

An aerial, painterly view of a dense urban landscape, likely Beirut, showing a river and a bridge. The city is built on a hillside, with numerous high-rise buildings and a mix of architectural styles. The river flows through the lower part of the image, and a bridge spans across it. The overall tone is somewhat desaturated, with a focus on textures and forms.

# YAZAN HALWANI

HOTEL BEIRUT  
OR MUNDANE ENTROPY

YAZAN  
HALWANI

HOTEL BEIRUT  
OR MUNDANE ENTROPY



Yazan Halwani, a finance specialist and artist, is famed for his graffiti murals of popular national icons, including Sabah, Fairuz, Khalil Gibran, Mahmoud Darwish, and Samir Kassir, as well as of other eccentric local personages, such as Ali Abdullah, the homeless man and drunk of Makdissi Street, well-known among Hamra dwellers and drinkers. Halwani, whose street art practice began when he was 15 years old, sought to replace portraits of sectarian figures with which the walls of Beirut are plastered with images that inspire national identification and belonging. He developed a style that was in harmony with his nationalist aims, elaborating calligraphic gestures that form halos around each figure in nearly every mural. For his latest body of work, Halwani has shifted from the production of public murals to a studio practice. This work consists of three series of paintings that depart stylistically and thematically from his street art.

The first series, *Perhaps the Moon is Beautiful Because it is Far* (the title is appropriated from a Mahmoud Darwish poem), depicts variations of a familiar bird's-eye-view image of Beirut as captured from a plane. Painted in tones of sepia, cement gray, lavender, black and white, they are paradoxical pictures: At once nostalgic and suffocating. Halwani's descriptive paintings appear wistful at a glance, but when one zooms in on the details the associations rapidly change. The buildings are crammed and almost indistinguishable, and some even appear to melt as they did after the August 4 explosion (though Halwani had begun this series before the disaster).

The second series, *Secondary Income*, represents descriptive paintings of migrating Lebanese in the crowded Beirut airport. Queues brimming with bodies, bags and boxes, suitcases stacked on trolleys to the point of spilling over, and much waiting make up some of the narrative scenes. The theme of migration, and its intimation of the difficult economic reality left behind was already explored in the artist's street mural in Mannheim, Germany, entitled *The Difficulty of the Inevitability of Leaving Things Behind* (2017), but now the artist resorts to a critical realist style.

The third series, *Barriers to Entry*, are “portraits” of traveling individuals substituted by electrical plugs and their corresponding sockets. These portraits comprise a tongue-in-cheek pronouncement of the commodification of human labor driving people across national borders in search of markets to which to sell their labor power. It is objects such as these plugs that structure our lives. They also evoke the history of the geopolitical determinants of the 12 standards presently in circulation.

Together the three series of narrative paintings present scenes of daily life in Lebanon that attempt to “dispel the myths of Lebanese exceptionalism centering on the successful expat, the Phoenician, the Lebanese polyglot,” as Halwani puts it. These are romantic narratives that obfuscate the global character of the present crisis, and of crises past. Halwani's work, by contrast, sheds light on the inextricability of economic downfall and migration in Lebanon from within the fabric of a total system of free-market, financialized capitalism.



## Artist Statement

## Hotel Beirut or Mundane Entropy

*“Only Entropy comes easy” - Anton Chekhov*

Like many of you reading these words, I have been told that Lebanon's uniqueness resides in its ability to adapt to everlasting adversity. But as a young Lebanese migrant, the tales of the regenerating phoenix, the successful expat, the widespread polyglotism, have never appeared to me as forms of resistance to our chaotic reality. I see these symptoms, which many romantically praise as the pillars of Lebanon's resilience, as nothing but a surrender to the rampant chaos that punctuates our existence.

Chaos is not exceptional in the universe (nor is the fate of young Lebanese migrants); it is the most probable direction when things are left to their own devices. Recalling my undergraduate physics and chemistry classes, the universe has a way of naturally sliding into disorder, not because the universe distinguishes chaos from order, but because chaos is more probable. Take the example of a billion grains of sand and imagine all possible configurations for them: only a *few* configurations can form an orderly sandcastle whereas most other configurations form an unrecognizable pile. Entropy, the measure of disorder in physics, has the tendency to increase without intervention. Our sandcastle will hence lose its shape over time and become unrecognizable. Simply put, without any concrete and purposeful action to reverse chaos, a system always finds its way to more chaos.

