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Defying the Violence
Lebanon's Visual Arts in the 1980s

Edited by Nadia von Maltzahn

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Introduction

Lebanon's Visual Arts in the 1980s Defying the Violence

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"We were a group of dreamers who believed that culture could stand up to the great shifts and devastation that had befallen the heart of Beirut," writes art critic and artist Faisal Sultan in the compilation of selected articles he published in the Lebanese daily *as-Safir* between 1976 and 1993, talking about his peers in the newspaper's cultural section.[1] How the visual arts and its protagonists have stood up to the shifts and devastation that had befallen not only the heart of Lebanon's capital, but the country as such during these years, defying the violence during the conflict-ridden (long) decade of the 1980s, is the subject of this special issue.

Thinking in decades, which can be seen as a form of abstraction and convenient solution, has been called out by art historian Enrico Crispolti as an obsession in the historiography of contemporary art, in a four-part lecture series on the 1970s in contemporary art in Italy.[2] He goes on to underline, however, that taking a decade as a point of reference rather than in the absolute—in which case it becomes an abstraction—can be extremely useful:

> What exactly is the point of reference? What I want to say is that history is something that continues, that continues without interruptions [...]. It is manifested in more than one direction, and in many cases in multiple directions, and to succeed in having points of reference that allow us to in fact not just become aware, but make a reconstructive orientation possible, we need to have points of reference.[3]

In this issue, the decade becomes a tool allowing us "to arrange the events in order";[4] it becomes a container that is by no means rigid, and rather stretches into the past and future. The 1980s in Lebanon were marked by the ups and downs of its civil war, which had officially started in April 1975 and lasted throughout the decade with varying intensity. Artistic production and exhibition practices during this violent period have largely been overlooked, although there is an increasing interest in revisiting how Lebanon's art world experienced the war.[5] While the circumstances forced some exhibition spaces to close and some artists to migrate, the 1980s also saw cultural infrastructures and artists adapting to the evolving context, and new spaces and art practices emerge.

1. Faisal Sultan, *Kitabat must'ada min zakirat funun Bayrut* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2013), 9.
2. These lectures were delivered in 2000. Enrico Crispolti, *Anni Settanta: Aspetti dell'arte contemporanea in Italia / The Seventies: Aspects of Contemporary Art in Italy*, ed. Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2021), 27.
3. Crispolti, *Anni Settanta*, 29.
4. Crispolti, *Anni Settanta*, 31.
5. In the summer of 2025, for instance, a series of roundtables with cultural actors of Lebanon's civil-war period was organized by Saleh Barakat at the cultural space Beit Beirut, including "Art Galleries and the War: Amal Traboulsi, Brahim Zod, Aouni Abdel-Rahim, moderated by Saleh Barakat" (28 May 2025), "Women Artists and the War: Katya Traboulsi, Ginane Makki Bacho, Afaf Zurayk, moderated by Wafa Roz" (18 June 2025), "Photography and War: Roger Moukarzel and George Azar, moderated by Katya Traboulsi" (25 June 2025), "Writing Art History and the Lebanese War: Nayla Tamraz, Walid Sadek, Gregory Buchakjian, moderated by Saleh Barakat" (2 July 2025), "The Artistic Press and the War: Maha Azizé Sultan, Faisal Sultan, Georges Bustani, moderated by Saleh Barakat" (9 July 2025). Also see Michelle Hartman and Malek Abisaab, eds., *Women's War Stories: The Lebanese Civil War, Women's Labor, and the Creative Arts* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2022), and Faisal Sultan's compilation of his articles written for *as-Safir* newspaper during this period: Sultan, *Kitabat*. Some important work is currently under way, such as the PhD thesis by Çiğdem İvren on art production and cultural infrastructures during the Lebanese Civil War.

This special issue focuses on the experience of Lebanon's artists and its art world during the 1980s, an experience that begins before that decade and lasts beyond it, and is not homogenous. It questions how the political, social, and economic environment impacted day-to-day artistic production and reception. Crispolti called for a "horizontal" rather than "vertical" contemporary art history, one that was informed by its context rather than through the selection of some leading names.[6] By interrelating context and artistic production, the nuances of how artists and institutions navigated the 1980s will be analysed. One concern is to rethink the conventional periodization of Lebanon's history into, first, a golden—or "gilded"—age between the 1950s and mid-1970s, then a war period, and finally a postwar period starting in the 1990s.[7] Whereas the so-called postwar generation of artists engaged extensively with the aftermath and memory of the war, in the midst of conflict artists applied different approaches to their engagement with what was happening around them.[8] War did not emerge out of nowhere; underlying social and political tensions had been present since the foundation of modern Lebanon in 1943. The contributors to this volume thus situate artistic production during the 1980s within the larger trajectory of artists and institutions.

While taking one country during one decade as a starting point, this issue speaks to overarching questions that are relevant for art historical inquiry in a broader sense: breaking down the idea of a monolithic bloc of wartime cultural production or even a shared experience of conflict; transnational experiences; how artists and institutions adapt to an unpredictable environment; how artists relate back to their home country in case of exile or migration; and to what extent the use of diverse media can be linked to the socio-political context of production. Artists' trajectories are also embedded within socio-cultural debates of the time, such as the cultural studies movement. Taking the decade rather than the war as point of reference allows us to consider the lived experience of artists and institutions beyond the war, despite the latter remaining omnipresent in most accounts.

Visual Arts in the 1980s

Let us start by looking at visual arts in the 1980s more broadly. Survey exhibitions or monographs on art in this decade have largely focused on artistic production in the United States and Europe, such as the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *The 80s* at Austria's Albertina modern (2021), or *Painting in the 1980s: Reimagining the Medium* by Rosemary Cohane Erpf (2022), to name two recent examples. *The 80s* defines the decade as the birth of today's art, marked by personalities such as Jeff Koons, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, and Richard

6. Luca Pietro Nicoletti, "Introduction," in Crispolti, *Anni Settanta*, 7–21, here 17.

7. For a discussion of the "gilded" age, see Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Chapter 6.

8. On postwar engagement with the war and memories of it, see Franck Mermier and Christophe Varin, eds., *Mémoires de guerres au Liban (1975–1990)* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2010), Section 6 on cultural productions, 485–552; Leyla Dakhli and Klaus Wieland, eds., *The Cultural Memory of the Lebanese Civil War – Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2025); Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Sarah Rogers, "Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008); Elisa Adami, "Writing History Under Erasure: Radical Historiographical Practices in Lebanese Postwar Art" (PhD diss., Royal College of Art, 2019); and Ghalya Saadawi, "Rethinking the Witness: Art after the Lebanese Wars" (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014).

Prince, that the book's introduction labels as iconic and international beyond the Austrian and other European artists exhibited.[9] They are all US American. *The 80s* highlights that rather than engaging with some of the major political events shaping this period, such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, just before the start of the decade, or the fall of the Iron Curtain at its end, or some of the dominant political figures of the time, such as British prime minister Margaret Thatcher or US president Ronald Reagan, artists protested consumer culture and feminist art critiqued male power and violence.[10] It was a time when normative art and the singularity of the artwork were questioned, and when forms of subculture such as graffiti art came to the fore. Social activism, such as that around AIDS, also played a role in the contemporary art of the time, especially in the North American context.[11] As Erpf points out, "labels such as New Image Painting, Neo-Expressionism, Italian Transavanguardia, Neo-Geo, and the blanket designation Postmodernism" were used by gallerists, curators, and art historians to categorize paintings of that decade, which despite these attempts at classification was marked by a plurality of styles, in which particularly the label "Neo-Expressionism" was rejected by the artists themselves.[12] It was a time when—rather than grand narratives—individual stories, experiences, artistic commentaries, and opinions dominated, as Albertina modern chief curator Angela Stief argues and summarizes in the phrase "anything goes." It was also a period when the (art) world started to be more globalized.[13] Institutions in Europe and North America started to think about what it meant to turn to the "global" as a programming framework, exemplified by the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at Paris' Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette from 18 May to 14 August 1989, preceded by the controversial MoMA exhibition *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* in 1984.[14] The limitations of the Pompidou exhibition's approach have been widely discussed,[15] and the wider move by art institutions to turn truly global has been limited to this date, despite some advances.

In her introduction on painting in the 1980s, Erpf justifies her focus on the United States and Europe by her understanding that it was mainly there that painting within a postmodern dialogue emerged, with elsewhere much of the painting following earlier traditions.[16] Challenging such standing assumptions, an important initiative to take visual arts in the 1980s as practised outside this geographic framework seriously is the forthcoming publication *Chronicle of the 1980s: Representational Pressures, Departures, and Beginnings in the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey*, edited by

9. Klaus Albrecht Schröder and Angela Stief, eds., *The 80s*, exhibition catalogue, Vienna, Albertina modern, 10 October 2021–13 February 2022 (Munich: Hirmer, 2021), 9–10.

10. Schröder and Stief, *The 80s*, 6–8.

11. Schröder and Stief, *The 80s*, 6.

12. Rosemary Cohane Erpf, *Painting in the 1980s: Reimagining the Medium* (Bristol: Intellect, 2022), Introduction, quote 2.

13. Angela Stief, "Von den postmodernen Befreiungsgesten des 'anything goes' zum zynischen 'rien ne va plus'," in Schröder and Stief, *The 80s*, 13–31, here 14.

14. "1984: The Controversial 'Primitivism' Exhibition," MoMA, last accessed 15 August 2025, https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/1980/the-infamous-primitivism-exhibition/.

15. See for instance Lucy Steels et al., eds., *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la Terre' 1989* (London: Afterall, 2013).

16. Erpf, *Painting in the 1980s*, 2.

Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers.[17] Taking an event, an artwork or a commission as starting point for each of its illustrated essays, arranged in chronological order, the book promises to provide a major resource for evaluating this period as it played out in the visual arts of West Asia and North Africa in an entangled art world. It argues that art produced by artists from this region was equally dynamic and formative for laying the grounds of contemporary art.

The chronicle emerged from the conference "1980s: Representational Pressures, Departures and Beginnings" organized by the University of Northern Texas, the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran and Turkey (AMCA), and NYU Abu Dhabi's al Mawrid Arab Center for the Study of Art, in November 2022. The same conference was the trigger for this special issue. Under the title "Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad in the 1980s: Artistic Production and Reception in Times of War," I had organized a panel examining how artists and institutions navigated this conflict-ridden decade in Lebanon, looking not only at the internal dynamics within Lebanon, but also how artists and institutions were connected regionally and globally at the time, and how artists who chose to leave Lebanon due to the ongoing war were integrated—or not—into their places of exile or migration. One motivation for putting together this issue of *Manazir Journal* following the conference was that despite being multifaceted, artistic production and exhibition practices in Lebanon have barely been analysed for this period of disorder. This holds true both for art historical accounts as well as the growing literature on the civil war, which generally ignores the art world. Let us consider parts of this literature to provide some of the context in which the visual arts in Lebanon emerged during this decade.

The (Long) 1980s in Lebanon

The 1980s in Lebanon were dominated by its ongoing civil war. This section sketches out the main phases of the war going back to 1975, as it is important to understand that it consisted of a series of interlinked conflicts that saw intense fighting in different parts of the country at different times, with intermittent periods in which people believed the war to be over. The intent here is not to go into the details of the different local, regional, and international factions involved in the war, but rather to provide a broad picture of some of its major stages that affected cultural production. Historians have identified five principal phases of the war.[18] Although there is no complete agreement on the exact timing of these phases, a rough overview will help us understand the circumstances that shaped the art world during this period. The official start date of the war is generally considered to be 13 April 1975. On this date shots were fired at Kataeb members in front of a church in Ayn al-Rumana. In revenge, on the same day, followers of this right-wing Christian party killed over twenty Palestinians in a bus heading to Tall al-Za'tar refugee camp. The first phase of the war, referred to as the "two-year war," lasted from April 1975 to mid-November

17. Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers, *Chronicle of the 1980s: Representational Pressures, Departures, and Beginnings in the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, forthcoming).

18. See for instance Sune Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War," SciencesPo, 25 October 2011, https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/historiography-and-memory-lebanese-civil-war.html; Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), Part III; Elizabeth Picard, "La guerre civile au Liban," SciencesPo, 13 July 2012, https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/la-guerre-civile-au-liban.html; Dima de Clerck and Stephane Malsagne, *Le Liban en guerre: De 1975 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2025), which also includes a chronology. For another useful brief chronology, see Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 30–33.

1976, when the arrival of Arab Deterrent Forces (ADF) in Beirut, dispatched after an Arab League resolution, formally ended this early period of war.[19] This phase saw several major massacres, some of which were later reflected on by artists: Black Saturday of 6 December 1975, where in revenge for the killing of four young Kataeb members on the road to Fanar between two to six hundred Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims were killed in Eastern Beirut; the Karantina massacre of 18 January 1976, in which Maronite forces killed over a thousand civilians, mainly Palestinian and Lebanese Sunnis; the Damour massacre two days later, in which Palestinian forces and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) attacked this Maronite Christian town south of Beirut and killed hundreds of its inhabitants in response to the killings in Karantina; and the massacre of Tall al-Za'tar in August 1976, in which Palestinian civilians were killed by Christian militias following the siege of this Palestinian refugee camp in north-eastern Beirut from January to August 1976.[20] The violence of the Tall al-Za'tar killings has been widely engaged with in cultural production, and features in Fadi Barrage's sketches on the war discussed in this issue.[21] This period also saw the "Battle of the Hotels" in central Beirut between October 1975 and March 1976, which further divided the city into East and West. Shortly after, journalist Maria Chakhtoura captured how this early war was played out on the walls of Lebanon through her book of graffiti and posters.[22]

"As if to close the Two Years' War, its most notable protagonist, [LNM leader] Kamal Jumblatt, was assassinated on his way from Mukhtara to Beirut on 16 March 1977 [...]. Everything indicated that Lebanon was finally moving toward peace. It was but the beginning of a new phase of the war," writes historian Fawwaz Traboulsi in his account of this period.[23] This perception that the war was coming to an end followed more than one phase, and was reflected in the response of cultural institutions. Monique Bellan recounts the opening and closing of galleries and exhibition spaces during the period that followed in her article in this issue, "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)." Although exhibition activities had come to a halt during the two-year war, in 1977 activities resumed, albeit in a limited manner. Of the prewar galleries, Contact Art Gallery resumed its activities in 1977, Galerie d'art Bekhazi (GAB Center) newly opened in the East Beirut district of Achrafieh in 1977, Galerie Rencontre in the West Beirut area of Watwat in 1979, and Galerie Épreuve d'artiste in Clemenceau in 1979, to name but a few of the more prominent spaces active during this time in defiance of the intermittent violence.[24] The lived reality of the period starting in 1977 is also captured visually by

19. Picard extends the period to August 1977, including the assassination of Kamal Jumblatt and revenge actions in the Shouf in March 1977 and August 1977, see Picard, "La guerre civile au Liban."

20. Picard, "La guerre civile au Liban"; Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War."

21. See for instance Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989); Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata or Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi. On Azzawi and Boullata's interpretation of the events, see Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 204–9.

22. Maria Chakhtoura, *La guerre des graffiti: Liban 1975–1978* (Beirut: Editions Dar An-Nahar, 1978). For a more systematic discussion of the posters of the war, see Maasri, *Off the Wall*.

23. Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 204.

24. See Monique Bellan, "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 21–56, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.2 for a more detailed account. Also see the exhibition timeline of the research project LAWHA: Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad, to be published in spring 2026 on the website www.lebanonartworld.org.

Lebanese photographer Fouad Elkoury (b. 1952) in his series entitled *Civil War, 1977–1986*.[25] This second phase, which followed the two-year war, continued until the Israeli invasion in June 1982. It is marked by failed attempts at peace, Israeli and Syrian intervention, and internal conflicts.[26]

The third phase is defined by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and its aftermath, and stretches until 1985. On 6 June 1982, the Israeli army crossed into Lebanon, beginning its siege of West Beirut on 3 July. The siege, which included heavy bombardments in August, initially achieved its aim to kick the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under the leadership of Yasser Arafat out of Lebanon and install a pro-Israeli Maronite government. Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, the military wing of the Kataeb party at the time, was elected president on 23 August 1982, but assassinated shortly thereafter, on 14 September. His assassination triggered the best documented massacres of the civil war, the Sabra and Shatila massacres that took place on 16–18 September in which the Lebanese Forces aided by the Israeli Defence Forces entered the Palestinian refugee camps and killed a large number of civilians.[27] The artist Greta Naufal remembers in our interview in this issue how the silence that reigned over the city following these events was suffocating, as though everyone had been swallowed by the earth.

The summer of 1982 also generated a number of photographic publications with little to no text, letting the images speak for themselves. The extent of destruction is striking. Lebanese war correspondent Stavro Jabra's book of that year, *Colombes de Guerre*, is rather gruesome, showing corpses, suffering, soldiers, and diplomats, but also a photo of Israeli soldiers passing women sunbathing and relaxing by the water, capturing the contrasts lived during this period.[28] A brief text by journalist Yvan Kougaz on the inside cover flap chronicles the rapidly unfolding events between 6 June and 24 September 1982, when the Israeli army left Beirut after the arrival of multinational forces.[29] *Beyrouth Souvenirs… realité*, created by Ghassan Tuéni with the support of Gebran Tuéni and Georges Trad in 1982, juxtaposes photos of Beirut in ruins with the same areas before the destruction, finishing with apocalyptic images of Beirut burning at night. "There are cities that refuse to die," Ghassan Tuéni begins his preface, continuing, "never has a place of commerce this flourishing become a theatre of wars this destructive" and the "streets occupied by fighters yesterday are waiting today for the return of peaceful passersby who do not recognize them."[30] On the occasion of the 1984 publication of French photographer Sophie Ristelhueber's photographs of Beirut in ruins, taken in November and December 1982,[31] an article in *Le Monde* concluded in the same vein as Tuéni, that "in the morning fog, one could think one more time

25. For samples of his work during this period, see his website: Fouad Elkoury, "Civil War, 1977–1986," Permanent Collection, last accessed 13 August 2025, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/works4respon.php?work=5.

26. Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War."

27. Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War." For a visual documentation of the aftermath, see Fouad Elkoury, *Sabra and Chatila Camp, a Few Days after the Massacre*, Beirut, 1982, on his website Fouad Elkoury, "Civil War, 1977–1986," last accessed 13 August 2025, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/completerokrespon.php?id=2557.

28. See also Fouad Elkoury's photo *The Sporting Club*, a few days before the Israeli invasion, Beirut, 1982, on his website Fouad Elkoury, "Civil War, 1977–1986," last accessed 13 August 2025, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/works4respon.php?work=5&limit=7.

29. Stavro Jabra, *Colombes de guerre* (Beirut: Aleph, 1982).

30. Translation from French by author. Ghassan Tuéni, "Beyrouth: Otage et defi," in *Beyrouth Souvenirs… réalité* (Beirut: Hachette; an-Nahar, 1982), n.p.

31. Sophie Ristelhueber, *Beyrouth photographies* (Paris: Hazan, 1984).

that the war has finished."[32] The book displays thirty photographs of Beirut's architecture in ruins, without a living soul, followed by one image of Baalbeck's columns of the Temple of Jupiter, with a fallen column in the foreground, maybe hinting at the fact that history repeats itself. The belief that the war had ended could be felt elsewhere too. That year, the Sursock Museum, Beirut's foremost museum of modern and contemporary art, reopened its doors with its tenth *Salon d'Automne* after a seven-year interruption, all three opening statements in the salon catalogue emphasizing the return to peace.[33]

Peace was not to last. The war of the mountains between Druze and Christian forces ensued in 1982/1983. This was followed by what has been considered the fourth phase of the war, dominated by the internal wars of the mid to late 1980s—what Picard calls "the reign of the militias (December 1985–September 1988),"[34] including the war of the camps between Palestinian and Shiite forces supported by Syria from 1985 to 1987.[35] The fifth phase is marked by the intra-Christian wars of 1988 to 1990, which included Michel Aoun's war with Samir Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces and the Syrian army in 1989/1990. This last phase once again included heavy bombardment of Beirut. In the interview with Greta Naufal, the artist remembers how this was the only time she had to make use of the shelter in her building, producing beautiful works inspired by Pina Bausch's Café Müller. This period also saw two exhibitions of Lebanese art in London. *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*, which drew attention to the situation of Lebanon's artists and supported them during hardship, was organized at Kufa Gallery in 1988 and documented in the transcript of a roundtable in this issue. *Lebanon, The Artist's View* was a large-scale effort organized by the British-Lebanese Association at the Barbican Centre in London in 1989 before travelling to the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris later that year.[36] At a moment of peace, back in Beirut, cultural activist Janine Rubeiz and comic artist George Khoury organized the remarkable exhibition *Beirut Tabaan* (Beirut, of course) in 1989, bringing together artists from across generations, artistic media, and the divided city, as discussed by Naufal and Flavia Malusardi in this issue.

Having already made reference to some of the contributions in this issue, the following looks at them more systematically. This issue does not aim to be comprehensive, but rather to offer an insight into the different experiences of the 1980s, of both artists and institutions, at home and abroad. These experiences are sadly relevant today, as war and multiple crises make (cultural) life in Lebanon vulnerable. "Why has the Sursock Museum closed its doors?" asks Zena Zalzal in *L'Orient-Le Jour* in late October 2024, in the midst of destructive Israeli aggression on the country. "'The closure is temporary,' affirms the director of the Beiruti institution, Karina el-Hélou. The

32. Frédéric Edelmann, "Stades de la destruction," *Le Monde*, 19 April 1984.

33. Opening statements were given by Chafic Sardouk, *mutawalli* of the museum and president of Beirut's municipality, Victor Cassir, president of the museum committee, and Loutfalla Melki, curator of the museum. *X^e Salon d'Automne*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Sursock Museum, 20 December 1982–20 January 1983 (Beirut: Sursock Museum, 1982). For a further discussion of the Sursock Museum during the 1980s, see Ashraf Osman, "Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1980s: Inclusion and Exclusion in a Decade of Conflict," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 57–82, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.3.

34. Picard, "La guerre civile au Liban."

35. de Clerck and Malsagne, *Le Liban en guerre*, 81–86; Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War."

36. Extensive catalogues were published for both iterations of this exhibition. See The British Lebanese Association, *Lebanon, The Artist's View: 200 Years of Lebanese Painting*, exhibition catalogue, London, Concours Gallery, Barbican Centre, 18 April–2 June 1989 (London: Quartet, 1989); Liban Culture, *Liban, Le regard des peintres: 200 ans de peinture libanaise*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe, 5 October–5 November 1989 (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 1989).

National Museum and several gallerists continue their activities for the moment."[37] By considering how artists and institutions navigated the troubled times of the 1980s, we are given a reference today, fifty years after the formal outbreak of the war, on how previous generations have tried to defy violence and coped with forced displacement, which at times has also been generative.

Institutions Navigating the 1980s

The issue starts with the article "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)," in which Monique Bellan examines the setting, role, and activities of Galerie Damo, providing an illustrative example of the art scene in the 1980s. Galerie Damo was launched in 1977 in the aftermath of the two-year war. Its portfolio primarily comprised artists who had been active in the decades preceding the war and who were largely considered part of the established Lebanese artistic canon. While focusing on the continuities regarding the choice of artists, the analysis also identifies potential shifts in the artistic approaches and themes pursued by individual artists that may be related to the war context. The gallery is set within the wider gallery system and art market, providing a useful overview of the exhibition scene from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. The analysis furthermore shows how galleries migrated to the Christian suburbs north of Beirut during this period. In an increasingly divided country, Christian forces had set up their headquarters in the town of Jounieh—what artist Fadi Barrage mockingly calls the "Duchy of Jounieh" in his diaries.[38]

Aside from the galleries, the Sursock Museum was Beirut's only museum of modern and contemporary art. Having first opened in 1961, it reopened to the public in the autumn of 1982 after a seven-year closure following the outbreak of the war. In "Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1980s: Inclusion and Exclusion in a Decade of Conflict," Ashraf Osman looks at the museum's efforts to navigate the 1980s, while it grappled with questions of representation and artistic value. Looking at who and what was exhibited throughout this decade shows us the challenges and logistics of operating during these times, and what networks and people were instrumental for keeping the museum running. By looking at what it meant to operate in this decade of conflict, and how critics and artists perceived the museum, it will become clear to what extent the war governed choices—and to what extent it did not. The article also draws links with the wider 1980s art world, as some of the artists positioned themselves against a perceived commercialization of art.

The next article examines how a cultural and artistic centre can be kept alive after its physical location is lost. In "The House Stands Tall: The Social Dimension of Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's Curatorial Activities during the Civil War in Lebanon," Flavia Malusardi examines the curatorial activities of Janine Rubeiz after Dar el Fan, the cultural centre she had set up in the 1960s, lost its physical space early in the war. It highlights Rubeiz's efforts to sustain cultural production amid crisis, and her use of art as a medium for political and social engagement. Drawing on concepts such as art agency and exhibitionary sociality, the article situates exhibitions like *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan* as dynamic, relational events that transcended traditional art displays to foster col-

37. Zena Zalzal, "Pourqoui le musée Sursock a-t-il fermé ses portes?," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 30 October 2024.

38. Fadi Barrage diary entries, 19 July 1983 and 25 July 1983. For a discussion of Barrage and his diaries, see Nadia von Maltzahn, "Fadi Barrage, an Artist's Diary: 'To Think Things Out in Painting'," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 160–89, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.7.

lective memory and critical discourse. Due to the lack of functioning exhibition spaces, Rubeiz also used her home as a gallery, which became not only a resilient space amid war, as Malusardi argues, but also a haven for encounter and dialogue, where new communities were formed.

Artists Navigating the 1980s

The next two articles focus on how artists navigated the 1980s and engaged with different artistic media. In her article "Against the Current: War Motifs and the Medium of Printmaking in 1980s Lebanon," Çiğdem İvren argues that the themes of resistance and struggle, often expressed in war motifs, are closely tied to the aesthetics of printmaking and its links to other fields of visual culture. She examines how Jamil Molaeb's fine art prints engaged with these forms, highlighting their shared ability to document, critique, and disseminate war discourse, contextualizing his work as part of a network of visual practices that crossed boundaries between fine art and popular imagery. Molaeb's woodcuts are discussed in comparison to the aesthetic and ideological framework in the work of Beirut-based Palestinian artist Mustafa al-Hallaj. İvren sets these works apart from what she considers mainstream art, often depicting landscapes, village scenes, abstract compositions, and calligraphic works.

Moving from printmaking to tapestry, a medium usually created in collaboration between artist and weaver, in "Tracing Lines, Forging Connectivity: The Tapestries of Amine El Bacha and Antoine Saadé (1984–1985)," Jessica Gerschultz explores continued artistic engagement with the medium alongside recollections of fibre and loom-making in a period of war. The onset of war had slowed aesthetic engagement and disrupted practitioners' networks. Yet weaving, in form and memory, endured. For some artists, the preparation of raw materials and tools, as well as the weaving of threads, assumed physical, sensory, and poetic possibilities. Tapestry both engendered new relationships and elicited strong, tactile memories. In an intimate portrayal, the article focuses on the tapestry collaboration between artist Amine El Bacha and weaver Antoine Saadé, who became El Bacha's neighbour in Hamra in the mid-1980s. Resonating with Malusardi's discussion of Rubeiz's home gallery, the importance of friendship and community that were formed due to the war context is powerfully evident. Forced displacement here becomes generative.

Going Abroad

The last two articles look at the trajectories of two artists after leaving Lebanon in the context of the war. In "Fadi Barrage, an Artist's Diary: 'To Think Things Out in Painting'," I draw on Lebanese artist Fadi Barrage's diary entries from the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with drawings, sketches, and other sources to explore how abstract painting for Barrage functioned as both a refuge and a reflective process for navigating trauma, memory, and marginalization. I examine the extent to which Lebanon and the early stages of war he witnessed continued to be present in his work and thinking, tracing his journey from Beirut to Athens. A key focus is Barrage's development of "Fleisseh," a term denoting both a real place from his youth and a conceptual framework for abstract expression. Fleisseh works embody what the artist called "paint-feelings," emotional compositions that concealed often erotic content under layers of abstraction. By engaging with Jill Bennett's theory of empathic vision and Kirsten Scheid's concept of *taswir*, the article situates Barrage's art within broader discourses on representing trauma and the interactive creation of

meaning through image-making. His painting practice offers insight into how experiences of violence and queer desire are encoded in visual form, in particular when open expression is constrained by social or political contexts.

Finally, in "Mona Hatoum's Other Story: 'Third World Post-modernism' in 1980s Britain," Joan Grandjean examines Mona Hatoum's early years in the UK after leaving Lebanon in 1975. It focuses on her involvement in British Black Arts and encounter with Rasheed Araeen, presenting a fresh analysis of key works that assesses their critical impact. The article shows how Hatoum actively engaged with the ideas of Araeen, exploring his reflections on Third World art, postcolonialism, questions of identity, and the notion of black arts in the United Kingdom. While she is now a globally recognized artist, there has been limited research dedicated to the phase of her life when she existed on the fringes of art history, often being considered a migrant artist or, as she once wrote, a black one. The article also puts forward her early trajectory in Lebanon, and the continued emotional link to this country where her parents remained based. This comes out very clearly in her 1988 film *Measures of Distance*, which movingly captures the effects of displacement and separation on the artist and her family. "I wish this bloody war would be over soon, so you and your sisters can return and we will all be together again, like the good old days," Hatoum reads from a letter her mother wrote her.[39]

Perspectives

The issue closes with two contributions to the section "Perspectives": a personal testimony of an artist who started exhibiting in the 1980s and the edited transcript of a roundtable on a notable exhibition outside of Lebanon. Greta Naufal looks back at her beginnings as an artist during the 1980s, reflecting on her education and early exhibitions within the context of the ongoing war. I wanted to add here a note about institutional geography. Naufal studied at the Raouché branch of the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts, which opened after relocating from Downtown Beirut following the outbreak of war. A second branch opened in the East-Beirut district of Furn al-Shebak in 1977. As travelling within the country became increasingly difficult, from 1976 onwards the possibility of opening a third branch in Tripoli in Northern Lebanon was studied. It opened in 1980. While this and the establishment of Tripoli's artist collective "Group of Ten," formed in 1974 and active for twenty years, are not discussed in this issue, some existing publications shed light on both.[40]

The edited transcript of a roundtable held in Beirut in May 2024 with the main protagonists behind the exhibition *Lebanese Contemporary Artists* at Kufa Gallery in London in 1988, notably curator Rose Issa and artist Mohammad El Rawas, sheds light on how this exhibition came about, the logistics of organizing an exhibition of Lebanese art in the midst of war in Lebanon, and its reception. A point that emerges strongly in the context of the roundtable is the expectation viewers in London had of seeing the civil war in the works exhibited, and their disappointment at its

39. Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1988. Video Tape, 15:34, accessible on YouTube. Accessed 26 September 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKGPefM-Uf8.

