

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Print

The beautiful children of a Franco-Arab affair



Laila Muraywid's "Fleh Opens and Blood Flows" (2009), polyptych of eight gelatine silver prints, 98cmx104cms Photo by Hasan Shaaban

🕒 May. 16, 2012 | 12:07 AM

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BEIRUT: Arab art has garnered increasing international attention over the last decade. Art fairs like ArtDubai and the Beirut Art Fair (née MENASART) have attracted thousands of visitors from around the world to look into the cultural production of the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

Art is becoming increasingly cross-cultural in expression, as global travel becomes easier and more artists choose to live and work among different countries and cultures.

The exhibition "Traits d'Union: Paris et l'art contemporain Arabe," nowadays on display at The Venue (Beirut Souks' self-confidently named exhibition space), explores the recent work of 13 Arab artists living between Paris and the Middle East. The "traits d'union," or hyphen, of the title refers to the hyphenated nature (hence the hybridity) of the Franco-Arab artists on show.

Exhibition curator Pascal Amel, editor-in-chief of "Art Absolument" magazine, teamed up with Beirut's French Institute to organize the show, which was staged in Paris last year and will travel to Yemen after its three-week stint in Beirut.

Title aside, the exhibition is not an encyclopedic overview of contemporary Arab art – lacking any representation from Jordan, Iraq or the Gulf. Nevertheless, the artists selected – most with ties to Lebanon, Morocco and Algeria, and one each from Syria, Palestine and Egypt, among them Taysir Batnaji, Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Khaled Takreti and Nermine Hammam – do provide a sense of the diversity of contemporary artistic practice, especially among Arab artists with direct links to Paris.

The local hero of the exhibition is Ayman Baalbaki, whose massive acrylic paintings come into their own in the enormous space of The Venue.

"Al-Moulatham" ("The Masked Man"), is particularly striking. A 2-meter-high portrait is one of Baalbaki's series of fedayeen, depicting black-haired, olive-skinned men wrapped in red-and-white kuffiya, rendered in rough daubs of acrylic.

Emblematic of the Palestinian freedom fighter, the kuffiya is wrapped around his head, enveloping all but his eyes and a hint of his hair.

In contrast with the kuffiya's red and white, the background is a riot of color, much of it provided by Baalbaki's canvas – a large cotton sheet adorned by a garish floral pattern. Leaf-like dabs of green and blue acrylic add to the verdant effect, only partially masking the chintzy flowers.

The painting combines patterns and motifs that are immediately attributable to two different cultures, playing with Western stereotypes of the Middle East. The depiction of the kuffiya can be seen to evoke the image of a veiled Arab woman as much as a fighter concerned with concealing his identity.

The black-and-white photos of "Version Soft," a series of self-portraits by Moroccan photographer Hicham Benohoud, depicts Benohoud's bald head and face arrayed in everyday items, making the series simultaneously playful and disturbing. Some of the works are reminiscent of a child dressing up with socks over his ears. Other suggest unorthodox implements of torture.

Syrian artist Laila Muraywid's photographs explore the human body in another light, focusing on the semi-nude female form and masking the face and head. "Flesh opens and blood flows" – a polyptych of eight photographs is a set of eerie, vaguely gothic images of two young women in bed, half wrapped in lace-like translucent fabric.

Mostly black-and-white with some ochre-and-brown sepia tones, the photos emphasize the bodies, partially wrapped in cloth, with flashes of naked limbs and bared breasts. The women cover or partially cover their faces with lumpy, scaly looking masks.

Also worthy of attention is Najia Mehadji, who was born in Paris but lives and works between France and the Moroccan town of Essaouira. Her series of four enlarged, white-on-black prints of organic looking swirls are made by an expert twirl of the paintbrush. Beautifully simple, these works are also suggestive, conjuring images of breaking waves, sand-worn shells and fabric whirling in motion.

Though rich in painting, photography and two-dimensional multimedia work, the exhibition doesn't boast much in the way of sculpture or installation – which may reflect the artists' inclinations as much as those of the curator.

"5 minutes," an installation by Lebanese artist Ninar Esbar, provides one of the exceptions. It consists of a row of 12 poles topped with light bulbs, intended to measure a five-minute stretch of time – the last moments before someone is shot by a firing squad.

The installation is one of the exhibition's more conceptual pieces, though the use of light bulbs as a visual means to measure time is reminiscent of Alighiero Boetti's famous 1966 work "Lampada Annuale" ("Yearly Lamp"), a light bulb in a box which unpredictably turns on for just 11 seconds a year.

No single exhibition can be expected to encapsulate contemporary art from every Arab country, or showcase every discipline. That said, "Traits d'Union: Paris et l'art contemporain Arabe" makes a good attempt to do so.

For anyone interested in contemporary Arab art – or Franco-Arab relations, for that matter – this exhibition is not to be missed.

"Trait d'Union: Paris et l'art contemporain Arabe" is on show at The Venue in Beirut Souks, until May 28. For more information please see www.traitsdunion.artabsolument.com.