This body of work, composed of three series, is an attempt to reframe elements of migrant identity – an identity that has become the epitome of surrender to the forces of neoliberal globalized economies, and that has transformed Lebanon, like *many other nations*, into a resource for increasingly commodified human capital. The works attempt to show that the ever-increasing chaos generated by these forces, rather than being resisted, is in fact infiltrating and molding every aspect of our lives and identity far more than our personal choices or where we come from do – from our notion of home, to our geographical whereabouts, to the most utilitarian of objects, the electrical plug and socket.

The first series, *“Perhaps the Moon is Beautiful Because it is Far”* explores the relationship many of us have with Beirut. When you are in Beirut, you want to be away, but once you are away you feel a longing to be back... Far from exceptional, this feeling is common to many migrants in today's globalized neoliberal world economy. Paradoxically, so-called national identity has somehow become defined by being away from that nation.

*Secondary Income* documents the (strangely undocumented) imagery of perhaps the most emotional public space and the only real microcosm of the nation: The airport – its chaos, oppression, and dehumanization. It is the gateway by which humans are exported to feed a (sadistic) business model of nations that are dependent on remittances to fuel their economies back at home.

The third and last series, entitled *Barriers to Entry*, despite not looking like it, is a *portrait* series of migrants through their electric plugs. The misfitting electric sockets, plugs, and converters accumulate as one travels and start to form a fingerprint-like unique assortment that tells the

historical whereabouts of its owners. Some people have told me that they see these as a metaphor for their process of fitting in (or failing to) in their newfound homes. The electric plugs themselves are curious vestiges of the history and political economy of the world that draw spheres of influence to tell the story of the economic and political dependence of the countries based on the standards they use (e.g., most countries still use a standard made by a country that has colonized them previously).

Today these works tell the story of people leaving, but I long for a future where they are recontextualized to evoke a purposeful return of migrants to reverse entropy. However unlikely, it is not foolish to believe sandcastles can be built, it is only foolish to wait, expecting the wind to be their architect.

