

Print Close

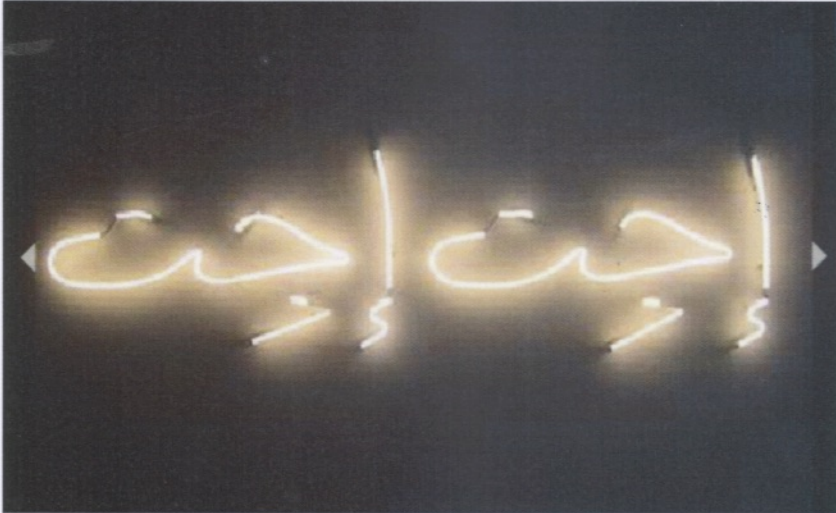
NOW

www.nowlebanon.com

## Narratives from Lebanon

APEAL's London exhibition showcases the works of Lebanese artists

Laura Allsop



Ayah Bdeir's *Elusive Electricity* or *Ejet Ejet* is a commentary on the conditions of living with unpredictable electric power cuts in a country that strives to be very modern.

(Photo courtesy of the curator)

"A foreign film with subtitles" is how curator Juliana Khalaf describes *Subtitled: With Narratives from Lebanon*. The exhibition, showcasing the work of over thirty contemporary Lebanese artists, is the second of its kind outside of Lebanon organized by the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL), following a successful first outing to Washington DC last year.

Artists have been grouped together for this exhibition at the Royal College of Art, one of the UK's most prestigious art schools, and work across media and subjects. Some are well-known internationally, such as film and video artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige and painter Ayman Baalbaki, while others are new to British audiences.

The last major exhibition of contemporary Lebanese art in the UK was *Out of Beirut* at Modern Art Oxford in 2006, in which artists showcased their ongoing preoccupation with themes including war, trauma and memory, even as the 2006 July War was raging. War continues to play an important part in the work on display as part of *Subtitled: With Narratives from Lebanon*. Yet Curator Khalaf has structured the exhibition such that it is one of many parts, in an attempt to convey both the particularities of life and the conditions of artistic production in Lebanon. Duly, she has divided the show up into five themes: "War-torn," "Constructing Narratives," "Bittersweet Narratives," "Cultural Narratives," and "Blurred Narratives."

A smart crowd attended the opening night on Thursday, which was accompanied by a panel discussion featuring some of the artists in the exhibition. How to reclaim a city, asked Lebanese artist Nada Sehanoui during a presentation of her work, when the scars from the-conflict are still felt today? She described the amnesty following the war as a collective amnesia, producing a fragmented reality and indeed, much of the work on show is preoccupied with memories of Beirut during the war. But the artists do not fetishize the ruined city, something easily done in the West. Hadjithomas and Joreige's 2001 video, *Rounds*, features regular collaborator Rabih Mroué driving alone around Beirut and musing on the city. But Beirut is never visible, the light outside the car is so overexposed that the car seems surrounded by a bright

fog. We are free to imagine the city from Mroué's piecemeal observations, which end with a description of the sea highway, constructed from the ruins of the war-torn city. "Don't be too moved," he says, offhandedly. Other works, such as Ayman Baalbaki's 2011 painting of the Bourj al-Murr tower, function as a hazy document with the monolith seemingly isolated in time.

While the past continues to exert a hold on artists, the present is just as much an inspiration. Sehanoui's installation *To Sweep* features a sea of broom heads, in front of which are scraps of paper heaped like confetti and bearing words including "terror" and "dictatorship." It was made toward the end of 2010, just a few weeks before events in Tunisia heralded the Arab Spring. "To sweep seems like one of the more common acts in our lives; from the simple daily chore of cleaning one's home to the more painful attempt to sweep up after conflict to sweeping up after a peaceful revolution. To sweep is an act that is essential to starting again, to rebuilding one's life," the artist explained.

The domestic sphere is further explored in Gilbert Hage's 2009 photographs of the interiors of Lebanese-Armenian homes, all of which feature in some way images of Mount Ararat. These depopulated interiors quietly evoke the conditions of exile in which many people are forced to live and the ache for a faraway homeland, suggested by the images of the distant peak, which inevitably accompanies displacement.

Meanwhile, for "Bittersweet Narratives," Ayah Bdeir's commissioned work *Elusive Electricity*, a neon work featuring the words "Ejet, Ejet" - Arabic for "it came, it came" - refers to the erratic, interruptive nature of electricity in Lebanon. "We always have this image of Beirut being the party city and people going there for the pleasures of the lifestyle," said Khalaf. "And at the same time, there are always gradations of pain we have to endure, like for example we still have electricity problems today."

Contingency emerges as the dominant condition of artistic production in Lebanon, as artist Nadim Karam, whose painting *The Massacre* recalls Picasso's *Guernica* with its greyish, twisted forms, highlighted during a presentation at the panel discussion entitled "Stories in Moments." It is possible to produce art, he said, but in snatched moments, in-between emergencies.

In spite of this contingency, Lebanese artists have in the last decade shown remarkable efforts to express themselves and support each other's work. Khalaf puts this down to the self-starting nature of the artistic community there. She says that though the country is currently lacking public institutions for viewing art, they will come in the future, as with the *Beit Beirut* cultural center, slated for completion in 2013.

In the meantime, APEAL is playing a vital role in bringing artists from Lebanon onto an international stage. "It is in its adolescent stage," Khalaf said of the country's cultural development. Judging from the work on view as part of *Subtitled: With Narratives from Lebanon*, it is surely hitting its stride.

*The exhibition runs from November 3 until November 6 at the Royal College of Art in Kensington Gore, London (SW7 2EU). For more information, please click [here](#).*



Post this article on your website