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# BEING AYMAN BAALBAKI

by ANASTASIA NYSTEN ([HTTPS://SELECTIONSARTS.COM/AUTHOR/ANASTASIA-NYSTEN/](https://selectionsarts.com/author/anastasia-nysten/))

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Ayman Baalbaki, the magnetic icon of Beirut, stroking his artistic ingenuity by his presence and his work. His personal style is present in the various mediums he engages in. He is adventurous. He reconciles the precise with the chaotic.

Written by Wafa Roz, courtesy of Dalloul Art Foundation



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-young.jpg>).

Ayman Baalbaki  
aged 5 years old.

Ayman Baalbaki, a contemporary visual artist, was born in 1975 in Ras-el-Dekwaneh in Beirut, Lebanon. Originally from Adaisseh, a village in south Lebanon, his parents relocated to the Wadi Abu Jamil neighbourhood in central Beirut, where Ayman was raised. His father, Fawzi Baalbaki, and his uncle Abdelhamid Baalbaki (1940-2013) were both visual artists and educators. Also, Said, Ayman's brother, and two of his cousins, Oussama and Hoda, are now established visual artists. Ayman finished his secondary education at the Ahlieh School in Wadi Abu Jamil in 1994[1] and then earned his diploma in fine arts from the Lebanese public University in Beirut in 1998. He did a one-year mandatory military service before moving to Paris in 2000. Ayman studied *Art et Espace* at the *École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD)* in Paris from 2000 to 2002 and completed his D.E.A in the art of images and contemporary art at Université Paris VIII from 2002-2003. In the summers of 2001 and 2002, Ayman attended the Ayloul Summer Academy in Amman, Jordan, a programme led by renowned Syrian- German modernist Marwan Kassab Bachi (1934-2016), who later mentored Ayman.[2]

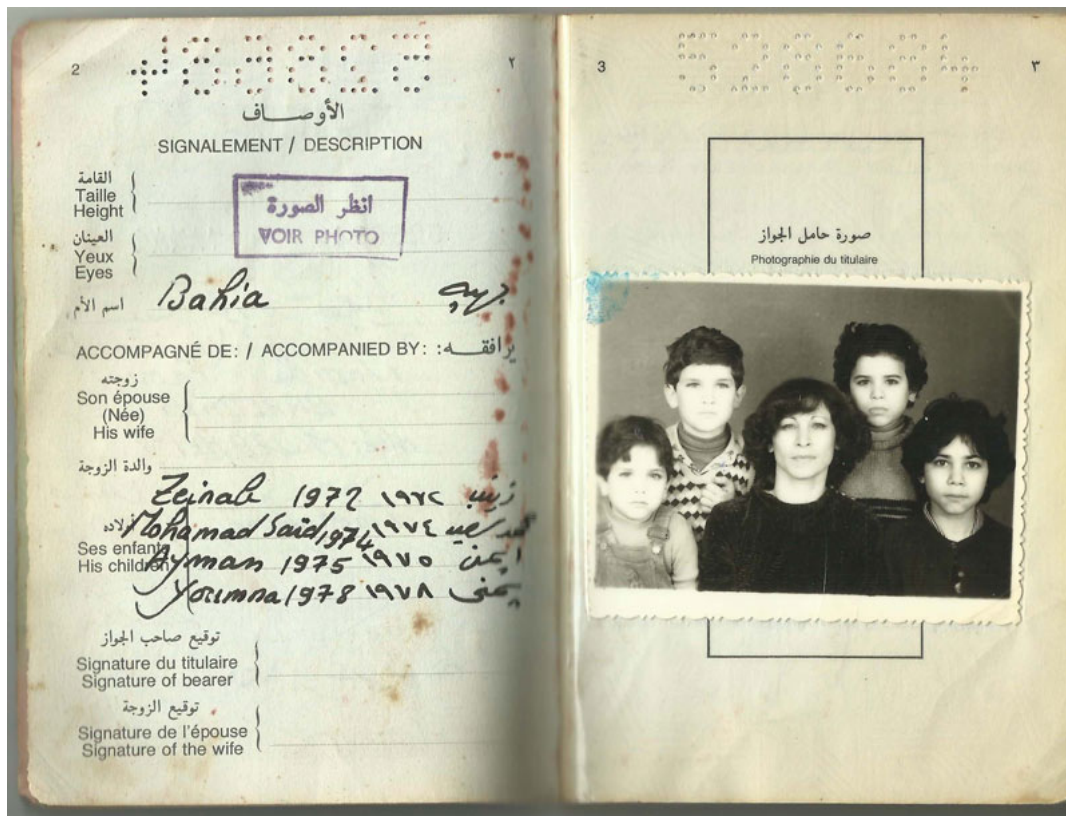


(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-young-1.jpg>).

