

In the pre-Islamic period, poetry was the only portable tool of self-expression, and memory was the ultimate means to safeguard nomadic culture

AT HOME IN THE WORLD

TEXT BY STEVEN TATE • PORTRAIT BY THIERRY VAN BIESEN

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Such is the reason why Ayman Baalbaki is more relevant now than ever. Born in Beirut in 1975 this multi-disciplined artist uses his refugee past to inform his work – which resonates even more with the current Syrian refugee crisis. Because of its direct impact on the West, the Syrian situation is what makes the news while the fact of displaced persons is, unfortunately, not unique to this conflict. Trained in Paris but now back in Beirut, Baalbaki is in a precarious place as an Arab artist - thrust into the role of teacher, communicator, and symbol of his home. His aim is to enlighten, beyond the media headlines, the history that contributes to today.

There's a theme of the nomad in your work. Where do you feel at home? – This is one of the most conflicting questions that comes to my mind. I've always asked

myself about the relationship between text and image. Images have always been present throughout my career and education. I've always been swimming in the field of painting: my father and my uncle are also painters. Besides what influences us from other cultures, as Arabs, text is the dominant part of our background: the Arabic culture is a "culture of Text."

I have spoken before of the strong connection between the principal themes of my work and the common structure of the pre-Islamic poetry (Al Mu'allaqat), whose recurring themes are loss, wandering, and affirmation of identity. Unconsciously, a connection emerged between nomadism and my experience as a refugee. At the time, we were obliged to constantly move, and every time our family baggage was heavy. At some point I had the feeling that, with the loss, our family baggage was

swelling and becoming heavier and heavier.

This is what pushed me to elaborate on a work like *Kalam Faregh* (Empty Words), which relates text to image. I understood then that the Arabic and Semitic cultures have always favored text over image and they see it as their own refuge.

In the pre-Islamic period, poetry was the only portable tool of self-expression, and memory was the ultimate means to safeguard nomadic culture. By entrusting their poetry to memory, nomadic tribes could therefore carry on with the preservation of their collective identity and cultural inheritance no matter where they wandered. The vocabulary used in reference to poetry is the same one used in architecture, illustrating how Arabs referred to text as home: *Bait Chi3r* (verse/house), *3amoud Chi3r* (sonnet/column), *Diwan Chi3r* (anthology of poems/court), and





Al Moulatham, 2005

Shatr (half verse/partial space). I feel like I'm on the trail, on a path, always searching for lighter baggage ... like words.

What inspires you? - My inspirations are quite various and come from several domains. First of all, all the painters that influenced me, and also popular art and culture, history, archives, philosophy . . . I would say almost everything! The more I elaborate on my work, the more my inspirations change. They also guide me during the concrete realization of my work. This allows me to take things further.

What is your goal as an artist? - There is the research in aesthetics: the connection that art has with its spectators and its sociopolitical impact and its relation to places. Positioned as an active spectator, the political problems and the social questions raised before me are a source of inspiration to me with which I intend to create symbolic forms.

What kind of responsibility do we demand from the artist as he is presenting us his work? - An artist doesn't have the responsibility to transmit objective information like a journalist, for example. He uses a multitude of signs and references to construct his works that don't necessarily have a meaning or a link to reality. I believe that, consciously or unconsciously, the artist engages himself when he understands that he belongs to society and to the world of his time. What characterizes this engagement is one's free decision that involves risks for which we are ready to assume consequences. I've always seen Gustave Courbet and his relation with the events of 1871 as a reference point in the questioning of art and engagement. However, nowadays the question of engagement in the visual art field can be surprising. Lately, I think lightness has passed from being a flaw to a model to follow.

Have the attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, changed your ability to travel as an Arab? - I received a Schengen visa some time ago that makes it easier for me to travel within Europe. But it's difficult for me to travel to other countries, even Arab ones. The Lebanese passport is ranked among the worst passports worldwide. The classification of passports like this is real discrimination.

The problem is not only physical, with events like November 13 in Paris or New York's September 11. The ability to interact has become more complicated. Some painted images like mine can be boycotted or even forbidden due to obtuse interpretations of them. I feel it happening, although it occurs discretely. I feel that while the virtual access to people around the world is increasing, there are more and more prohibitions to physically meeting each other. All this makes people think that they are closed off in a small environment.



Burj El Murr, 2014

Ten years ago, you were quoted as saying that you have known only war, thus it is infused in your work. How have your art, perspective, and opinions about war changed in the past decade?

