



Hanibal Srouji, *Cage XIII*, 2006, Acrylic and fire on canvas, 73 x 146 cm

**You were born in Beirut in 1957 and left your homeland and emigrated to Canada during the first part of Lebanese Civil War in 1976. You returned to your country many years later. Please talk a bit about the childhood memories you have of Lebanon, and how these images appear in your artwork?**

It took me thirty-five years to get back. We left at the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War in 1976, on the first cargo boat to come to the port of Saida. [At that time], the city was surrounded and no boats were allowed. It was a funny feeling seeing the land disappear in the distance, engulfed under water, as we headed away from Lebanon and out to sea. This vision has accompanied me since.

When I was a child, I could look at the sea every day. It was always there, reassuring - this horizon and the world beyond it. Forced to leave, we were sad and excited, dreading the unknown. It was a long trip, although we were not going far. It was very emotional.

This image is depicted in my latest large vertical painting series entitled "Land/Sea", which I started in 2009, a year before I finally moved back to Beirut. It was a funny conjecture, a kind of prediction...

**When you lived outside of Lebanon as a diasporic artist, did you feel a sense of creative freedom? Is it different now that you have returned home? How?**

I had just finished high school when the family arrived in Canada. I ended up studying art at university. Initially, I was more interested in science and later on social science. I finally concentrated on art as a field of study. I found it was an open field, where all my varied interests could converge.

I have always viewed art making as a space for research and expression. The very act of creating art includes many discoveries. I did not know much about art, and I had to learn everything! The only advantage that I may have had was this *naïve* desire to say something.

Later, I started looking at art throughout history and the artists who were presenting their own interpretation of freedom.

Regarding being a diasporic artist and is it different if I am outside or inside? I don't think so. When I was abroad, I was very concerned with the situation in the country and the region. I was more concerned because of the distance, the news that focuses on dramatic events.

Once inside, I live the events. I share the tragedies, the sorrows, as well as the joys and the happy moments. Being home allows me to be in direct contact with the present, as well as my past and permits momentary glances into what the future could be.

Finally, creative freedom is something that has to be actively created and earned. It is deeply personal and a continuous struggle. For me personally, it is synonymous with inner peace.

**Is it possible to achieve liberation and a sense of freedom through the creative process? How?**

When an artist has come to grips with the means of production technically and visually, when the work is highly personal and genuine, when everything in the composition of the artwork is an absolute necessity and relates to meaning and when we embark, as viewers, on a challenging journey, then I believe, yes, art *is* a liberating act. It opens new *free* visual spaces of liberty for the eye, the mind and the soul.

I get very excited when I see an artist showing me "Look where I am, what I am thinking about and how I put it all together." It may not be a matter of complexity or high sophistication - it could be as simple as: "Look how green is *my* green, open, fresh, tender and free! Enjoy!"

**Despite experiencing the trauma surrounding Lebanon's Civil War and tensions that have arisen in a post 9/11 world, do you employ an aspect of "play" in your work? How?**

My work is essentially autobiographical and represents the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War, the effects relating to the 9/11 drama itself and the aftermath that concerns us all. Although the subject is serious, it does not mean that I cannot examine or tackle it with fresh eyes and have hope. My first reaction to violence was, naturally, to try to sublimate it.

Looking at the impacts of the gunshots on the buildings of Beirut, they looked amazingly similar to the ones that were in Belfast, Baghdad, or any other city in the world. These same marks became my composition "tools" in the 1990's. Fire became an element that I play with to mark the canvas, to draw with.

**Please tell us more about what fire and the burnt parts on your canvases depict. What technique/s do you use to get this particular effect?**

"Playing with fire" became a sign or rather a symbol to voice. It is pure energy. Harnessing the use of fire was fundamental to the evolution of mankind. It is essential to create, build and prosper or it can be designed to devastate. When let loose, it can eat and destroy everything. It is a matter of choice.

"Play" is essential to being able to create. Passing through a dramatic [event] doesn't abolish hope or the will to carry on. The debris of armed conflicts can be recycled, directly or symbolically, just as the empty shells of Kalashnikovs became the medium for artist Alain Vassoyan, who was a child during the Lebanese War. Vassoyan's first artwork was a metal "Tree", made with the brass shells of machine guns. It launched his career in sculpture and installation.

**You have more recently been working with neon. How did you come to work with neon and what aspects of this medium do you enjoy working with the most? And what do you find the most challenging?**

My recent works combine neon, fire and paint on canvas, referencing my childhood memories of Beirut in the 1960's and early 70's when neon signs lit the centers of the city. Beirut, for those who remember, was a major cultural and commercial center in the Middle East, before the outbreak of the Civil War put out its lights for more than twenty years.

These works are meant as signs of rebirth and light, in spite of difficult times - light and colour on burnt canvas. They hang, also, as a tribute to the hopeful movements of rebirth that are taking place in the Arab world today.

It recalls the memories of the little boy who I once was, before the war. When I was young, I visited a sign manufacturer in Beirut where my relatives worked. It was fascinating to see the artisans work. It was magical images and letters appeared. Glass tubes were heated and fashioned according to the drawings. Lines, colours plastic shapes, and neon lights were amassed all over the space. When I came back to Beirut, I found it was now called "Neon National". It had moved, but was still manufacturing neon. It was with great joy that I found an old stock of old tubes under a heavy layer of dust. These glass tubes that are my age, maybe even older.

These works [and series] remain, for me, a direct homage to all the anonymous artists, designer, workers and artisans who were part of the cultural and social rise in the past. My last exhibition was a tribute to, namely my uncles, the artist and designer Victor Essayan, equally and dearly to Eduard Akel, a glass Maestro, and all the anonymous creative people of the past and the present.