Ayman Baalbaki  
aged 5 years old.

Baalbaki grew up during the Lebanese Civil War (1975- 1990). As a young boy, he witnessed shelling, snipers, destruction, and the Israeli invasion of Beirut. Wadi Abu Jamil, previously known as the Jewish quarter, became a refugee haven for Kurds and Lebanese southerners fleeing the Israeli assaults. Baalbaki and his family stayed there for nearly two decades. In 1995, they moved to Haret Hreik in the southern suburbs of Beirut.[3] Sadly, Haret Hreik was razed to the ground during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah July war, and the Baalbakis were displaced once again.

The memory of the Lebanese Civil War is a sensitive subject for many Lebanese. The war ended with the 1989 Ta'if Accord and the 1991 amnesty law that pardoned all political crimes before that date.[4] But, Baalbaki chooses to face the past or attend to a “devoir de mémoire,” as he puts it. A critical and imaginative artist, Baalbaki tackles the war’s painful events with cynicism, only to underscore the absurdity of war. Baalbaki’s body of work, including painting, installation, and sculpture, revolves around themes such as collective memory, loss, displacement, and identity. Rapidly, Baalbaki earned international acclaim for his staggering hyper-expressive paintings.



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-family-2.jpg>).

Family passport used to travel to France. Bahia Baalbaki and her four children, Zeinab (b.1972), Mohamad Said (b.1974), Ayman (b.1975) and Youmna (b.1978)

Baalbaki’s most alarming paintings are ones that depict havoc in the aftermath of war. These paintings belong to two ongoing series; one is *Tammouz*, which he started in 2007, as an elegy to the ravaged southern suburbs of Beirut, following the 2006 July war, and another, *Contre-Jour*, which he began in 2009.[5] *Contre Jour* is a play on words. It translates to *Against Daylight* in English, alluding to barbaric acts executed in broad daylight. Both series picture the destruction of individual architectural buildings in Beirut. In some of his paintings, Baalbaki depicts giant concrete bullet-riddled buildings in progressive collapse. Marked with despair and abandonment, most canvases amass crumbling ruins and debris. Baalbaki’s acrylics on canvas buildings usually occupy the centre of his canvas; black and grim like emblems of disaster. Baalbaki lightens the mood of his paintings with gaudy backgrounds toned in altered palettes of yellow, blue, green, or pink. At times, he mounts ready-made floral fabrics to the stretched canvas before he begins a piece.

Onto these flowery backdrops, Baalbaki applies paint in flat, thick, gestural brushstrokes, in an effort to re-enact modern warfare. Most paintings are untitled. Still, one is entitled *Immeuble Yassine*, 2010.[6] It features a ravaged building in Haret Hreik, where the Baalbakis once lived.

As a commemoration, Baalbaki paints Beirut’s civil war landmarks – famous hotels and high-rise buildings that are now peppered with shrapnel and bullets. Baalbaki

painted the Burj al Murr tower, the Holiday Inn hotel, the “Barakat sniper building” (recently turned into the Beit Beirut Museum), and “the Egg,” a nicknamed old

movie theatre. In these paintings, his work takes on a personal and political dimension. These buildings are located along the infamous “green line,” which once separated the militant factions of west Beirut from their rivals in east Beirut. The line was a footstep away from Wadi Abu Jamil.

Baalbaki speaks of how he was inspired by the floral fabrics adopted in the ‘Kitschy’ outfits of the Lebanese southerners and Kurds who inhabited Wadi Abu Jamil. Baalbaki envisages these people “kept their once-left gardens and orchards in the floral fabric of their outfits.” The floral fabrics also reminded him of the clothes that people hung on their balconies on laundry lines, and which they had to leave behind during the 2006 July war.[7]



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-young-8.jpg>).