40. Most notably artist and educator Fadl Ziade's memoir; he was one of the key actors both in the Group of Ten and in establishing the institute in Tripoli. Fadl Ziade, *Trablus... Um Ahmad Um Antun wa qisati m'a al-funun* (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2013), especially 121–59. For further insights into the Group of Ten, also see Elias Dib, *Masarat majmu'at al-ashra fi trablus: turath hadatha wa ibda'* (Beirut: Manshurat jam'aiyat al-azam wa al-sa'ada al-ijtima'iya, 2016).

perceived absence. Here two things are important to keep in mind: Rose Issa's argument that many paintings depicting the two world wars, for instance, were commissioned war paintings, and nothing of the sort existed in the context of Lebanon. And that artists produced works engaging with the war, but did not necessarily exhibit them during the 1980s when violence was all around. Sometimes artists needed distance from the events, both physical and temporal. When Pablo Picasso painted *Guernica*, one of the most famous war paintings, he was neither in Guernica nor in Spain, but at home in Paris.[41] As Martin Giesen, co-founder of Galerie Épreuve d'artiste, recollects:

> Between 1975 and 1985, Lebanese artists showed little appetite to participate in postmodernist discourse of meta-life and meta-art. The impact of the war was too immediate to allow clever distinctions. Consequently, one might have expected Lebanese artists to grasp the foil presented by the war to shape their narrative. Think again! Work produced and exhibited in Lebanon between 1975 and 1985 hardly treated the war. Lebanese artists treated it from a metaphorical distance: clothed in abstractions, veiled in quotations, surrealist analogies and mythological allusions.[42]

Fadi Barrage reflected on the war after he had left, and Mohammad Rawas recounted how he artistically dealt with the war from London in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but could not get himself to do so when he returned to Lebanon in 1981. This is affirmed by art critic Joseph Tarrab, who also maintains that of the little artistic activity that remained in the 1980s, it was largely artists continuing their previous work rather than innovating. Those who managed to create something new did so abroad, during longer or shorter stays, finding themselves paralysed again after their return to Lebanon, he reflects in a lecture delivered in Beirut on 6 March 1987.[43] This bleak perception is evident in the subtitle of his conference: "from galaxy to black hole." While the 1980s might not have produced the amount of exhibitions and innovative artworks the previous two decades had generated when Beirut acted as an artistic hub for the whole region (a "galaxy"), it was nevertheless a dynamic period, as clearly comes out in this issue. Not only in spite of, but also because of the war and its consequences, as the context could also be generative. The examples of Greta Naufal, Amine El Bacha and Antoine Saadeh, Jamil Molaeb and the afterlife of Dar el Fan are a case in point.

The Question of Generations

In her book *Painting in the 1980s*, Erpf concludes that the artists she presents "do share several commonalities such as the influence of non-painting sources, use of pictures or fragments to suggest a larger story, the appropriation of images or styles from art history, and utilizing unortho-

41. This is pointed out by Joseph Tarrab, who also makes Issa's point that most paintings that treat war are commissions, and that war often triggers creation but with a delay. Joseph Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité. Arts plastiques et théâtre: De la galaxie au trou noir," 6 March 1987, in *Les conférences de l'ALDEC, Liban: Société en guerre et créativité* (Beirut: Université Saint-Joseph, 1987), 21–40, here 38.

42. Martin Giesen, "Our Beginnings," in Amal Traboulsi, *Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste: Chronique d'une galerie sur fond de guerre* (Beirut: Épreuve d'artiste, 2018), 52.

43. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité," 33 and 38.

dox materials."[44] Mohammad Rawas's work would fit well into this description.[45] What Lebanon's artists of the 1980s shared was lived experiences of war, displacement—inside and outside the country—and processing what they witnessed, sometimes choosing to focus on what can be perceived as the mundane aspects of life. In Lebanon's art history, artists are often divided into generations, those of the prewar, the war, and postwar. I am not going to attempt to challenge this division in this introduction, but would like to highlight the following. Greta Naufal addresses the gap between the generations in her interview, stressing that the new generation did not want to make the link with the previous generations. They dismissed the little they saw. The rejection of what came before is to some extent natural, as Joseph Tarrab stated in his lecture: "most creatives are of their time, and reject the paintings of their masters, particularly the Lebanese post-impressionists such as the Onsis, Gemayels, Farroukhs, that today are so much in vogue."[46] He explains this popularity and the return to an interest in landscape painting amongst the public by a renewed passion in folklore rooted in everyone's villages; "finally there are works [...] with which one can identify completely, even more so that for those from the Keserwan mountain they represent Keserwan, the Chouf for those from the Chouf, the South for those from the South."[47] When Ziad Abillama (b. 1969), who is considered one of the pioneers of the postwar generation, returned from his studies at Amherst College Massachusetts in 1991, he was interested in the politics of Lebanon and how people could live together after civil war. He and his peers were reflecting on the urgency of the moment, thinking about the politics of the time immediately after the war and what role art could play in it. Visiting two galleries upon his return, Amal Traboulsi's Épreuve d'artiste and Odile Mazloum's Alwane, the paintings Abillama saw of red-roofed houses, symbolizing the celebration of an idealized Lebanese heritage, for him were reinforcing separation—as Tarrab pointed out—rather than providing a tool for coexistence.[48] It was this that the new generation went against. They were not aware of the more experimental work of the previous generations, and did not search for it either. Abillama had never heard of the exhibition *Beirut Tabaan* for instance, which was held while he studied abroad.[49]

Defying the Violence

While landscapes were selling well during the 1980s, the phenomenon is not to be confused with the act of defiance present in some of the works. In an interview on the occasion of his 1980 exhibition at Galerie Faris, one of two galleries exhibiting art from the Arab region that were opened

44. Erpf, *Painting in the 1980s*, 270.

45. Heather Reyes, ed., *The Art of Rawas* (London: Saqi Books), 2004.

46. He refers here to some of the pioneers of Lebanese painting, Omar Onsi, César Gemayel, and Mustafa Farroukh. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité," 28.

47. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité," 34.

48. In December 1991, Galerie Épreuve d'artiste opened an exhibition entitled *L'Orient: Mirage et réalité, aquarelles et pastels orientalistes du Liban, du Yemen et d'Arabie* by Leyla al Akl Farra, which sounds like it might have contained romanticizing landscapes. See exhibition booklet, Orient-Institut Beirut. At Alwane, he might have seen works in the gallerist's collection of what Tarrab calls "imperfect imitations of the approach of the masters of the 1930s and 1940s" (the pioneers of Lebanese painting described above). Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité," 35.

49. Conversation with Ziad Abillama, 7 August 2025.

in Paris by gallerists previously based in Beirut,[50] Amine El Bacha is quoted as saying: "to paint is to put the war in brackets."[51] In his review of El Bacha's 1984 solo exhibition at the Spanish Cultural Centre in Beirut, Mahmud al-Zibawi writes how the most beautiful thing was how the artist captured moments of joy.[52] In his depictions of everyday scenes, such as the picnic scene on the cover of this issue, El Bacha was not escaping reality or catering to a romantic vision or market demands. The scene can rather be read as an act of resistance, the protagonists not giving in to the violence, divisions, and logic of the war surrounding them. To go on these picnics in Mount Lebanon, El Basha and his family had to cross from West to East Beirut before continuing to the mountains, where they would eat their lovingly prepared food, as Gerschultz describes in her article.[53]

Taking the 1980s in Lebanon's visual arts as a reference has allowed us to foreground the artistic practices of a time too often overshadowed by conflict. This issue expands our understanding of Lebanon's art history, but also challenges assumptions about art produced in times of war. It highlights the complexity of artistic responses, and the significance of memory, displacement, and community. In doing so, it opens space for rethinking how we write art histories, not only of Lebanon then and now, but of other regions shaped by upheaval. The 1980s constituted not simply a pause between a prewar past and a postwar future, but a dynamic and formative period in its own right. By returning to this decade, we not only recover overlooked histories, but also gain tools for navigating the urgencies of the present.

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50. Galerie Faris was founded by Waddah Faris, co-founder of Beirut's Contact Art Gallery, at 50 rue de l'Université in Paris, active between 1979 and 1990; Galerie Brigitte Schehadé at 44 rue des Tournelles, active between 1977 and 1996, was set up by Schehadé, who had previously run the Centre d'Art and Centre d'Art 2 in Beirut. For a list of exhibitions at these spaces, see the annex of Elisa Michelle Karam's unpublished MA thesis, "L'art arabe à l'étranger, migration et galleries libanaises à l'époque de la guerre civile au Liban: Galerie Brigitte Schehadé et Galerie Faris à Paris" (Mémoire d'étude [MA thesis], École du Louvre, 2025).

51. Mirèse Akar, "Amine el-Bacha: 'Peindre, c'est mettre la guerre entre parenthèses'," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 22 January 1982.

52. Mahmud al-Zibawi, "Amin al-basha yansab wa tatahad ishkalihi darbat aula wa lawhat arb'a majmu'at," *an-Nahar*, 31 March 1984.

53. For an image of the museum crossing, one of the few crossings between East and West Beirut, see Fouad Elkoury, *Passage du musée*, Beirut, 1982, on his website Fouad Elkoury, "Civil War, 1977–1986," last accessed 13 August 2025, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/works4respon.php?work=5&limit=14.

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Articles

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Ruptures and Continuities

Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)

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Abstract

The paper examines the development of art galleries and exhibition spaces in Lebanon since the beginning of the civil war in 1975 and throughout the 1980s, with a particular interest in the shifts and changes that occurred as a result of the hostilities. This includes the dissolution of Beirut as an artistic centre and the gradual decentring of spaces and activities outside the capital. While the focus is on the decade of the 1980s, the analysis will look at developments that began earlier in order to contextualize them. One gallery in particular, Galerie Damo, will be examined in detail, including its founding history, mission, and exhibition programme. The gallery began operating after the first phase of the civil war in 1977 and serves as an example of exhibition activity outside the capital. It relied largely on artists who had exhibited extensively in various art galleries, cultural centres, and other spaces in Beirut before the war, and is therefore well suited to analysing the ruptures that occurred after 1975, as well as possible continuities.

Keywords

Lebanon, Art History, Art Galleries, War, Exhibitions

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Introduction

This contribution aims to look at some of the transformations within the artistic scene triggered by the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). Despite the state of emergency and the resulting unpredictability of events, exhibitions continued to take place during this fifteen-year period, although at a different rhythm and in often different settings than before. A comprehensive and nuanced picture of this time, that examines continuities, ruptures, transformations, and possibly new beginnings, will help us to ultimately connect these exhibition practices to prewar and postwar artistic activities rather than view them as separate developments. The article will examine the setting, role, and activities of Galerie Damo in greater detail, with the aim of providing an illustrative example of the 1980s that started in 1977, in the aftermath of the first phase of the war. Galerie Damo's portfolio primarily comprised artists who had been active in the decades preceding the war and who were largely considered part of the established Lebanese artistic canon. The gallery and its programme are therefore suitable for an analysis of artistic continuities in times of radical rupture. While focusing on the continuities regarding the choice of artists, the analysis also identifies potential shifts in the artistic approaches and themes pursued by individual artists that may be related to the war context. Furthermore, this article seeks to establish connections between the initiatives introduced by Galerie Damo, particularly those pertaining to the gallery system and art market, and those initiated by seminal galleries such as Gallery One and Contact Art Gallery. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of developments that commenced during the 1960s and 1970s.

The Dissolution of a Centre: The Migration from Beirut to the North

Prior to the war, Beirut was emblematic of openness, fluidity, and sense of experimentation.[1] The city succeeded in attracting artists, intellectuals, writers, thinkers, and activists from other Arab countries and internationally. As Kamal Boullata noted, "Beirut's brand of openness created the ideal environment for becoming a microcosm of the Arab world, embracing all its distinctions and contradictions."[2] It boasted a significant concentration of artists, intellectuals, writers, and art lovers, coupled with a proliferating network of cultural outlets, periodicals, and galleries that not only disseminated these ideas but also facilitated their exchange. Consequently, Beirut served as "a nexus of transnational Arab artistic encounter, aesthetic experimentation, intellectual debate and political contestation."[3] Cultural life in Beirut was at its peak. In his analysis, art critic Joseph Tarrab (1943–2024) likened Beirut to a "galaxy."[4]

1. For more information on the status of Beirut in the 1960s and '70s and its cultural, literary and artistic activities, see Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019) and Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

2. Kamal Boullata, "Artists Re-member Palestine in Beirut," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2003), 24.

3. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 12.

4. This impression of a galaxy was triggered by the view of the nocturnal city centre from the mountains with its countless sparkling lights, which turned into a "black hole" with the outbreak of the war. Joseph Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité, arts plastiques et théâtre: de la galaxie au trou noir," *Les conférences de l'ALDEC*, *Liban: Société en guerre et créativité* (Beirut: Université Saint-Joseph, 1987), 22.

The city hosted an array of art galleries, especially in Ras Beirut and the area around Hamra. In addition, there were numerous cultural centres and clubs, modern hotels, restaurants, cafés, and others, all of which regularly hosted art exhibitions.[5] Among the most important galleries in terms of vision and outreach were Gallery One, established by Helen Khal (1923–2009) and Yusuf al-Khal (1917–87) in 1963, and Contact Art Gallery, founded by Waddah Faris (1940–2024), César Nammour (1937–2021), and Mireille Tabet (1939–2022) in 1972. Both galleries shared an interest in introducing the public to new (Arab) artists, styles, and in broadening the artistic canon across the Arab region. In this capacity, they played a pioneering role, making a significant contribution to the emergence of Beirut as a centre for the artistic avant-garde in the Arab region. Together with the other galleries and spaces, they constituted a dense network of artistic activities.

With the outbreak of civil war, cultural life came to a near standstill, with few, if any, possibilities for artists to exhibit their work. The so-called "Battle of the Hotels," which occurred during the early phase of the armed conflict, had a particularly detrimental impact on the area of Minet al-Hosn and the adjacent neighbourhoods of Clémenceau, Ain al-Mraisseh, Zokak al-Blat, and Hamra, where most galleries were located. Many galleries closed for good, while some relocated to other regions or abroad.[6]

By the end of 1976, what was known as the "two-year-war" seemed to be over, and some spaces, including the foreign cultural centres and cultural clubs, resumed their activities. However, this process was gradual and hesitant, as evidenced by a magazine article titled "The galleries are absent and the visual arts occupy new spaces" from November 1977.[7] Its author expressed regret that almost no former art galleries had reopened, despite the readiness of artists to exhibit. He considered art to be a "national necessity" (*darura wataniyya*) at this juncture and therefore urged gallery owners to reopen their spaces without delay if they were to facilitate the revival of the artistic movement. Of the galleries referenced in the article, only Contact Art Gallery resumed its activities, in December 1977. The gallery, then managed by César Nammour and Mireille Tabet alone, organized three exhibitions[8] before being forced to close permanently due to the resumption of hostilities.

In these challenging times, new initiatives and spaces were emerging in Beirut, including Galerie d'art Bekhazi (GAB Center) in Ashrafieh, which was founded by Nader, Souheila, and Georges Bekhazi (1977), Galerie Rencontre by Antoine and Michel Fani in Watwat (1979), Galerie Trait d'Union–Maisons Fleuries by Raymond Chouity in Ashrafieh (1980), Galerie Platform by Samia Tutunji (1984), and al-Muntada initiated by Mohammad Barakat and run by Faeqa Owaida in Clé-

5. For an overview of art galleries and exhibition spaces in Beirut between 1943 and 1990 refer to LAWHA (www.lebanonartworld.org as of 2026) and "Perspective #1. Witness to a Golden Age. Mapping Beirut's Art Scene 1955–1975," Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, last accessed 13 August 2024, http://saradarperspective.com/perspective1/.

6. Waddah Faris, the former co-director of Contact Art Gallery, opened Galerie Faris in Paris in 1979 (until ca. 1992). Brigitte Schehadé, the former director of Centre d'art 1 and 2, opened Galerie Brigitte Schehadé in Paris in 1977 (until ca. 1997).

7. The original Arabic title is "Al-galirihat ghaʾiba wa al-tashkil yahtallu masahat jadida." The article by Asʿad Shahadeh was published in the Lebanese magazine *Al-Hasnaʾ* in November 1977 (exact date unknown, probably 17 or 18 November), 16–17.

8. Salwa Raouda Choucair: *Recent Sculptures* (6–21 December 1977), Shafic Abboud: *Tant qu'il y aura des hommes* (7–21 February 1978), and Wajih Nahlé: *Dynamic Harmony* (14 March–4 April 1978).

menceau (ca. 1984).[9] Two venues run by George Zeenny (1943–2015) also regularly organized exhibitions: the restaurant Smugglers' Inn on Makhoul Street, which had become a refuge for artists and writers during the war (ca. 1977), and, in close proximity, the Planula Elissar Visual Art Center on Bliss Street (1980). Zeenny was instrumental in creating opportunities for artists to exhibit their work and meet. In January 1984, for instance, he initiated weekly meetings among artists at the Planula Elissar Visual Art Center. He also organized group exhibitions featuring both emerging and established artists.[10] On the same street, Lebanon's first diner, Uncle Sam's, founded in 1960, reopened in 1981 with a new formula that allowed for artistic events such as exhibitions.[11] Among the former hotel galleries, only the Carlton Hotel in Raoucheh continued to organize exhibitions, along with the newly established and nearby Summerland Hotel.[12] In 1980, the Hôtel Alexandre in Ashrafieh emerged as an exhibition space too, but mainly, it seems, as an extension of the activities of Galerie Chahine. Other venues included the gallery of the National Council of Tourism (CNT) in Hamra (also known as *Salle de verre*), which held regular exhibitions throughout the 1980s, the Goethe-Institut in Bliss Street, the private residence of Samia Tutunji next to the National Museum,[13] and other, sometimes improvised spaces.[14]

One of the galleries taking up the challenge to show art in war-time Beirut was Galerie Épreuve d'artiste, founded by Amal Traboulsi (b. 1943) and Martin Giesen (b. 1945) in 1979. It was situated in the Clémenceau area in Ras Beirut. It was the first gallery in Lebanon dedicated to graphic art and contemporary prints, and unlike most new galleries, it did not open outside the Hamra area, but in the middle of it. In an interview, Amal Traboulsi elucidated the rationale behind the establishment of the gallery:

> Some of the Lebanese artists stopped creating, the war was too heavy for their sensitive nature. The opening of a new gallery in those times was a breath of fresh air which gave them some hope (because most galleries were closed), and they started to create again. It was very interesting. But it was not always the best of each artist's work. War was not really something that gave them motivation. […] We wanted to specialize in the techniques of printmaking such as etching, lithography, woodcut, linocut, and silkscreen. It was what we liked

9. This space was originally an office space that belonged to the Islamic welfare institution "Dar al-Aytam," the Islamic Orphans' House. Mohammad Barakat, the director, offered this space to the artists as a possibility to exhibit, meet, exchange, and sell their works. It only existed during the war time, from roughly 1984 to 1990. It also organized readings and other events. Conversation with Saleh Barakat, Beirut, 28 September 2022.

10. "Georges Zeeni transforme 'Planula' en centre vivant de l'art," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 25 January 1984, 4.

11. Owner Nabil Majdalani reopened the space in June 1981 with a group exhibition by artists Fadi Barrage, Seta Manoukian, Wajih Nahlé, and Yvette Achkar. "L'Uncle Sam' fébrile," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 24 June 1981, 4.

12. It opened in 1978.

13. She organized exhibitions in her home from about 1977 to 1984, before opening Galerie Platform.

14. In March 1982, for example, Hussein Madi exhibited in a space on the third floor of the Piccadilly Building in Hamra. It is not known whether this was an office, studio or other private space. See the exhibition poster here: "Madi," American University of Beirut, University Library Collections, last accessed 11 November 2024, https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/blacklight/catalog/ark86073b30g9n?f%5Bcollection_ssim%5D%5B%5D=Posters&search_field=all_fields.

> very much. But it didn't work out really well because what was done in the West did not interest the Lebanese at that time. They felt a big gap between their emotions and the rigid concept of the contemporary western art.[15]

Opening an art gallery in Clémenceau in the middle of the war meant claiming back normality. Artistic practice was often regarded as an act of hope and a means of resisting the war as evidenced by the newspaper article "Continuing for an art-hungry audience" in which gallery owners reported that sales had almost ceased, but that they were willing to continue.[16] Exhibition openings were also an occasion to meet and exchange, something that had become rare during those years. However, the gallery was compelled to adapt to the prevailing local circumstances and reposition its profile accordingly. During periods of relative calm, Galerie Épreuve d'artiste frequently invited artists from abroad. Such occasions provided a valuable opportunity for artists to engage in discourse and exchange ideas about their work. Amal Traboulsi points out that, contrary to what one might assume, artistic activity was quite vibrant during the 1980s "as Beirut remained the capital of Arab art despite the war and the opening of the Emirates to the art world."[17]

A newspaper article on the occasion of Noff al-Hadi's exhibition at the Summerland Hotel in Beirut and Sami Abou Kheir's exhibition at the Casino du Liban in Maameltein in June 1980,[18] whose tone is almost too enthusiastic when contrasted with Joseph Tarrab's statements on the declining situation of art during the war, testifies not only to the continuation of artistic activity, but also to its effervescence: "There is no denying that painting in Lebanon is doing well, very well indeed. Not a week goes by without at least one or two vernissages."[19] The frequency of exhibitions depended on the phases of the war and could sometimes be more intense than in other years. It was also connected to the location of the venues.

Despite these new beginnings, the intellectual fabric and enriching diversity of Beirut's pre-1975 art scene had disintegrated. According to Joseph Tarrab, not only was the infrastructure heavily damaged, but more importantly, so too were the social and intellectual ties.[20] Nevertheless, Beirut retained its status as a cultural centre or as the "metropolis of Arab modernity," in Kamal Boullata's words, until 1982, the year of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the withdrawal of the PLO, which marked the end of Beirut's pivotal role in the formation of modern Arab culture.[21] This correlates with increased migration from the capital to the suburbs after 1982, linked to the deterioration of the political situation.

15. Taymour Grahne, "Amal Traboulsi Interview," Art of the Mid East, 8 September 2011, https://artofthemideastdotcom.wordpress.com/2011/09/08/amal-traboulsi-interview/.
16. Fabienne Thomas, "Bilan et perspectives des galeries 'Damo' et 'Épreuve d'artiste'. Continuer à l'intention d'un public assoiffé d'art...," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 14 January 1982, 4.
17. Amal Traboulsi, *Galerie Épreuve d'artiste: Chronologie d'une galerie sur fond de guerre* (Beirut: Épreuve d'artiste, 2018), 32.
18. The birth dates of both artists are unknown but can be placed around 1955.
19. Hala Khoury, "Noff al-Hadi au Summerland: 'La mélancolie mène au bonheur...' ... et Abou Kheir au 'Casino du Liban': 100 toiles avec le rose pour l'espoir," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 6 June 1980, 4.
20. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre," 31.
21. Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (London; San Francisco; Beirut: Saqi, 2009), 124.

Outside the capital, in the suburban areas to the north, Galerie Damo in Antelias was the first gallery to open in 1977. In 1982, Yusuf al-Khal relaunched Gallery One in collaboration with architect and urbanist Riad Tabet, near the highway in Zalka and close to Antelias.[22] It existed only until 1983 and did not reach the same level of activity and outreach as previously. Among the few activities were individual exhibitions by Alfred Basbous and Michel Akl in 1982, and by Georges Akl and Jean Khalifé in 1983. The former space for the Arab avant-garde that had been a galaxy of its own was now entirely isolated from its former networks, neighbourhoods, and publics.

Additionally, a novel phenomenon emerged, whereby galleries established spaces in the recently constructed beach resorts situated along the coast between Beirut and Jounieh. Galerie Chahine by Richard Chahine, while maintaining its branch in Beirut's quarter of Verdun, opened a new space at the "Solemar" beach resort in Kaslik in 1984. In 1983, Galerie La Toile by Alexa Bourji opened at the "Rimal" resort in Zouk Mosbeh, and around 1987, César Nammour, who had previously served as the co-director of Contact Art Gallery, inaugurated Galerie Les Cimaises at the "Holiday Beach" resort in Nahr al-Kalb. Galerie Épreuve d'artiste relocated from Beirut to Kaslik in 1986, and Galerie Alwane by Odile Mazloum, the proprietor of the previous Galerie L'Amateur, in 1988.[23] Interestingly, the Automobile et Touring Club du Liban (ATCL) in Kaslik[24] also regularly hosted exhibitions, some of which were organized by Galerie Chahine before it opened its branch in the "Solemar" resort.[25]

The exhibition programme at Galerie La Toile was comparable to that of Galerie Damo, featuring mainly prominent artists who had exhibited extensively prior to 1975 including Paul Guiragossian, Said Akl, Naim Doumit, Mohammad al-Kaissi, Joseph Basbous, and sculptor Zaven. Galerie Chahine on the other hand catered more to the younger generation, including artists such as Greta Naufal, Andre Jazzar, and Maroun Hakim. So did Galerie Les Cimaises, which organized many group exhibitions for young artists such as Aram Jughian, Theo Mansour, and Samir Müller, but also included established artists such as Jean Khalifé with a posthumous exhibition on the nude model and a collective exhibition on portraits and self-portraits by well-known artists from Lebanon.[26]

While the establishment of galleries in beach resorts can be perceived as a retreat into a more secluded and private domain, away from the urban environment, there were also practical considerations, such as a dearth of suitable exhibition spaces. But more importantly, a significant proportion of the potential audience that had sought refuge from the conflict in Beirut now resided in these areas (and resorts). This included the gallery owners. Moving homes and gallery

22. As a prelude to the opening of the gallery space in Zalka in 1982, Gallery One organized Paul Guiragossian's exhibition *Gebraniat* which took place at the Casino du Liban from 3 to 24 December 1981.

23. Zéna Zalzal, "Odile Mazloum: J'ai dans ma tête et dans mon cœur des centaines de toiles…," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 20 July 2020, https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1226454/odile-mazloum-jai-dans-ma-tete-et-dans-mon-coeur-des-centaines-de-toiles.html.

24. The club was established in 1919. "Historique du Club," ATCL, last accessed 9 October 2024, https://atcl.org/historique-du-club/.

25. Among the artists who exhibited at ATCL were Michel Basbous (1979), Mohammed al-Kaissi (1981), Omran al-Kaissy (1981), and Maurice Bonfils (1981).

26. *Le nu chez Jean Khalifé* (27 May–16 June 1987); *Les artistes témoins d'eux-mêmes. Auto-portraits et portraits 1919–1987* (20 March–20 April 1987).

spaces, often more than once, was a common practice at the time.[27] While the beach resorts, due to their private nature, were not suitable for meetings among artists, they arguably facilitated encounters between "pedestrians" within the resort itself and provided easy access to the gallery spaces. Consequently, they served to recreate, to some extent, the former urban environment of Beirut. Antelias, Kaslik, Zouk Mosbeh, and Zalka were, in contrast, suburban residential zones with some commercial activity but almost no pedestrians and a lack of convivial infrastructure, such as cafés where chance encounters might occur.

Filling the Void: Galerie Damo as a Project of "National Unity"?

The shift from Beirut to other areas in Lebanon after 1977 represents a rupture in many ways. While prewar Beirut with its cosmopolitan atmosphere had been an amalgam of a multitude of nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and religious affiliations, Galerie Damo was set up in a different reality, namely that of fragmentation and segregation. It is worth noting Sarah Rogers' argument that Lebanon's cosmopolitanism presented itself as a cosmopolitan nationalism, which was "intimately associated with a Maronite Christian community that privileges a Franco-Mediterranean identity over a regional Arab one in Lebanon."[28] Antelias, where Galerie Damo was located, was initially an agglomeration of a few residential houses, in a predominantly Christian area. During the war years it underwent a substantial transformation as a result of the influx of former residents of Beirut and other regions who relocated to this area north of the capital, but remained essentially Christian.

Galerie Damo, the name stands for *Décorateurs et artistes du Moyen-Orient*, was a design office and an art gallery at the same time. Situated on the first floor of a building opposite the Armenian Church in Antelias, it consisted of three spaces. The gallery was founded by Tripoli-born sculptor and furniture designer Brahim Zod (b. 1942). Together with his wife, the artist Souleima Zod (b. 1944), and Jacqueline Zogheib, wife of the poet and writer Henri Zogheib (b. 1948), he managed the space between 1977 and 1988. The gallery formally existed until 1988, although its last exhibition took place in 1986. In the intervals between exhibitions, the space was frequently utilized as a furniture gallery.

Prior to the gallery opening on 17 November 1977, an exhibition within the "Lebanese Cultural Week in Rome" (8–13 October 1977) prepared the grounds for the inaugural exhibition at Galerie Damo a few weeks later.[29] Organized by Father Maroun Atallah (1928–2022) and *Les amis de Charbel*, the Lebanese cultural week and exhibition in Rome centred on the figure of Saint Charbel, who was canonized by Pope Paul VI on 9 October 1977. Maroun Atallah was a cleric at the Saint Elias Convent in Antelias and the co-founder of the Cultural Movement Antelias, located at the

27. The architect and painter Maurice Bonfils (1935–2013) also moved his architectural office to the "Holiday Beach" resort in 1981 or 1982. See Hala Khoury, "'Il faut sortir du ghetto intellectuel'," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 1 April 1982, 4.

28. Sarah Rogers, "Postwar Art and Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Architecture, 2008), 68 and 92, http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/45935.

