohammad Fares. Cherri says: 'one of the functions of the work was to re-appropriate these images and make them tell stories. [...] images have power to make us dream'.

Cherri's work can be found at: [Galerie Imane Farès, 41 Rue Mazarine, Paris, France, +33 1 46 33 13 13](#); and the [Museum of Modern Art \(MoMA\), 11 West 53 Street, NY, USA, +1 212 708-9400](#)

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Akram Zaatari, Saida June 6, 1982-2002, 2013, loop, 80 seconds | Courtesy the artist & Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/ Hamburg

Akram Zaatari

[Akram Zaatari](#) is an artist and curator, working in photography, film, video, installation and performance. He co-founded the Arab Image Foundation with Fouad Elkoury, Walid Raad and Samer Moadad. Zaatari collects, examines and re-contextualises images, videos, sound and other documents that testify to the cultural and socio-political conditions of post-war Lebanon. His artistic practice engages with the ways in which such documents can influence, contradict and confuse notions of history and memory. Some of his work explores 'the mediation of territorial conflicts and wars through television and the logic of religious and territorial resistance', such as in his 'All is Well on the Border' (1997). Zaatari has also directed feature films such as *This Day* (2003) and *In this House* (2005), which consider the circulation and production of images in the context of physical division in the [Middle East](#). The videos are the result of Zaatari's personal archive of photographs, recordings and notes of personal and public significance that he collected during the war. The video installation 'Dance to the End of Love' (2011) comprises of videos made by Arab youth found on YouTube, examining the role of social media as a space that is both intimate and public.

Zaatari's work can be found at: [Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon](#), +961 1 566 550 and the [Museum of Modern Art \(MoMA\), 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY, USA](#), +1 212 708-9400



Fouad Elkoury, Balaton Airport, 2010, Chromogenic Print Diasec, 50 x 75 cm | Courtesy the artist and The Third Line

Fouad Elkoury

Building



Jalal Toufic, Saving Face, © 2003 | Courtesy the artist

[Fouad Elkoury](#) is a photographer and filmmaker. He studied Architecture in London before turning to photography to document daily life in war torn Lebanon. In 1984, his images were part of *Beyrouth Aller-Retour*, a book about the life of a war torn city. His passion for photography led him to co-found the Arab Image Foundation, a non-profit organisation who collect, preserve and study photographs from the Middle East, [North Africa](#) and the Arab diaspora. Unlike his younger contemporaries, Elkoury doesn't show images of a 'clandestine archive of Lebanon's civil war', rather he creates photographs that embody the spectre of civil war with humour. His black and white images of Egyptian film stars and derelict landscapes are posed against backdrops reminiscent of the work of Lebanese studio photographer Hashem el Madani. In 'The Lost Empire' (2014) at The Third Line (Dubai), Elkoury features images from his photographic journey through abandoned soviet military bases. The

series presents a topography of war, featuring landscapes and architecture affected by human conflict and left in desolation and ruin. Elkoury represented Lebanon in the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007 with the photographic series 'On War and Love' (2006), based on a diary written during the 33 days of war in Lebanon during the summer of 2006.

Jalal Toufic

Art Gallery, Building



[Jalal Toufic](#) is an artist, filmmaker and author who defines himself as a 'thinker and mortal to death'. He is of [Iraqi](#) and [Palestinian](#) origins – a mixed heritage that influences much of his practice. In 'The Sleep of Reason. This Blood Spilled in My Veins' (2002), Toufic documented the ritual slaughter of two cows and two sheep, in contrast to images of people sleeping. The video, as expressed by ZKM, attempts a 'religious

exaltation and glorious fulfilment of basic existence'. In his other works, he draws from rituals of martyrdom and penitence to explore the same concept as found in the religious traditions of Islam. Boris Groys in *'Ritualizing Life: Videos of Jalal Toufic'* writes: 'the videos of Jalal Toufic almost always lead the viewers to feel like witnesses of a certain public or private ritual'. In 'Ashura. This Blood Spilled in My Veins' (2002), he documents a public Shiite ritual, Ashura, the commemorative mourning for Saint Hussein Ibn Ali. 'Saving Face' (2003) documents another kind of ritual, that of politics and specifically during Lebanon's parliamentary campaign in 2000. Posters of candidates and their faces mix with and hide one another, blurring and merging their identities.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

[Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige](#) work together as artists and filmmakers, creating inextricably linked visual and cinematic artworks. The duo direct documentaries, such as 'Khiam 2000-2007' (2008), as well as feature films such as their most recent *Je Veux Voir (I Want to See)* (2008). Their work engages with Lebanese history, the civil war, the country's past and present socio-political situation and Beirut's changing urban and social scene. *Beirut, Urban Fictions* (1997), their first solo exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, included their early series 'Equivalences', 'Bestiaries' and 'Circle of Confusion'. During a talk in Abu Dhabi about 'Lasting Images (2013)', the artists explained about their practice: 'we don't show images of war. We show what war does to the images'. Their exhibition *I Must First Apologise...* (2014) at the Villa Arson in Paris, was the outcome of ongoing research and investigation since 1999 into spam emails and internet fraud. The show featured installation, sound, video, sculpture and drawing that unfolded like a dynamic and provocative narrative itinerary.

Hadjithomas and Joreige's work can be found at [The Third Line, Street 6, Al Quoz 3, Dubai, UAE +9714 341 1367](#); [The Solomon R. Guggenheim](#)

[Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY, USA, +1 212 423 3575; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 2RL, UK.](#)



Lamia Joreige, *I Cannot Stop Thinking About It*, Nights and Days Series, 2007, Lambda prints mounted on aluminum | Courtesy the artist and Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York

Lamia Joreige

[Lamia Joreige](#), an artist and filmmaker, is inspired by Lebanese history and explores the representation of war and its aftermath, particularly in Beirut. The essence of her practice lies in the concept of time – its recording, its traces and effects – as well as its role in delineating memory and the impossibility of constructing a complete narrative. 'Objects of War No.3' (2006), in the collection at the Tate in [London](#), is a single-channel video installation that 'examines the ways in which memory and trauma come to be embodied in material objects, sublimating the psychological effects of past conflict.' The artist seeks to present an alternative history to the one provided by mainstream media and records personal experiences and stories that would otherwise be forgotten. The photographic series 'Nights and Days' (2007) is based on videos and notes taken during the war of summer 2006 and expresses the passage of time and the transformations brought about by war. It juxtaposes notions of 'beauty' versus 'horror'. In her film *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003), Joreige draws a personal map of Beirut

through the memories of people she encounters and talks to on her journey along the invisible Green Line, which historically divided Beirut between East and West and was the site of military checkpoints and the scene of many kidnappings. Joreige represented Lebanon at the 52nd [Venice Biennale](#) (2007), with the interactive video installation *Je d'Histoire* (2006)

Joreige's work can be found at [Taymour Grahne Gallery, 157 Hudson Street, New York, NY USA](#), +1 212 240 9442; *Galerie Tanit, East Village Building, Beirut, Lebanon*, +961 76 557 662; and [Tate Modern, Bankside, London SE1 9TG, UK](#), +44 (0)20 7887 8888