Ayman Baalbaki's portrait by Gilbert Hage taken after winning first place at Empreintes, Joumana Rizk's Maraya Art Gallery award in 1996.

Baalbaki often incorporates text into his work, either in the form of metal stencil or neon light. For example, at the bottom of *The Sniper*, 2009,[8] acrylic on fabric mounted on canvas painting, Baalbaki places a horizontal stencilled copper sheet that reads *alqannas* in Arabic, meaning sniper. *Al-qannas* is backlit in striking yellow, while the painting features the tall hulky building of the Holiday Inn hotel, which was a sniper's nest during the war. The pop sign gives the painting a look of an Egyptian movie poster. Baalbaki's Holiday Inn testifies to the transformation of a touristic haven, a place where movies were shot, to a fortress of war. Likewise, in 2009, during a solo show in London, Baalbaki displayed a blue neon light installation on the glass façade of the gallery's entrance. It read "*Ceci n'est pas la Suisse*," also the title of the show. His 'pop art' intervention resonates with Rene Magritte's surreal image-word painting "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*;" it mocks the fact that Lebanon was famously called "the Switzerland of the Middle East" before the war. Baalbaki said, "I wanted to incorporate in my work a textual aspect which is omnipresent in Arab culture." [9]

Baalbaki's understanding of the significance of text in Arab culture goes back to his formative education years. His father was keen on teaching his children traditional Arabic poetry, specifically the pre-Islamic odes, *al-Mu'allaqat*. Besides learning the verses, Baalbaki gained insight from the thematic structure of the poems. Author Michel Fani was the first to relate Baalbaki's art, contextually, to the thematic structure of *al-Mu'allaqat*. Fani explains, "three themes are at the heart of pre-Islamic poetry: a special relationship to space and place, wandering, and identity." He then asks, "are they not exactly what guides Ayman Baalbaki's brush and inspiration?" [10]

Indeed Baalbaki depicts displacement and wandering in a sequence of installations entitled *Destination X*, which he started as early as 2004. Drawing from Arte Povera, he deploys pre-used or cheap everyday objects. *Destination X*, 2010, for example, which was shown in Liverpool in 2010, comprises a worn-out red Fiat placed on a rotating platform with a neon light rim around it.[11] The car is loaded with household furniture and bedding all tied up in a bundle on the roof of the vehicle: floral mattresses, pillows, bags, chairs, and plastic buckets. The bright colours and clumsy setup suggest frivolousness, even when the theme is not humorous at all. This play, in contrast between material and context, is also realised in Baalbaki's 2013 Murano glass sculptures depicting car tires and X-shaped metal barriers as border checkpoints. In one of his most celebrated and controversial sequences of portraiture known as *Al-Mulatham* (the masked), Baalbaki experiments with the oftencontradictory themes of anonymity and visibility.



Large-scale paintings, in acrylic on fabric laid on canvas, feature one gigantic bust view portrait of a *fida'i* (a freedom fighter) against a vibrant flowery background. [12] The head and face are obscured in a white and red chequered *keffiyeh*, and only the shadowed sharp eyes are spared. Though stunning in their animated patterns and bright colours, the portraits echo uncertainty and disillusionment. Baalbaki explains that these portraits “incarnate both hope and despair.” He also adds, “in every portrait, I seek to offer a different interpretation and a new way of reading.” [13] Curiously, author Michel Fani perceives *Al-Mulatham* as Baalbaki’s self-portrait in the guise of a *fida'i*. The word *fida'i* is usually associated with Palestinian freedom fighters. However, it generally translates to “the one who sacrifices himself” and is associated with Christ as saviour. Therefore, the *fida'i* can be anyone seeking redemption or salvation.



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-family-1.jpg>).

Fawzi Baalbaki and his children Zeinab, Youmna, Said and Ayman (from left to right). Photo taken during Eid by Ayman Baalbaki’s uncle Abdelhamid Baalbaki

In *Al-Mulatham*, Baalbaki examines the *keffiyeh* as an iconographic symbol. The *keffiyeh*, a white square cotton scarf chequered in black or red, was initially used as a traditional headdress and soon evolved into a glorified symbol of the Palestinian resistance. In the west, it has become a symbol of Islamist extremists. However, for Baalbaki, *Al-Mulatham* is neither a glorified symbol nor a symbol of terror. Though Baalbaki’s *keffiyeh* is imposing, it is painted with frenzied red and white brush strokes. The *fida'i* holds no weapons and is drawn against a ‘kitschy’ background. *Al-Mulatham* is a complex and often misread masked hero.

