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Lebanon's art scene

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Pascal Hachem's 'No Condition is Permanent' (2007)

The directions to Lebanese artist Pascal Hachem's studio include these enigmatic details: "Near Cinema Vendôme (used to exist – now it is an empty plot). There is a stair (a long one)." Hachem, born in Beirut in 1979, lives and works in a small concrete bunker at the bottom of a large house on a steep hill in the hip district of formerly Christian East Beirut, Gemmayzeh. Constantly under threat of demolition, the area is a picturesque mix of Ottoman, French mandate (1920-1943) and modernist architecture, and a warren of fashionable bars, boutiques and restaurants. As the gap where the cinema once was testifies, what civil war and Israeli incursions have failed to demolish, Beirut's thrusting developers have their eye on. Hachem puts it succinctly: "All the city I knew is disappearing. The sound of the war has given way to the sound of construction. Beirut is a noisy city."

Hachem's studio, by contrast, is a haven of quiet order. One wall is hung with a series of mouse traps of differing designs. A row of antique hammers bought in Cairo are lined up on a workbench. We drink freshly crushed apple juice and eat twists of flatbread containing thyme, to counter the heat (there is no air conditioning, here in our mouse hole). On his laptop, Hachem illustrates projects accomplished in Zurich, Bern, Rome, London and here in downtown Beirut. Next week, Hachem will open his first solo show in London, at the gallery of Tunisian gallerist, Selma Feriani.

A designer by training, his work sometimes involves the construction of bizarre working machines; sometimes the work is a performance or a photograph or an intervention in a public place (the sale of miniature crescent shaped buns, boxed up like tourist gifts, with a political message on the base of the boxes, at a festival outside Beirut).

He once installed 50 chicken feet sprayed gold on plinths in the French Cultural Centre in Beirut and called the piece "Nausea". At Art Dubai this year he constructed a machine that drove three parallel rows of miscellaneous kitchen knives bought in the Dubai market very slowly upwards through a fibreglass table covered in sand to recreate the Dubai skyline. In Rome in July he placed 2,000 forks overlapping in concentric circles, touching a central white plate, inside the first-century BC Pyramid of Gaius Cestius, and then fixed a machine to jiggle the plate at regular intervals, moving the forks as if they were a land mass.

"For me it is like the army, because there are so many. The man who ordered the tomb organised food for the people. Today there are so many more forks that need to be fed."

He remarks of this variety of approaches and media: "I want to keep my position where I can be very flexible. A gallery has to give me a platform and a moment. I cannot be asked to produce such and such a piece. Always with my shows it is a risk, it is at the last minute." If the accomplishment is testing, so is the inspiration. To the question "What does Beirut give you?" he answers immediately, "Tension. I love to be here, I love the challenge of the city. To exist in this city is what inspires me."

The contradiction that Hachem lives out, in common with many other Lebanese artists of his

generation, is that of belonging to a highly developed artistic community, within a city and a state midway between collapse and wild rebirth. The daily combat with urban chaos – a city constantly transforming, traffic in permanent deadlock and intensified by continuing political instability – is matched by a longer term fear of renewed outbreaks of violence with Israel on the southern border. For the last 20 years, however, in spite of an almost total lack of state support, without public art galleries or non-profit exhibition spaces, with only the most conservative fine art education available within Lebanon, a vital alternative infrastructure for the making and exhibiting of contemporary art has developed within Beirut.

In defiance of the difficulties confronting them a small number of curators and artists, using funds from private individuals and institutions both within Lebanon and abroad, has consistently nurtured a creative avant garde. Independent organisations such as the renowned Ashkal Alwan group of artists, the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut DC, Irtijal, Né à Beyrouth and others, have built audiences and encouraged critical conversation both within Lebanon and with other independent arts organisations in the wider Middle-Eastern and North African region – in Amman, for instance, Cairo, Alexandria and Istanbul. Individual gallerists have also encouraged ambitious work and brought it into the wider world: Sandra Dagher through her own artistic space, Espace DC, and now as co-director with artist Lamia Joreige of the first non-profit public space in Beirut, the Beirut Art Centre, opened in January 2009; Saleh Barakat of Agial Gallery, co-curator with Dagher in 2007 of the first Lebanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale and commercial gallerist Andrée Sfeir-Semler, who, based in Germany since 1985, opened a large white space in an old industrial district of Beirut in 2004.