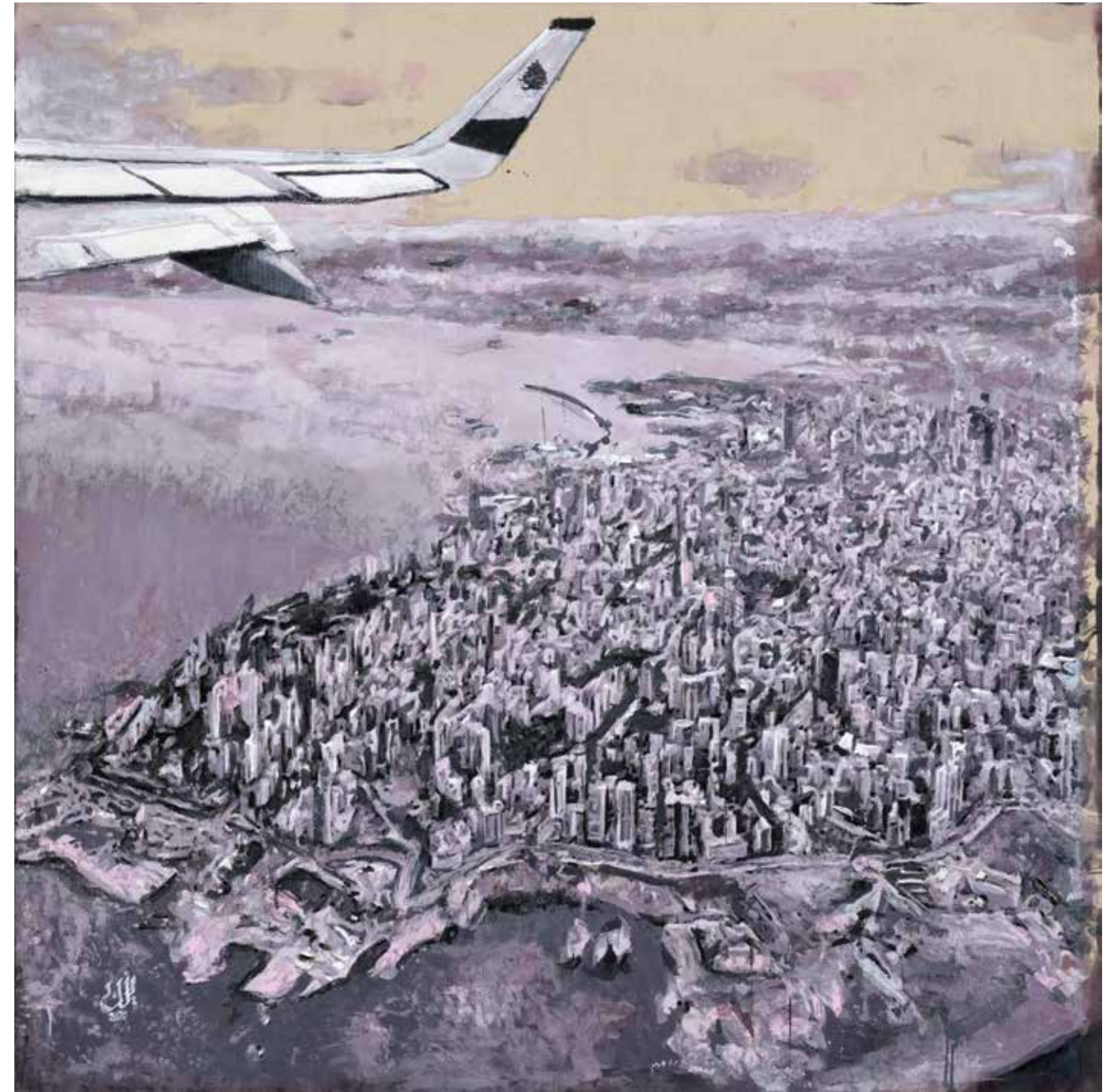
Yazan Halwani



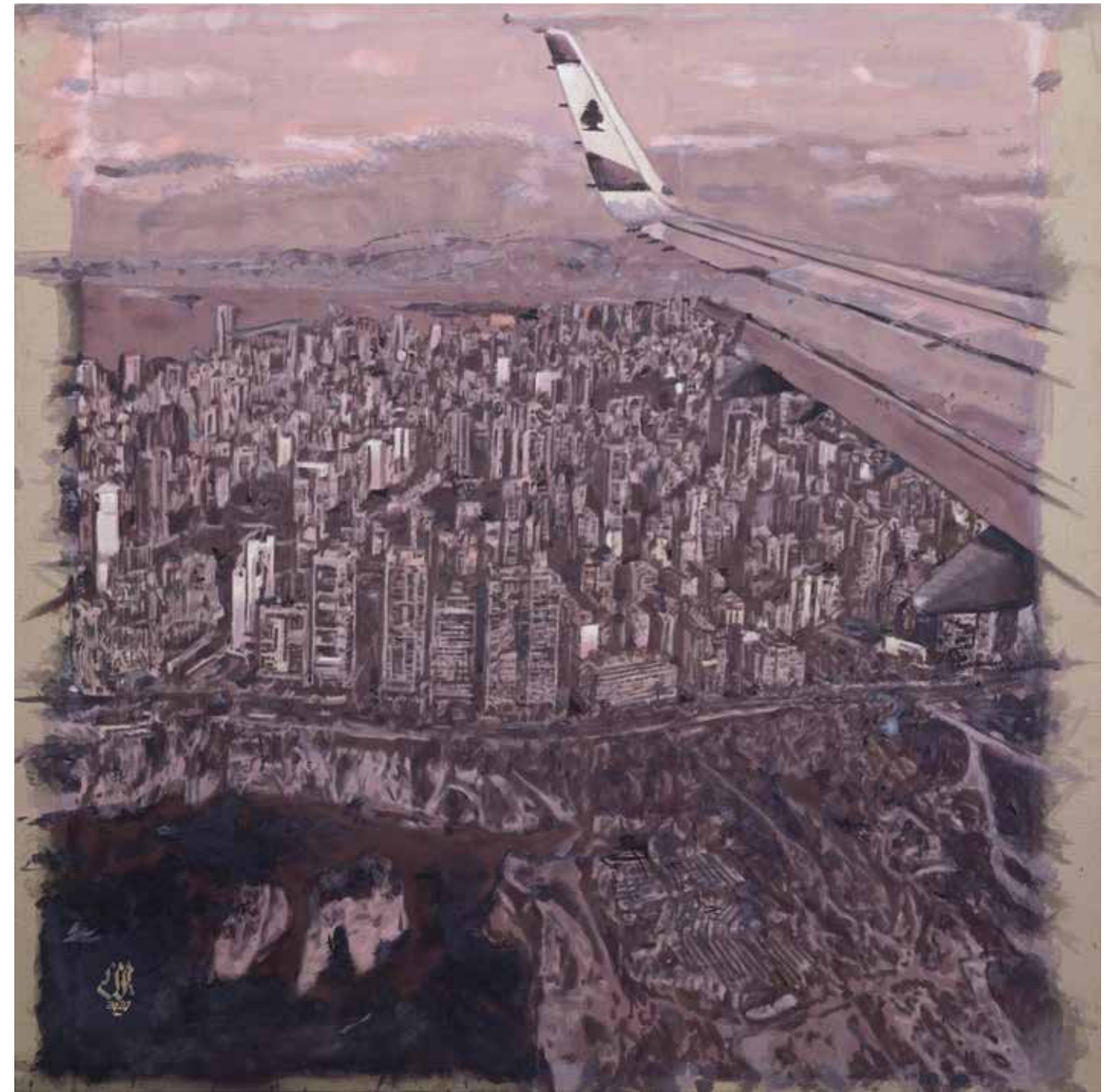


Perhaps the Moon is Beautiful Because it is Far





Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2020



Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2020





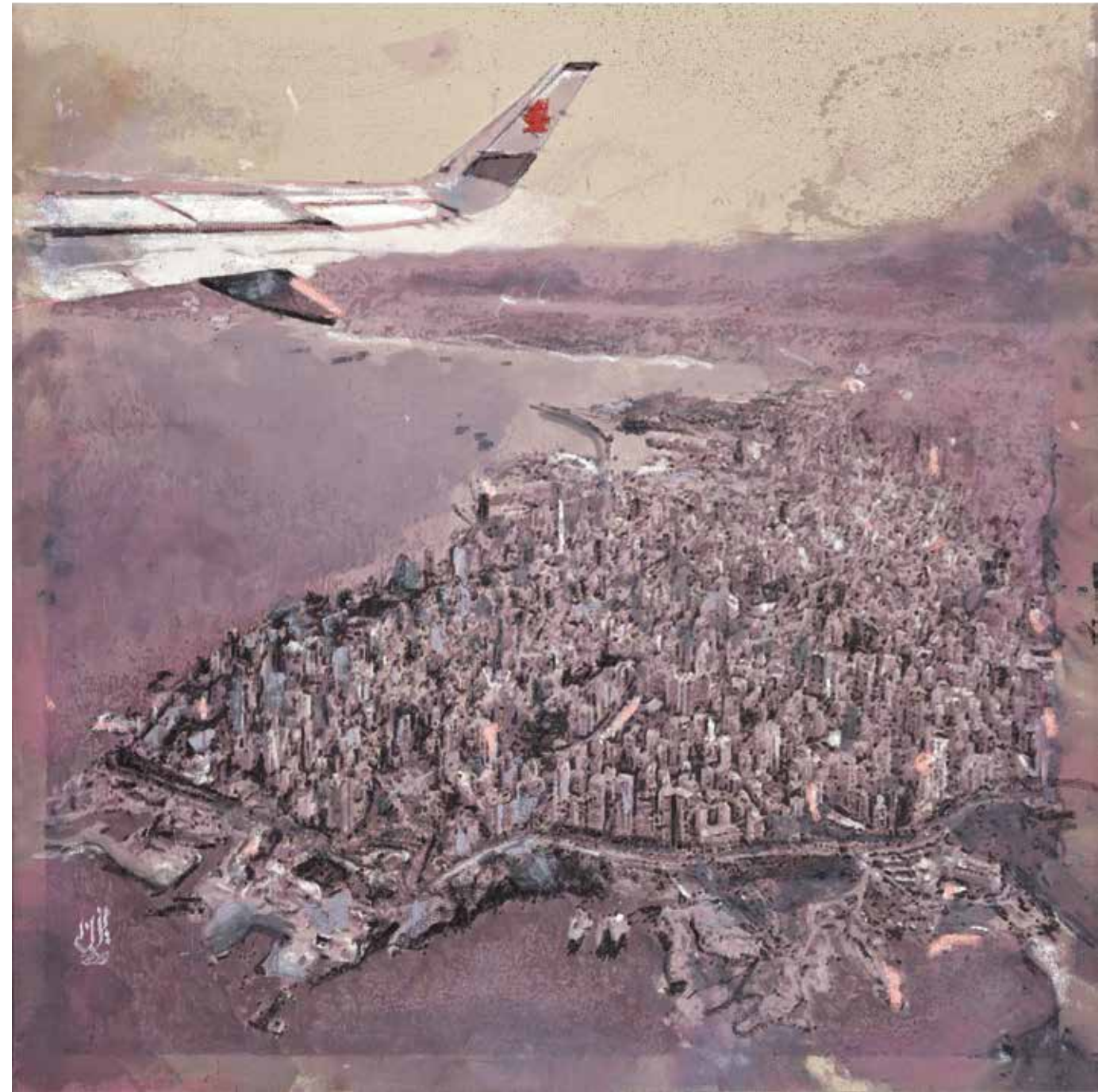
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2020





Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2020





Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2019



Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2020





Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2019





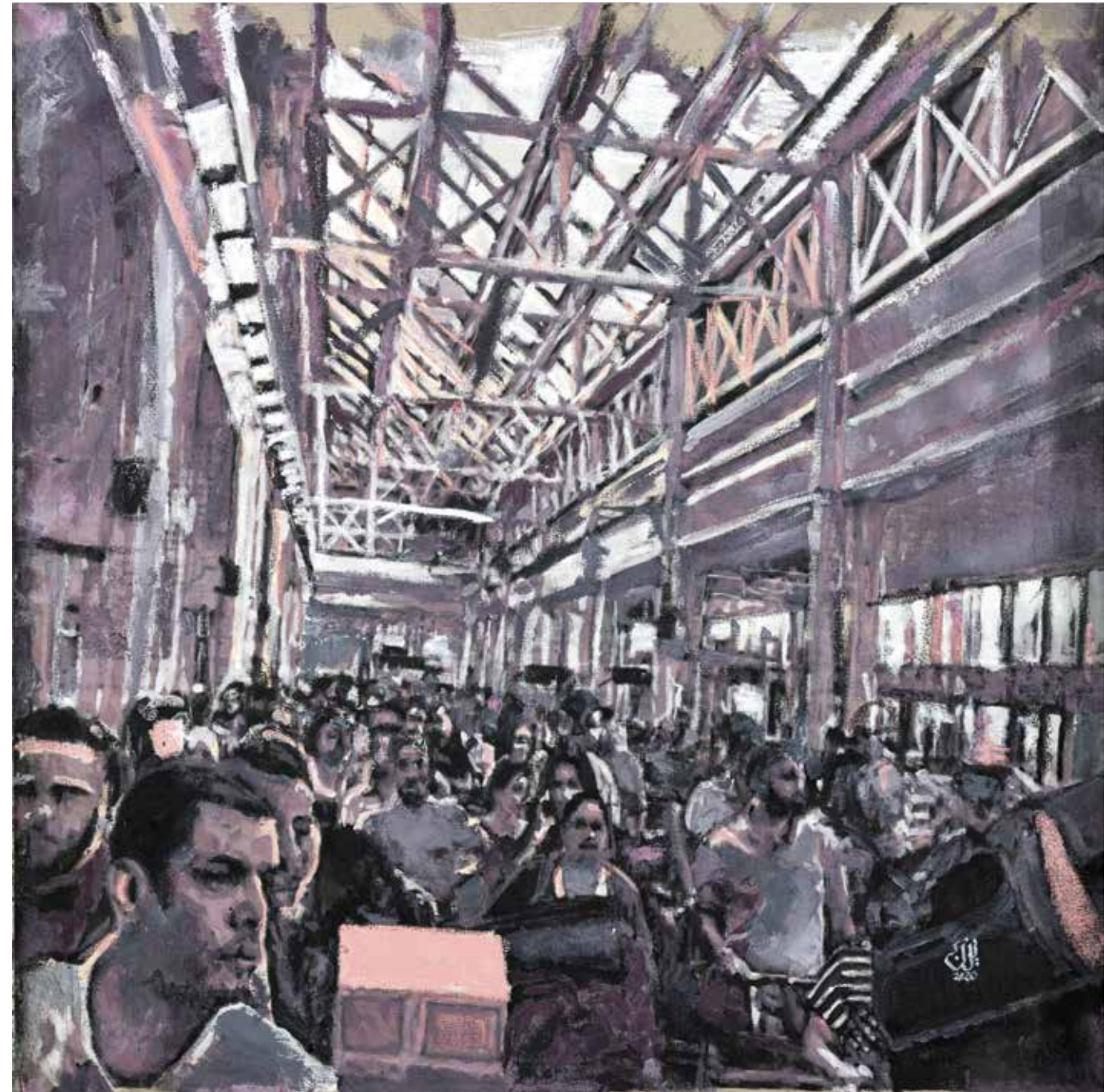
Secondary Income





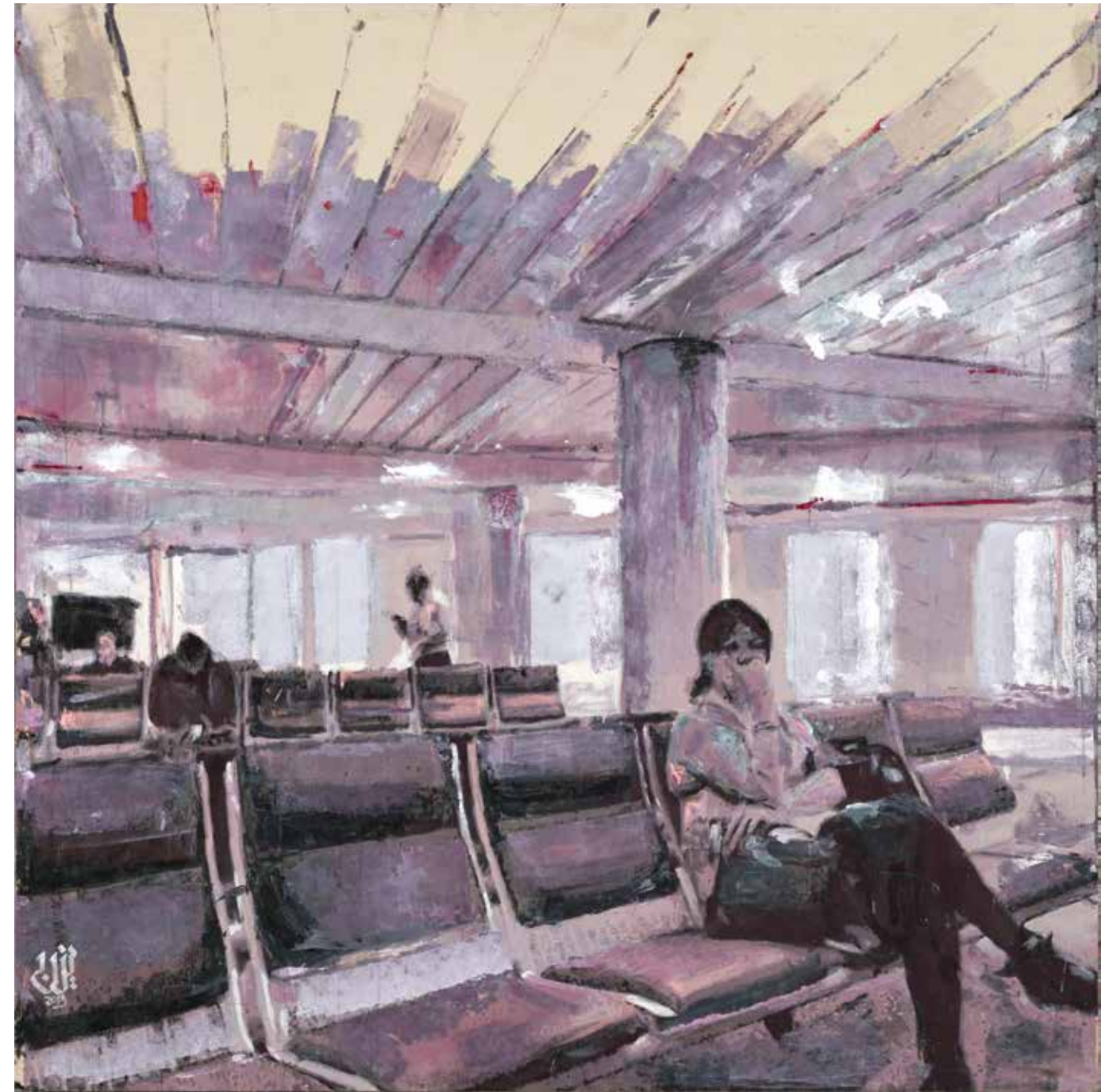
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2020





Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2020





Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2019



Acrylic and oil on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2020





Barriers to Entry





Acrylic and oil on canvas  
100 x 100 cm each  
2020





Acrylic and oil on canvas  
100 x 100 cm each  
2020





# Yazan Halwani

Yazan Halwani is an artist born in post-war Beirut, Lebanon where public spaces were lacking, and the lack of art infrastructure (e.g., museums, institutions, galleries, education) made art and design highly undemocratic and inaccessible for the public. His work focuses on identity.

Growing up in Beirut, public spaces were riddled with political propaganda, a remnant of the Lebanese Civil War: Large-scale images of political leaders and banners with political quotes written in beautiful Arabic calligraphy. Both provoked and inspired, he turned himself to creating installations in these same public spaces to allow everyday people to reflect on their own identities and challenge the dominant narratives amidst a normalized highly sectarian post-war environment. His work has frequently been viral and been embraced as landmarks within the city.

His undergraduate degree from the American University of Beirut, and graduate degree from Harvard, allowed him to study a range of topics that influence identity from philosophy, history, engineering, design, economy, business and public art. Today, his creative practice focuses on exploring identity through all these lenses.

Yazan's work has been featured in several international publications such as The New York Times, The Guardian, The Economist's 1843. His work has been exhibited in several countries such as the USA, France, Germany, Tunisia, Ivory Coast, Lebanon, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Singapore. His artwork is in art collections around the world such as The Arab World Institute (Paris, France), Barjeel art collection (Sharjah, UAE), KA collection (Beirut, Lebanon).

## Education

- 2020 Harvard Business School, MBA.
- 2015 American University of Beirut, Bachelor of Engineering in Computer and Communications Engineering.

## Group Exhibitions & Awards

- 2020 Year Zero, Arthaus, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 2019 Beyond, Philips gallery, London, United Kingdom.
- 2018 The Urban Experience, Artual Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon.  
White Wall, Public art project by the French Institute for Culture in Beirut and the Goethe Institute Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 2017 Untitled, Artual Gallery, Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire.  
8eme Jeux de la Francophonie, Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire (Gold Medalist).  
Disobedience Prize, MIT Media Lab, Cambridge, USA.  
Stadt Wand Kunst, Public mural project in Mannheim, Germany.
- 2016 Untitled, Mark Hachem gallery, Beirut, Lebanon.  
Baladk, Public mural project, Amman, Jordan.
- 2015 Du Bronx Aux Rues Arabes, Arab World Institute, Paris, France.  
UrbanArt Biennale 2015, Völklingen Ironworks UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, Saarbrücken, Germany.







© Agial Art Gallery - All rights reserved  
Design by Carol Chehab  
Photography by Mansour Dib  
Printed by Salim Dabbous Printing Co. sarl  
April, 2021  
Agial Art Gallery | 63 Abdel Aziz St. | Hamra  
Beirut | Lebanon  
[www.agialart.com](http://www.agialart.com) | [info@agialart.com](mailto:info@agialart.com)

 @agialgallery  
 Agial Art Gallery  
 @AgialArt  
 Agial Art Gallery