- Something got lost in the translation of that interview: what I meant to say was that history and conflicts have repeated themselves in Lebanon and the region at regular intervals so often [that] they have become the dominant reality. However, I still find myself akin to (French cultural theorist) Paul Virilio when he describes himself as a "baby of war" due to his childhood: "These are the traumatizing events that shaped my thinking. War was my university; everything has proceeded from there."

[With] great changes in the nature and in the scale of the wars, now even the smallest battles are becoming increasingly global - making the wars become more deceitful and mediocre. The examples of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, etc ... are quite flagrant. Wars are the interest of the strongest, masked by their lies, and their first victim has always been the truth.

When I create a work, I don't set out to tell a story. Rather, I try to stand as a witness of my perception of history and with respect to current events that I feel like sharing.

What do you see as common misunderstandings between the West and the Middle East? - I am wary of the term East/West, I find that, at the base, quite simplistic and it is "erroneous." This polarization reinforces prejudices. Besides the terms, so many misunderstanding exists that we need to make a colossal effort to deconstruct prejudices, the clichés, the ready-made ideas, and the generalities, etc. A writer like Rudyard Kipling wrote: "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." It was a (supposed) reality in his time. But to me it makes no sense, now or back then, except for it being used as a war doctrine.

Unfortunately, writers like the French orientalist Gaston Weir, Edward Said and others had great knowledge about the two worlds, but they are not references anymore. The mass media, however, spotlights the hatred and ignorance of radical people on both sides of this arbitrary East/West divide.