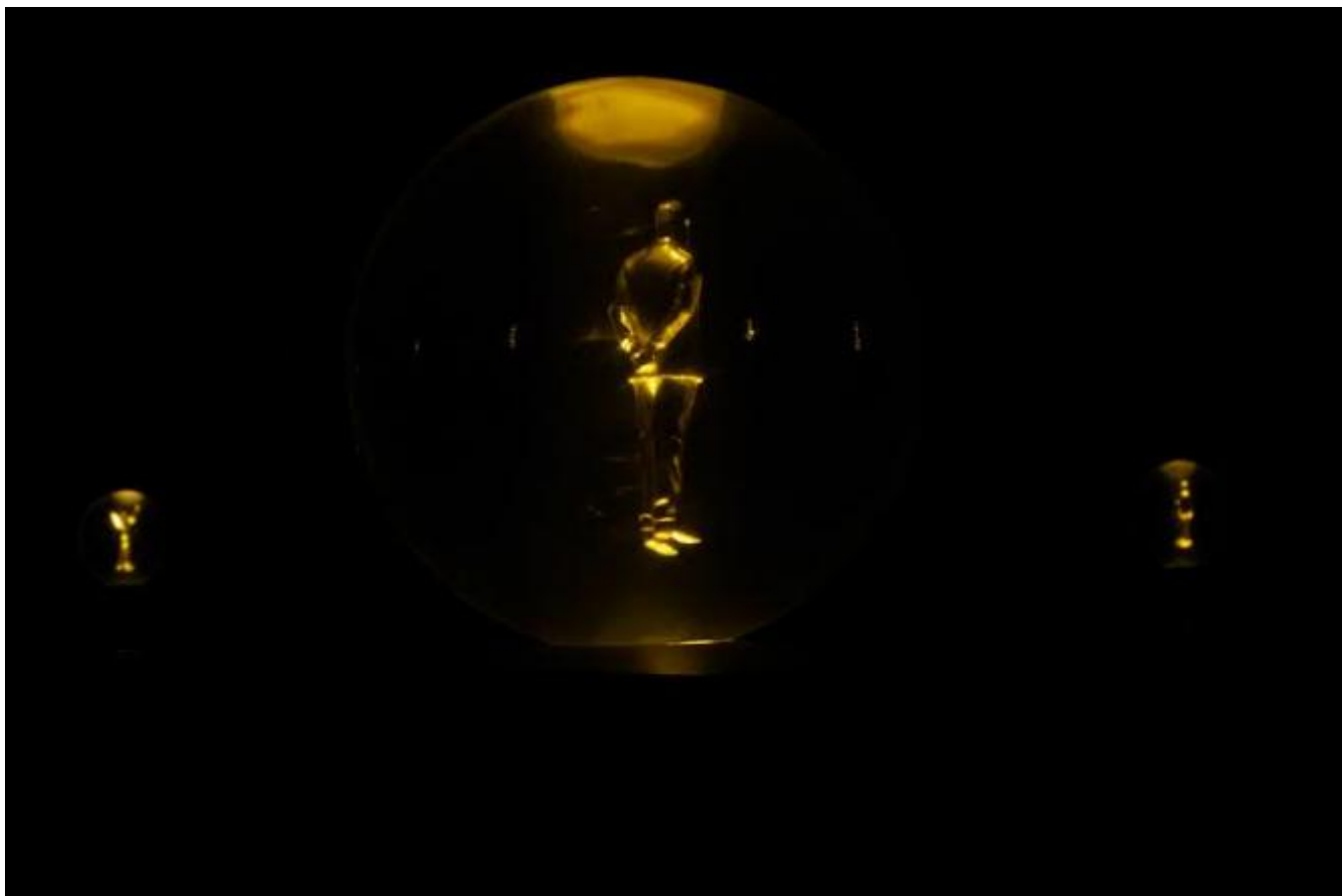
Mounira Al Solh *Sama'/Ma'as*, 2014 Double-sided patchwork textile curtain 275 x 286 cm, each Installation view Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut and Hamburg

Mounira Al Solh

[Mounira Al Solh](#) works with video, painting and photography. She

engages with issues related to the story of Lebanese immigrants and the socio-political and religious conflicts. She uses a fictional and, at times, even fantastical approach, through which she transforms the dramatic into the ironic. Her work links issues of personal identity with aesthetics, such as in 'As If I Don't Fit There' (2005), a video installation presented at the Lebanese Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007). The video explores her personal fear of ceasing to be an artist and her doubts about her own place in the art world, as she slowly takes on the identity of four fictional artists she presents in her work. In 'Rawane's Song' (2006), Al Solh expresses her 'refusal to talk about the war.' As critic Hans Beerekamp wrote, the video is a 'work of fiction about running away from reality and finding yourself.' Al Solh is also Editor-in-chief of NOA (*Not Only Arabic*) Magazine, the third issue of which will centre around 'Language and Schizophrenia', a topic she started working with in 2010. Her interest in spoken language and its effect on visual imagination can be seen in 'The Mute Tongue' (2010). In the video, she staged, in silent vignettes, 19 Arabic proverbs that she uses in daily life.