29. *Exposition de peinture* at the Museo del Folklore Romano, Piazza S. Egidio (Trastevere). The programme also included the theatre play *Charbel* under the direction of Raymond Gebara at the Teatro Sistina (7–8 October 1977).

same premises.[30] In 1977 he reached out to Brahim Zod, who had started the process of opening his gallery, to assist with organizing the exhibition in Rome. In preparation for the exhibition a board was formed, including Yusuf al-Khal, May Menassa (1939–2019), writer and art critic at the Lebanese daily *an-Nahar*, Samia Tutunji (1939–89), founder of Galerie Platform, and others.[31] The board agreed to include works by well-known artists Jean Khalifé (1923–78), Paul Guiragossian (1926–93), Samir Abi Rached (b. 1947), Rafic Charaf (1932–2003), Hussein Madi (1938–2024), Saliba Douaihy (1915–94), Moustafa Farroukh (1901–57), Omar Onsi (1901–69), César Gemayel (1898–1958), and Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883–1931).

Galerie Damo's inaugural exhibition, *L'exposition des amis de Charbel*, ran from 17 to 30 November 1977 and comprised a total of fifty-nine works. On the day of the opening, acclaimed art critic Victor Hakim (1907–81)[32] left a short note in the guestbook of the gallery, which read "Exposition collective et homogène" ("Collective and homogenous exhibition"). Another entry, dated 25 November 1977, states, "Damo, espoir de l'unité nationale" ("Damo, hope of national unity").[33] Both entries highlight the collective endeavour that put artists of different backgrounds, styles, and eras in dialogue, and the homogenous and harmonious result as a desirable template for Lebanon. It was seen as a sign of hope for national unity, albeit from a Christian perspective. This was particularly significant given the two years of war and the dissolution of a formerly vibrant artistic scene.

The exhibition in Rome and its subsequent iteration at Galerie Damo shared a nearly identical body of works, with the exception of paintings by Saliba Douaihy and Gibran Khalil Gibran.[34] Instead, works by painters Souleima Zod, Maha Bayrakdar (1947–2025), Wajih Nahlé (1932–2017), Joseph Matar (b. 1935), Cici Sursock (1923–2015), and sculptors Halim El Hajj (1915–90) and Antoine Berberi (b. 1944) were added (fig. 1 and fig. 2). Brahim Zod was well connected within the artistic scene in Lebanon, which enabled him to leverage these relationships when he opened his gallery. The exhibition was regarded as an illustrative cross-section of the artistic representations of Lebanon, encompassing its natural environment, cultural heritage, and traditions.

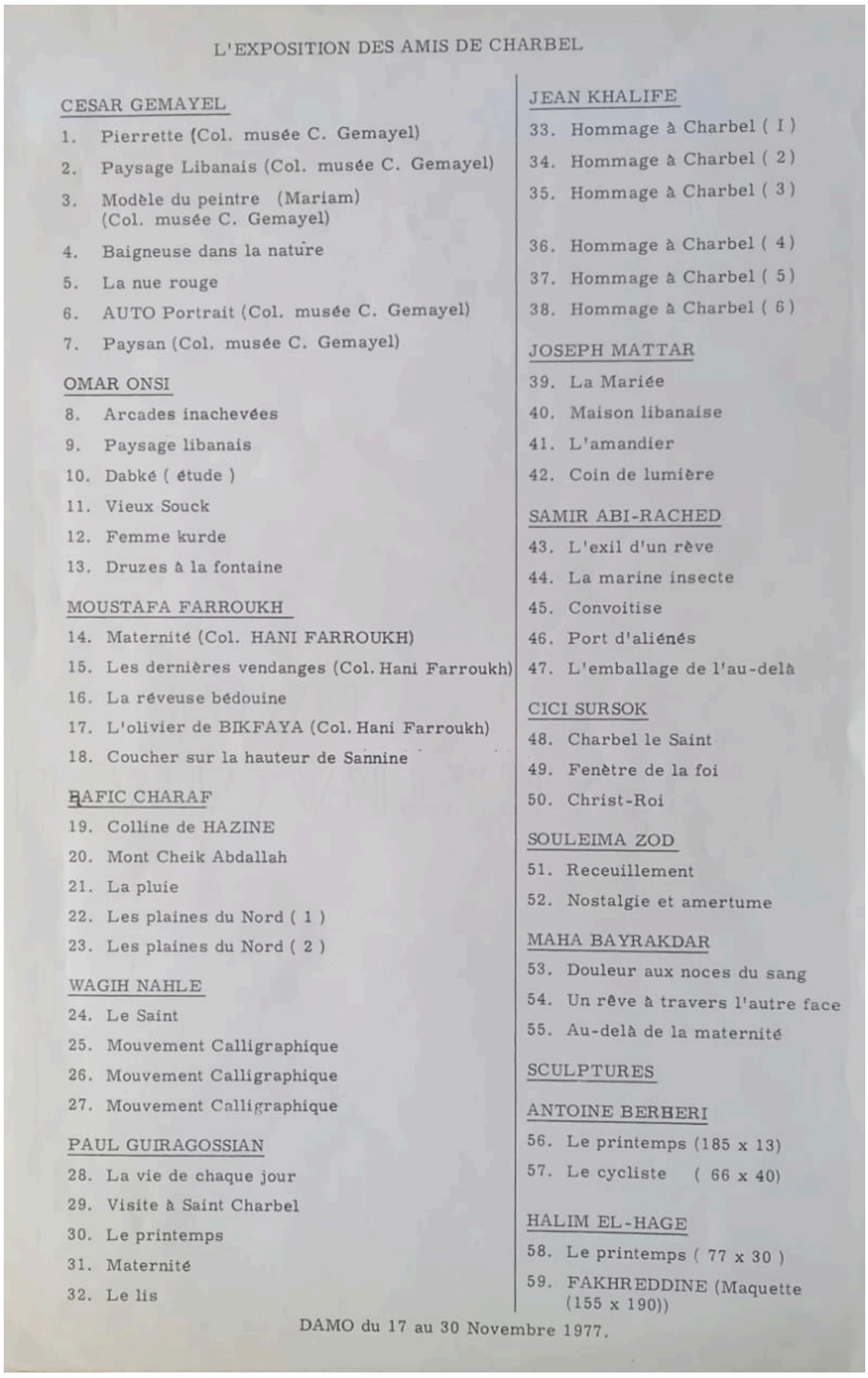
30. For further information on the Cultural Movement Antelias refer to "Le Mouvement Culturel – Antélias," homepage, MCALEB, last accessed 18 June 2025, http://www.mcaleb.org/fr/.

31. The other board members were Sadek Tabbara (professor of architecture at ALBA), Father Youhanna Sader (art critic and painter), Georges Ghanem (poet), and Joseph Zaarour (Director General of the Ministry of Culture). Henri Zogheib, "Damu Bayrut… li-Lubnan wa al-sharq al-awsat," *an-Nahar*, 14 November 2023, https://www.annaharar.com/culture/news/190871/دامو-بيروت-للبنان-والشرق-الأوسط.

32. Victor Hakim used to write for the weekly *La Revue du Liban et de l'Orient Arabe* between 1949 and ca. 1980. Michel Fani, *L'art au Liban* (Grenoble: Éditions de l'escalier, 2007), 313.

33. The guestbook is part of the private collection of Brahim Zod.

34. The works had to be returned to the lending institution and the collectors in Lebanon and were therefore not included. The bulk of works in the Rome exhibition was by Gibran Khalil Gibran (twenty-nine out of seventy-seven paintings).



L'EXPOSITION DES AMIS DE CHARBEL

CESAR GEMAYEL

1. Pierrette (Col. musée C. Gemayel)
2. Paysage Libanais (Col. musée C. Gemayel)
3. Modèle du peintre (Mariam) (Col. musée C. Gemayel)
4. Baigneuse dans la nature
5. La nue rouge
6. AUTO Portrait (Col. musée C. Gemayel)
7. Paysan (Col. musée C. Gemayel)

OMAR ONSI

8. Arcades inachevées
9. Paysage libanais
10. Dabké (étude)
11. Vieux Souck
12. Femme kurde
13. Druzes à la fontaine

MOUSTAFA FARROUKH

14. Maternité (Col. HANI FARROUKH)
15. Les dernières vendanges (Col. Hani Farroukh)
16. La réveuse bédouine
17. L'olivier de BIKFAYA (Col. Hani Farroukh)
18. Coucher sur la hauteur de Sannine

RAFIC CHARAF

19. Colline de HAZINE
20. Mont Cheik Abdallah
21. La pluie
22. Les plaines du Nord (1)
23. Les plaines du Nord (2)

WAGIH NAHLE

24. Le Saint
25. Mouvement Calligraphique
26. Mouvement Calligraphique
27. Mouvement Calligraphique

PAUL GUIRAGOSSIAN

28. La vie de chaque jour
29. Visite à Saint Charbel
30. Le printemps
31. Maternité
32. Le lis

JEAN KHALIFE

33. Hommage à Charbel (1)
34. Hommage à Charbel (2)
35. Hommage à Charbel (3)
36. Hommage à Charbel (4)
37. Hommage à Charbel (5)
38. Hommage à Charbel (6)

JOSEPH MATTAR

39. La Mariée
40. Maison libanaise
41. L'amandier
42. Coin de lumière

SAMIR ABI-RACHED

43. L'exil d'un rêve
44. La marine insecte
45. Convoitise
46. Port d'aliénés
47. L'emballage de l'au-delà

CICI SURSOK

48. Charbel le Saint
49. Fenètre de la foi
50. Christ-Roi

SOULEIMA ZOD

51. Receuillement
52. Nostalgie et amertume

MAHA BAYRAKDAR

53. Douleur aux noces du sang
54. Un rêve à travers l'autre face
55. Au-delà de la maternité

SCULPTURES

ANTOINE BERBERI

56. Le printemps (185 x 13)
57. Le cycliste (66 x 40)

HALIM EL-HAGE

58. Le printemps (77 x 30)
59. FAKHREDDINE (Maquette (155 x 190))

DAMO du 17 au 30 Novembre 1977.

Figure 1: List of exhibited works at the inaugural exhibition at Galerie Damo (17–30 November 1977). © Brahim Zod Archive.

Figure 2: At the opening of the inaugural exhibition on 17 November 1977. In the foreground: the model of Halim El Hajj's sculpture *Fakhreddine* (gypsum, 155 × 190 cm). In the background from right to left: Jean Khalifé, Henri Zogheib, Elias Rahbani, Halim El Hajj and his wife, and the painting *Hommage à Charbel* (oil on canvas) by Jean Khalifé. Photographed by Brahim Zod. © Brahim Zod Archive.

Despite the considerable stylistic diversity among the participating artists, they were unified by a common focus on Lebanon, its landscape across different seasons, the mountains, and Saint Charbel. While the claim was that Saint Charbel addressed all the Lebanese, both Christians and Muslims, he was however deeply rooted in the Maronite homeland of Mount Lebanon and strongly remained a Christian figure with limited capacity to unify. He is the product of the "search for local authenticity (as opposed to Western influence) and the constitution of a 'national' community narrative," as Bernard Heyberger points out.[35] Hence, the idea of showing this exhibition in Lebanon could be interpreted as an attempt to start anew with the figure of the "Christian hero,"[36] to whom the power to save the nation is attributed by the Maronite leadership to this day.[37]

35. Bernard Heyberger, "Saint Charbel Makhlouf, or the Consecration of Maronite Identity," in *Middle Eastern and European Christianity, 16th–20th Century: The Collected Works of Bernard Heyberger*, ed. Aurélien Girard et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 245–63, here 245. The author points out that the narrative of Saint Charbel as a unifying figure was constructed retroactively since Charbel Makhlouf himself did not leave any writings during his lifetime.

36. Heyberger, "Saint Charbel Makhlouf," 245.

37. Bernard Heyberger points to the link between the saint and the land where "religion (*din*) and fatherland (*watan*) form an inseparable pair" and where the "Maronite identity and Lebanese identity blend into one another." This "maronitude" or "political Maronitism" characterized the discourse of the Lebanese Forces, says the author. See Heyberger, "Saint Charbel Makhlouf," 255–56. In his homily on the occasion

The question of whether the establishment of Galerie Damo and the inaugural exhibition represent a project of national unity, which was not an explicit goal of the gallery itself but rather a hope expressed in the guestbook, remains to be addressed. What nation are we talking about, who was included or excluded? While Beirut as a "nexus of transnational Arab artistic encounter," in Zeina Maasri's words, and a cosmopolitan space had gradually been disintegrating since the beginning of the war, activities shifted partially to the predominantly Christian regions north of Beirut. Not only did the capital lose its former status as a unifying space for diverse and often divergent ideas, backgrounds, and opinions, but Lebanon itself as a multi-confessional space, with the Christian-Maronite community claiming a leading role, was under scrutiny.

Therefore, the vision of "national unity" may have played a role in holding this exhibition in Lebanon, especially since it was initiated by *Les amis de Charbel* and the Cultural Movement Antelias, one of whose objectives it is to "strengthen national unity."[38] There may also have been pragmatic reasons for kicking off the gallery programme with an exhibition that was (almost) ready with only the gap left by the withdrawn paintings of Saliba Douaihy and Gibran Khalil Gibran to be filled.

It is difficult to assess which artists, if any, were excluded after the two-year-hiatus between 1975 and 1977. Most foreign artists, including the Arab artists, had left the country, as had many Lebanese. Many of them, however, did not cut their ties with Lebanon and exhibited there when the opportunity arose. Therefore, it is perhaps more appropriate to think in terms of absences rather than exclusions. One observation regarding the confessional background of the public is striking, although not surprising given the location of the gallery in Antelias. The vast majority was from Christian backgrounds. The same applies to the artists, with the exception of Amine El Bacha and Rafic Charaf. It should be pointed out that the gallery itself was in no way biased in terms of sectarian background. However, the situation, especially in the early days of the war, when being affiliated to the "wrong" sect could be dangerous, did not encourage cross-regional exchange, which significantly limited the heterogeneity of both the artists and the public. The public consisted mainly of residents of the surrounding areas and of Beirut with a professional background, often linked to educational, research, and cultural institutions such as the Université Saint Esprit Kaslik, the Institut français d'archéologie, the Collège Notre Dame de Jamhour, the American University of Beirut, the Lebanese University, and the Goethe-Institut, as evidenced by the guestbook entries. Professions also included a number of businessmen, physicians, dentists, professors, and lawyers. There was a great interest in art at the time and "the need to deny the horrors of the war and maintain a semblance of civilized living," as Brahim and Souleima Zod

of the feast of Saint Charbel on 18 July 2021, Cardinal Béchara Raï, Patriarch of Antioch of the Maronites, prayed for the intercession of Saint Charbel to "help the nation recover from one of the worst economic and political crises it has ever faced." "Cardinal Rai Entrusts Lebanon to Saint Charbel," *Vatican News*, 20 July 2021, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-07/cardinal-rai-entrusts-lebanon-to-saint-charbel.html.

38. See "Les Objectifs du movement Culturel – Antélias," MCALEB, 5 December 2007, https://www.mcaleb.org/fr/introduction/objectifs.html.

recall.[39] It was "essential to experience the regenerative power of the creative act [...]."[40] Moreover, "people with money to spend and nowhere to go were in spendthrift mode and eager to buy," notes Helen Khal.[41] As many of them had to redecorate their homes, either because of war damage or relocation, there was also increased demand.

Another observation that deserves some thought is the decrease in the number of female artists exhibiting at Galerie Damo.[42] Only five women as opposed to twenty-two male artists exhibited at the gallery (including solo and group exhibitions). This is remarkable in that the number of female artists in Lebanon who had been exhibiting since the 1960s was considerable. Compared to Gallery One and Contact Art Gallery this seems like a drastic discontinuation of past practices from almost half, to one third, to one quarter of female artists.[43] However, this absence was probably due to the war and the fact that many artists – both male and female – had left Lebanon or were unable to produce art under the circumstances. It was probably felt more acutely given that the total number of exhibitions was quite limited.

It is also noteworthy that experimental art, often using new media such as installation, video, and performance, and focusing on the effects of the war on the individual and on society, was largely absent in the commercial galleries.[44] However, some foreign cultural centres in Beirut, most notably the Goethe-Institut, promoted these art forms in the 1980s.[45] What was lacking were institutions that supported experimental art forms and a market for them.[46] Since the mid-1960s, the market had been dominated by commercial galleries that "favor painting and sculpture – objects appropriate for domestic decoration."[47]

Going back to Galerie Damo and its programme following the inaugural exhibition, the gallery started the year 1978 with an exhibition of works by Rafic Charaf (19–31 January 1978), followed by Maroun Hakim (16 February–2 March), Souleima Zod (27 April–2 May), and Alfons Philipps (25 May–8 June). When hostilities resumed, the exhibition programme was suspended for the rest of the year.[48] From then on, exhibitions took place irregularly, accompanied by an increasing discrep-

39. Helen Khal, "Souleima Zod Transforms the Body into Landscapes of Virtual Reality," in *Resonances: 82 Lebanese Artists Reviewed by Helen Khal*, ed. César Nammour et al. (Beirut: Fine Arts Publishing, 2011; first published in *The Daily Star*, 19 November 1997), 327. Saleh Barakat confirms this observation (interview, 23 February 2022). This may have been contingent upon the phases of the war, as elucidated in a newspaper article from November 1983, where several gallery owners articulated concerns about the stagnation of sales: "On travaille au ralenti en attendant la reprise," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 2 November 1983, 4.

40. Khal, "Souleima Zod," 327–28.

41. Khal, "Souleima Zod," 327–28.

42. The percentage of women exhibiting at the other galleries in the 1980s remains to be researched.

43. As the reconstruction of the exhibition activities of these spaces is still underway, I indicate a preliminary trend based on my findings so far.

44. Galerie Épreuve d'artiste was one of the first galleries to embrace more experimental approaches in the early 2000s, with artists such as Mario Saba (1962–2011). See Traboulsi, *Galerie Épreuve d'artiste*, 248–51.

45. In the 1980s, the artist Imad Issa (b. 1953), for example, repeatedly exhibited his often provocative works at the Goethe-Institut in Beirut. He also exhibited at the Cultural Council of South Lebanon in Beirut (*Al-majlis al-thaqafi li-Lubnan al-janubi*) and at the Spanish and Russian cultural centres. See "Articles," IMAD ISSA, last accessed 3 November 2024, https://imadissa.wordpress.com/articles-%d9%85%d9%82%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%aa/.

46. Rogers, "Postwar Art," 46.

47. Rogers, "Postwar Art," 47.

48. For an overview of all exhibitions at Galerie Damo refer to the table at the end of this article.

ancy between the planned and actual outcomes. In 1981, for example, only two exhibitions were held, by Georges Guv (12–21 February) and Elie Kanaan (11–21 December).[49] All other scheduled events were cancelled or postponed due to the prevailing circumstances. The gallery's activities reached a peak in 1980 with a total of seven exhibitions and a low in 1984 and 1985 with no exhibitions at all. The average number of exhibitions was between two and four for the other years. The daily routine of shattered plans and continuous cancellations and postponements was characteristic of this time and applied to all galleries.

Defining an Identity: Galerie Damo's Mission and Objectives

In his opening speech on 17 November 1977, the main points of which had been announced at a press conference two days earlier, Brahim Zod underscored the role of art in society and its capacity to heal the wounds of war.[50] He outlined the mission and objectives of Galerie Damo, which included the organization of monthly exhibitions featuring artists from Lebanon and abroad, in addition to yearly group exhibitions.[51] The latter were to be curated and organized by a designated group of artists and art critics. In terms of media, the gallery's focus was unambiguous: painting and sculpture. Nevertheless, Brahim Zod's vision extended beyond the mere exhibition of art. He sought to establish the gallery as a cultural centre, hosting a diverse range of cultural events, including poetry readings, theatrical performances, and musical events.

Galerie Damo was also seeking collaboration with other galleries with the objective of releasing an annual publication of all exhibitions held in Lebanon during the preceding year. The publication was intended to include detailed information about the exhibited works, the prices at which they were sold, and which works were still available at the galleries. Furthermore, the intention was to provide information regarding the artists, including their educational background, artistic trajectory, and stylistic approach.[52] This was a novel and challenging approach that required a high degree of transparency and collaboration between galleries. The renewed outbreak of the war in 1978 stopped the pursuit of this ambitious project as communication, mobility, and thus collaboration became even more difficult. The outcome could have served as a valuable documentation of gallery activities and the evolution of the art market in Lebanon, simultaneously serving to unite the various artistic communities in the country.[53]

49. The exhibition by Maroun Tomb (1912–81) scheduled from 14 to 24 May 1981 was cancelled because the artist passed away a few weeks before the opening.

50. Brahim Zod, "Bayan iftitah Galiri Damu – Antelias, yawm al-khamis, 17 tishrin al-thani 1977," unpublished Arabic typescript, dated 14 November 1977 and held at the archive of Galerie Damo. All translations by the author of this article.

51. The gallery also wanted to include artists from the region, hence the geographical reference "Moyen-Orient" in its name (DA"MO"), but this did not materialize.

52. Zod, "Bayan iftitah."

53. There were other initiatives reaching out for collaboration within the artistic community such as the exhibition *Liban, l'art: 1977–1981* initiated by George Zeenny. Held in June 1981 at the exhibition hall of the National Council of Tourism (CNT) in Beirut, it was a showcase of all exhibition activities in Lebanon since 1977, grouped in chronological order. The exhibition brought together invitation cards, posters, programmes, books, and photo albums of almost all the exhibitions organized during this period, 463 of which were counted. Many galleries, cultural centres and individuals collaborated on this project, including Galerie Damo. Marie-Thérèse Arbid, "'L'exposition des expositions', une grande première en son genre," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 19 June 1981, 4.

A related field Brahim Zod intended to work on and improve was the professionalization of art galleries and their commitment to promote and represent the artists they were collaborating with. This encompassed the regulation of prices and the marketing of artwork. Accordingly, Galerie Damo sought to collaborate with other galleries in Lebanon to establish a "quota" that would regulate prices and respect the artist and their creative output.[54] In an interview with the Lebanese weekly *al-Hawadith* from 1980, Zod asserted that, until then, no institutions in Lebanon or the Arab world had adopted a sound approach in the field of art. What was lacking, he said, were relationships between artists and galleries that extended beyond the often hasty preparations for an exhibition, which did not take into account the artists' need for ongoing support and a climate in which they could create without having to think about sales.[55] Artists were usually not committed to a particular gallery, and vice versa. This resonates with what Waddah Faris from Contact Art Gallery and others had previously envisaged. In an interview with the Lebanese francophone newspaper *as-Safa*, Faris responded to the question why artists often switched galleries: "Because the galleries are not really organized. They are not yet complete 'establishments' with all the concerns that go with them."[56] Following Faris, the relation between artists and galleries needed to be strengthened through the continuous promotion of the artist. The same point was previously articulated by Helen Khal in 1963 as one of the explicit objectives of Gallery One, which was to "bring order to the existing chaos in art exhibition and pricing."[57] Consequently, Zod was not introducing any novel ideas; rather he was picking up the threads of previous efforts and addressing a problem that still needed to be solved.

He was also keen on further developing the appreciation for art among the Lebanese through close collaboration with art critics (fig. 3). Zod perceived the role of the gallery to be that of an intermediary between artists and their publics. In advance of each exhibition, he invited art critics to engage in discourse with the artists, thereby gaining an in-depth understanding of the respective exhibitions and the artists' intentions and artistic approaches. This was because, as he says, there was "nothing more challenging for the artist than to teach his audience how to read his painting or sculpture."[58] This resonates with what Kirsten Scheid has observed about art appreciation and the perceived gap between artists and audiences, particularly in comparison with abroad.[59] Brahim Zod's approach seems to have borne fruit insofar as exhibition reviews became more informative, providing readers with background information on the artists in addition to

54. Zod, "Bayan iftitah." Zod's intention was to draft a standardized contract in collaboration with the other galleries; however, this did not come to fruition. WhatsApp exchange with Brahim Zod, 22 October 2024.

55. Jihad Fadel, "al-Fannan al-lubnani… mazlum!," *al-Hawadith*, no. 1251, 24 October 1980, 94.

56. Claude Safar, "Waddah Faris et l'avant-gardisme dans les pays arabes," *as-Safa*, 17 August 1972, n.p.

57. "Opening of Gallery One: A First Art Institution of Its Kind," in *MoMa Primary Documents*, ed. Anneka Lenssen et al. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 206.

58. Zod, "Bayan iftitah."

59. Scheid provides the example of artists Yvette Achkar and Aref Rayess who stated: "We depend on each other. The public here is very amateur, *not like in the USA* [italics in the original quote], where people are concerned." See Kirsten L. Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects: Art and Sociality from Lebanon, 1920–1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 19. However, this is relativized by Helen Khal's impressions of the art scene in the USA and Lebanon conveyed in a typescript letter to Huguette Caland from Washington dated 7 August 1980. "In the Middle East," she says, "there is more of a personal involvement, more vitality in the relationship between the artist, the art and the audience. Here I feel a commercial and impersonal kind of pretentiousness in the whole art scene […] it all appears too 'elite' […] In the Middle East, perhaps they are still unsophisticated in their responses, but still the people do show a much more lively and honest reaction to work." The letter is part of Helen Khal's archive at the Modern and Contemporary Art Museum, MACAM.

their work.[60] Before, other galleries such as Gallery One and Contact Art Gallery had maintained close relationships with art critics as well. This practice culminated in what was initially planned to become a series of public meetings with art critics as part of the programme at Contact Art Gallery in 1978.[61]

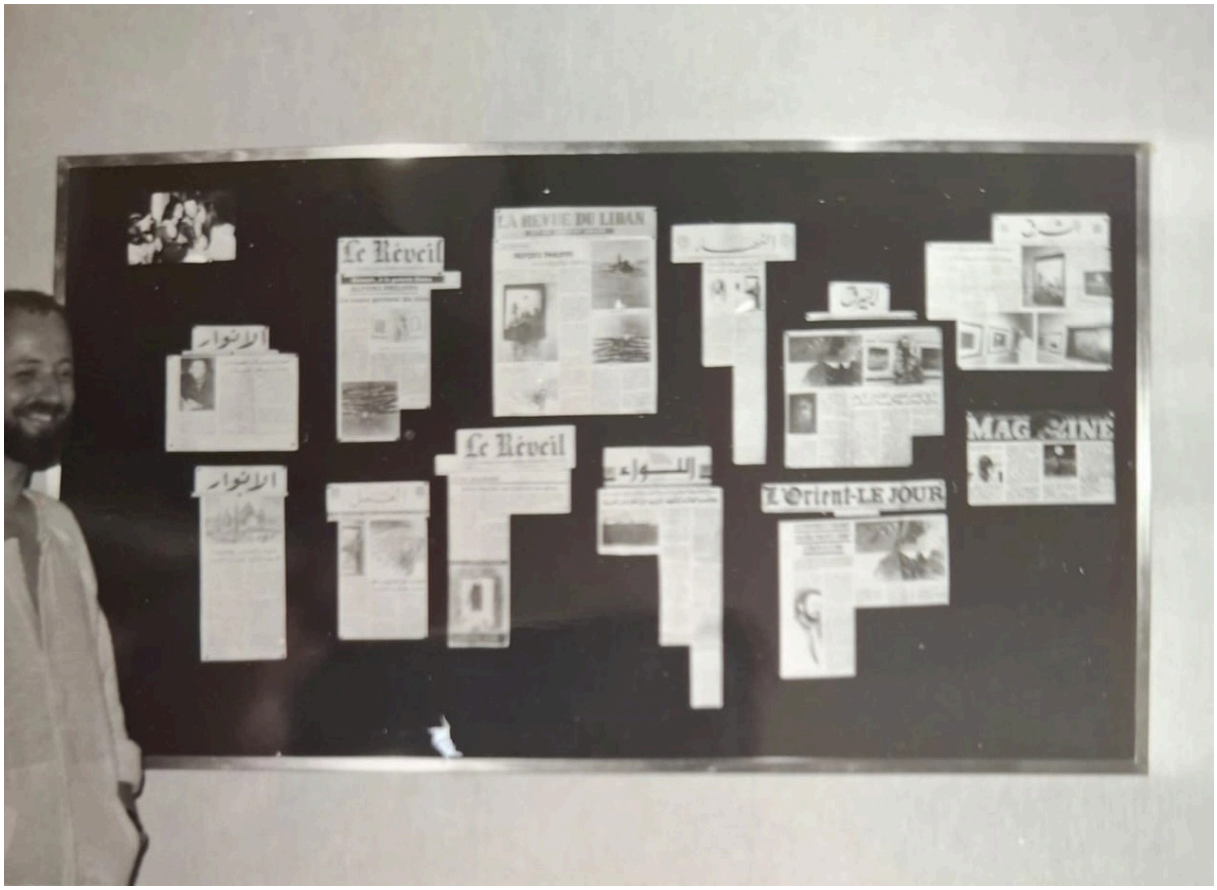


Figure 3: The artist Alfons Philipps next to the press cutting board for his exhibition at Galerie Damo (15 May–8 June 1978). Photographed by Brahim Zod. © Brahim Zod Archive.

The gallery also expressed interest in fostering international collaborations and disseminating knowledge about Lebanese art abroad. At the opening, Brahim Zod announced the idea of reciprocal exhibitions:

60. Brahim Zod also provided the journalists with material such as information about and interviews with the artists, studies of their work, and black and white images of the whole exhibition. Often, articles were already published on the opening day to encourage visitors to attend. WhatsApp exchange with Zod, 22 October 2024.

61. Two public exchanges with art critics Samir Sayegh and Joseph Tarrab took place on the occasion of Shafic Abboud's exhibition (7–21 February 1978), and Wajih Nahlé's exhibition (14 March–4 April 1978). The war and the subsequent closure of the gallery brought this project to a halt.

> Galerie Damo is currently contacting foreign galleries to arrange for Lebanese artists to exhibit abroad in exchange for international artists exhibiting here. This helps educate our audience and spread our art to international galleries. It also shows respect for our art because our artists do not always exhibit in the most distinguished galleries abroad.[62]

The aim was to encourage artists to exhibit as part of an exchange rather than individually to ensure that they would be shown in prestigious galleries. In the end, however, Zod felt it was more important to "build ourselves up inside Lebanon before we go out into the world."[63] This points to the aforementioned relationship between "here" and "there," and between those who need to be "educated" (the local public) and those who "teach" (the local and foreign artists).

