

Profile

Hanibal Srouji A song for freedom

'Somewhere in the Orient, there is a magnificent bird with a celestial voice'. So began one of the tales Hanibal Srouji used to read as a child. He once wrote 'In our countries, in Lebanon in particular, people give food and nurture birds for their delicate colours and their wonderful songs, often as symbols of freedom',

TEXT BY ROULA EL-ZEIN

Freedom is at the heart of Hannibal Srouji's work. Lebanon, too, plays a role in his artistic expression. "For me, painting is a necessity. My work is always linked to the history of Lebanon and the Middle East," says Srouji, who left his homeland at the tender age of 18.

The year was 1976 and the civil war was raging in Lebanon. After many sleepless nights in the Southern city of Saïda, which had been blockaded for weeks, he and his family escaped to Cyprus aboard a ship which had docked in Lebanon to deliver flour. From there, he immigrated to Canada.

Srouji's nostalgia for the beloved paradise he had lost slowly gained momentum. When he returned to Lebanon 15 years later and saw his country still in ruins, the experience left an indelible mark. By accepting the reality of his country's position, Srouji was able to move forward and, as time passed, he began to revisit Lebanon more and more, and even became a regular exhibitor.

"In Lebanon, I found my place among other artists and colleagues for whom I have a lot of respect. But I must say that my presence in Beirut is mainly due to the work I do with Janine Rubeiz Gallery," says Srouji. "The gallery has given me the opportunity to do so many new things. I consider every exhibition as a project. It's not just about sending paintings I have here [in Paris] . I always think about every show and prepare specifically for each exhibition."

For Srouji, the renewed conflict in 2006 brought back terrible memories. Having left Saïda as a teenager, his city was experiencing a new tragedy 30 years later. "On 12 July, I was in my studio in Montreuil with Nadine Begdache [the owner and director of Janine Rubeiz Gallery] when we heard the tragic news," says Srouji. "She managed to go back to be with her family and I stayed in Paris. Faced with the terrible events that were taking place, I was in a state of shock. It was a disaster on

all levels. It was a human tragedy, an economical disaster and an ecological catastrophe for the country. After the civil war, the Lebanese had managed to rebuild ...but the country was transformed back into rubble in just a few days."

The series 'Memory and Transformation' encompasses both the themes of human emotion and of Beirut following the civil war. These large-panelled works evoke the crippled buildings and surfaces of the Lebanese capital. One can see how their bullet-marked walls are painted amid a torrent of emotion. In places, Srouji has even spread the acrylic over the canvas with his own sprawling hands, while in others he has used a blow-torch to create small holes and lines. These manifestations of the conflict's structural and emotional damage give the paintings colour and an additional dimension. "Sometimes, I also use a small bowl of cotton, which I soak in olive oil. Next, I set light to it and roll it around on the canvas. I push it with the tip of my thumb so it goes from side to side creating burns that, in the end, give the same visual effect as drawing."

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Srouji's exploration of the destruction created by errant particles and his experiments in other media on large scale canvases began, following his return to Beirut. As an artist, he sees the marks left by flaming cotton as akin to musical tones; visual sounds which he, as the choreographer of the scene, directs. "The particles are in perpetual movement..." says Srouji. "They remind me of the Lebanese people who are constantly on the move." Although he still has concerns for his homeland and fellow countrymen, Srouji has not lost confidence. "I am sure that the Lebanese, with all their differences, are capable of rebuilding the country. After 15 years of fighting each other, we have learnt that we are all bound to this little piece of land, and there is no way to survive except to unite. It is this specificity of Lebanon, with its multi-confessional and - multi-ethnic society, and the liberty and tolerance which it allows, that makes it the target of so much aggression."

In his large studio in the Parisian suburb of Montreuil, one can see how Srouji is struggling to emerge from the darkness. Some of the canvases adorning the walls, both finished and unfinished, are so light in texture and colour that one can see Srouji's 'lost paradise' resurrected.

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The "healing" period, as he calls it, relates to works which address the state of Lebanon. It started in 1996 with a series which featured colourful, yet uniform, strips of canvas juxtaposed with ones of a more sombre nature (some even carry charred ends). Whether a wall hanging or mounted side by side in a frame, Srouji ensures no strip is displayed alone. However, their arrangement is random and the composition temporary. "They're not just something to look at, but to rearrange as well," he says. "It's all part of the game."

Srouji applies a playful approach to his latest works too. This time, the paintings are square and can be hung alone or joined to form diptychs or triptychs. By changing the combination, Srouji offers an almost infinite variety of interpretations, depending on the sequence of the works. By turning each painting upside down, a whole new range of possibilities opens up, which in turn pours forth new meanings. "My work is in constant evolution; free, colourful but grave in its allegory. It is a work of variable dimensions and temporal existence," says Srouji, who has personal experience of what it is like to be uprooted and move from one world to another.

Srouji has spent the last three decades travelling the world, exploring new places and experimenting with different modes of expression. Perhaps it is fate that the artist/wanderer carries the same name as the great Carthaginian general who scoured the world but always carried a deep love for his home/and. From Saïda, he pursued formal studies in art at Concordia University in Montreal, before moving to Paris where he has been living since 1989. A disciple of drawing and painting from an early age, Srouji was waylaid by science for a while before returning to the artistic fold and graduating with a Master's degree in Fine Art. His thesis focused on the role of the objects in painting "not as a representation but as the object itself in sculpture, painting and installations."

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During the research for his paper, he spent several months in the city of Nîmes in the South of France, a place he regularly visited once he became Assistant Professor at Canada's Concordia University. "I used to take my students there for an intensive month of painting. I was planning to organise a similar thing for students from Lebanon; to bring them to France for summer courses in painting, drawing and museum visits... This is an idea, but still a feasible one," says Srouji who continues to educate the next generation from his base in Paris.

Srouji does not teach painting anymore (he stopped in 1993) but is indulging in his scientific interest once again as a computer programming tutor. "I was interested in computers from the very beginning," he says. "in 1980, I saw my first mouse. Now, 20 years later, I have reinvested in computing and I am currently teaching artists computer drawing skills. I am still in education and run the drawing section at a photography school." Of course, Srouji spends a lot of time tucked away in his studio. His adventures in fire, rust and water add force to his art. From his deliberations in the pure aesthetic, to investigating the representational force of the abstract, Srouji allows the interpretation of his work to be almost limitless. Every one of his realisations comes with a story and a language. It is the fruit of a thought, a decision, and an unremitting desire to express.

Hanibal Srouji is represented by Janine Rubeiz Gallery in Beirut, Lebanon.

June Kelly Gallery in New York, USA.

Eulenspiegel Gallery in Basel, Switzerland.

Janet Rady Fine Art, London.

For further information, please visit www.hanibalsrouji.com