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Artist Greta Naufal's 'Exodus' takes on added measure of relevance

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REVIEW

BEIRUT: It was a tragic piece of irony that just moments before the scheduled opening of Greta Naufal's exhibition "Exodus," at Beirut's Goethe Institute on Wednesday evening, the bomb that killed MP Walid Eido and seven others exploded only a few hundred meters away.

Naufal's solo show, her third at the Goethe Institute in the past four years, takes inspiration from the plight of refugees around the world. In eight mixed-media works on cardboard, the artist explores the experiences of men, women and children who are forced to leave their homes due to violence and strife. Her pieces range from gestured and expressive to austere and abstract, yet each portrays a hauntingly minimalist image of her subject set against a moody, tempestuous painted background.

Several of Naufal's works illustrate figures who carry their belongings on their backs as they trod heavily through empty landscapes. One, titled "Exodus VI" and included in the Sursock Museum's 2006 Autumn Salon, depicts a half-clothed man holding a newspaper over his head for shelter. Another, titled "Exodus IV," shows a man shouldering the weight of an elderly woman, presumably his mother, and they leave behind an unseen but intimately suggested catastrophe. Naufal, who has made a long career of experimenting with new techniques, constructed these works primarily in black and white. It was the first time she has done so.

Naufal is an expressionist who considers it her duty to capture the themes and conflicts of her times. She began working on the "Exodus" paintings after reading newspaper accounts of the war in Lebanon last summer. However, the series debuted in April at the Goethe Institute in Dublin, where, in a prime example of context informing content, Naufal's images stoked memories of the Great Famine that caused some two million refugees to flee Ireland.

Perhaps because she is engaged with the tumultuous politics of her day, Naufal works fast and responds nearly in real-time to events taking place around her. After returning to Beirut from Dublin last month, she added two new pieces to the original six works that were exhibited in Ireland. One is a tribute to Red Cross workers who risk their lives in the service of aiding refugees. In another tragic piece of irony, Naufal finished the painting before two Red Cross volunteers were killed in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp last Monday.

Naufal's exhibition at the Goethe Institute also includes a site-specific installation created for the show. It consists of a room full of suitcases that Naufal borrowed from friends, painted white and stamped with the installation's title, "Necessite a aller et difficile de partir" or "Necessity To Go and Difficulty of Leaving."

The stark white containers represent the suitcases refugees must pack, often in haste, before fleeing from home. The installation recalls another, similar artwork that was on view last summer in Lebanon - Rayanne Tabet's "Fossils," a haunting collection of vintage suitcases covered in concrete and included in the group show "Moving

Home(s)" at Galerie Sfeir-Semler. Tabet's piece, which in turn recalled pieces by artists Rachel Whiteread and Mona Hatoum, was an attempt to question the tendency, all too familiar in Lebanon, to normalize situations of war. It was also an effort to put childhood memories to rest.

Naufal, for her part, admits that she keeps a packed suitcase by her door in the event that she too will have to leave her homeland.

The open room in the Goethe Institute where the suitcases are displayed resembles an airport, while the closed-circuit television screen that transmits images of the installation's viewers in the work itself represents the surveillance we are subjected to an age of fear. Naufal, in conceiving the piece, specifically asked the Goethe staff to clear out the room to heighten the sense of alienation.

Musical collaborations have become a hallmark of Naufal's public presentations of her work. In 2003, she showed a series of paintings titled "Jazz Portraits." Last year, when she mounted an exhibition, also at the Goethe Institute, grappling with the assassination of journalist Samir Kassir, the post-punk band Scrambled Eggs performed at the opening. For "Exodus," the Arthur Satyan Trio was scheduled to play Wednesday evening. Jazz has long held a place in Naufal's heart, she says, since she and her friends used to congregate in Beirut's jazz clubs during Lebanon's Civil War.

"We just had to listen to something else besides the war," she recalls.

Dramatist and producer Nagi Sourati was also scheduled to give a lecture after the concert.

While the bombing in Manara made Naufal's opening no normal cultural affair, one hopes the exhibition will wind down on June 22 as planned, with Nassri al-Sayegh presenting a lecture on famed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, followed by producer Lina Abyad performing a text by George Perec.

Naufal created her latest exhibition as a tribute to the troubles of Lebanon's past, but in light of the ongoing clashes in the North and the spate of bombings in Beirut, her work remains painfully relevant to the present.

In the catalogue that accompanies the show, Naufal writes: "Exodus proves everyday that peace is never acquired, barbaric deeds never defeated."

Sadly, the events marring her opening confirm the truth of Naufal's words.

Greta Naufal's "Exodus" is on view at the Goethe Institute through June 22. For more information, please call +961 1 740 524

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