In addition, Galerie Damo sought to cultivate relationships with collectors by sending out individual, targeted invitations prior to the opening.[64] Each collector was received individually in order to maintain discretion. On the day of the opening, some works were already sold, as indicated by red dot stickers, which potentially encouraged others to purchase as well.[65]

Brahim Zod articulated a keen interest in providing support to young and emerging artists. However, Galerie Damo's primary objective was to showcase established artists and to "preserve Lebanon's artistic tradition."[66] For this purpose, he sought to collect works of deceased artists and to "market them at a price commensurate with the artist's value and reputation."[67] Hence, Galerie Damo was more concerned with preserving and distributing knowledge about the artistic canon in Lebanon than trying to pave the way for new generations and experimental approaches in art. Maroun Hakim (b. 1950) was the only young artist who started his career at Galerie Damo.[68] It was rather outside the regular gallery programme that Brahim Zod promoted young and emerging artists. In 1980 and 1981, he organized two group exhibitions for young artists in collaboration with the Cultural Movement Antelias which were held at the premises of the Saint Elias church.[69]

The points that Brahim Zod mentioned in his opening speech were representative of the fundamental aspects of an art gallery. In this regard, they were not novel. However, in the Lebanese context, where a comprehensive gallery system was not yet fully established, as various gallerists

62. Zod, "Bayan iftitah."

63. Zogheib, "Takrimuhum fi al-watan wa fannuhum fi… al-ʿalam," *al-Hawadith*, 25 November 1977, 97.

64. Zod, "Bayan iftitah."

65. WhatsApp exchange with Zod, 22 October 2024. Among those who regularly purchased paintings were also other gallerists, artists (actors, musical composers, etc.) and art critics, as the sales lists for Amine El Bacha's exhibition in 1986 show. The sales lists are part of Galerie Damo's archive.

66. Zod, "Bayan iftitah."

67. Zod, "Bayan iftitah."

68. First introduced by artist Jean Khalifé (1923–78), he had three solo exhibitions at Galerie Damo (1978, 1979, and 1980). Conversation with Brahim Zod, Antelias, 10 February 2022.

69. The first exhibition *Maʿrad al-fannanin al-judud* took place from 6 to 15 February 1980 and included fifteen young artists. The members of the selection committee were May Menassa, Yusuf al-Khal, Halim Jurdak, Paul Guiragossian, Riad Fakhoury, Georges Ghanem, and Brahim Zod. See "Le Mouvement culturel d'Antélias présente les artistes non professionnels," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 7 February 1980, 4. The second exhibition took place from 5 to 14 February 1981 and included twenty-seven artists. See Hala Khoury, "Exposition des œuvres de jeunes peintres," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 4 February 1981, 4.

had repeatedly claimed, these points were worthy of consideration, particularly in the aftermath of two years of war. In this regard, it was a new and invigorating beginning, underscoring collaboration as a means of restoring connections.

The gallery's artistic identity and mission were not defined following any specific medium (with the exception of painting and sculpture) or aesthetic lines, but put "quality" centre stage. As Zod explains,

> [T]he primary objective in organizing these exhibitions is to provide the public with novel experiences, but above all to maintain a certain quality, which necessitates a meticulous selection of painters according to highly specific criteria. There is a considerable number of artists who express a desire to exhibit their work. However, it is not the intention of this establishment to encourage mediocrity by commercializing art. Nevertheless, Galerie Damo is open to the general public, as it aims to serve as a hub for the primary trends in visual arts in Lebanon.[70]

This placed Damo Gallery in alignment with numerous other galleries, including Gallery One, La Toile, Alwane, and Épreuve d'artiste, which univocally employed a singular criterion for acceptance: the quality of the work, irrespective of the artist's style or training.[71] In an undated typescript by Helen Khal, probably from the mid-1960s, the author discusses the role of the gallery, which

> akin to that of the critic, must be to establish for the public reasonably reliable standards of quality. It must weed out the unready or bad artist, and try to show and sell only what it believes to be good art. Only on this basis can it build a reputation of reliability and honesty. [...] And a clientele that trusts their judgement is what they keep looking for.[72]

The emphasis placed by gallerists on the importance of "quality" (as a criterion for exhibiting artwork in an art gallery) is a self-evident aspect of the gallery's role. However, it may have been a way of distinguishing themselves from other venues such as hotels, where any artist could rent a space and exhibit without anyone "to tell him whether his work [was] worth showing or not,"[73] by underscoring the fact that it was the gallery that selected the artists, rather than the artists who presented themselves.

In addition to its exhibition programme, Galerie Damo functioned as a cultural space.[74] The gallery regularly organized book signings, poetry readings, gatherings, musical and theatrical representations such as the staged reading of the play *al-Mekenseh* ("The Broom") by the author, poet and playwright Thérèse Basbous (1934–2020), wife of the sculptor Michel Basbous, on 4 Feb-

70. Thomas, "Bilan et perspectives," 4.

71. Sabine Farra, "Ces dames des galeries d'art," *La Revue du Liban*, 1986 (exact date unknown), 44–45.

72. The typescript is part of Helen Khal's archive at MACAM.

73. The typescript is part of Helen Khal's archive at MACAM.

74. Information on the gallery as a cultural space is mainly drawn from the interview with Brahim Zod from 10 February 2022.

ruary 1985.[75] Nohad Salameh's poetry book signing of "Folie couleur de mer" in December 1982 in conjunction with the exhibition opening of Françoise Muller, which attracted "a large crowd comprising the political, diplomatic, cultural and artistic elite of Beirut, as well as members of the business community and the press [...],"[76] is another example of Galerie Damo's cultural activities.[77]

Figure 4: Ellen Stewart at Galerie Damo in 1980. On the right side, from back to front: Shakib Khoury, Ellen Stewart, Mona Gebara and Camille Salameh. Paintings (mixed media on plexiglass), titles unknown, by Souleima Zod. Photographed by Brahim Zod. © Brahim Zod Archive.

The gallery was close to the theatre scene and frequented by numerous theatre directors, playwrights, and actors such as Raymond Gebara, Jalal Khoury, Shakib Khoury, Rifaat Torbey, and Antoine Kerbaj, and musical composers such as Elias Rahbani. The idea of organizing a meeting at the gallery in October 1980 for Ellen Stewart (1919–2011), founder and director of the La MaMa

75. *Al-Mekenseh* is a dramatic piece in three acts written by Thérèse Basbous in 1979. Also known by her maiden name Thérèse Aouad, Basbous was the wife of sculptor Michel Basbous (1921–81).

76. The French original states: "Une foule nombreuse composée du Tout-Beyrouth politique, diplomatique [...]." Nicole Malhamé-Harfouche, "Une double manifestation à la Galerie Damo. Signature de 'Folie couleur de mer' de Nohad Salameh, vernissage des œuvres récentes de Françoise Muller," *La Revue du Liban*, 11 December 1982, 148.

77. Born in Baalbek in 1947, the Lebanese poet has been living in Paris since 1989. From 1976 to 1988, she was the head of the cultural section at the Lebanese francophone newspaper *Le Réveil* where she regularly covered exhibitions. For further information, see: "Nohad Youssef Salameh," Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, Archival Collections, last accessed 8 July 2025, https://www.usek.edu.lb/phoenix/archival-collections/nohad-youssef-salameh.

Experimental Theatre Club in New York City, was therefore evident (fig. 4).[78] Poets, writers, and art critics were also regular visitors and friends of the gallery. Among them were Unsi al-Hajj, Yusuf al-Khal, Joseph Tarrab, Nazih Khater, César Nammour, and many others (fig. 5). Weekly gatherings were held at the gallery, attended by members of these circles. Galerie Damo appeared to fulfil a need for exchange, and its vision to act as a cultural centre worked out in that sense. The meetings also provided a forum for exchange on matters pertaining to art and cultural politics. When the gallery closed in 1988, these gatherings continued in hotel venues. Together with the weekly meetings at Yusuf al-Khal's house in Ghazir, in which Brahim Zod and others participated, they can be seen as a continuation of prewar practices, where meetings had become institutionalized, first with Yusuf al-Khal's poetry magazine *Shi'r* and its "Thursday gatherings" and later on meetings at Gallery One and Contact Art Gallery. It was also an effort to bring together different artistic disciplines and to encourage exchange among artists.

Figure 5: At the opening of Michel Basbous's posthumous exhibition at Galerie Damo (11–25 November 1986). From left to right: César Nammour, Georgette Gebara, Brahim Zod, Amine El Bacha, unknown, and Joseph Tarrab. Front: Alfred Basbous. Photographed by unknown. © Brahim Zod Archive.

78. She was visiting Lebanon as a guest of the actress Reda Khoury (1934–2001). In 1972, Stewart had participated in the Baalbek International Festival with her theatre company.

Comebacks and New Beginnings

A number of artists made a comeback at the beginning of the 1980s. Some returned or visited from abroad, while others resumed their work and exhibited after several years of silence due to the war. In March 1981, for instance, newspapers enthusiastically announced the comeback of the artist Krikor Norikian (b. 1941), who had been living in Paris since 1974, with an exhibition entitled *Rêves capturés*, to be held at the Planula Elissar Visual Arts Center from 2 to 18 April 1981.[79] Another artist who made a comeback in 1981 after several years of silence was the sculptor Nazem Irani (b. 1930), who exhibited several works at the UNESCO Spring Exhibition. However, he deviated from his usual media and exhibited paintings instead of sculptures: "I would like to forget about sculpture for a while."[80]

Galerie Damo also offered a platform for comebacks and new beginnings: when Pierre Sadek (1938–2013) exhibited at Galerie Damo from 12 to 22 March 1980, it was his first exhibition after twenty years (fig. 6).[81] He was well-known as a political caricaturist, having previously worked for the Lebanese daily *an-Nahar* and working for the newspaper *al-ʿAmal* at the time of the exhibition. Sadek surprised his audience with thirty-six drawings revealing a "visual technique" ("une technique plastique").[82] His black and colour ink drawings rendered in a "surrealistic and expressive" style, as Sadek himself describes them, put the focus on the human condition and the nature of existence.[83] In contrast to his political cartoons, which consistently referenced current political developments, these works diverged in their focus. Reflecting on the atrocities of the war, Sadek's intention with this exhibition was to work against oblivion: "'My objective was to convey the Lebanese people's silence, their aspirations, and their daily lives.' [...] These are neither caricatures nor paintings. These are canvases created by Pierre Sadek."[84]

Pierre Sadek's exhibition was the first of its kind in his long career as an acclaimed political cartoonist. The audience, including some art critics who were used to his political caricatures reflecting on the political, economic, and social themes of war-torn Lebanon, found it challenging to categorize his works, which were situated between caricatures and paintings.[85] Unlike his political cartoons often tied to a precise event, his new paintings had a more universal character, which made them suitable to be "displayed permanently, in a living room, without fear of being outdated the next day or even a year from now."[86] With the works in this exhibition reflecting on the human condition, the artist sought enduring images in times of rapid change. The experience of war, which led to his comeback in an art gallery, urged him to seek more depth in his artistic expression.

79. "Le comeback de Norikian," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 11 March 1981, 4.

80. "Des thèmes plutôt que des couleurs," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 16 March 1981, 4.

81. Nohad Salameh, "La caricature ou l'amertume du rire," *Le Réveil*, 13 March 1980, 5.

82. Salameh, "La caricature," 5.

83. "Pierre Sadek et la caricature sociale," *Magazine*, March 1980 (exact date unknown), 48.

84. "Pierre Sadek et la caricature sociale," 48.

85. "Biyar Sadiq yajri mubadala tarikhiyya bayna Adam wa-Hawwa'," *al-Hawadith*, no. 1221, 28 March 1980 (page number missing).

86. "Pierre Sadek et la caricature sociale."

Figure 6: Poster for Pierre Sadek's exhibition at Galerie Damo (12–22 March 1980). Paper. 50 × 35 cm. Brahim Zod Collection/AUB University Libraries, Beirut. Shared under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license. Last accessed 18 June 2025, https://n2t.net/ark:/86073/b3qs64.

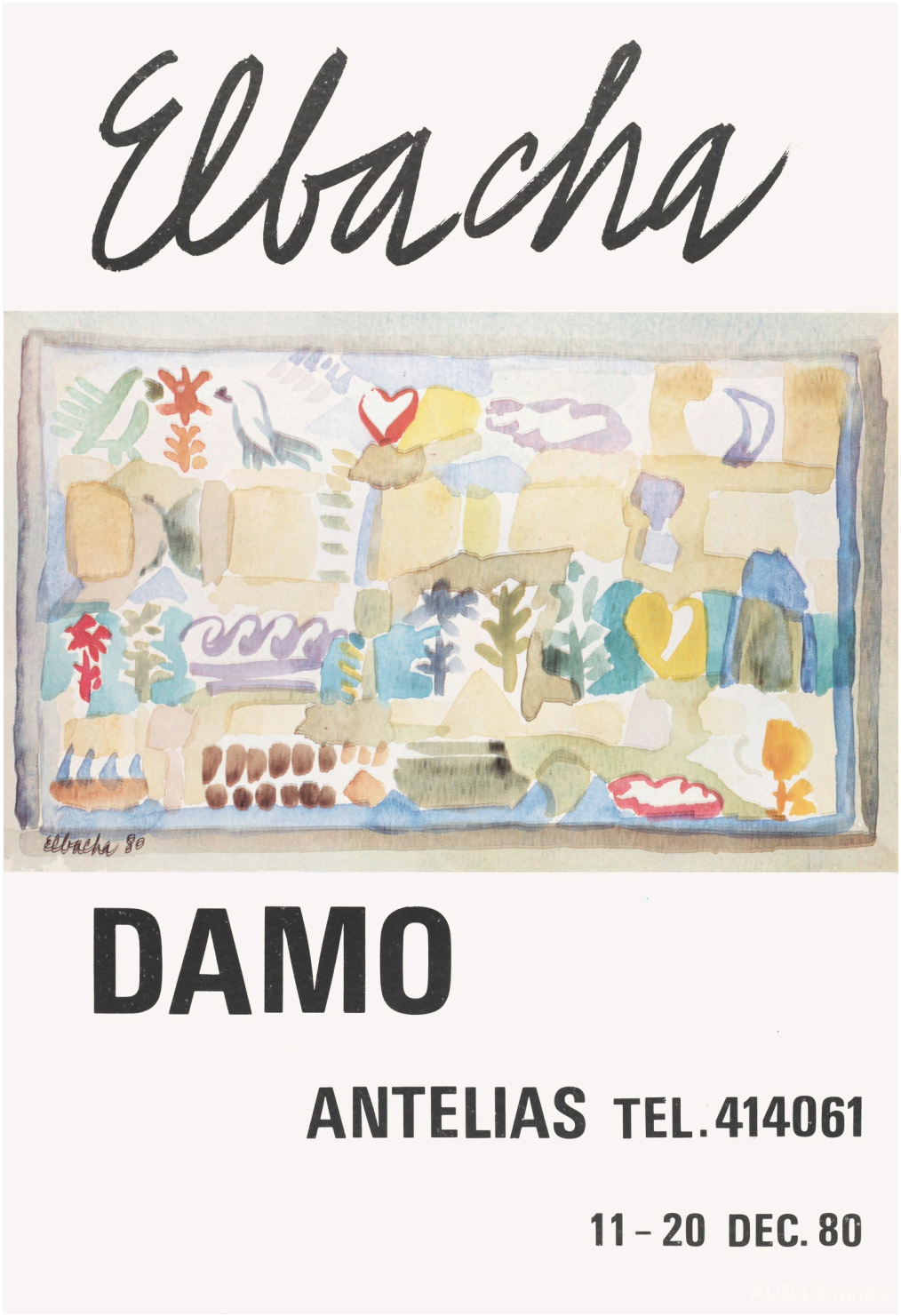


Figure 7: Poster for Amine El Bacha's exhibition at Galerie Damo (11–20 December 1980). Cardboard. 49 × 33 cm. Brahim Zod Collection/AUB University Libraries, Beirut. Shared under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license. Last accessed 18 June 2025, https://n2t.net/ark:/86073/b3z92z.

Another artist who was having his comeback was Amine El Bacha (1932–2019). Following a period of several years in Italy, the artist's first exhibition back in Lebanon took place at Galerie Damo between 11 and 20 December 1980 (fig. 7). El Bacha employed formats that were markedly disparate from one another, a departure from his customary practice. The exhibition comprised fifty-eight miniature watercolour paintings, one ink drawing, and one large-scale work covering two entire walls at the gallery.[87] Despite the unconventional format, the works themselves remained consistent with the artist's established style, which typically depicted interiors, flowered terraces, gardens, marine landscapes, and flower arrangements. Art critic Nazih Khater, who covered the event, highlighted the artist's consistent artistic qualities while also noting a lack of experimentation and innovation in his work:

> It appears that the exhibition at Galerie Damo was assembled without a discernible plan or conscious effort. The work does not intend to transmit any particular vision or to explore the specific characteristics of watercolour as a medium with the intention of changing its meaning, role, or dimensions. The works appear to be a reiteration of previous pieces by the same artist.[88]

In the view of Nazih Khater, the exhibition at Galerie Damo demonstrated "some kind of visual memories" rather than the artist's present artistic preoccupations. It was as though Amine El Bacha was "offering us professional remains, leaving his living experiences for the future."[89] Some art critics had anticipated a novel development in the artist's approach, particularly given his prolonged absence from Lebanon.[90] His "comeback" was thus a return to his established style rather than a reinvention under new circumstances.

While Pierre Sadek's engagement with Lebanon, politics, and the war is evident in his work, Amine El Bacha's is more nuanced and obscured beneath the colourful, seemingly carefree surface. In an interview with Etel Adnan in 1972, Amine El Bacha gave a potential explanation for this absence: "However sad the artist may be, the gesture of art is always positive, always a belief in happiness. That is why I think there are very few works that are sad, even if their subjects are sad."[91] In his work, El Bacha offers a compensatory vision that counters the disillusionment of the prevailing reality with a vision of hope and imagination. In an interview with journalist Mirèse Akar on the occasion of El Bacha's exhibition at Galerie Faris in Paris in 1982, the artist elaborated more on the relation of war and artistic creation, offering his personal perspective:

87. The information concerning the measures of the work varies. Journalist Mireille Fares mentions 8 m in "Amine el-Bacha: Grande expo le 11 décembre," *Le Réveil*, 5 November 1980. Nazih Khater, however, speaks of 9.40 × 1.50 m in "Amin al-Basha darbat risha. Dauww talwini li jughrafiyya wa zaman," *an-Nahar*, 18 December 1980, 5.

88. Khater, "Amin al-Basha darbat risha." Joseph Tarrab confirms these impressions in "Quoi? L'éternité. Amine El Bacha à la Galerie DAMO," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 16 December 1980, 4.

89. Khater, "Amin al-Basha darbat risha."

90. Among them Joseph Tarrab (*L'Orient-Le Jour*) and Faisal Sultan (*as-Safīr*).

91. Etel Adnan, "Amine El-Bacha: Un peintre qui voit passer les avions. Bientôt à la galerie Contact," *as-Safa*, 25 October 1972. This resonates with Shafic Abboud's comments about his own paintings. Mirèse Akar, "Shafic Abboud: 'Plus le monde va mal, plus ma peinture devient joyeuse'," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 7 June 1981, 4.

> In Lebanon, even though my attitude tended to put the war between parenthesis, the situation encouraged me to make some works based on chronology: for example, to represent a tree from its germination to its death, which amounted to representing the passage of time, which the war may have made us measure differently.[92]

The invitation card that accompanied the exhibition at Galerie Damo also echoed the artist's playful gesture and served to further illustrate his deep and enduring connection to Lebanon. It shows El Bacha's ability to combine images and text in a manner that is both poetic and humorous. The motifs are all related to Lebanon, its nature, traditions, and mythology, with birds, hearts, flowers, fish, horses, men, and women floating through this dream landscape. In the midst of these elements, the viewer encounters poetic sentences such as, "I saw a white dove blending in with the white clouds… nothing could be more normal… The white clouds soften the blue sky… The sky of Lebanon" (fig. 8).[93]

The series of comebacks continued when Guv (1918–90) held his exhibition at Galerie Damo from 12 to 21 February 1981. It was his first after six years of silence following the outbreak of the war.[94] The exhibition comprised fifty-one works created using a pointillistic technique, primarily featuring the female figure set against dreamlike, often submarine landscapes with the sun/moon being a recurrent element in these compositions. The vertical woman is depicted without arms, imparting a sense of levitation reminiscent of seaweed in the artist's landscapes (fig. 9). Fascinated by submarine landscapes in particular, Guv's drawings have an ecstatic and transcendental power in which "matter annihilates itself and becomes only spirit. It's the beginning of eternity, an approach to God."[95]

The search for the essence of life is what is also intrinsic to El Bacha's work. However, Guv's art is deeply rooted in and affected by the misery and suffering of humankind. This includes the pain caused by the Armenian genocide, the war in Lebanon and the catastrophe of Hiroshima: "In my forms, in my beings, there is pain; they are tortured, torn, shredded, pierced, perforated, quartered, but grave and silent, their heads held high."[96] In the context of the war in Lebanon, the artist's works elucidated the "frightening silence in the face of disaster."[97] The exhibition was well received, as evidenced by the many enthusiastic entries in the gallery's guestbook, mostly expressed by the word "Excellent!," but sometimes more detailed: "Guv's woman fearlessly and thoughtfully contemplates her place in the cosmic scheme. […] Hardly ever works of art are so profound. Fantastic."[98]

92. Mirèse Akar, "Amine El-Bacha: Peindre, c'est mettre la guerre entre parenthèses," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 22 October 1982, 4.

93. All quotations are originally in French. All translations by the author of this article.

94. "Guv et le monde de la femme," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 12 February 1981, 4.

95. Bernadette Momdjian, "Explorateur de ce champ clos qu'est le monde," *Le Réveil*, 13 October 1981, 5.

96. Momdjian, "Explorateur de ce champ clos qu'est le monde," 5.

97. "ʾImraʾa musharʾiba tusaytiru ʿala al-zaman wa al-makan," *al-Usbuʿ al-ʿarabi*, no. 1114, 16 February 1981, 48.

98. Entry in English from 20 February 1981. The guestbook is held at the gallery's archive.

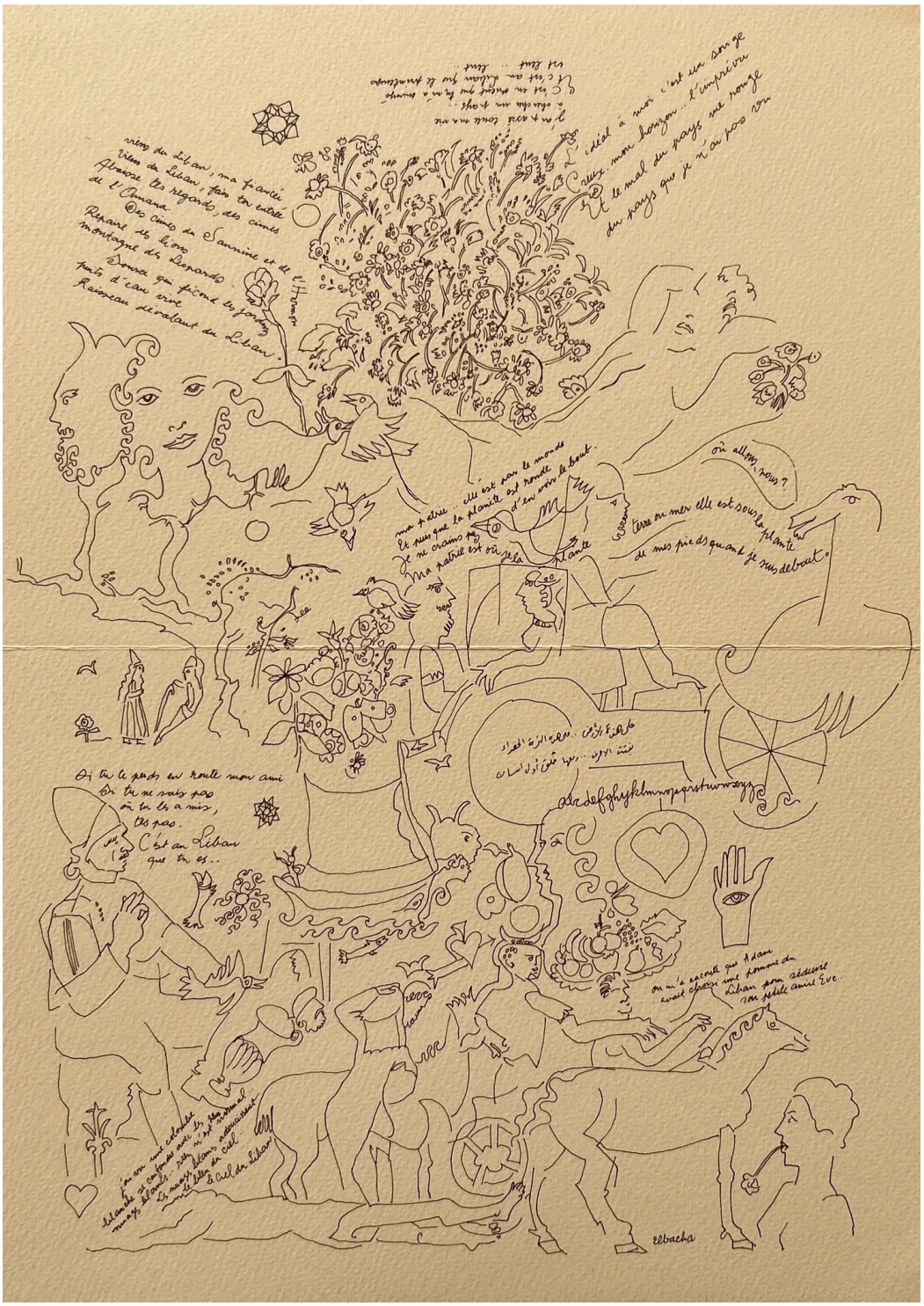


Figure 8: From the booklet for Amine El Bacha's exhibition at Galerie Damo (11–20 December 1980). Cardboard. 21 × 15.5 cm. Brahim Zod Archive. © Brahim Zod Archive.

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Figure 9: From the booklet for Guv's exhibition at Galerie Damo (12–21 February 1981). Cardboard. 21 × 15.5 cm. Brahim Zod Archive. © Brahim Zod Archive.

The three exhibitions briefly discussed here have in common that the artists involved had all been absent from the artistic scene in Lebanon for some time (whether due to physical absence or artistic inactivity because of the war) before taking up this opportunity by Galerie Damo. While both Guv and Sadek offered new insights into their artistic work, Amine El Bacha's exhibition provided a more comprehensive overview of his artistic output over the past few years. Together with other spaces, Galerie Damo provided a platform for these artists and encouraged their return to the art scene. As a result, the gallery played a pivotal role in sustaining artistic production while offering continuity as well as opportunities for new beginnings despite the difficult situation, which Helen Khal acknowledged as follows:

> It was one of the very few galleries that managed to survive and serve art faithfully amid the disruptive, enervating and often dangerous conditions of the ongoing conflict. Other galleries would come and go, but Damo persisted for more than a decade, from 1977 to 1988. At times without electricity, but with a good stock of kerosene lamps on hand for those black-out nights. And with the postal service completely disfunctional [sic], the gallery owners had to depend on a combination of word-of-mouth, telephone messages and hand-delivered invitations to announce its shows and other cultural activities.[99]

Aquarelle Landscape Painting: A Symptom of the War?

The impact of the war on artistic creation thus varied significantly between individual artists. One noteworthy phenomenon was the increased interest in and production of aquarelle landscape painting during the early 1980s.[100] The success of watercolours depicting Lebanese landscapes, village life, and traditions could be interpreted as a longing for "normality," "purity," and perhaps "a state of innocence" projected onto the past. Joseph Tarrab critically speaks of aquarelle landscape painting as a phenomenon of the war time period; under the "pretext of preserving the cultural heritage" it steadily increased since the beginning of the war.[101] This phenomenon became particularly evident during the 1980s, coinciding with a deterioration in the situation. Concurrently, the pioneers of Lebanese landscape painting, including Omar Onsi (1901–69), Moustafa Farroukh (1901–57), and César Gemayel (1898–1958), witnessed a surge in interest in the art market.[102] Landscape paintings were treated as "lenses to a prewar, nationally self-evident Lebanon."[103] The usual absence of people, such as in Omar Onsi's "typical paysage lubnani," coincided with the war and postwar viewers' longing for an "apolitical, unideological, and irreligious" space,[104] for a kind of dream: "The pine trees, house, and no people, no cars, no smoke [...] sort of a Lebanese form of paradise."[105] The interpretation of images and how they affect us is thus largely shaped by our individual historical and cultural perspective, our aesthetic repertoire, our expectations and needs.

99. Khal, "Souleima Zod Transforms the Body into Landscapes of Virtual Reality," 326–27.

100. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive overview and analysis of this vast and complex subject. However, at the risk of simplification, especially with regard to the relationship between nationalism, sectarianism, regionalism and visual representations of nature, heritage, and traditions, this article would like to share some observations on the subject. For more information, particularly on landscape painting in the mandate era in Lebanon, see Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*.

101. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre," 34.

102. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre," 34.

103. Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*, 145.

104. Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*, 145. Onsi's paintings were, however, filled with piety as Scheid points out, *Fantasmic Objects*, 33.

105. During their visit to the Moustapha Farroukh retrospective at the Sursock Museum in 2003, Jean Said Makdisi explained to Scheid with these words why so many people liked Lebanese landscape painting. See Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*, 182.

In the early 1980s, many young artists began to produce watercolour landscapes that were highly sought after.[106] According to Tarrab, the interest in landscape painting had less to do with its aesthetic qualities (which he often found lacking) than with what it promised in terms of order, tranquillity, and, above all, security and identity.[107]

Galerie Damo did not follow this trend. Only two individual exhibitions focused on watercolour landscapes, namely Maroun Tomb's and Amine El Bacha's exhibitions, as well as some works in the inaugural exhibition. It would appear that a significant proportion of exhibitions featuring watercolour landscapes by artists of the younger generation were held in venues other than the established galleries. Such venues included hotels and other alternative spaces such as the Casino du Liban. The majority of commercial galleries, including Galerie Damo, tended to rely on established artists to represent this genre.