As the global art community began to turn its attention to the Middle East a decade ago, they found in Lebanon an art scene already mature and rapidly evolving, with artists ripe for invitation to art fairs, festivals, residencies and group shows abroad. It is the latest generation that Selma Feriani is keen to introduce to Londoners in the autumn, following the show of Hachem with solo exhibitions of Ninar Esber and Ziad Antar. As she puts it: "The emergence of this fascinating art scene in a region with such a rich history is too little known about in the west."

As the hopeful signs ("Beirut is back on the map"; "Beyrouth revît son age d'or") pasted on building sites around the city remind us, until 1975 Beirut had been a significant centre for trade, commerce, banking, and tourism, a Mediterranean hot spot, as well as a dynamic hub for Arab cultural and intellectual life. The Lebanon's many-stranded cultural inheritance – Armenian, Ottoman, French, Arabic, Palestinian, Christian and Muslim of many denominations – and links with a wealthy diaspora worldwide had always made it one of the more accessible countries of the Middle East, with a sophisticated social and cultural life. In spite of a vital contemporary literature and cinematographic scene, however, there was nothing comparable in the fine arts.

It was Lebanon's bitter and destructive 15-year civil war (roughly 1975-1990) that paradoxically stimulated the development of a distinctively Lebanese visual art tradition. Since then three generations have grown up under siege. For the first "War Generation" of artists, bearing witness to the tragedy of war was their means of creative survival. The second generation, who began exhibiting in the 1990s, but had grown up either within the conflict or in exile from it, found their role in the complex socio-political context of a country recovering from trauma. On the whole rigorously conceptual, nurtured by the fiercely high-minded curator Christine Tohme, one of the founders of Ashkal Alwan, the majority use film, video, photography, installation or public intervention – there is very little that is pure painting or sculpture.

One of the best known figures internationally in this generation is Walid Raad, who is being given a solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery in the autumn. A veteran of Dokumenta and biennials the world over, his work, like that of many of his contemporaries, is inspired by the need to research and archive the past from a determinedly political stance in the present. His most famous project is produced under the rubric of The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, which gathers audio, visual and literary artefacts, mostly associated with the war. It plays with two conceits: it honours the ideal of group action in a time of crisis, whilst in fact being the work of one man; and it seems to narrate a coherent contemporary history of Lebanon while in fact eluding any one reading of the fragmentary, partly factual, partly fictional, evidence it musters.

The third generation, Hachem's generation, born at the end of the 1970s or later, had only really just got started, in a spirit of optimism, when, in July 2006, war with their enduringly hostile neighbour, Israel, erupted with shocking ferocity. Over 34 days, besides the severe human costs, much of Lebanon's already fragile infrastructure was laid waste and its economy devastated. As artist Zena el Khalil expressed it in her note on her work in a group show in Beirut and Turin in 2008, "I was born in war. Everything around me now is war. I cannot remember a time when there was no war."

The difficulty for these artists is to escape that war, both as seductive subject and as the defining significance, for outsiders, of all their work. Ninar Esber, a performance and video artist, who was brought up in Paris but returned in January to Beirut, insists that "My work has nothing to do with the war in Lebanon. It has to do with universal feelings of fear, anxiety, loss." Ziad Antar, an artist using photography and video, also educated partly in Lebanon, partly in Paris, also resists pigeonholing: "The only question I ask myself with every piece is 'What is it to make a video?'." At the same time, he

acknowledges that the persistent charming humour in his work is there to "give a moment of hope: sadness is easy, humour is a challenge." The day we arrive in Beirut there is a spat between Lebanese and Israeli forces on the border. Antar reminds us that this was how the war started in 2006: "But forget the stress, live other stresses. We have been at war since 1948."

Pascal Hachem at Selma Feriani Gallery, London, October 14-November 27 2010; Ninar Esber, December 2010; Ziad Antar, March 2011; ***www.selmaferiani.com***

Installation in St George's Church, Mayfair, scheduled for January 2011

Walid Raad at Whitechapel Art Gallery October 30-January 2 2011

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