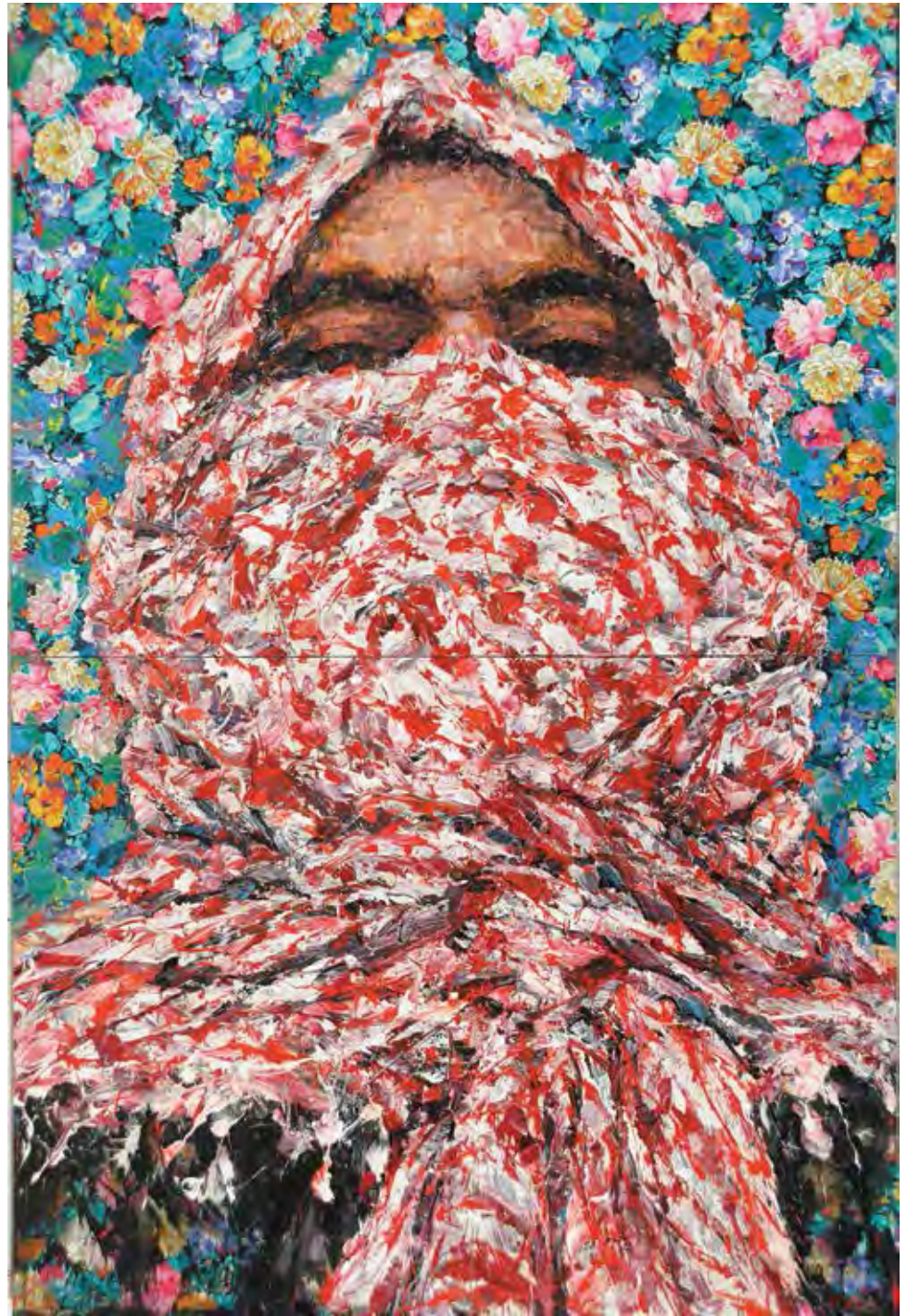


AB-01, Middle East, 2013

It seems that Arabic countries display a "rejection in front of the West", though I'm not so sure. This rejection finds its origin in the frustrations and humiliations that these people have endured throughout the course of modern history, the cause now being the asymmetrical current wars. In the meantime, more and more people in the West speak of a "Clash of Civilizations." However, the only evidence of a clash is a series of sometimes huge but ambiguous incidents. Since September 11, many have continued to repeat the narrative of "weak

savages" who have taken the initiative and attacked the "First World." But the reality is very complicated! I see that disequilibrium is a global issue: it goes beyond the East/West misunderstanding. It is a mix of different mentalities and ideologies, power relationships, historical progress and delays. The best tool we are left with to win over the situation is culture that pushes [us] to a mutual understanding.

How do different people from different countries perceive your work? - It



Al Maw3oud, 2011

always depends from the culture and the sensibility of the viewer. I don't think that our different origins define how we interpret work; it's more about our different experiences and what we have lived. Because my work feeds mainly on Western painting, the difference always comes from the cultural reference of the image and daily life. I am sometimes asked, from all sides, questions that are often outside the art field, mainly when my paintings represent subjects that are seen through the media every day. People

in my region sometimes misinterpret my paintings when they remove them from their context, and regional wars also contribute to the warping of my images

What is your creative process?

- Photographs are the genesis of my work - whether they are photographs from archives or others that I take myself. I choose the photos based on my theory of "traces": the traces that remain all around us, somehow, like witnesses of what has happened in the period that I have lived



Untitled, 2010

- symbolic photos that have the ability to update the past. Sometimes I even use photographs as a medium to actually paint on - for instance, advertising posters. I rarely work on a white background. I feel a sort of apprehension in front of a virgin canvas. So usually, before attacking the painting, I cover it either with a unifying color, or stick a collage material (posters, flowered fabric, etc . . .) and sometimes follow that by the ripping off of some of these materials that blend with the paint. I feel that expansion of my concepts, my tools, and my own methods and blend them all at the same time.

Where do you live at the moment?
- I live in Beirut, in Hamra - a diverse neighborhood that was able to maintain



Untitled

its spirit, even during the civil war. Hamra's originality lies in its multifunction, its social diversity, and its varied stories.

How has Beirut changed? – It's constantly changing, due to its location between three continents. It's been a historical passage for invaders, as has been the whole Middle East region.

Everything happens fast. I was born in Beirut but in a refugee neighborhood that was already a new layer of Lebanon's social fabric. Our parents were on a "quick" route from the rural areas to the cities. All this happened from one generation to the next. The end of the war and the beginning of the "Downtown" rebuilding project put an end to this reality, and Beirut on a whole

has changed a lot in its urban aspect. The disasters that happened after the war have been far greater than the war itself. Nevertheless, I'm optimistic, even if we carry a heavy baggage due to our location - be it the constant wars and its disasters or changes in our demographics, I believe that Beirut still has a specific role to play in relation to the Arab world and the Mediterranean. There's a need nowadays to preserve what still exists in the mixture of the region and Beirut is part of it.

How is work going now? – It's a bit slow, and I use the "repetition" for effect. I'm working on various new themes: bombed and crashed airplanes, barriers, and burned flags. But at the same time, I still approach older themes. I don't believe in working in

a linear progression or in a totally thematic way. It's a bit random: I weave like a silkworm around my old works. Simultaneously, I let unforeseen themes vander the materials themselves guide me. I believe that my progression is in the continuity.

The theme in this issue of Ubikwist is "escape". Is art an escape for you? – Art challenges the common view of reality. It requires one to question what we call reality by simply suggesting another vision of the world. Sartre said, "Aesthetic contemplation is a provoked dream." Combined with dreams and imagination, art is a means to escape from this heavy and restricting reality. It offers us "another world"...





Destination X



Anatomy of Wandering

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