The Lebanese-Palestinian artist Maroun Tomb (1911–81), who fled with his family from Haifa to Lebanon in 1948, and who is known for his watercolours inspired by Palestinian and Lebanese landscapes and village scenes, was programmed twice at Galerie Damo (May 1980 and April 1981) (fig. 10). His paintings, created in a realistic and romantic style, are markedly different from those of Amine El Bacha. In the press, aquarelle landscape painting is often mentioned in conjunction with the war situation in Lebanon, with the aspect of "fraîcheur" (freshness) repeatedly highlighted.[108] The freshness and softness of the colours, evoking feelings of well-being, vitality, and enthusiasm created a peaceful atmosphere and offered distraction in these difficult moments. One example of the numerous press articles that were published on the occasion of Maroun Tomb's exhibition in 1980 emphasizes the therapeutic aspects of landscape painting during the war:

> The twilight of Roumieh against the backdrop of the sea, the Abou Ali river, the citadel of Jbeil, the old souk of Tripoli… all enchanting settings that restore Lebanon's original character and help viewers forget the horrors of war.[109]

The depiction of nature and mountain villages in their purest form, with the use of earthy tones and soft contours, provided a sense of tranquillity amidst the turbulence and uncertainty of war, responding to the necessity for evasion from the harsh reality by creating a "diluted reality." Beneath the seemingly picturesque surface, however, lay the unspoken horrors of war, as we can sense from statements that link the use of certain colours to the situation. One example is Sami Abou Kheir's exhibition at the Casino du Liban in 1980, which included landscapes, trees, and portraits, all coloured pink. In a press article entitled "100 canvases using pink for hope," the artist said: "It's not just about hope, it's also about a return to innocence […] I have expressed a wish, a desire to see my country return to its good days."[110]

106. Interview with Joseph Tarrab, Jounieh, 6 October 2022.

107. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre," 34.

108. For instance, Y.G., "A 'Rimal', les aquarelles-fraîcheur de Mohamed el-Kaissi," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 28 May 1984, 4.

109. Tina Dahdah, "Maroun Tomb à la Galerie DAMO. Un bain de fraîcheur… ," *Le Réveil*, 9 May 1980, 5.

110. Khoury, "Noff al-Hadi au Summerland."

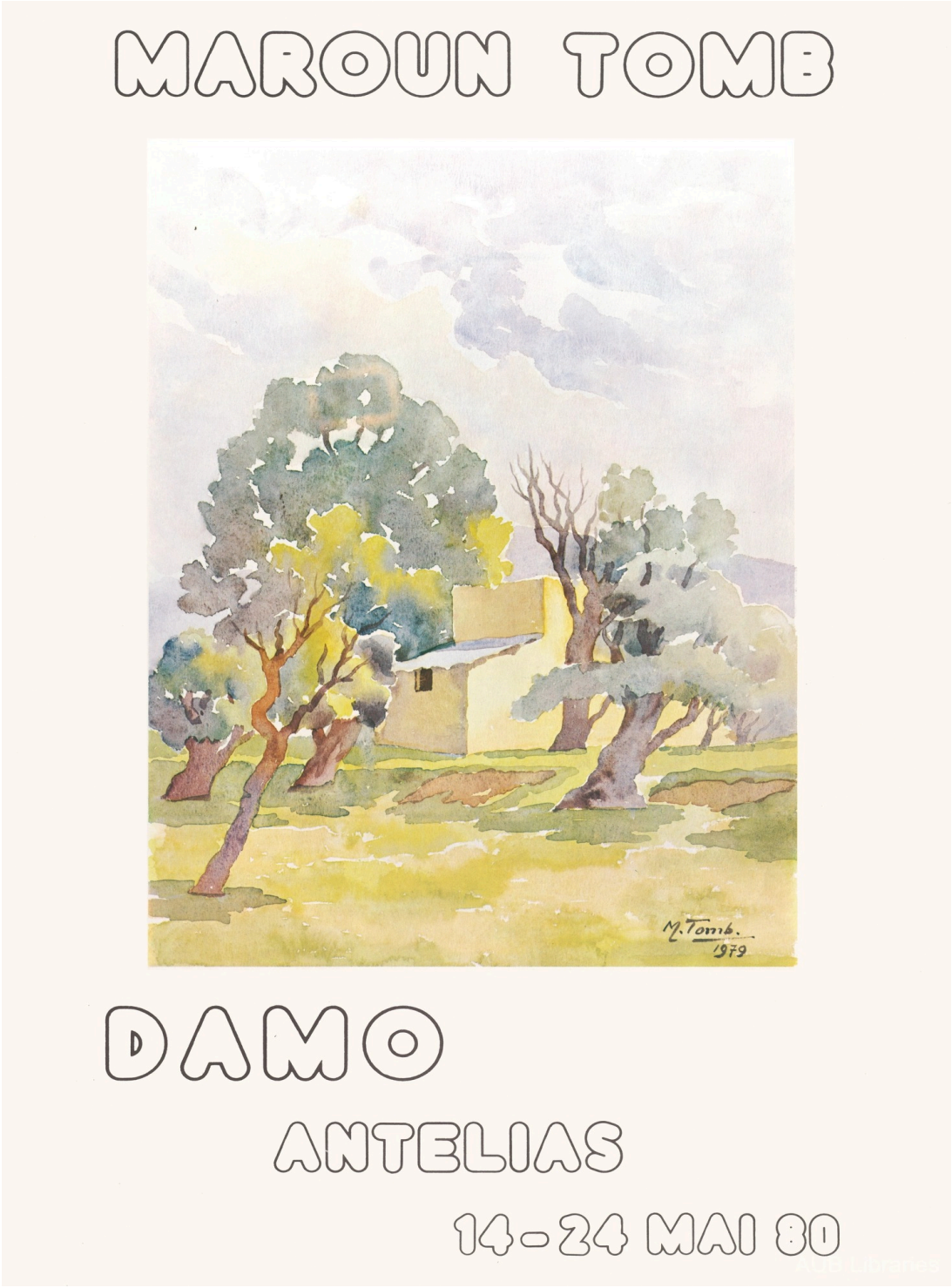

Figure 10: Poster for Maroun Tomb's exhibition at Galerie Damo (14–24 May 1980). Cardboard. 49 × 34 cm. Brahim Zod Collection/AUB University Libraries, Beirut. Shared under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license. Last accessed 18 June 2025, https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/blacklight/catalog/ark86073b3m34j.

Unlike the modernist, often abstract paintings of the 1960s and ’70s in Lebanon, which only had a limited and initiated, albeit increasing circle of admirers, landscape painting represented something that one could easily grasp and identify with. The confessional fragmentation of Lebanon as a result of the war was reflected in its regional fragmentation, which was expressed through landscape painting and became an important marker of identity. Although not primarily political, the decision to depict one’s own region or village, though imbued with the desire to seek refuge in nature and local traditions, became an expression of regional belonging. Consequently, it could be considered a form of political expression in itself.

Conclusion

Amidst the changes and ruptures that had taken place in Lebanon since the outbreak of the civil war, Galerie Damo played the role of an anchor of stability and continuity. With destruction all around and the “degradation of artistic standards,” as Joseph Tarrab described it, the gallery focused on established rather than on emerging artists, and on traditional media such as painting and sculpture rather than on experimental art. As a result, Galerie Damo did not explicitly attempt to promote a specific aesthetic or cultural vision with the intention of radically changing or expanding the perception of art. This may also be attributed to the fact that the war had devastated a considerable part of the previously flourishing artistic community, of which Brahim Zod himself was a member, making this relatively “conservative” approach a logical consequence. Galerie Damo was a space for exchange, offering a wide range of cultural activities where artists of all kinds and writers could meet, discuss, and maintain their friendships. It thus served as a bridge between the past and the future, providing opportunities for artists and their audiences to stay in touch, while at the same time working on a structural level to improve the gallery and the art system in Lebanon. As such, it was able to provide much-needed continuity throughout the 1980s, while also offering opportunities for new beginnings. Despite some similarities with prewar galleries such as Gallery One and Contact Art Gallery in terms of the repertoire of artists and the intention of establishing a space for exchange beyond that of a mere exhibition space, Galerie Damo operated in a very different cultural, social, and political context that lacked the prewar prosperity on both the economic and creative levels, as well as its cosmopolitan fabric and its Arab identity. Its founding history in Antelias, outside the cultural centre Beirut, and its inaugural exhibition, initiated by *Les amis de Charbel* and closely linked to the church, testify to this new framework. However, the gallery was open and in no way tied to regional and other identities, but the war situation limited access to the venue. While Lebanon’s acclaimed cosmopolitanism in the 1960s and ’70s appears to have been rather a cosmopolitan nationalism associated with the Maronite Christian community, as Sarah Rogers has pointed out, one might question whether cosmopolitanism remained a distinguishing feature in the 1980s, or if sectarian nationalism had completely overtaken it.

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Appendix

Table 1: Exhibitions at Galerie Damo between 1977 and 1986.

	Exhibited artists	Year	Duration
1	INAUGURAL GROUP EXHIBITION with César Gemayel, Omar Onsi, Moustafa Farroukh, Rafic Charaf, Wajih Nahlé, Paul Guiragossian, Jean Khalifé, Joseph Matar, Samir Abi Rached, Cici Sursock, Souleima Zod, Maha Bayrakdar, Antoine Berberi, Halim El Hajj	1977	17–30 November
2	RAFIC CHARAF	1978	19–31 January
3	MAROUN HAKIM	1978	16 February–2 March
4	SOULEIMA ZOD	1978	27 April–10 May
5	ALFONS PHILIPPS	1978	15 May–8 June
6	ALFRED BASBOUS	1979	8–18 May
7	MAROUN HAKIM	1979	29 May–7 June
8	ALFRED BASBOUS	1979	14–24 November
9	AMINE SFEIR	1979	12–22 December
10	SOULEIMA ZOD	1980	16–26 January
11	WAJIH NAHLÉ	1980	13–23 February
12	PIERRE SADEK	1980	12–22 March
13	MAROUN HAKIM	1980	16–26 April
14	MAROUN TOMB	1980	14–24 May
15	GROUP EXHIBITION *ÉTÉ 80* with Amine El Bacha, Alfred Basbous, Maroun Hakim, Wajih Nahlé, Pierre Sadek, Amine Sfeir, Maroun Tomb, Souleima Zod, Liliane Abou Chaar	1980	25 June–30 September
16	AMINE EL BACHA	1980	11–20 December
17	GUV	1981	12–21 February
18	MAROUN TOMB (The opening of the exhibition was cancelled due to the sudden passing of the artist.)	1981	16–25 April

	Exhibited artists	Year	Duration
19	ELIE KANAAN	1981	11–21 December
20	HALIM JURDAK	1982	17–27 February
21	FRANÇOISE MULLER	1982	7–17 December
22	PAUL WAKIM	1983	31 March–7 April
23	SOULEIMA ZOD	1983	20–30 April
24	GROUP EXHIBITION AT SALON ALTAVISTA, KASLIK with Amine El Bacha, Michel Basbous, Halim Jurdak, Jean Khalifé, Pierre Sadek, Souleima Zod	1986	3–18 May
25	HALIM JURDAK	1986	7–21 May
26	MICHEL BASBOUS	1986	11–25 November
27	AMINE EL BACHA	1986	9–20 December

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Article

Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1980s

Inclusion and Exclusion in a Decade of Conflict

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Abstract

This article examines the curatorial approaches and exhibition practices of Beirut's Sursock Museum during the 1980s, a decade marked by civil war and socio-political fragmentation. Following a seven-year closure, the museum reopened in 1982 and resumed a limited but symbolically charged programme. The study explores how the institution navigated inclusion, representation, and legitimacy in this fraught period, focusing on logistical constraints in a divided city, the formalist strategies of group exhibitions—especially the *Salons d'Automne*—and shifting criteria for artistic recognition. Drawing on archival material, press coverage, and curatorial documents, it positions the museum's wartime programming as a case of institutional resilience, symbolic manoeuvring, and cultural gatekeeping. Particular attention is given to the perspectives of excluded or self-excluded artists, such as Mahmoud Amhaz, Mohammed al-Kaïssi, and RoseVart, whose critiques complicate the museum's claims to neutrality. By interrogating jury composition and the political and aesthetic implications of their choices, the article contributes to debates on institutional critique, historiographic curating, and canon formation during conflict, reframing the 1980s as a contested terrain of curatorial agency and cultural significance rather than a lost wartime decade.

Keywords

Sursock Museum, Salon d'Automne, Lebanese Civil War, Inclusion and Exclusion, Cultural Production in Conflict

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Introduction

The Sursock Museum, Beirut's museum of art that first opened in 1961, reopened to the public in the autumn of 1982 after a seven-year closure following the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. Founded through the bequest of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock (1875–1952), a member of one of Beirut's leading Greek Orthodox families, the museum was conceived as both a cultural gift and a cosmopolitan showcase; it became both a symbol of elite patronage and a locus of artistic recognition. Located in East Beirut in what was then a divided city, the museum in the 1980s was embedded in many of the broader socio-political dynamics of Lebanon's conflict. Its efforts to navigate this turbulent decade—while grappling with shifting forms of representation and artistic value—offer a lens through which to view the complexities of cultural production during wartime. This article approaches the museum's curatorial and institutional strategies, and exhibition practices in this period as shaped by logistical pragmatism and pre-existing institutional networks, but also considers how debates around inclusion and exclusion were increasingly framed in aesthetic, rather than explicitly political, terms. It examines inclusion and exclusion at the museum as phenomena with aesthetic (formalism vs. figuration), political (sectarian and right/left affiliations), and social (elite vs. popular) dimensions. Rather than advancing a single linear argument, this study engages with a set of overlapping tensions surrounding institutional judgment, artistic legitimacy, and representational strategy in a time of fragmentation.

It traces three interrelated dimensions of the museum's wartime operations: the logistical challenges of exhibition-making in a divided city (the actual effects of war on participation); curatorial gestures that sidestepped or aestheticized wartime realities (the disavowal of overt political engagement); and the tensions expressed by artists and critics navigating shifting criteria for inclusion (individual grievances). This analysis proceeds in five parts: beginning with a quantitative overview of exhibitions during the 1980s, it then examines the Sursock Museum's group exhibitions—especially its *Salons d'Automne*—within the spatial and political divisions of Beirut. Subsequent sections address the reactions of critics and artists (both participants and those excluded), the composition and politics of the museum's jury, and the challenges of evaluating artistic merit in such a fraught context. By embracing rather than resolving the contradictions that emerge, this study reflects the ambivalence and fragmentation that characterized not only the museum's programming, but also Lebanon's cultural and political landscape more broadly. It asks both how the museum operated and what it meant for it to operate at all.

While scholarship on modern and contemporary art in Lebanon has grown significantly over the past two decades, sustained studies of the Sursock Museum's internal operations during the 1980s remain limited. This article builds on critical contributions in the field of institutional critique and historiographic curating, particularly those that address the museum's role as both an arbiter of artistic legitimacy and a contested public institution. During the fifteen-year war, the museum was open to the public for seven years, from 1982 to 1989. This period has received little scholarly attention. In the official history of the Sursock Museum, *Musée Nicolas Sursock: Le livre* (Nicolas Sursock Museum: The book,[1] which will subsequently be referred to as *Le livre*),[2] it is

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

2. Sylvia Agémian et al., *Musée Nicolas Sursock: Le livre* (Beirut: Sursock Museum, 2000), 106–31.

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addressed only briefly—in two paragraphs of the section *Survivre par l'art: Guerres et paix au musée* (Survival through art: Wars and peace at the museum) and a postscript to the section before it. The bulk of that section focuses on the postwar decade of so-called "peace," a curatorial and editorial decision that aligns with the wave of state-sanctioned amnesty and amnesia that marked the 1990s.[3] While *Le livre* provides key data regarding exhibition frequency and public programming, it is treated here not simply as a documentary source but as a self-authoring narrative—its silences, elisions, and selective emphases read as symptomatic of the museum's broader institutional positioning.

This article draws on a triangulated methodology combining archival reconstruction, curatorial analysis, and critical historiography. In addition to *Le livre*, the research mobilizes a range of archival traces, including exhibition catalogues, jury instructions, and internal correspondence—especially from figures such as the curators Camille Aboussouan and Sylvia Agémian.[4] Press coverage from the 1980s, including articles in *An-Nahar* and *L'Orient-Le Jour*, provides insight into how exhibitions were publicly framed and received during wartime. These materials are approached not as neutral documents but as historically situated artefacts, produced within—and contributing to—the institution's discursive formation.

Recent curatorial projects have contributed significantly to this emerging discourse. *Je suis inculte!* (2023–24), curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi, critically revisited the *Salon d'Automne*'s exclusionary legacy by foregrounding artists who had been omitted from the museum's narrative.[5] Similarly, *Beyond Ruptures*, curated by Karina El Helou, explored the museum's history through its fragmentary archives and latent contradictions—many of which resonate with the complexities addressed in this article.[6] Through archival materials such as rejection letters and unrealized proposals, the exhibition reframed institutional silence as a key site of historiographic inquiry.

Nadia von Maltzahn's work has been foundational in situating the Sursock Museum within broader socio-political frameworks. Her analyses of the *Salon d'Automne* highlight the contradictions embedded in the museum's jury structure and aesthetic frameworks, where formalist neu-

3. The period of "national reconciliation" in Lebanon was framed by the 1989 Taif Agreement and subsequent General Amnesty Law of 1991. This law granted amnesty for crimes committed before its enactment, effectively absolving many warlords and militia leaders, who later became political figures, from prosecution for crimes committed during Lebanon's fifteen-year war. This move was intended to foster national reconciliation and stabilize the country. However, it also meant that war crimes and atrocities remained unaddressed, leading to criticisms of impunity and the perpetuation of sectarian divisions. See National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities, "Lebanon: National Reconciliation Accord – Taif Agreement (1989)," UNHCR Global Law and Policy Database (Refworld), 5 November 1989, https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/natlegbod/1989/en/121325; Dima Smaira and Roxane Cassehgari, "Failing to Deal with the Past: What Cost to Lebanon?," International Center for Transitional Justice, 30 January 2014, https://www.ictj.org/publication/failing-deal-past-what-cost-lebanon.

4. Camille Aboussouan was curator of the Sursock Museum from 1960 until 1978. Sylvia Agémian started as researcher and artistic assistant under Aboussouan (in 1967), and became deputy curator in 1975 (until 2015).

5. "Je suis inculte! The Salon d'Automne and the National Canon: Curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi," Sursock Museum, 26 May 2023, https://sursock.museum/content/je-suis-inculte-salon-dautomne-and-national-canon.

6. "Beyond Ruptures, A Tentative Chronology: Curated by Karina El Helou," Sursock Museum, 26 May 2023, https://sursock.museum/content/beyond-ruptures-tentative-chronology. The author researched and wrote the timeline text of the exhibition.

trality often masked deeper logics of exclusion and hierarchy.[7] Her essay "The Museum as an Egalitarian Space?" explicitly challenges the myth of institutional impartiality, emphasizing how the Sursock Museum served as a site of symbolic contestation rather than merely a space for representation.[8] My own previous work has extended this critique by focusing on the museum's administrative operations and the influence of figures such as Aboussouan and Agémian in shaping public programming. Through archival research and historiographic analysis, I have argued that the museum's curatorial decisions in the 1960s reflected not only aesthetic preferences but also broader tensions around memory, authority, and national identity.[9]

Understanding the museum's institutional positioning requires acknowledging the broader cultural dynamics outlined by Silvia Naef in *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, emphasizing Lebanon's role as a bridge between Arab and Western modernities, often eschewing overtly nationalist aesthetics: "The conflicting interests of the various Lebanese sects regarding the country's international status (its relations with the West and the Arab world, its position on Arab unity or unity with Syria) have prevented the birth of a common national consciousness among all Lebanese. This consciousness has been replaced, in most cases, by sectarian loyalties that have shaped Lebanon's cultural history and life."[10]

By contributing to this growing discourse, the article reclaims the 1980s as a period of curatorial experimentation, institutional uncertainty, and symbolic tension. It begins by returning to the few official references to the decade, such as Agémian's note in *Le livre* that "the list of exhibitions carried out clearly shows the downtime imposed by the dangers of the war that had resumed in Lebanon,"[11] before examining what that list actually reveals—and what it omits—about the museum's self-presentation during the conflict.

Exhibitions: At a Glance, by the Numbers

The museum had sixteen exhibitions[12] in the seven years it was open in the 1980s, making it the lowest average of exhibitions per year for the museum in the second half of the twentieth century.[13] However, it could be argued that, in many other ways, the 1970s was the most disrupted and disruptive decade for the museum that half century. The decade started with the museum closed due to its first expansion project, which started in 1969. It reopened to the public in 1974 for only one year, and closed again at the start of the war in 1975. That decade the museum

7. Nadia von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public? The Salon d'Automne at Beirut's Sursock Museum," in *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: The Politics of Taste Making*, ed. Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan, Beiruter Texte und Studien 132 (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), 235–80.

8. Nadia von Maltzahn, "The Museum as an Egalitarian Space?," *Manazir Journal* 1 (October 2019): 68–80, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2019.1.1.5.

9. Ashraf Osman, "The Rise of the Sursock Museum: The Power of the Image to Create an Image of Power," in *A Driving Force: On the Rhetoric of Images and Power*, ed. Angelica Bertoli et al. (Venice: Venice University Press, 2023), 287–304, https://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-771-5/017.

10. Silvia Naef, *Bahthan ʿan Ḥadatha ʿArabiyya* [In search of an Arab modernity] (Beirut: Agial Art Gallery, 1996), 163. First published as *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996).

11. Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 107.

12. There were actually twelve exhibitions at the museum in Beirut and four abroad, three of which were repeats.

13. An average of 2.3, compared to 3.0 in the 1970s, 3.4 in the 1990s, and 5.5 in the 1960s.

also experienced a major shift in its leadership—the first since the museum's founding. Camille Aboussouan was the curator of the museum from its inception in 1960 until 1978, when—three years into the war—he was appointed permanent delegate ambassador of Lebanon at UNESCO in Paris.

While Aboussouan was officially succeeded as curator by Loutfalla Melki in 1980, it is clear from the museum's archival documents that the person truly steering and powering the museum at the time was Sylvia Agémian, who in 1975 went from researcher and artistic assistant to deputy curator of the museum. In the fall of 1979, for instance, she authored two key internal documents for the museum's operations during that pivotal period: the first on "Artistic activities: Notes and proposals on the work likely to be carried out at the Sursock Museum in the absence of exhibitions"[14] and the second on "Work concerning the museum library."[15] It was also Agémian who authored the plan for the reopening of the museum with the tenth Autumn Exhibition in the autumn of 1982.[16] The Autumn Exhibition (*Salon d'Automne*) was "a group exhibition of contemporary art in and from Lebanon," for which the Sursock Museum became known since its opening in 1961.[17]

In addition to the relative dearth of exhibitions imposed by the challenging circumstances of the war, the 1980s were marked by a shift in the nature of exhibitions. The 1960s, in addition to being the most active decade for the museum in the second half of the twentieth century, had offered the most varied mix of exhibitions: European (45%); Lebanese (21%); regional/Arabic (17%); and global (17%).[18] By contrast, exhibitions in the 1980s were limited to the first two categories, with European exhibitions staying nearly the same (42%), while Lebanese ones formed the rest (and majority), climbing notably higher (to 58%). That considerable proportion of Lebanese exhibitions increased slightly (to 64%) the following decade (in the 1990s), while that of European ones reached the lowest proportion that half of the century (28%).[19]

14. Sylvia Agémian, "Activités artistiques: Notes et Propositions sur les travaux susceptibles d'être menés au Musée Sursock en l'absence d'expositions," Sursock Museum Archives, Beirut, 5 September 1979.

15. Sylvia Agémian, "Travaux concernant la Bibliothèque du Musée," Sursock Museum Archives, Beirut, 10 October 1979.

16. Sylvia Agémian, "X^{e} Salon d'Automne 1982 Préparation," Sursock Museum Archives, Beirut, 5 October 1982.

17. Von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public?," 253.

18. Several of the global and European exhibitions of this decade were of "reproductions" from UNESCO (where Aboussouan was secretary general of the Lebanese National Commission), as in faithful copies or photographic replicas of original artworks. In the 1960s, this practice was more widely accepted within institutional exhibition culture, especially in contexts aiming for public education and accessibility. The Sursock Museum itself embraced this logic in its inaugural exhibition *The First Imaginary Museum in the World* (1957), held in the UNESCO building in Beirut, which featured over 600 reproductions of global masterpieces. The title and spirit of the show were directly inspired by André Malraux's concept of the *Musée imaginaire*, which proposed that reproduction could liberate artworks from the confines of geography and class, creating a "museum without walls." This practice was not merely pragmatic, but responded to a foundational challenge for the Sursock: the absence of a substantial inherited fine art collection at its inception. See Osman, "The Rise of the Sursock Museum," 292.

19. The data presented here are based on my own analysis of the Sursock Museum's exhibition lists from the 1960s and 1980s, compiled from archival documents, public listings, and exhibition brochures. The dataset includes forty-five exhibitions from the 1960s and sixteen from the 1980s. Each exhibition was recorded with its title, date, and geographic framing. Where an individual show did not clearly fit one of these geographic categories, it was folded under the prevailing theme proposed by the exhibition title and curatorial framing. The methodology privileges the museum's own representational logics, allowing for insight into how it conceived its curatorial identity over time.

Table 1: Sursock Museum exhibitions in the 1980s.

Exhibition	Year	Date	Location
The Book and Lebanon	1982	18–30 January	Paris (UNESCO)
Arabic Art in Spain (photographs)	1982		Spain
Tenth *Salon d'Automne*	1982–83	21 December–21 January	Beirut
Lebanese Architecture from the 15th to the 19th Century	1984	5 June–30 November *	Paris *
Tribute to Nadia Tuéni	1984	17–27 October	Beirut
Eleventh *Salon d'Automne*	1984–85	21 December–21 January	Beirut
Lebanese Architecture from the 15th to the 19th Century	1986	10 April–10 May	Beirut
Twelfth *Salon d'Automne*	1986–87	16 December–31 January	Beirut
Horst Janssen	1987	12 June–11 July	Beirut
Philippe Mohlitz, Engravings	1987	2–3 December	Beirut
Thirteenth *Salon d'Automne*	1987–88	December–January	Beirut
Arabic Art in Spain (photographs)	1988	25–30 March	Beirut
Elly Ohns Quennet and Dagmar Schenk Güllich, Engravings	1988	10–20 May	Beirut
Contemporary French Graphic Art	1988	14–30 October	Beirut
	1988	14–30 October	Paris
Fourteenth *Salon d'Automne*	1988–89	December–January	Beirut

* *Académie Diplomatique Internationale* (5–15 June), *Hôtel de Sully* (24 July–24 August) and *Bibliothèque Nationale* (12 October–30 November).

Looking beyond the numbers at the types of exhibition, it seems the choice was largely governed by pragmatism and relying on the networks already established by the museum in the first two decades of its existence. The vast majority of the European exhibitions in the 1980s (four out of five) was of engravings or graphic art by French and German artists (see Table 1), which were more mobile (and less valuable) than paintings and sculptures. And aside from the five *Salons d'Automne*, two of the three remaining Lebanese exhibitions were curated by the former curator, Aboussouan, from Paris—and in the case of one, *The Book and Lebanon: Four Thousand Years of Humanism*, presented in Paris only, before the reopening of the museum in Beirut at the beginning of 1982. According to Agémian, Aboussouan "had always dreamed of publishing two major works: one dealing with the history of books in Lebanon and the other on Lebanese architecture

since the 15th century."[20] Amine Beyhum, mayor of Beirut who was *mutawalli* (legal custodian)[21] of the museum from 1962 until his death in 1981, "asked him to associate the name of the Sursock Museum" with these projects.[22] This conveys to what extent the personal preferences of the former curator continued to dominate the museum's curating practices in the 1980s. It also suggests that the museum board, presided by the mayor of Beirut, was looking at ways to keep the museum active during the war.

Thanks to the continued collaboration with Aboussouan, a quarter of all exhibitions that decade took place abroad. This was higher than in any other decade that half century: in the 1960s and 1990s exhibitions abroad constituted only 7 per cent of the total (there was none abroad in the 1970s). "Was it 'written' that this museum, already forced to go extramural to make its debut with its 'imaginary exhibition', must also, to continue, 'emigrate' with its curator?," Agémian asks in *Le livre*.[23] Accordingly, three out of those four exhibitions were in Paris. It is worth noting that this extramural "imaginary exhibition"[24] debut in 1957 had taken place at Beirut's UNESCO Palace, located in what, during the 1980s, had become West Beirut in a divided city (fig. 1). The artworks for that first exhibition were also stored there, and were unfortunately destroyed during the Israeli invasion of 1982.[25] Throughout the 1980s, however, there were no Sursock Museum exhibitions in the western part of the city. If you lived in Paris in the 1980s, you had better chances of attending a Sursock Museum exhibition than if you lived on the other side of Beirut.

The list of exhibitions suggests that the museum during this decade took advantage of opportunities presented to it, be it in the form of cooperation with European cultural institutes or reverting back to its formative curator Aboussouan, despite him having moved to Paris. Its main focus in terms of exhibitions in Beirut remained its *Salons d'Automne*, the museum's flagship showcases of local art. Looking at these in more depth allows us to tease out how the museum dealt with questions of identity, representation, and artistic value.

20. Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 93.

21. A *mutawalli* is the legal custodian or administrator of a *waqf* (endowment) under Lebanese religious and civil law. In the case of the Sursock Museum, the building and its contents were formally established as a *waqf* by Nicolas Sursock in his last will and testament, dated 19 January 1952. In this will, Sursock endowed the entirety of property no. 83 in the Rmeil district of Beirut—including all movable and immovable objects within it—as a permanent public museum. The will also stipulated that the *mutawalli* of this endowment would be the sitting president of the municipality of Beirut, the mayor, "whoever he is and whatever the political regime of the country." For a fuller citation and excerpts from the will, see Loutfalla Melki, "Nicolas Sursock: The Man and His Museum," in Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 19–23.

22. Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 93.

23. Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 93.

24. Inspired by Malraux's "Imaginary Museum," the exhibition was titled in Arabic more matter-of-factly as "Museum for Paintings Reproduced in Colour." The Sursock Museum held this exhibition in 1957 before the actual museum opened in 1961.

25. Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 47.

