

## AYMAN BAALBAKI

Beirut Art Fair, 2019

In his latest intervention, Ayman Baalbaki presents a painting of the Piccadilly Theater in its present ruined state, and a larger-than-life-size sculpture of the torso of a masked militant, *al-mulatham*. The two artworks crystallize the themes of his artistic practice, which concern the legacy of the Lebanese Civil War and its protraction in everyday life. More specifically, Baalbaki's work has engaged with the question of political militancy through the representation of the pre-war figure of *al-mulatham*. He has also consistently relied upon the trope of the ruin in his painting.

In his painting of the Piccadilly Theater, Baalbaki presents a vista of empty theater seats, rendered from the perspective of a ghostly stage presence. Vigorous brushstrokes of corporeal reds and deathly blacks that make up the abandoned hall are juxtaposed by seemingly discolored yellow, gray and beige contours in the arched building's structure. The remains of this Hamra fixture of the pre-war years appear like a relic of modernity, a modernist remnant which records the passage of time, but also as an anachronism – a fragment of a future past. More curiously, however, the future past that Baalbaki records is also our presentist contemporaneity; the ruin of the Piccadilly Theater was itself the site of a fire in the year 2000.

Baalbaki's sculpture of the militant's torso is monumental but ironic in its resemblance to a toy soldier – a resemblance that is achieved in its material (resin) and military colors. With this sculpture, Baalbaki intends to invoke the spirit of the toys of his childhood years. Its scale ambivalently highlights the gravity and frivolity of political militancy without explicitly taking a position. Baalbaki neither glorifies nor deplores the *mulatham*; he does not lionize him, but he also does not admit the defeat of past struggles.

Starting from concrete instances related to the Lebanese Wars, Baalbaki's work should be considered within the broader global context of 1990s artists who ruminate on the legacy of modernism in an aesthetics of ruins.