Al Solh's work can be found at: [Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon](#), + 961 1 566 550



Vartan Avakian, A Very Short History of Tall Men, 2013, Gold and synthetic glass | Courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries Athens – Thessaloniki

Vartan Avakian

[Vartan Avakian](#) is a multidisciplinary artist, working with installation, video and photography. His practice revolves around notions and related questions of scale, hyper-reality, simulacra, media, action movies, the boundary between reality and fiction, and how to access erased Lebanese history. Avakian is fascinated by the parallelism between synthetic and natural materials, as well as historical figures and their contradictory heroic and despicable aspects. His oeuvre occupies the space 'in-between' – where slippages and confusion arise and a myriad of possibilities can be created. 'A Very Short History of Tall Men' (2013) was the winner of the Abraaj Group Art Prize 2013. The work commemorates the forgotten leaders of failed coup d'état. The result of a detailed research in archives, libraries and online, it attempts to reconstruct the identity of these 'almost important' figures in history

through the minimal traces they left behind. These reconstructions take the best commemorative form: a golden statue in a triumphal, authoritative pose before a man's demise. The paradoxical nature of such heroic failures is represented in their precious appearance versus their diminutive toy scale. Avakian raises questions and reflects upon the role of commemoration, triumph and failure.

Avakian's work can be found at: [Kalfayan Galleries, 11 Haritos Str, 106 75 Kolonaki, Athens, Greece, +30 210 7217679](#)



Walid Sadek, On the labour of missing, 2012, Installation (Wall drawing – Plexiglass – Concrete bench), Variable dimensions, Galerie Tanit – Beyrouth, 2012 | Courtesy the artist and Galerie Tanit

Walid Sadek

[Walid Sadek](#) is a conceptual artist and writer, currently the Associate Professor of Architecture and Design at the American University of Beirut. His highly minimalistic practice ranges from investigating the violent legacies of the Lebanese civil war through a poetic and metaphoric language, to his later output, consisting mostly of theoretical texts, engaging with 'ways of understanding the complexity of lingering civil strife in times of relative social and economical stability'. His latest

works explore the ambivalence of living through what he calls 'a protracted civil war', seen in 'Place at Last' (2012) at Beirut Art Centre, featuring Sadek's work since 2004. In this piece, printed texts, silk-screened texts on walls and floor and wall objects are divided into three clusters – 'Learning to See Less', 'Love is Blind' and 'Mourning in the Presence of the Corpse'. 'Love is Blind' (2006) is an installation consisting of two parallel walls onto which Sadek places five captions, referencing paintings by Mustafa Farroukh, the founder of a national Lebanese art movement.

Sadek's work can be found at: *Galerie Tanit, East Village Building, Beirut, Lebanon, +961 76 557 662 (Beirut)*



Walid Raad, Views from outer to inner compartments, Untitled II, 2011, Wood, paint, 250 x 500 x 20 cm | Courtesy the artist & Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/ Hamburg

Walid Raad

[Walid Raad](#) creates video, photography and literary essays under his own name and that of [The Atlas Group](#), a fictional foundation. His practice engages with the history of contemporary Lebanon and particularly the wars between 1975 and 1991. The Atlas Group was established in 1999 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, through the location, preservation, study and production of audio, visual and literary artefacts. The documents are preserved in the group's Archive in Beirut and [New York](#). In the past five years, Raad has also engaged with the forging of art history in the context of the new art institutions that are proliferating in the Arab world, through a project called *Scratching on Things I could Disavow*. A spinoff of this can be seen in his exhibition at the Louvre *Walid Raad: Preface to the First Edition* (2013), in which he drew from a collection of Islamic artefacts to construct a fictitious narrative of transformation through a process of displacement and re-contextualisation of the display.

Raad's work can be found at: [Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon](#), + 961 1 566 55

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