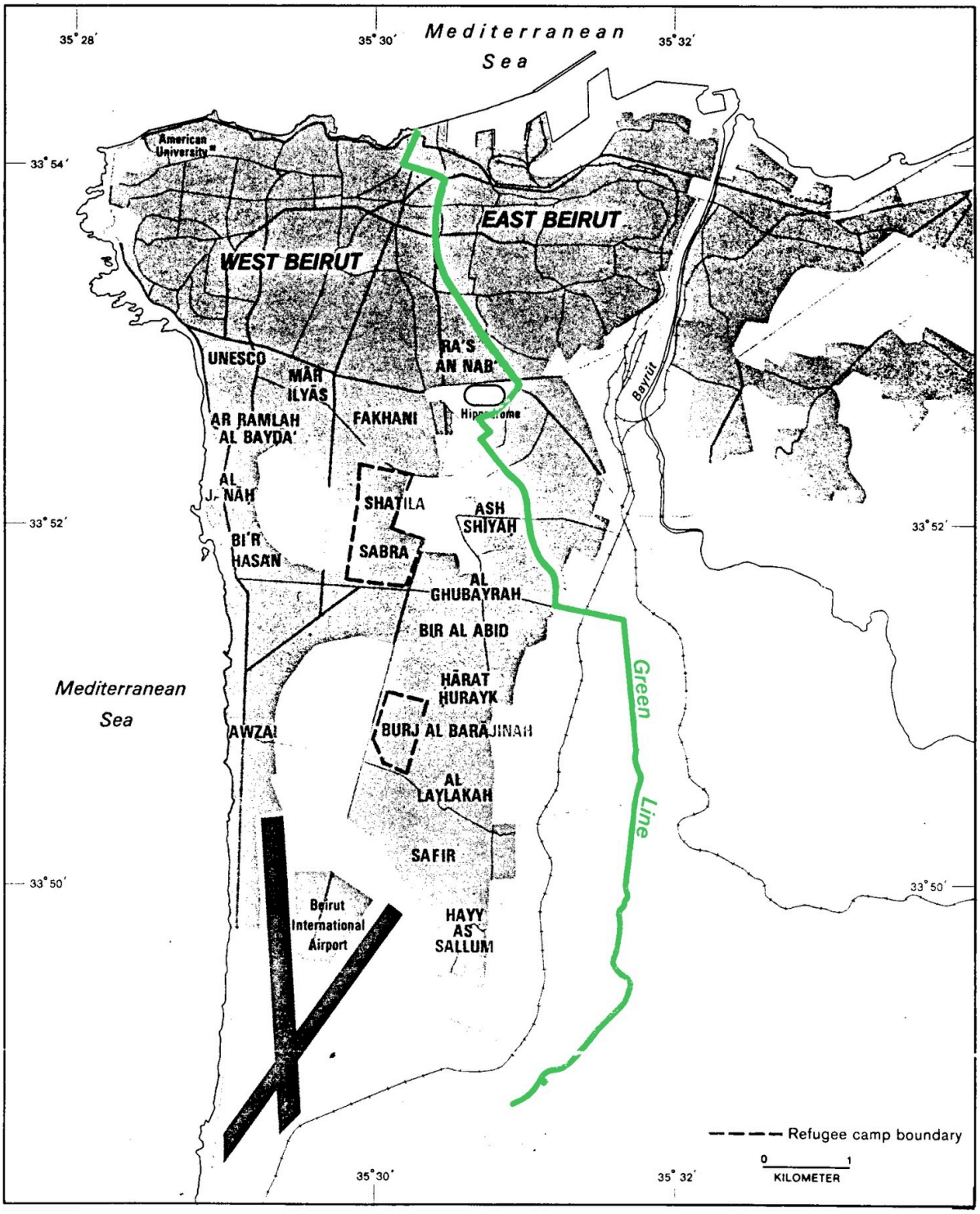

Figure 1: Map of Beirut in 1986 showing the Green Line dividing the city. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, public domain, CIA, 4 August 1986. Last accessed 24 July 2025. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Key_Shia-Controlled_Neighborhoods_in_Southern_Beirut_(cropped).png.

Salons in a Divided City

Israel's 1982 invasion, officially aimed at dismantling Palestinian armed groups, devastated much of Lebanon's infrastructure and intensified the country's sectarian fractures. The war not only resulted in large-scale human displacement, but also deepened Beirut's east-west division, impacting the circulation of people, goods, and cultural production across the city. The divide in the city was limited not only to the viewing of exhibitions, but extended as well to participation in them. After seven years of closure to the public since the start of the war, the museum reopened in December 1982 with the tenth edition of the *Salons d'Automne*, announced with "a glorious poster"[26] by Saad Kiwan, depicting a large orange disc behind the museum building. It was supposed to represent the "sun rising above the museum"[27] (though with its placement to the west of the building, one would not be entirely wrong to mistake it for a sunset) (fig. 2), in "times that seemed to allow hope for a return to normalcy,"[28] according to Agémian, but for the first time in a city divided in two.

While Agémian's reflections in *Le livre* offer valuable insight into the museum's wartime challenges, they must be situated within her role as an active agent shaping the institution's self-narrative. As deputy curator, her portrayal of resilience and hope reflects not only institutional memory but also a strategic framing of the museum's endurance during a period of profound national fragmentation. This alignment between personal recollection and institutional positioning is further evident in more recent critical assessments of the museum's wartime programming. As noted in the exhibition *Je suis inculte! The Salon d'Automne and the National Canon*, the museum's 1982 reopening—with the tenth *Salon d'Automne*—occurred a few months after the Israeli invasion and the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Yet, "the war was only glimpsed in the content of paintings and sculptures at the salon—the aesthetic program was enduringly formalist."[29] The museum, the exhibition argues, continued to see itself as an "enlightener amid the darkness of civil war,"[30] selectively foregrounding formalist aesthetics over direct engagement with the surrounding devastation. Agémian's comments, therefore, can be read as part of a broader institutional strategy to emphasize cultivation, continuity, and resilience—at times, at the expense of confronting the immediate political and human crisis outside its walls.

26. Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 108.

27. Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 108.

28. Agémian et al., *Le livre*, 108.

29. Sursock Museum, "Je suis inculte!," n.p.

30. Sursock Museum, "Je suis inculte!," n.p.

Figure 2: Kiwan, Saad. *Sursock Museum: X^e 1982 Fall Exhibition*. 1982. Poster printed on paper. 63 × 47 cm. Sursock Museum, Beirut. Image courtesy of the Sursock Museum | American University of Beirut art posters collection (AUB University Libraries). CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 License. Last accessed 24 July 2025. https://n2t.net/ark:/86073/b32s80.

The reopening was "an event in itself, marking the resumption of activities of the only truly living museum in Beirut, whose absence has been keenly felt in recent years in the field of major exhibitions," wrote the art critic Joseph Tarrab in a three-part series in the main French-language newspaper, *L'Orient-Le Jour*. "Just for having undertaken to fill this void so quickly, the museum committee is entitled to the recognition of art lovers." He admits, however, that "the very speed of setting up this first major postwar event did not allow, in the current state of things, to contact all the interested artists, because of the difficulties of communication, many of them being either abroad or in their villages."[31] The new curator of the museum then, Loutfalla Melki, referenced this diasporic spread of the artists in the catalogue: "from all regions of Lebanon, as well as France and Italy, our artists sent their creations, making of this museum the meeting point and the melting pot of Lebanese art."[32] However, for the first two war editions, artists in the western part of the city wanting to submit their art for consideration had to transport it across treacherous checkpoints to the museum in the eastern part, and back. Possibly due to that, and the frustration of the war that raged on, the second of those editions (the eleventh *Salon d'Automne*, in 1984) saw a drop in exhibited works to less than a quarter of the prior one (forty-one compared to 125), making it the smallest *Salon d'Automne* ever.

That changed with the twelfth *Salon d'Automne* in 1986, when artists were given the option to drop off their work in West Beirut at the Lebanese Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors (LAAPS) in Verdun. That year, eleven artists took advantage of that option, eight of whom were included in that salon. For half of those, it was their first ever participation; and for three of those four, it would be their last that decade.[33] The following month, one of those artists, Fayçal Sultan, who was an art critic for *As-Safir* newspaper, wrote in a review of the museum's output that, despite the museum's open invitation to everyone to participate, and even Agémian's move to facilitate the possibility of collecting and transferring works from the western region, the outcome was disappointing. Artists—from both sides of the dividing line—chose not to participate for various reasons, including the difficult security conditions, not wanting to subject their works to the "whims of the judging committees," and a general indifference to group exhibitions.[34] While the security situation and possibly the indifference to group exhibitions were related to wartime conditions, reactions to the perceived bias of the jury were nothing new and had accompanied the salons since their inception.

The perceived bias of the jury was rooted not simply in personal preferences but in deeper structural alignments. The museum's committees historically favoured formalist abstraction and a Francophile cultural orientation, reflecting broader nationalist and socio-political currents. As von Maltzahn argued in "Guiding the Artist and the Public?," and the museum's own *Je suis inculte!*

31. Joseph Tarrab, "Le Salon d'Automne au Musée Sursock: I-Une revanche posthume," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 21 December 1982, n.p.

32. *X^e Salon d'Automne*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Sursock Museum, 20 December 1982–20 January 1983 (Beirut: Sursock Museum, 1982), n.p.

33. The four artists that had participated before were: Henri Bedrossian, Lina Kabbani, Saloua Raouda (Choucair), and Mohammad Rawass. The four that had not were: Naziha Knio, Fayçal Sultan, Ghada Jamal, and Claire Sununu. For Sultan and Jamal, it would be their last that decade; for Sununu, it was the one and only time that century. Based on a list titled "al-mantaqa al-gharbiyya" ["the western district"] of participating artists from there (cross-referenced against participations in other years) found in the *XII^e Salon d'Automne* (1986) folder, Sursock Museum Archives, Beirut.

34. Fayçal Sultan, *Kitabat musta'adah min dhakirat funun Bayrut* [Writings recovered from the memory of Beirut arts] (Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2013), 262.

exhibition later highlighted, the aesthetic programme of the *Salon d'Automne* maintained a formalist and nationalistic tone even amid the devastation of the civil war, framing art as an instrument of "cultivation" and "hope" while largely avoiding direct engagement with the violence unfolding outside its walls.

No matter the reasons, in that year (1986) participation in the *Salon d'Automne* bounced back to just above average for the decade (ninety-two compared to eighty-nine works per salon), though that remained lower than the average for the five decades that century (122). The following year, the West Beirut location was changed to the office in Barbir[35] of the *mutawalli* of the museum, Shafiq Sardouk. No information was available on participants from West Beirut that year, although we know that overall participation dropped back below average (to seventy-five works). As well preserved as the museum archives are, they can only begin to hint at how war complicated the logistics of running these salons, the different ways the museum tried to cope with the divisions in the city (and the country), and how that may have impacted the submissions.

What is perhaps most remarkable in the references to the salons of the 1980s, however, is the absence of the context of war, except maybe in passing as a euphemism (such as "dark clouds darkening the sky" or "difficult and dark years")[36] or cause of pragmatic difficulties (as in the earlier quotes by Agémian and Tarrab), but not as an overwhelming existential challenge. Otherwise, much of the prewar debates—about abstraction and figuration, inclusion and exclusion, old and new, the safe and the challenging—continued unabated. One of the few art critics to point this out about the first salon of the decade was Nazih Khater who, in the first of a four-part series in *An-Nahar* focusing on the museum's reopening, wondered whether one remembered that a war had taken place in Lebanon and was still ongoing, as a visitor to the *Salon d'Automne* might not guess it by looking at the works. Khater wrote that he was not judging this, and that every artist was free to choose what to depict:

> How to pass by a group exhibition in December 1982 and not note the absence of the war's human features from its details? And at least its human flavour? What does an artist draw if he distances his sight from his conscience? All of this brings us to a question about the meaning of an exhibition like this at the beginning of the 1980s of the end of the twentieth century. That is, the question that contains in its question mark the rest of the questions. Would we be harsh on it if we said that the tenth Autumn Exhibition is one of reassurance?[37]

In this context, "reassurance" can be understood as both an aesthetic and a political gesture. At a time when Lebanon was experiencing extreme violence, displacement, and social fragmentation, an exhibition that largely avoided representing war might have offered visitors a sense of stability, continuity, or escapism—an affirmation that beauty, culture, and artistic production could endure. Yet this very gesture could also be seen as alienating or conservative: by emphasizing aesthetic formalism and avoiding direct engagement with the country's trauma, the museum

35. "Barbir Checkpoint," Mapping MENA, last accessed 24 July 2025, https://mappingmena.org/map/lebanon/barbir-checkpoint.

36. *X^e Salon d'Automne*.

37. Nazih Khater, "Ma'rad al-Kharif shuhub am 'afiyah?" [Fall exhibition paleness or wellness?], *An-Nahar*, 24 December 1982, n.p.

risked appearing disconnected from the lived realities of the majority of the populace. Reassurance, then, was double-edged: it could comfort some, but also signal a retreat into insularity and denial, raising difficult questions about the role of cultural institutions during periods of profound national crisis.

This critique of alienation from context is reminiscent to one levelled against the museum and its salon eighteen years earlier. In a 1964 *Magazine* article titled "*Je suis inculte!*" (I am uncultivated!), Jalal Khoury asked whether a citizen of the world who was dropped in the middle of the *Salon d'Automne* of the Sursock Museum would be able to know where they were just by looking at the paintings around them.[38] Taking this article as the starting point for their exhibition, curators Gasparian and Kiblawi noted that, in the 1980s, the museum's aesthetic programme being formalist was the museum's attempt to maintain neutrality during the war.[39]

The salon catalogues from that decade reflected subtle yet significant political alignments through their choice of epigraphs. The 1982 *Salon* opened with a quotation from then-president Amine Gemayel, emphasizing Lebanon's capacity for "extraordinary renewal and perpetual rebirth" through cultural creativity. At the time, Amine Gemayel had just assumed the presidency of Lebanon following the assassination of his brother Bashir Gemayel. As a leading figure of the right-wing Phalangist Party, his presidency embodied a Christian nationalist project that blamed the Palestinian presence for much of the country's descent into war, and sought to restore a Christian-dominated political order. Similarly, the 1987 *Salon* cited Michel Chiha, presenting Lebanon as a "predestined country" endowed with "human qualities" and "resources of intelligence."[40] Michel Chiha, whose writings deeply shaped mid-twentieth-century Lebanese political thought, articulated a vision of Lebanon as a unique, pluralistic, but ultimately Christian-anchored society. His emphasis on human resourcefulness and resilience was often used to affirm Lebanon's exceptionalism in the face of regional upheavals.

While the museum may have aimed for neutrality, the invocation of such figures—especially at a time of profound national division—carried enough cultural subtext to suggest the museum's political positioning, however discreetly framed. Given that the museum resumed its exhibitions after the expulsion of the Palestinian leadership from Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in June 1982—a moment that, in the discourse of right-wing, largely Christian factions, was framed as the "restoration of sovereignty" and the end of a major cause of the war—the catalogues give insights into the museum's political positioning. The expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership from Beirut in the summer of 1982, following the Israeli invasion, dramatically altered the city's political terrain. The withdrawal weakened the Palestinian and leftist pres-

38. Jalal Khoury, "Je suis inculte!" [I am uncultivated!], *Magazine*, 17 December 1964.

39. Sursock Museum, "Je suis inculte!."

40. *XIII^e Salon d'Automne*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Sursock Museum, December 1987–January 1988, n.p. In the 1982 *Salon* catalogue, Loutfalla Melki, the museum's curator, quoted President Amine Gemayel: "I have always repeated that Lebanon cannot be built by ordinary capacities and means. Lebanon can only be built through creativity," *X^e Salon d'Automne*, n.p. In the 1987 *Salon* catalogue, Melki cited Michel Chiha: "Lebanon has on the map the place of a predestined country. The essential part of his heritage are human qualities, resources of intelligence," *XIII^e Salon d'Automne*, 1987, n.p. Melki quoted Chiha only in French. (For the first salons during the war, all catalogue texts were published bilingually, in Arabic and French, as in years before. But for the last two salons that decade, the text by the museum's curator was published only in French, while that of the *mutawalli*, Chafic Sardouk, was only in Arabic. That practice continued into the 1990s.) In the *Je suis inculte!* exhibition wall text, Gemayel was described as a "right-wing phalangist" and Chiha as a "Christian ideologue."

ence in West Beirut, while allowing Christian forces to consolidate control over East Beirut—the side of the city where the Sursock Museum is located. As Nadia von Maltzahn has suggested, "the hopeful tone and the statement that now peace had returned clearly inscribes the Museum into the—right-wing, largely Christian—camp that blamed the Palestinians for the war."[41]

While the war was largely absent from the content of the exhibitions, it was nevertheless present in homages to deceased artists that became integral to the salons in the 1980s. The format of an homage within the salon was not novel to the decade; it had started in the mid-1960s with memorial tributes to departed pioneering artists, César Gemayel and Moustafa Farroukh, in the fifth and sixth salons, respectively (the artists had died in the late 1950s). The homages did not continue, however, with the following editions, until its return in the 1980s.

Table 2: Homages and jury members of the Salon d'Automne (SA) at the Sursock Museum in the 1980s.

SA	DATES	HOMAGES	JURY
10	20/12/1982–20/1/1983	Farid Aouad (1924–82), Hussein Badreddine (1939–75), Michel Basbus (1921–81), Jean Khalifé (1923–78), Ibrahim Marzuk (1937–75), Khalil Zghaib (1911–75)	Aimée Kettaneh, Pierre al-Khoury, Abdul-Rahman Labban, Joseph Rabbat, Rickat Salam, Samir Tabet, Georges Tohmé
11	21/12/1984–21/1/1985	[none]	Sylvia Agémian, Nazih Khater, Pierre al-Khoury, Hind Sinno, Joseph Tarrab
12	16/12/1986–31/1/1987	Sophie Yeramian (1915–84)	R.P. Abdo Badaoui, Rafiq Sharaf, Hussein Madi, Joseph Rabbat
13	12/1987–1/1988	Alfons Philipps (1937–87)	R.P. Abdo Badaoui, Rafiq Sharaf, Pierre al-Khoury, Hussein Madi, Joseph Rabbat
14	12/1988–1/1989	Fadi Barrage (1939–88), Olga Limansky (1903–88)	Sylvia Agémian, Pierre al-Khoury, Hussein Madi, Joseph Rabbat, Joseph Tarrab

Another tradition from the salons of the 1960s, the prizes, was also halted the following decade, in the 1974 *Salon*, when the curator, Aboussouan, announced, "No prizes, only acquisitions, until we have a decent collection."[42] That remained the case throughout the 1980s, until after the war. So, while the 1960s was the decade of prizes (a total of forty-seven, compared to fifteen in the 1990s), the 1980s was the decade of homages (a total of ten, compared to six in the 1990s, two in the 1960s, and none in the 1970s). While artists commemorated in the 1980s were not explicitly described as war casualties—Fadi Barrage, for example, honoured in 1988, was one of the first

41. Von Maltzahn, "The Museum as an Egalitarian Space?," 70.

42. Laure Ghorayeb, "Aboussouan: La jawa'iz bal shira' ila an namluk majmou'ah la'iqah" [Aboussouan: No prizes, only acquisitions, until we have a decent collection], *An-Nahar*, 28 November 1974.
The salon prizes traditionally consisted of monetary awards, sometimes accompanied by honorary mentions or certificates. Here Aboussouan announced the suspension of prizes, arguing that the museum should prioritize building its permanent collection rather than allocating funds to awards. Financial constraints during the war years likely reinforced the continuation of this policy throughout the 1980s.

artists in Lebanon to die of AIDS complication—the act of posthumous homage nonetheless contributed to the overall tone of loss and mourning that characterized the period. The absence of prizes, which had marked the previous decade, was attributed by Aboussouan to the museum's desire to build a collection before awarding distinctions. Yet it is also plausible that the economic uncertainty and infrastructural instability caused by the war itself made monetary awards impractical or inappropriate. Together, these gestures of homage and abstention from awarding prizes contributed to the museum's sombre and arguably evasive stance toward the war's immediate realities.

The Absent, the Refused, the Missing

It is perhaps not so surprising then that after such a long absence[43] and in the midst of war, absence itself would play a prominent role in the reception of the salons. In fact, the first section in the first instalment of Tarrab's aforementioned three-part series in *L'Orient-Le Jour* is titled "The absent, the refused, the missing." In it, he describes the groups of absentee artists: first, there are "those who, having died during the war through violent death or illness, would certainly have participated if they were still among us" (and accordingly were honoured in homages); then, there are "two important categories of known or established artists: those who were too modest and reserved to come forward on time [...] and those who were blessed abroad for several years"; and lastly, there are "those refused."[44] We will come back to the second category; for now, let us consider the last, the refused. The catalogue of the museum's tenth Autumn Exhibition stated that "360 works by 140 artists were presented. 103 works by 66 artists were selected."[45] So, while less than a third of the works presented were selected (29%), nearly half of the artists were accepted (47%). Tarrab considered that to be "a sign of health, without doubt, and a measure of the moral prestige of the *Salon*" and lamented the "laxity of collective and private exhibitions in recent years." He admitted: "the fact remains that this is one of the most effective ways for strangers to get noticed if they are selected." And he continued:

> It would perhaps be interesting and very instructive on the state of pictorial attempts among budding artists to organize, in parallel with the *Salon d'Automne*, a counter-*Salon des refusés*, which would allow everyone to judge the merits of the jury's decisions: but there is reason to fear, given the massive craze for bad painting, that the success of this counter-exhibition, which risks turning into a fair, will eclipse that of the official *Salon*. But, in fact, don't we already have such a salon (or almost) with that of *Printemps*?[46]

43. The museum was closed to the public from the beginning of the civil war in 1975 until after the Israeli invasion of 1982, the longest closure in its history up to that time.

44. Tarrab, "Le Salon d'Automne au Musée Sursock," n.p.

45. *X^e Salon d'Automne*, n.p.

46. Tarrab, "Le Salon d'Automne au Musée Sursock," n.p.

The *Salon du Printemps* was that held since 1953 by the Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts, alongside a *Salon d'Automne* introduced by the ministry the following year, which it later discontinued. And as in the Sursock salon, "the ministry appointed a jury that consisted of cultural figures (including architects) as well as of artists."[47]

Not everyone agreed with Tarrab's assessment, however. Three days later, in the first instalment of his aforementioned four-part series in *An-Nahar*, Khater wrote on the strictness in the selection of the Sursock Museum's committee. Although not knowing who was actually turned down, Khater notes that many artists were excluded from showing their work in the salon. While he appreciated the quality of the works as well as their display ("serious scientific museal standards"), and that attendance was free, he wondered why some artists were selected when others were not.[48] A few days later, in the second instalment of the series, Khater presented another reading on those absent from the salon, elaborating on the role of the museum, and questioning that of the jury:

> Is it the role of the museum, no matter how stringent it is in its choice, to hold a group exhibition using the logic of galleries? How can a museum accept subjecting professional visual artists with recognized creativity to a jury ruled by amateurism? For example, does the museum need Mrs Aimée Kettaneh, Mr Rickat Salam, Dr Abdul-Rahman Labban, Mr Samir Tabet, and Dr Georges Tohmé to accept the works of Shafic Abboud, Yvette Ashkar, Halim Jurdak, Elie Kanaan, Hussein Madi, and Nadia Saikali? And then how are we surprised that a wide group of artists stays away? Should the museum not act within clear cultural visions that give its initiatives the extent of scientific selection for its end points? The difference between a museum's collective exhibition and others' exhibitions may be that the museum knows well and in principle what it wants to show in its initiative, and therefore it knows well who it wants to see in its exhibition.[49]

To a large extent, this does not differ much in essence from earlier discussions on the role of the jury and the museum, except perhaps in a notable shift in the identitarian critique of the jury members: from a foreign versus national axis earlier to gradations within the national end of the spectrum in the 1980s. We will return for a closer look at this towards the end of this article. For now, it is worth noting that in the following edition of the *Salon d'Automne* in 1984, both critics, Khater and Tarrab, were part of the selection jury, "in favour of supporting the second wave of modernism and restoring contemporary experimental painting to its avant-garde role in the museum."[50] The questions they raised remain central to considering the role of the museum in this period.

47. Von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public?," 256.

48. Khater, "Ma'rad al-Kharif shuhub am 'afiyah?" n.p.

49. Nazih Khater, "Mathaf Sursuq akthar min salah" [Sursock Museum is more than a hall], *An-Nahar*, 29 September 1982, n.p.

50. Fayçal Sultan, "Maʿarid al-Kharif fi Mathaf Sursuq 1961–1986" [Autumn exhibitions at Sursock Museum 1961–1986], *As-Safir*, 29 January 1987, n.p.

How was the museum then perceived by some of these absent artists, who either chose not to participate in the salons of that decade, or tried but were denied the opportunity? Let us start with an artist who had participated in all *Salons d'Automne* since 1964, but in 1982 chose no longer to do so. Mahmoud Amhaz, a professor of art history at the Lebanese University with a doctorate from the University of Liege in Belgium,[51] who had taken part in the last six Autumn Exhibitions before the museum's closure in 1974, chose not to participate in the exhibitions of the 1980s. In an interview in *Al-Liwaa* newspaper in December 1982, Amhaz explained his distance from the salons, lamenting that "artistic production has become artificial and commercial, concerned with appearances rather than profound artistic research." He further noted that "the political situation in Lebanon does not provide a psychologically comfortable framework for the artist to work." For Amhaz, participating in exhibitions under such conditions felt disingenuous, as "art has been reduced to an embellishment of daily life, divorced from its essential human and existential concerns." He continued that "the participation of the artists was only a kind of encouragement for the security measures [the museum] hoped will succeed," and generally considered Sursock's salon outdated.[52] Amhaz's comment about "security measures" can be understood as referring to the broader attempts by institutions in East Beirut—such as the Sursock Museum—to project an image of stability, normalcy, and cultural continuity amid ongoing conflict and division. His critique suggests that, in his view, artists' participation in the salon would serve less as a genuine artistic engagement and more as a symbolic endorsement of these efforts to "secure" public life through cultural programming, at a time when the realities of war and political fragmentation were still deeply unresolved.

Note here the resonance with Khater's earlier critique of the tenth Autumn Exhibition as an act of "reassurance," in Amhaz's suggestion that artists' participation served as "encouragement" and "hope" for stability. The concepts of reassurance, encouragement, and hope are invoked here as interpretive markers to capture the affective and symbolic dimensions of the museum's wartime exhibitions. The rejection of the museum's Autumn Exhibitions appears to stem from overlapping concerns—on one hand, the perception that the salons were becoming commercially driven, and on the other, a growing sense that the institution was no longer in step with evolving artistic sensibilities. Further on, however, while discussing his recent publication, *Contemporary Fine Art (Painting: 1870–1970)*,[53] Amhaz elaborated on connections between art and commerce, saying that "the traditional concept of the artwork as a commodity is one of the factors that pushed some artists to these negative positions," such as the "absurd trends that led to what is called non-art." He continued:

> The art exhibitions that appeared in Europe [...] consecrated the artwork as a commercial commodity in the exhibition hall with all its background issues (of advertising—financiers—publicity). All of these issues are negatives on the level

51. George Al-Rassi, *Risha fi mahab al-rih: Antulujya al-fan al-tashkili al-lubnani min al-bidayat hatta al-yawm* [A brush in the wind: Anthology of Lebanese fine art from the beginnings until today] (Beirut: Dar al-Hiwar al-Jadid, 2012), 269.

52. Hiyam Wehbe, "D. Amhaz.. rassaman wa bahithan: 'Nawafidh al-dhakira' jadidi alladhi ʿudtu bihi min al-harb" [Dr Amhaz, painter and researcher: 'Windows of Memory,' my latest that I brought back from the war], *Al-Liwaa*, 31 December 1982.

53. Mahmoud Amhaz, *Al-fann al-tashkili al-muʿasir: At-taswir: 1870–1970* [Contemporary fine art: Painting 1870–1970] (Beirut: Dar al-muthallath, 1978).

> of artistic production, which reduced it to the level of commerce, and led to the emergence of an artistic movement by artists to raise the level of art and return it to its natural place by producing (non-artistic) works represented by some modern trends.[54]

Amhaz continued to paint and show his work in commercial galleries, but he never again exhibited at the Sursock Museum that century. While his distancing from the salon can be partly attributed to the destabilizing effects of Lebanon's ongoing civil war, his critique also reflected broader anxieties about shifts in the global art scene. In his view, the increasing commodification of art—exemplified by the European and North American market systems where galleries, advertising, and financial speculation began to dominate artistic value—had eroded the integrity of artistic production. His rejection of the salon thus intertwined a local disillusionment with wartime cultural life and a wider unease about the commercialization of art on a global scale.

Next, let us consider an example from the other end of the decade, this time from the archives of the museum, to further illustrate how tensions between artists and the Sursock's jury structure persisted—and even deepened—throughout the 1980s. Mohammed al-Kaïssi is another artist, also a professor at the Lebanese University, who had participated in three *Salons d'Automne* (in 1962, 1982, and 1987) but whose 1988 entry was refused by the selection committee. In February 1989 he penned a page-long "Letter to the curators of the Sursock Museum,"[55] a month after the fourteenth Autumn Exhibition ended. He opened with a regret that he felt there was a divide between Lebanon's established artists and the museum, which he considered the main forum for gathering artists and displaying their works. His criticism of the 1989 Autumn Exhibition was particularly directed at a committee member whom he held responsible for "deleting and cancelling" an artist (namely himself) at the stroke of a pen, wondering whether "to make [his] fine painting disappear, and deprive many art connoisseurs and critics from seeing it, [was] the goal of the committee?" The artist then went on to describe the rejected painting in question, "a very important painting from the stages of [his] artistic life that spanned from 1950 to today. A thesis painting representing the suffering of Eastern women, an oil painting measuring 2.50 m × 1.00 m in a new fresco style, divided into 16 paintings." Kaïssi continued by inviting the committee to "note that this painting was transferred from the Western region to the museum in a secure envelope, in the car of the mayor of Beirut, Mr Shafiq Al-Sardouk, and guarded by three security forces guards," underlining the support received from the mayor, who was *mutawalli* of the museum after all.

In an effort to establish his worth, the artist then detailed his professional affiliations and the various places, in Lebanon and abroad, where his work had been shown, noting in particular that the first exhibition he participated in was the ministry's Autumn Exhibition at UNESCO in 1954, "where the paintings of César Gemayel, Moustafa Farroukh, Omar Onsi, Saliba Douaihy, Georges Cyr, Rashid Wehbi, and other great artists were presented. We felt proud and appreciated, and at that time I received the Zalfa Chamoun Award.[56] Where is the autumn of '54 of UNESCO from that of Sursock '89?" He concluded his letter with the following:

54. Wehbe, "D. Amhaz.. rassaman wa bahithan," n.p.

55. Mohammed al-Kaïssi, "Risalah ila al-qayyimin ʿala mathaf sursuq" [A letter to the curators of the Sursock Museum], Sursock Museum Archives, Beirut, 8 February 1989.