What is most remarkable about Baalbaki is his signature expressionist style. This is best exemplified in one of his seminal mixed media on canvas paintings entitled *The Middle East*, 2014 measuring 207.5×407.5 cm.[14] Approaching the large-scale artwork, one is faced with an explosion of paint in all directions – paint splashed, smeared, and dripping. The painting features the carcass of a wrecked Middle East Airlines aeroplane with the green cedar tree logo marked on its remaining red tail. At a closer look, the viewer discovers that cut-out prints and floral fabric lie underneath a thick stratum of a burgundy, grey, red and turquoise colour palette. This painting registers the bombing of the Beirut airport by Israeli forces in 1982; one more artwork dedicated to Lebanon’s eclipsed turbulent history.



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-5.jpg>).

Ayman Baalbaki (wearing white, fourth student on the upper left) and Said Baalbaki (wearing red, third student from the upper right) at school in Gentilly, France, 1985-1986

“Most of the time, I don’t do preparatory studies,” says Baalbaki. “I start to paint spontaneously, and the painting takes over. It’s very violent,”[15] he adds. The artist draws inspiration from German Expressionism, Neo-Expressionism, and Abstract Expressionism or Tachisme. Baalbaki applies paint in aggressive brushstrokes. At other times, he uses spray paint, or strikes masses of acrylic paint from a distance onto his canvas. He completes the desired picture in

A free soul and an inspiring artist, Baalbaki currently lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon.

- [1] Roz Wafa. Ayman Baalbaki Interview. Personal, May 16&19, 2020.
- [2] Issa, Rose. "Biography ." Essay. In Ayman Baalbaki, Beirut Again and Again, 100. London: Beyond Art Production, 2011.
- [3] Roz Wafa. Ayman Baalbaki Interview. Personal, May 16&19, 2020.
- [4]"Te Ta'if Accord that ended the war in 1989 failed to resolve or even address the core conflicts of the war, including the sectarian division of power in Lebanon," "Te Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War." Portail Sciences Po, October 25, 2011. <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/historiography-and-memory-lebanese-civil-war.html>.
- [5] Roz Wafa. Ayman Baalbaki Interview. Personal, May 16&19, 2020.
- [6] Tammouz Destruction & Loss,". In Ayman Baalbaki, Beirut Again and Again, 47. London: Beyond Art Production, 2011
- [7] Roz Wafa. Ayman Baalbaki Interview. Personal, May 16&19, 2020.
- [8] Issa, Rose. "Ayman Baalbaki in Conversation with Rose Issa." Essay. In Ayman Baalbaki, Beirut Again and Again, 18. London: Beyond Art Production, 2011.
- [9] "Breakfast at Baalbaki's – Artbahrain." Accessed May 21, 2020. <http://artbahrain.org/wp2017/breakfast-at-baalbakis/>
- [10] Fani, Michel. "Ayman Baalbaki: Searching f or Lebanon's Soul." Essay. In Ayman Baalbaki, Beirut Again, and Again, 25. London: Beyond Art Production, 2011.
- [11] " 'Errance' Displacement & Wandering ." Essay. In Ayman Baalbaki, Beirut Again, and Again, 76. London: Beyond Art Production, 2011.
- [12] Te Middle East,2014, mixed media painting is part of DAF collection.
- [13] "Breakfast at Baalbaki's – Artbahrain." Accessed May 21, 2020. <http://artbahrain.org/wp2017/breakfast-at-baalbakis/>
- [14] One of the Al-Mulatham, acrylic on fabric laid on canvas, paintings dated 2013. (250x200cm) is part of DAF collection.
- [15] Stoughton, India. "Ayman Baalbaki." Executive Life, October 13, 2016. <http://life.executive-magazine.com/art-culture/artists/ayman-baalbaki>.
- [16] Roz Wafa. Ayman Baalbaki Interview. Personal, May 16 &19, 2020

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