56. Zalfa Chamoun was the wife of then president Camille Chamoun.

> These are signs of the dwarfing of art in Lebanon. Have we really reached this level? Who is responsible?
>
> I have decided to boycott the Autumn Exhibitions at the Sursock Museum, as long as there are people among the committee members whose aim is the destruction of talent and art in Lebanon.
>
> I record this message for history as an artist [...] preserving my personal right to do whatever I deem appropriate to correct my artistic position.[57]

It is worth noting that, two years later, Kaïssi did participate in the first *Salon d'Automne* after the war, the fifteenth, in 1991, as well as the following one. That was the fifth time he was selected by the jury, which qualified him then to become a member, or *Sociétaire*, thus allowing him hence to be admitted to the salon without being subjugated to the jury's evaluation.[58] Kaïssi returned as such to participate five more times that century. While the specific circumstances of Kaïssi's renewed selection are not documented in available sources, it is plausible that the postwar restructuring of the cultural field—and the broader shift toward national reconciliation—eased previous tensions between artists and the museum's jury. The reopening of the *Salon d'Automne* in 1991 may also have involved changes in jury composition or selection criteria, reflecting a new political and institutional climate in the aftermath of the war.

While Amhaz chose not to participate in the Sursock Museum's salons starting in the 1980s, being disillusioned with the artistic direction he felt the museum had taken, and Kaïssi voiced his anger at being rejected by one single salon while being admitted to others, the example of another artist, RoseVart, questions more directly the selection criteria of the salon. Rosine Vartouhi Sissérian, better known as RoseVart, applied to the *Salon d'Automne* three times that decade (in 1982, 1986, and 1988; see fig. 3) only to be repeatedly rejected. She wrote about her experience in *Le Reveil* in January 1989 after visiting the museum's salon, in an article titled "The *Salon d'Automne*: What Are We Looking For?" She opened the article with a description of two works at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by Kazimir Malevich that were exhibited for the first time in 1918 at the tenth State Salon in Moscow. The works titled *Homage to the Vertical* and *Homage to the Horizontal* consist of "two blank sheets of paper, square shaped, with a vertical line on the first and a horizontal line on the second, drawn finely with a lead pencil." That is followed with an anecdote about a student of Amine Al-Basha, leading to the main question of the piece, "What is a good painting?" From there, she continued to relay her experience of submitting a number of her works in different media, including oil paintings, watercolours, gouaches, and tapestry, to the salon throughout the 1980s, in the hope of being admitted to what she called "this 'sanctuary of art,'" but being consistently rejected. She wondered about the reasons for her rejection, as she had each time selected pieces reflective of her style and use of colours, grounded in her academic training and not offensive. "I don't think I have intimidated or offended the members of the jury, as I did not present the nude of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*," she noted, alluding to the latter's infamous rejection by the Paris salon jury in 1863. RoseVart graduated from the Academie libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) with distinction in 1980, as she pointed out in the text, and had

57. Al-Kaïssi, "Risalah ila al-qayyimin."

58. Von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public?," 268.

since been teaching there and serving on several of its juries. With this in mind, she asked: "On what basis beside genuine values, [do] mediocre works manage to be hanged on the picture rails in the Museum? On what basis and on what criteria do we choose our artists and artworks? It is certainly not with drawing lots that they decide what to choose."[59]

Figure 3: Sissérian, RoseVart. *Beyrouth ville martyre* [Beirut, the Martyr City]. 1986. Oil on canvas. 100 × 80 cm. Image courtesy of the RoseVart Collection. From Sonia Nigolian, *RoseVart… A Life Story* (Beirut: Photogravure Packlayan, 2000), 16–18.

There is no easy explanation for RoseVart's persistent rejection, at least not explicitly on political grounds. Her close affiliation with ALBA would have qualified her from a technical point of view, and her association with *Le Reveil*—the French-language daily newspaper launched by Amine

59. Rosine Vartouhi (RoseVart) Sissérian, "'Le Salon d'Automne': What Are We Looking For?," *Le Reveil*, 25 January 1989, repr. in Sonia Nigolian, *RoseVart… A Life Story* (Beirut: Photogravure Packlayan, 2000), 16–18.

Gemayel in 1977 to support Kataeb Party positions[60]—suggests she was not politically misaligned with the museum's general cultural milieu. In the absence of concrete evidence linking her exclusion to political motives, it is more plausible that her rejection by the jury members was based on aesthetic preferences. However, the intertwining of aesthetic and political values within the salon's history cautions against treating these domains as fully separate, especially given the broader cultural alignments operating during the war period.

The debates around inclusion and exclusion during the 1980s salons appear, based on the limited available evidence, to have been shaped more by aesthetic debates related to developments in contemporary art than by explicit political alignments. However, given the entanglement of aesthetic and political values in the Lebanese context, definitive conclusions remain difficult to draw. Was this "out of step" in the words of Dafoe, who argues that, once upon a time, an:

> approach, which emphasizes an artwork's physical properties (composition, colour, scale) over the external contexts of its making (the artist's identity and intentions, say), was the dominant theoretical mode for much of the modernist era of the early twentieth century. But by the 1960s and '70s, as new critical approaches—feminism, postcolonialism, structuralism—evolved in response to a cultural landscape shaped by political violence and burgeoning social movements, the formalists' close-eyed approach seemed out of step.[61]

The tensions underlying the judgment of art in 1980s Beirut were symptomatic of a broader cultural rift: RoseVart's formalist and technically grounded practice may not have aligned with the jury's shifting preferences, while Amhaz's critique of commercialism revealed an opposing frustration with perceived conservatism and market encroachment. These differing perspectives suggest a fragmented consensus about what contemporary Lebanese art should be—one that paralleled the fractured national context in which the museum operated.

Judging Art in War

The 1980s were not a monolithic period; the Lebanese Civil War evolved through shifting alliances among Christian and Muslim militias and political movements, Palestinian factions, and regional powers. Each phase of the decade—from the Israeli invasion of 1982 to the "War of the Camps" (1985–88) and the final battles of the late 1980s—altered the rhythms of violence and the spaces available for cultural life, including at institutions like the Sursock Museum. The politics of inclusion and exclusion at the museum in that conflicted decade emerge, based on the available testimonies and archival traces, as complex and difficult to decipher—mirroring in some ways the ever-shifting alliances of the fifteen-year war in Lebanon. Artists such as Mahmoud Amhaz, Mohammed al-Kaïssi, and RoseVart questioned not only their exclusion from exhibitions but also the opacity and subjectivity of the jury's decisions, raising broader concerns about institutional legitimacy during a time of national fragmentation. Perhaps RoseVart was onto something when

60. Pierre Maroun, "Dossier: Amine Gemayel Former President of Lebanon," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (February 2003), archived at the Internet Archive, last accessed 13 August 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20030801140636/https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0302_ld.htm.

61. Taylor Dafoe, "Will AI Change Art History Forever?," *ARTnews*, 30 August 2024, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/ai-changing-art-history-raphael-painting-attribution-1234716025/.

she asked, "On what basis and on what criteria do we choose our artists and artworks?" What criteria were applied? When Khater asks, "How can a museum accept subjecting professional visual artists with recognized creativity to a jury ruled by amateurism?" Who were these people in the jury? And what qualified them to judge another's work? When Kaïssi wrote, "there are people among the committee members whose aim is the destruction of talent and art in Lebanon," was this directed against some members in particular? Kaïssi's frustration suggests he perceived the 1989 jury as more exclusionary than others. His rhetorical phrasing reflected a deep disillusionment with a process he believed was driven less by artistic criteria and more by personal antagonism or institutional opacity.

So, who was judging art at the Sursock Museum that decade? The museum jury was "generally composed of representatives of some of the fine art departments at national and private universities in Lebanon, as well as of art critics and, at times, the acting president of the Lebanese Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors (LAAPS)." By the 1980s its members had been mainly Lebanese.[62] That decade, the jury of the *Salon d'Automne* (SA) ranged from four members (SA12, 1986–1987) to seven members (SA10, 1982–1983) at a time, the remaining three juries having five members each. In total, fourteen people were on the salons' juries that decade, four of whom were women. Half of those fourteen participated more than once (see Table 2).

At the high end, with four contributions each, were Pierre el-Khoury (SAs 10, 11, 13, and 14) and Joseph Rabbat (SAs 10, 12, 13, and 14). El-Khoury was a prolific architect and graduate of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Rabbat, an interior architect and founder of the School of Decorative Arts at ALBA, was also an alum of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The two of them are followed by an artist, Hussein Madi, who contributed to three of the juries of the 1980s (SAs 12, 13, and 14). Madi was a graduate of ALBA and the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. Another artist follows with two jury participations that decade: Rafiq Sharaf (SAs 12 and 13). Sharaf was also an alumnus of ALBA as well as the Real Academia de Bellas Artes in Madrid, and was director of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University then. His participation was remarkable, as he was a vocal critic of the Sursock salons in the 1960s when he boycotted them. In the same two juries as Sharaf (SAs 12 and 13) was another figure associated with another Lebanese university: Reverend Father Abdo Badawi of the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK). Badawi was head of the Department of Conservation, Restoration, Cultural Property and Sacred Art there. Two other figures round up the two-timer jury list that decade, both of whom served on the same juries (SAs 11 and 14): Joseph Tarrab and Sylvia Agémian, whom we have introduced above.

None of the above can be considered amateurs in the field of visual arts. Khater specifically cites Aimée Kettaneh, Rickat Salam, Abdul-Rahman Labban, Samir Tabet, and Georges Tohmé in his criticism. Other than Labban, who had already served on two previous juries in the 1960s, and Samir Tabet, who participated in several salons as an artist and served on one further jury in 2008, the others served only on the jury of that 1982 tenth *Salon d'Automne*—the reopening of the museum during the war—along with Joseph Rabat who is not mentioned in Khater's list. While Khater might consider them amateurs, it is notable that many were nonetheless active in the cultural field: Aimée Kettaneh, for instance, was the long-standing president of the Baalbeck International Festival committee. Their inclusion on the jury may reflect the museum's urgent need to project cultural vitality at a precarious historical moment, even if that meant relying on fig-

62. Von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public?"

ures whose primary expertise was not in visual arts criticism. Tarrab implied that the tenth *Salon d'Automne* was organized in haste, possibly to signal that "peace had returned." The fact that most of these jury members only served once would suggest that the museum's leadership itself recognized the provisional, improvised nature of this jury—prioritizing symbolic gestures of resilience over the rigour traditionally associated with its juries. In this light, the criticisms voiced by artists and critics alike reflect not simply personal grievances but a deeper unease about the fragility of cultural authority during a time of national crisis.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Sursock Museum's operations during the 1980s did not reflect a single coherent institutional stance toward Lebanon's civil war, but rather a set of evolving responses to the fragmented and unstable conditions of the time. The article traced three overlapping tendencies: logistical and curatorial adaptations driven by wartime constraints (actual effect); expressed or implied institutional stances through patterns of inclusion/exclusion (disavowal); and the reactions of artists and critics (individual grievances). These are not presented as distinct phases or isolated positions, but as interrelated dynamics shaped by the war's shifting material, spatial, and ideological pressures. At moments, the museum's programming seems governed more by the logics of survival and pre-existing networks than by a desire to engage directly with the conflict. At others, curatorial choices—like the absence of war in exhibited works or the political valence of certain catalogue texts—implicitly echoed dominant narratives of blame, denial, or normalcy.

This complexity does not negate the war's influence; rather, it demands an analysis that accommodates ambivalence. This article does not argue that inclusion and exclusion were exclusively determined by sectarian alignment or factional power, but rather that they were shaped by a convergence of wartime conditions, aesthetic preferences, institutional legacy, and the increasingly globalized art market. As Naef notes,[63] the Arab art world in this period was grappling with imported market logics, formalist aesthetic legacies, and evolving regional debates on authenticity, representation, and modernity. The Sursock Museum reflected these entanglements—often passively, sometimes strategically—through the choices it made and the discourses it avoided.

In this light, the case of the Sursock Museum in the 1980s becomes less about identifying a singular political position and more about analysing how a cultural institution—one with claims of neutrality—became a site where aesthetics, institutional priorities, and wartime realities collided. Inclusion and exclusion were not simply reflections of political bias or aesthetic judgment, but also of deeper contradictions within the Lebanese art scene's attempts to define itself amid national rupture and global transition.

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63. Naef, *Bahthan ʿan Hadatha ʿArabiyya*, 159–71.

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Article

The House Stands Tall

The Social Dimension of Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's Curatorial Activities during the Civil War in Lebanon

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Abstract

This article examines the curatorial activities of Janine Rubeiz during the Lebanese Civil War, highlighting her efforts to sustain cultural production amid crisis. This serves as an entry point in the analysis of Rubeiz's use of art as a medium for political and social engagement. Drawing on concepts such as art agency and exhibitionary sociality, the article situates the two large-scale exhibitions *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan* and the gallery she opened at her own flat as dynamic, relational spaces that transcended traditional art displays to assume a deeper role. These initiatives, while heralding the social importance of culture in times of crisis, provided artists and audiences with opportunities to confront and renegotiate understandings of belonging, community, and the memory of the war. Ultimately, the essay challenges the assumption that periods of conflict disallow artistic and intellectual endeavours. In doing so, it contributes to the analysis of art's presence and role during the Lebanese Civil War, opening research terrain previously obscured by the focus on postwar artistic production and critique.

Keywords

Janine Rubeiz, Dar el Fan, Lebanese Civil War, Art Agency, Exhibitionary Sociality, Cultural Resilience

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Introduction

> Dar el Fan was completely destroyed and looted, only a few archives could be saved. These thin sheets, witnesses of our effort, seem very precious to us today, because it was perhaps the only conscious work that was carried out in order to unite, to link, to establish a dialogue.[1]

With these lines, cultural advocate Janine Rubeiz (1926–92), founder and three-time president of Dar el Fan wa-l-Adab (House of Art and Literature, Dar el Fan in short) refers to the destruction of the cultural centre she had founded in 1967 with a group of fellow artists and intellectuals in the heart of Beirut. A key figure in Beirut and Lebanon's cultural scene for her unwavering commitment to art and culture, Rubeiz's interests spanned visual arts, theatre, and fashion.[2] Moreover, she was an active member of the Progressive Socialist Party[3] and a staunch advocate for women's rights in line with the ideas of second-wave feminism.[4]

Dar el Fan was a vibrant creative hub. Housed in a nineteenth century Lebanese central hall mansion, it served as a non-profit space and a meeting point where artists, journalists, thinkers, researchers, and politicians could meet, socialize, and discuss their work. Over the years, it hosted around two hundred and fifty cultural events including conferences, art exhibitions, movie screenings, poetry readings, musical concerts, and debates on political and current issues, with the aim of bringing art and culture closer to the audience. The centre came to constitute an important catalyst in Beirut, where private-led initiatives filled the gap of an absent state-driven cultural policy – a condition that had long defined the Lebanese cultural landscape. The Sursock Museum, universities, foreign cultural centres, galleries, and local clubs such as the Arab Cultural Club and the Cénacle Libanais[5] contended with one another in nurturing intellectuals and promoting their own cultural agenda.[6] Within this competitive panorama, Dar el Fan's role quickly expanded beyond the mere exhibition of art and support of cultural activity. It became a site for the production and circulation of knowledge and ideas, asserting the agency of cultural works not as passive reflections of society, but as active interventions in their own right. With its left-

1. "Dar el Fan est complètement détruit et pillé, seules quelques archives ont pu être sauvées. Ces minces feuillets, témoins de notre effort, nous paraissent bien précieux aujourd'hui, car ce fut peut-être le seul travail conscient qui ait été réalisé afin d'unir, de lier, d'établir un dialogue." From a text written by Janine Rubeiz and preserved in the archives of Dar el Fan, at Galerie Janine Rubeiz in Beirut. I thank Nadine Begdache for having allowed and supported my research in the unindexed archives.

2. On Janine Rubeiz and Dar el Fan, see Nadine Kassab, ed., *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan: Regard vers un patrimoine culturel* (Beirut: Dar an-Nahar, 2003); Khalida Said, "Dar al Fann wa-l-adab: Al-thaqafa ka-nasij al-hayat" [Dar el Fan w-al-Adab: Culture as a Structure of Life], in Khalida Said, *Yutupia al-madina al-muthaqqafa* [Utopia of an intellectual city] (London: Al Saqi, 2012), 181–99.

3. Founded in 1949 by Kamal Jumblatt (1917–77), the party's constitution aims to achieve a socialist society in Lebanon. It supported Lebanon's Arab identity and the Palestinian Cause.

4. In 1977, she was elected Commissioner for Women's Affairs of the PSP. Rubeiz admired the French writer Simone de Beauvoir and her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949). However, throughout her years at Dar el Fan, she consistently demonstrated a keen awareness of her own cultural and political context—an awareness that culminated in the organization of a series of events dedicated to women in Lebanon in May 1975.

5. On the Cénacle Libanais, see the work of Amin Élias, *Le Cénacle Libanais (1946–1984): Une tribune pour une science du Liban* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2019).

6. Sarah Rogers, "Galleries and Cultural Centres in 1960s Beirut, a Brief History," *Perspective #1* (Saradar Collection, 2018), accessed 16 July 2025, http://saradarperspective.com/perspective1/essays.

ist[7] and pro-Palestinian stance, Dar el Fan played a crucial role in shaping subjectivities between the various political and national currents weaving through Lebanon, among tensions fuelled by sectarianism.[8] It was described by its founders as "the first actual Lebanese cultural centre,"[9] a definition that portrays not only its multifaceted institutional structure but also posits its mission and cultural intentions as aiming to define a Lebanese cultural identity or, as in the words of its president, "personality." This ambition would become especially vital during the war years, when Rubeiz sought to use Dar el Fan's curatorial programming as a means of fostering social cohesion amid escalating fragmentation.

With the outbreak of the civil war, Dar el Fan halted its activities in the autumn of 1975, as the building was situated along Bishara el Khoury street, which turned into the infamous Green Line that divided East and West Beirut during the conflict. The war dispersed the members of the executive board of Dar el Fan,[10] Rubeiz's close friends among artists and intellectuals, as well as Dar el Fan's most loyal and regular audience that either left the country or was unable to move freely in the city. In early 1976, the building was heavily damaged, scattering irreparably the archives and records of events that Rubeiz and other members had meticulously kept for eight years. Despite no longer having access to the building, the atrocities of the war and its impact on the cultural life of Beirut, Rubeiz continued her mission until her death in 1992. The loss of a physical location hindered the execution of events that were previously central to Dar el Fan's activities such as public lectures, exhibitions, and community gatherings. When possible, these had to be organized in other venues that, however, did not have the same impact or social relevance of Dar el Fan. In order to address these difficulties, Rubeiz began developing alternative strategies to sustain the centre's mission.

This article offers an overview of Rubeiz's most significant artistic initiatives during the Lebanese Civil War.[11] These encompass two large-scale exhibitions, namely *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*, and the organization of smaller art exhibitions at her own apartment.[12] It traces her commitment to supporting cultural production throughout the conflict, which serves as a key entry point for

7. The spectrum of the Lebanese left was wide and diverse at the time. While Dar el Fan and the majority of its committee leaned towards socialism, its members belonged to a variety of political affiliations, with some of them being close to right-wing parties.

8. On the history of modern Lebanon, see Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988).

9. This definition is debated. It is found in papers about Dar el Fan written by its founders and members and has been used by some of the interviewees as well. However, others did not recognize its validity, mainly due to the existence of other cultural spaces such as the Arab Cultural Club and the Cénacle Libanais (see below). Nonetheless, the author finds the definition compelling in gaining a deeper understanding of Dar el Fan's self-portrayal.

10. It proved difficult to reconstruct the 1975 Executive Board, which was elected on a yearly basis. Previous members included architect Wasek Adib, artist Moazzaz Raouda, Wajih Nahle, Aref El Rayess, decorator Francois Harfouche, cultural advocate and philanthropist Lady Yvonne Cochrane Sursock, art critic Nicole Harfouche, poet Samia Toutounji, journalist and PSP politician Marwan Hamade, Irene Jabre, and journalist Maurice Sakr.

11. Rubeiz remained active in the organization of politically oriented events throughout the civil war. However, their analysis is beyond the scope of this article. Namely, in 1981, she launched the lecture series "The Christians and the Arabs"; in 1984, "Lebanon and the Sectarian Structure"; and in 1987, "Dialogue for Unity." These were all aimed at fostering national reflection, promoting dialogue across sectarian and ideological divides, and affirming a civic vision for Lebanon's future amid the ongoing conflict.

12. Rubeiz also co-curated the exhibition of the private collection of ambassador Salah Stétié in June 1988. This exhibition is not discussed in this article as it did not have the same social impact as *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*.

analysing her use of art as a vehicle for social engagement. I will draw on concepts of art agency[13] and exhibitionary sociality[14] which consider art not merely as an object but as a relational and transformative experience, and exhibitions as dynamic players in the social and cultural discourse rather than static displays. In this sense, they are imbued with dimensions that extend beyond their primary functions, and they come to constitute what Kirsten Scheid defined as "art acts."[15] These, which form agency through art, occur in specific sociopolitical contexts and enable audiences to confront, negotiate, and reshape their understandings of identity, history, and community. Together, *Liban 78*, *Beirut Tabaan*, and the home gallery will be considered as art acts because they constituted spaces of agency where resilience was articulated amidst the war. More specifically, *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan* served as social gatherings where a collective memory of the conflict was shaped. The home gallery provided a haven for artists, but, more importantly, constituted an informal space for encounters and dialogue across different generations and sects. The analysis also sheds light on how the vision of Dar el Fan evolved in response to the crisis. During the war, its role began to shift: whereas it had previously operated primarily as a cultural institution, it increasingly took on the function of a social bond. Although differently, these initiatives became a tool for the elaboration of the lived violence and the constitution of a social group necessary, as it has been argued by Peleikis in her work on a multi-confessional village in Lebanon, for the very survival of the nation.[16]

The research draws on archival materials from newspapers and magazines in addition to oral history. The significant loss of Dar el Fan's archives has impacted the available sources. The inherent fragility of oral history adds further challenges, as the passage of time has restricted the availability of key informants. To validate and cross-reference the oral accounts, reliance on contemporary sources such as press articles has been crucial. These have provided an alternative perspective, serving as supplementary evidence to corroborate or challenge the information obtained through oral histories.

"The Lebanon We Want for Tomorrow": *Proposal for a Cultural Policy* and *Liban 78*

The Lebanese Civil War took place from 1975 to 1990 and was one of the most devastating conflicts of the late twentieth century. In addition to the large number of dead, much of Lebanon's infrastructure was shattered and the war had a deep, long-term impact on the art and cultural scene, affecting both organizations and artists' production, with consequences that undermined the vibrant cultural scene of prewar times. Although it is difficult to gather exact information and statistics, research currently undertaken provides a panorama on how the conflict destabilized the established network of official and unofficial cultural places and meeting spaces and the

13. On the concept of agency related to art, see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) and Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

14. See Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996).

15. An important precedent for the analysis of the social component in relation to artistic practices in Lebanon is set by Kirsten L. Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects: Art and Sociality from Lebanon 1920–1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

16. Anja Peleikis, "The Making and Unmaking of Memories: The Case of a Multi-confessional Village in Lebanon," in *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 133–50.

social fabric of intellectuals, artists, and journalists that animated it.[17] In spite of this, exhibitions and cultural events did continue to happen throughout the war, though at a much lower pace, following the rhythm of the conflict.[18]

Dar el Fan became inaccessible in September 1975. After having continued its activities amidst the clashes and bomb explosions of the first months of the war, Janine Rubeiz recalls that "on 12 September 1975 we had to leave our headquarters in disaster [...]. During the summer of 1975, keeping optimistic, we had established almost completely the programme of the upcoming season. But we had to face the facts."[19] Soon the area became a battlefield for the militias, and the building was heavily damaged. In February 1976, *An-Nahar* published a short statement from Dar el Fan, announcing the destruction and the looting of the building with the following words: "We hope that we can rescue some intellectual documents to remain a witness to our cultural activities and a contribution to the building of a better future."[20]

The civil war and the physical destruction of Dar el Fan had a profound impact on Rubeiz, who retired from the cultural scene for two years. Disheartened by the lack of government support for the cultural sector, she reflected about cultural policies and practices, pondering on the growing challenges of the Lebanese artistic community. In this period of introspection, she participated in the discussion over the creation of a Ministry of Culture. Such debate in Lebanon was recurrent, involving various cultural and intellectual figures at a height in the early 1970s.[21] In March 1971, Dar el Fan had hosted a debate on the topic, titled "For a Ministry of Culture," chaired by poet and Lebanese nationalist Said Akl, with the participation of the French and Polish cultural attachés, the founder of the daily *L'Orient*, Georges Naccache, and modernist architect Wassek Adib, who stressed how a dedicated ministry could help artists and intellectuals feel more connected to their nation.

Rubeiz's reflections culminated in her deeply considered 1977 *Proposal for a Cultural Policy* (*Iqtirahat min ajl siyasa thaqafiya*) (fig. 1). Published in the local newspapers and addressing the then-president Elias Sarkis, the *Proposal* emphasized the role of culture and the urgent need for concrete government support, calling for the establishment of a Lebanese Ministry of Culture from which all Lebanese citizens could benefit.[22] The manifesto began by defining culture as "a con-

17. See for instance the work of Çiğdem İvren in this issue and the LAWHA database www.lebanonartworld.com. Both Zeina Maasri's *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) and Sarah Rogers's *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut: Drawing Alliances* (London: Routledge, 2021) offer extensive analysis of the wider cultural context of pre-war Lebanon. Maasri's *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009) traces the events of the civil war through the production of posters.

18. See for instance Viktor Hakim, "Reprise du rythme des expositions: Cinq peintres libanais à la Chase Manhattan Bank," *La Revue du Liban*, no. 918 (April 1977): 46 for an early account, and the other contributions in this special issue.

19. Janine Rubeiz, "Vers une reprise des activités de Dar el-Fan," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 28 March 1980, 4. See also Janine Rubeiz, "La parole est à Janine," in Kassab, *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 22–23.

20. "Dar al Fann wa-l-Adab tahattamat muhtawiyatiha wa-nuhibat" [Dar el Fan was destroyed and its content was looted], *An-Nahar*, 5 February 1976, 4.

21. On the debate about the establishment of a Ministry of Culture, see Nadia von Maltzahn, "Ministry of Culture or no Ministry of Culture? Lebanese Cultural Players and Authority," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38, no. 2 (2018): 330–43, https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-6982101.

22. For a brief introduction and English translation, see Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 415–19; Janine Rubeiz, "Iqtirahat min ajl siyasa thaqafiya li-khalq al-muwatin

scious and unconscious foundation for society."[23] Building on this premise the ministry's role should be to ensure egalitarian access to culture. This would foster cohesion within the country and lay the groundwork for building a strong Lebanese nation, because "it [was] only through culture that Lebanese citizenship [would] be realized on a profound level."[24] The publication of the *Proposal* after two years of civil war was significant not only as a means to secure rights for artists but, more importantly, to empower them as citizens with an active role in society, especially in promoting culture as a unifying tool in a time of crisis.

The *Proposal* was released a few weeks before the opening of the large-scale exhibition *Liban 78*, which seemed to reinforce the central premise of the *Proposal* by positioning culture as a site for reflecting on the present, transcending societal divisions, and imagining a more hopeful collective future. *Liban 78* functioned as an art act because it was not merely a display of artistic works, but a performative and civic gesture in itself. Its theme, "the Lebanon we want and hope for tomorrow"[25] and the visuality of the artworks proposed an elaboration of the lived violence and a narrative of the war and its aftermath.

Held at the Glass Hall of the Ministry of Tourism in November 1977, *Liban 78* came at a time when many believed the civil war was drawing to a close. It was preceded by an open call issued through various local newspapers, inviting visual artists to participate. A prize of 1,500 Lebanese lira was also established and awarded to the best artwork, sponsored by the National Council for Tourism Development and in line with Dar el Fan's mission of offering concrete support to artists. Renowned artist Aref El Rayess (1928–2005), then-president of the Lebanese Artists Association of Painters and Sculptors, designed the poster for the exhibition (fig. 2). A lifelong friend of Rubeiz and a regular exhibitor at Dar el Fan, El Rayess's involvement was particularly significant given the exhibition's content and his influential role in the Lebanese art scene as a pioneering modernist artist. Rayess was also known for his politically charged works referring to anti-imperialist stances, and sympathetic to the Third World Movement and the Palestinian Cause.[26]

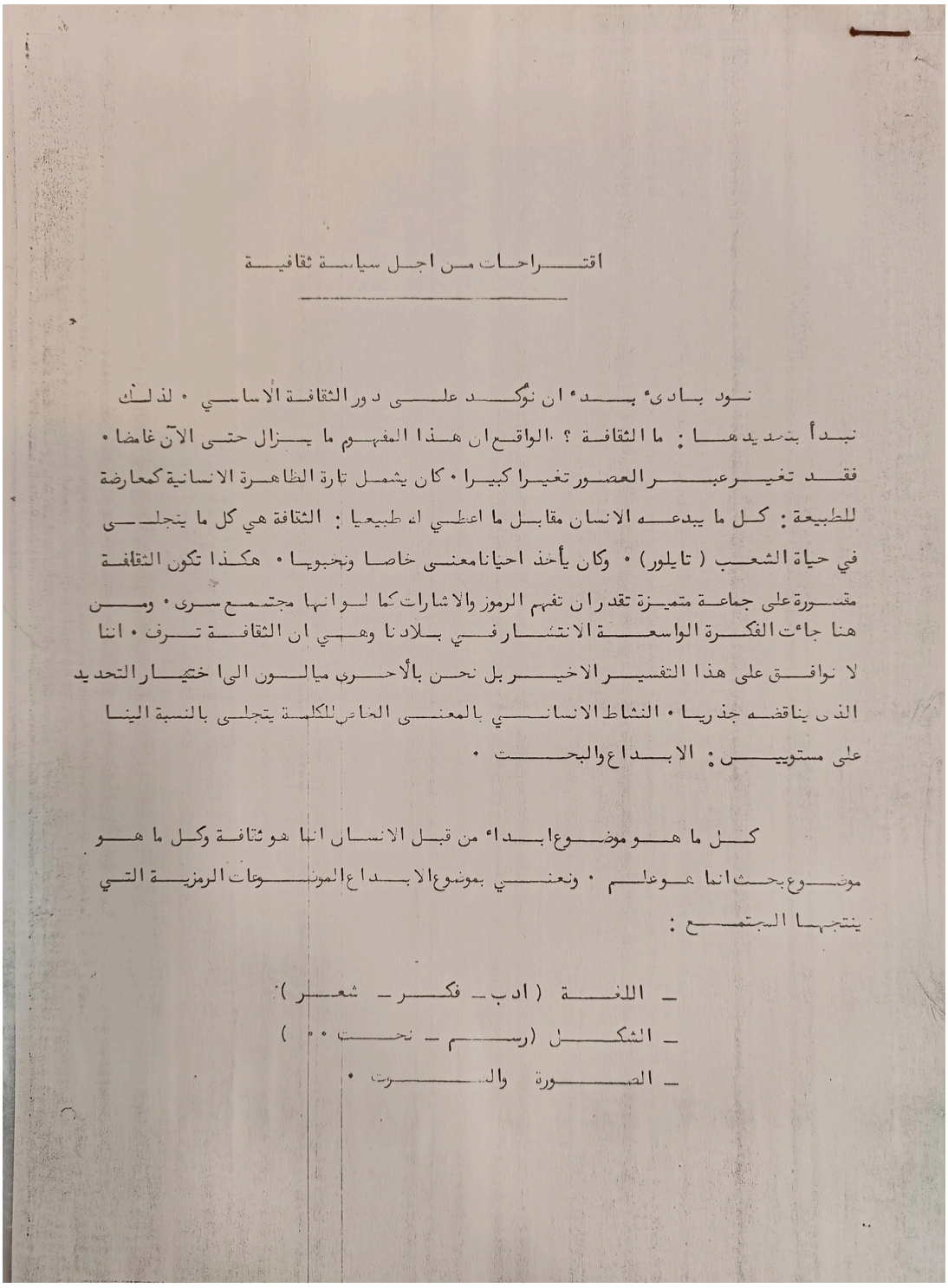
al-lubnani al-jadid" [Proposal for a cultural policy for the creation of the new Lebanese citizen], *Al-Ahrar*, 21 September 1977, accessed 6 August 2025, https://galeriejaninerubeiz.com/storage/posts/December2018/pWfoShyXUw6mopJ4u4E2.pdf.

23. Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 415.

24. Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 418.

25. Rubeiz, *Vers une reprise*, 1980.

26. In 1968, Aref El Rayess contributed the poster *The Palestinian*, also known as *Che Guevara* or *The Resurrection of Che Guevara* in a collective exhibition organized by Dar el Fan and the Friends of Jerusalem in support of the Palestinian villages in the West Bank; in June 1972, during an event commemorating the tenth anniversary of the end of the Algerian War of Independence at Dar el Fan, he donated his painting *Greetings to the Martyrs of the Algerian Revolution* to the Algerian ambassador Mohamed Yazid. See Flavia Elena Malusardi, "Committed Cultural Politics in Global 1960s Beirut: National Identity Making at Dar el Fan," *Biens Symboliques/Symbolic Goods* 15 (2024): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.4000/13kxy. For an analysis of Aref El Rayess's commitment, see Natasha Gasparian, *Commitment in the Artistic Practice of Aref el Rayess: The Changing of Horses* (London: Anthem, 2020).



اقتـــراحـات مـن اجـل سيـاسـة ثقافيـة

نـود بـادئ بـدء ان نؤكـد علـى دور الثقافـة الأساسـي . لذلـك نبدأ بتحديدهـا : ما الثقافـة ؟ .الواقـع ان هـذا المفهـوم ما يـزال حتـى الآن غامضا . فقـد تغيـر عبـر العصور تغيـرا كبيـرا . كان يشمـل تارة الظاهـرة الانسانية كمعارضة للطبيعة : كـل ما يبدعـه الانسان مقابـل ما اعطـي له طبيعيا : الثقافة هي كل ما يتجلـى في حياة الشعـب (تايلور) . وكان يأخذ احيانا معنـى خاصـا ونخبويـا . هكـذا تكون الثقافـة مقصورة على جماعـة متميـزة تقدر ان تفهم الرموز والاشارات كما لـو انها مجتمـع سـرى . ومـن هنا جاءت الفكـرة الواسعـة الانتشـار في بـلادنا وهـي ان الثقافـة تـرف . اننا لا نوافـق على هذا التفسيـر الاخيـر بل نحـن بالأحـرى ميالـون الى اختيـار التحديد الذى يناقضـه جذريـا . النشاط الانسانـي بالمعنـى الخاص للكلمة يتجلى بالنسبة الينـا على مستوييـن : الابـداع والبحـث .

كـل ما هـو موضـوع ابـداء من قبـل الانسان انما هو ثقافـة وكـل ما هـو موضـوع بحـث انما هـو علـم . ونعنـي بموضوع الابـداع الموضـوعات الرمزيـة التـي ينتجهـا المجتمـع :

- اللغـة (ادب - فكـر - شعـر)
- الشكـل (رسـم - نحـت ..)
- الصـورة والصـوت .

Figure 1: Janine Rubeiz, *Proposal for a Cultural Policy*, 1977, 1. © Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut (Lebanon). Photographed by the author.

Figure 2: El Rayess, Aref. Exhibition poster for the exhibition *Liban 78*. 1977. Galerie Janine Rubeiz. Courtesy of Galerie Janine Rubeiz © Aref el Rayess Foundation, Aley (Lebanon). Photographed by the author.

The exhibition grouped around one hundred Lebanese artists and showcased roughly one hundred and fifty artworks encompassing different media such as sculpture, engraving, murals, photography, and tapestry.[27] The participants ranged from established figures like Aref El Rayess, Paul Guiragossian, Huguette Caland, Chafic Abboud, Yvette Achkar, the Basbous brothers, and Saloua Raouda Choucair, to emerging talents such as Samir Abi Rashed, Hassan Jouni, and Nadia Baydoun; many others were simply amateurs. This mix of seasoned artists and new voices highlighted Dar el Fan's mission to nurture diverse artistic expressions and support young creatives alongside better-known ones. The exhibition was divided into a main section serving as a focal point, and sub-sections celebrating the artistic contributions of specific regions. A special "Parisian section" featured Lebanese artists based in Paris, for instance, offering a glimpse into their diverse perspectives and experiences. These included Assadour, Juliana Seraphim, Solange Tarazi, Huguette Caland, Moazaz Rawdah, and Nadia Saikali, the last of these artists contributing a mural sent from the French capital.[28] The reviews mention that other sections, focused on artists from the south and from Tripoli, were represented as well, without however, providing further details.

Although no catalogue was produced, the available documentation of press clippings with the images of the artworks shows that most of the pieces were influenced by what was commonly referred to as "the events"[29] between 1975 and 1977. Noteworthy works included Samir Abi Rashed's *Salvation* and *The Phoenix*, Achkar's *The Reconstruction*, and Moussa Tiba's *The Exodus*.[30] The titles of these artworks provide an indication of the thematic focus as well as their visual content. Together, they not only reflected the urgency of the moment but also functioned as visual agents of memory and future aspiration. In this sense, *Liban 78* held significant importance in the context of 1977 Lebanon, in light of the perception of the war that devastated the country. Images both *of* the conflict and *in* the conflict bear what Bredekamp defines as a "Medusa-like power" on the spectator.[31] Far from being passive, they create experiences and actions in relation to perception and they shape the reality around them. Within this framework, they acquire an active, performative nature in shaping how societies remember, process, and rebuild during and after conflict. I argue that both the exhibition itself, as an act of coming together, and many of the artworks on display, with their visual content and titles, acted as a galvanizing event among the audience to foster unity and an impetus towards "the future."

This emerges in particular from the reviews of the exhibition, where a discernible will to move on from the events of the 1975–77 war is predominant, privileging present concerns and future possibilities over retrospective analyses of its causes. Widely attended by the public, the exhibition

27. These figures need to be treated cautiously. The exact number of artists is unknown, some sources report 98, some 99 and another 103. According to the newspaper article "Intifaḍa fanniyya wataniyya min taht al-ma'sat!" [A national artistic uprising from under the tragedy!], *Al Mustaqbal*, 12 November 1977), the artworks numbered 192, with 168 paintings, 7 murals, and 17 sculptures. *L'Orient-Le Jour* (Irène Mosalli, "Plus qu'un slogan pictural, élan national," 4 November 1977) records 147 artworks selected among the three hundred submitted.

28. Habib Shawq, "Ru'a 99 rassaman wa-nahhatan 'Lubnan 78' takhluq fi al-nafs jaw'an al-ṭuma'ninah wa-l-raha" [Visions of 99 painters and sculpture of 'Lebanon 78' create an atmosphere of tranquillity and comfort in the soul], *Al Bayrak*, 7 November 1977.

29. Such terminology is the most common to address the clashes and bombings during the civil war, which were rarely described using the word "war."

30. "Ru'a 99 rassaman."

31. Bredekamp, *Image Acts*.

received extensive media coverage, with almost all the national newspapers featuring a review of it among their pages. It was described as a celebration of the artistic community that was still active in Lebanon after two years of war, and that was longing for peace and a reprise of cultural activities. One newspaper described the fighting of the past two years as "an hour of childish anger that had passed,"[32] underscoring a naive understanding of the conflict and the urgent desire to move beyond the turmoil. An article titled "A National Artistic Uprising from Under the Tragedy," a sentence that, while portraying Lebanon as a fragmented nation, underlined a creative uplift that would bridge divides and embody unity.[33] Again, the pages of *Al Shorouq* praised *Liban 78* as an exceptional artistic display.[34]

With a hundred and fifty artworks on display, the event seems to have prioritized the inclusion of the widest possible range of artists and works over strict curatorial selection. One of the most common criticisms was that the choice of the artworks did not adhere to conventional aesthetic standards. Some critics argued that works were included regardless of their artistic quality, stressing their immature and utopian approach. Abi Saleh in *Le Réveil*[35] claimed that the lack of curatorial discernment weakened the impact of the exhibition, which was proposed by an institution that was supposed to guide the Lebanese public in both politics *and* art. He described it as "a medley of the best and the worst" stressing the faults of a jury that opted to include everything resulting in a *kermesse* which shifted the focus, the potential, and the quality of some of the artworks.[36] The critic writes: "A group exhibition [...] is not prepared like a charity ball. It is not enough to promote national unity for the exhibition to be a success."[37] In his opinion, the exhibition's themes mainly seemed to revolve around clichéd slogans and motives in relation to "the nation" or national unity, without delving into a proper evaluation and selection of the artworks, thus feeding an "artistic confusion"[38] unworthy to represent the Lebanese scene.

While *Le Réveil* might have been sceptical of artists and artistic production falling outside the official canon, this review reinforces the social role of an exhibition whose significance was, regardless of its declared curatorial statement, to constitute a space of resilience where violence was processed, and possibly surpassed, through visual culture. Indeed, many acknowledged the exhibition's unifying force in a fragmented country and an antidote to war, to revive a sense of solidarity. Rubeiz herself asserted that "we do not believe that the role of culture at this stage can go in any other direction."[39] *Liban 78* functioned as a bridge for communities to come together, interact, and build social connections while grappling with complex themes such as conflict, nationhood, and identity. In this sense, the exhibition enacted a form of collective agency where civil society

32. "Fi ma'rid 1978 99 fannanan lubnaniyyan ya'ridun namadhij wa-alwan" [In the exhibition 1978, 99 Lebanese artists displayed models and colours], *Al Shorouq*, 5 November 1977.

33. "Intifaḍa fanniyya."

34. "Fi ma'rid 1978."

35. The newspaper was started by Amine Gemayel in 1977 and often featured translated articles from the official Phalange newspaper, *al-ʿAmal*.

36. "L'exposition Liban 78. Une sarabande du meilleur et du pire," *Le Réveil*, November 1977.

37. "L'exposition Liban 78." "Une exposition collective [...] ne se prépare pas comme un bal de charité. Il ne suffit pas de bêler l'unité nationale pour que l'exposition réussisse." Translation by the author.

38. "L'exposition Liban 78."

39. "'Ma'rid 78' ittijah thaqafi wahid... mutawahhid" ['Exhibition 78': One cultural trend... united!], *Al Shorouq*, 8 November 1977.

was not only represented but actively constituted through a cultural initiative, transforming the act of cultural gathering into a statement of resilience and shared belonging. Both the exhibition and the art on display offered a paradigm of engagement with the concept of "being Lebanese" and its negotiation during a civil war. It foregrounded belonging as a cultural and performative practice—one in which artists, curators, and audiences asserted their "Lebaneseness," a form of citizenhood grounded in a shared presence, participation, and hope for the future. In such a way, the central theme and the artworks played a crucial role in shaping a memory of the lived war, nurturing a national bond rooted in a cultural production that aimed at offering a *visible* alternative "tomorrow."

Redefining Creative Spaces: How Janine Rubeiz's Home Gallery Reimagined Dar el Fan

To overcome the loss of space and the closure of many galleries in the capital, some started hosting exhibitions in private apartments.[40] Janine Rubeiz began using her flat in the Scotch Club Building in Raouche as exhibition space and a meeting place, and became one of the most active cultural hosts during the war. This section will explore the dual nature of Rubeiz's home gallery. On one level, it functioned as a resilient space that sustained cultural production amid the devastation of war. On a deeper level, however, it became a haven for encounter and dialogue, a site where new forms of community were forged. In this sense, it did not simply replace Dar el Fan, but rather extended its ethos into a more intimate network of interactions. Even in the absence of the formal institution, the spirit of Dar el Fan persisted, carried forward through relationships, memories, and artistic practices that transcended its physical space. This persistence of cultural life, operating through informal gatherings, emotional attachment, and collective memory, suggests that absence or *acting the absence* itself became a powerful mode of presence, shaping how the institution's legacy was lived and reimagined.

Rubeiz opened up her house for the first time in December 1980 to exhibit the works of artist Michel Akl (1922–97). After having studied with César Gemayel and Omar Onsi, Akl exhibited his work in Beirut throughout the 1960s, but his house was destroyed during the war and most of his artworks were dispersed. Rubeiz was committed to provide him with economic support in a city where opportunities for artists had become scarce. The exhibition featured forty-six pieces,[41] including canvases, paintings on Masonite, and China ink drawings. Roughly half of the works were sold, indicating that both the public and the market were still active during the conflict. In October 1987, she displayed the work of Halim Jurdak (1927–2020), who had previously exhibited at Dar el Fan in 1970. A graduate of the Academie Libanaise des Beaux Arts (ALBA), Jurdak also lived and studied in Paris, travelled extensively in Europe, and was well known within the cultural community in Lebanon, where he was a member of the Lebanese Association of Painters and Sculptors. His work underwent different phases and subjects, spanning figurative and non-figurative abstraction, cubism, and nature painting.[42] The 1987 exhibition, titled *L'éternel féminin* (fig. 3), presented a collection of fifty-three abstract nude paintings that the artist had worked

40. Poet Samia Toutounji, for instance, a member of the Executive Board of Dar el Fan and president in 1972, used to organize exhibitions at her place, before opening Gallery Platform in the mid-1980s (cut short by her untimely death in an attack against the Spanish Ambassador in 1989).

41. According to the price list preserved in the archives.

42. On the work of Halim Jurdak, see Halim Jurdak, *Halim Jurdak: A Self Portrait* (Beirut: Fine Art Consulting & Publishing, 2004).

on for three years. The artworks focused on the female body, portrayed in the style of abstract expressionism. Colour and its application were central to the pieces, featuring minimal details and blurred lines that evoked a sense of suspension in both space and time. Rather than emphasizing their exterior appearance, the bodies seemed to invite a deeper, introspective analysis.[43] The opening of the exhibition, which received good coverage from the press despite its brief duration, saw a positive turnout and the presence of established artists Hussein Madi and Amine El Bacha, alongside younger artists such as Mohammad Rawas and Loulou Bassiri.[44] This way, Rubeiz's apartment served as a meeting place not only for the exchange of artistic ideas but also to foster encounters and dialogues among artists of different generations and across sectarian backgrounds.

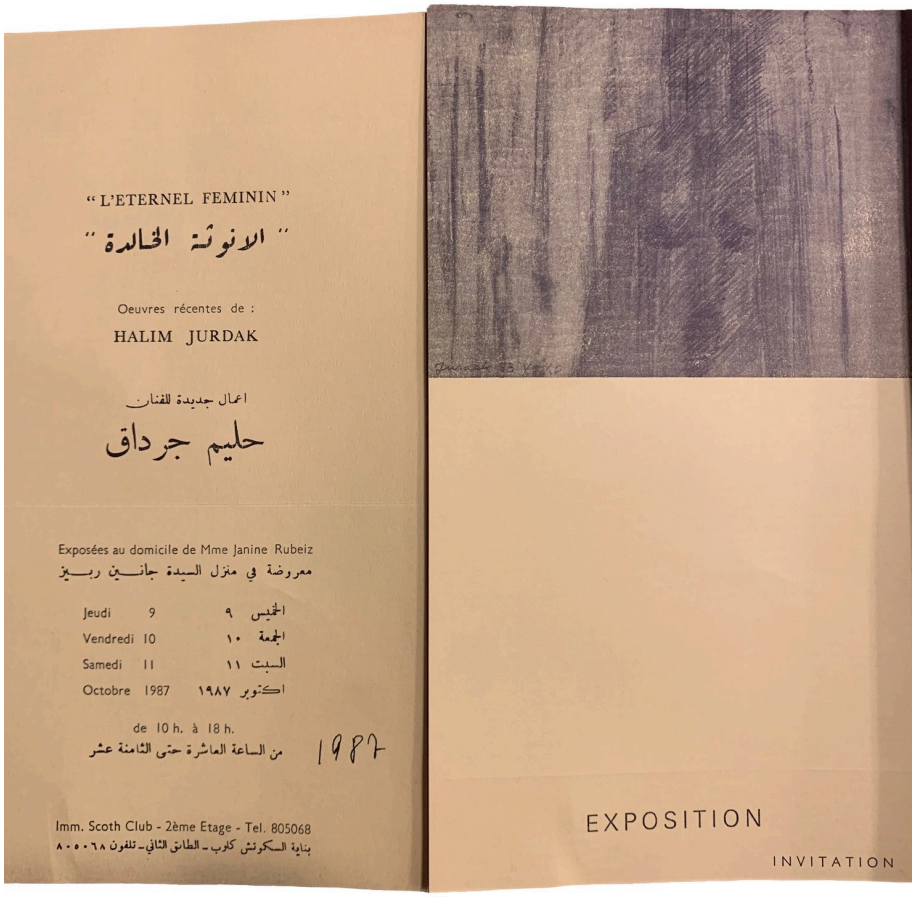


Figure 3: Brochure for the exhibition of Halim Jurdak, *L'éternel feminin*, at the apartment of Janine Rubeiz, 1987. Galerie Janine Rubeiz. Courtesy of Galerie Janine Rubeiz © artist's family. Photographed by Ashraf Osman.

43. See Faysal Sultan, "Halim Jurdak fi ma'ridihi 'Al-unutha al-khalida': Ḥurriyyat al-alwan wa-ḥurriyyat istikhdam al-tiqniyyat al-mukhtalifa" [Halim Jurdak in his exhibition 'L'éternel féminin': Freedom of colours and freedom to use different techniques], *As-Safir*, 11 October 1987. The exhibition was covered by *An-Nahar*, *Al-Liwa'*, *L'Orient-Le Jour*, and others.

44. "Sous les auspices de Dar el Fan, Halim Jurdak, nouvelle manière," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 10 October 1987.

Exhibitions for artists who had remained in Lebanon were not limited to Rubeiz's apartment. In December 1985, she organized a solo show for emerging talent Mahmoud Zibawi (b. 1962) at the Carlton Hotel. A second exhibition of his work followed in 1987 at ALBA. At the Carlton, he presented around thirty mixed media paintings and about twenty charcoal and China ink drawings. In line with his previous production, Zibawi focused on the human face, paying particular attention to its expressions. While the subjects in his earlier work were characterized by a sense of anguish, the ones exhibited at the Carlton seemed to be more concerned with meditation and introspection. The style drew inspiration from abstraction as well as from what was defined by both the artist and some critics as "Byzantine" aesthetics, for the centrality of the human figure and the use of gold in the background, in contrast with the darker tones employed for the previous portraits. Rubeiz described the exhibition as able to "illustrate very well the Islamic and Christian heritage of Lebanon."[45] This reading is particularly interesting amidst a backdrop of a war fought along a strong sectarian axis, and it attempts, once again, to use culture as a tool to level differences and foster connection across different groups. In this case, the "heritage of Lebanon," rather than being simply constitutive of its past and present, is instrumental to building its very own future after ten years of war.

These exhibitions, organized under the banner of Dar el Fan, maybe in an attempt to continue the space's mission and role, had different characteristics than *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*, which will be discussed below. As the cultural centre aimed at forming and orientating the audience's taste in the arts, these were more attentive in their curatorial selection and similar to those organized in art galleries, targeting an audience of art *connoisseurs* rather than the general public. Likewise, the display of art and the informal encounters at Rubeiz's home marked a shift in how art was exhibited and received. It provided a venue for artists to display their works, but it also created a more intimate environment for cultural exchange and discussion. Unlike the earlier period of Dar el Fan, which featured a widely attended programme of public lectures and debates, by the early 1980s these forms of intellectual engagement appear to have given way to more spontaneous interactions. While existing documentation focuses primarily on the exhibitions and there is little concrete evidence of discussions or exchanges about art during this period, it is probable that, given Rubeiz's central role in the art scene, such conversations did persist, albeit they tended to be more exclusive, and accessible to individuals already within Rubeiz's social circle, who were more likely than strangers to come to her private home. As such, it is uncertain to what extent these exhibitions reached the public who might have used to visit Dar el Fan for more widely consumed cultural products. This contrasts both with *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*, where the audiences were broader and the impact more visible, as well as with the initiatives concerning the political status of the country that Rubeiz organized throughout the war.

Nonetheless, by gathering in this precarious setting, I would argue that participants defied the surrounding chaos, searching for ways to assert their humanity amid the conflict. The absence of Dar el Fan, whether as a physical space or a consistent cultural presence, paradoxically *acted* a sense of belonging among its community. This absence created a longing and an emotional attachment, as individuals came to associate the institution not merely with its tangible offerings but with the ideals, memories, and culture it represented. The ethos of Dar el Fan was carried forward in the practices, interactions, and art acts of those who had been influenced by it. This

45. Gladys Chami, "La foi artistique de Mahmoud Zibawi," *Le Réveil*, 17 December 1985.

distributed presence ensured that the institution's legacy transcended its physical boundaries, embedding itself in the cultural fabric of the society it served. In this way, absence became a form of presence, reinforcing a collective attachment to Dar el Fan and solidifying its place as a cornerstone of cultural and civic formation.

These dynamics shifted when Janine Rubeiz decided to formalize the space by officially opening a gallery under her name on 10 March 1988, which she ran until her death in 1992.[46] The move was likely influenced by both artistic and economic considerations, as a solid business could sustain itself better than a cultural association in the precarious wartime panorama. The gallery was inaugurated with a solo exhibition of watercolours and oil paintings by prominent painter and sculptor Amine El Bacha (1932–2019). Born into a family of open-minded creatives, El Bacha grew up surrounded by artists, musicians, and thinkers who used to gather in his family's house. His works often drew from his surroundings in Lebanon, featuring landscapes, the buzzing life of the capital, urban scenes, and human figures, rendered in a style that blends impressionism with modernist abstraction and a vibrant use of colours that defy easy categorizations. El Bacha studied art in Paris at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in the late 1950s. In the French capital, which hosted a great number of artists and intellectuals at the time, he shared his days with fellow Lebanese artists Chafic Abboud and Farid Aouad. El Bacha's collaboration with Rubeiz dates back to the 1960s, when he contributed to the establishment of Dar el Fan and was among the first artists to exhibit there in 1968. Both El Bacha and Rubeiz remained in Beirut throughout the war, maintaining and deepening their professional and personal relationship.

The watercolour featured on the exhibition's invitation card depicts a serene picnic in nature, where the figures and natural elements are blurred and undefined, typical of El Bacha's dream-like, tranquil style (fig. 4). While the use of peaceful imagery may appear incongruous with the surrounding atrocities, it can be understood as an expression of longing for normalcy in the face of prolonged instability. This longing was not merely a nostalgic yearning for a lost past, but an act of imaginative resistance: an attempt to assert continuity and emotional survival in a fractured world. In depicting a serene landscape, the artist evoked an alternative reality anchored in "normal" everyday life. In this sense, the words of his daughter Mahita el Bacha on the artist are telling, as she writes that "some could not understand how an artist could be embedded in a war zone and appear to not quite be there at all. But this is exactly what El Bacha is about: creating his own universe through his work [...] generally keeping darkness, sorrow and depression out of the picture."[47] In this way, the aesthetic turn to peace was not escapist but aspirational, offering a symbolic space where the possibility of healing and persistence could be envisioned.

46. The legacy of Janine Rubeiz is continued by her daughter Nadine Begdache, who has been running the gallery since 1993.

47. Amine El Bacha, *Beyrouth Amine El Bacha: Aquarelles et dessins, 1953–2009* (Beirut: Dar Nelson, 2009), 29.

Figure 4: Invitation card for the exhibition of Amine el Bacha at Galerie Janine Rubeiz, 1988. Archive of the Sursock Museum, Beirut. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut © Amine El Bacha Foundation. Photographed by the author.

Inaugurating the gallery with a solo exhibition by an artist whose work consistently celebrates Beirut's vibrant life and the landscapes of Lebanon stands in stark contrast to the surrounding devastation of the civil war. Although such a gesture could be dismissed as the escapism of a privileged elite, detached from the daily suffering, it can more compellingly be read as a conscious aesthetic choice by both El Bacha and Rubeiz. This way the exhibition offered an alternative visual and emotional vocabulary that refused to reduce the city to rubble and conflict. On the pages of *Al Tadamun*, Taher Ghaddar describes the exhibition as a testament to Lebanon's resilience, emphasizing that despite the challenges of conflict, the nation will ultimately reclaim its freedom and cultural vitality.[48] El Bacha's works illuminate another aspect of the Lebanese Civil War: the persistence of everyday life amidst the chaos. Despite the constant threat of violence, life, against all odds, did continue. People still sought moments of normalcy, whether by going on picnics, gathering with loved ones, or simply trying to preserve a sense of peace and routine in the midst of violence. As Jean Said Makdisi poignantly recalls in *Beirut Fragments*, everyday life persisted not in denial of war but in defiance of it, with families continuing to mark birthdays, cook elaborate meals, and create small rituals of continuity amid the chaos.[49] People cultivated life amid ruins not just as survival, but as an insistence on hope and futurity in spaces marked by recurring destruction. And they developed practices of "living around violence"[50] that reflected both resilience and an effort to preserve ordinary rhythms. These accounts foreground how practices of care, leisure, and sociality coexisted with (and at times resisted) the logics of war. The portrayal of a picnic in a pastel-coloured landscape, far removed from the devastation of Beirut's wrecked buildings, underscores this enduring human spirit, a quiet act of resistance against the war's overwhelming darkness.

Celebrating Resilience as a Social Bond: *Beirut Tabaan* [Beirut, of Course]

At a chronological antipode in relation to *Liban 78*, large-scale exhibition *Beirut Tabaan* [Beirut, of course] was curated by Rubeiz and comic artist George Khoury at Dar el-Nadwa, a cultural space in the heart of the capital (fig. 5). The exhibition was, once again, a celebration of the creativity present in Beirut, despite its precarious conditions for more than a decade, and a homage to the enduring capital. It opened on 28 October 1989, almost in concomitance with the Taif Agreement, which brought an end to the civil war.[51]

48. T. Ghaddar, "Mu 'azufat al-alwan" [Melody of colours], *Al-Tadamun*, 11 March 1988.

49. Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (New York: Persea Books, 1991).

50. Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). See also Munira Khayyat's *A Landscape of War: Ecologies of Resistance and Survival in South Lebanon* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).

51. The Taif Agreement was a peace accord signed in 1989 in Taif, Saudi Arabia. It was negotiated under the auspices of Riyadh and the Arab League, with the participation of Iran, the support of the US, and under the direct supervision of Syria. This agreement restructured Lebanon's political framework and sought to restore stability and balance between Lebanon's various religious and political groups. See Michael C. Hudson, "Lebanon after Ta'if: Another Reform Opportunity Lost?," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 27–40.

Figure 5: Khoury, Jad. Invitation card for the exhibition *Beirut Tabaan*. 1989. Courtesy of the Orient-Institut Beirut, collection Joseph Tarrab © Jad Khoury. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn.

George Khoury (b. 1956), known by his pen name Jad,[52] who described Rubeiz as "a diva of the art world,"[53] used to attend the exhibitions she hosted at her home. He recalls an incident during one such visit when a violent shelling occurred, compelling them to take refuge indoors until the danger subsided. He attributes the genesis of the idea for *Beirut Tabaan* to this moment, though this account, like many memories shaped by the affective intensities of war, remains difficult to corroborate. The aim of the exhibition was "to honour Beirut and the survival of its spirit, the continuation of its role and the confirmation of its creativity" as we read in the press release.[54] Rubeiz and Khoury assembled a diverse group of roughly forty artists, spanning different ages, levels of establishment, aesthetics, and techniques. Belonging to two different generations, their distinct perspectives emerged in their curatorial choices.[55] Rubeiz selected rather traditional works of art, such as paintings and sculptures, reflecting her long-standing connections and deep roots in Beirut's established art scene. Khoury introduced contemporary forms such as comics, music performances, and installations created from everyday objects and upcycled materials, presenting his engagement with newer artistic practices, while attempting to reframe the parameters of what was commonly understood as art. This blend of curatorial styles underscores the interplay of the traditional and the emerging, highlighting the importance of cross-generational collaboration in nurturing a dynamic and ever-evolving artistic community.

Among the selected artists were prominent figures in the Lebanese art world who displayed their works alongside then emerging talents such as Lulu Bassiri, Mohammad Rawas, and Greta Naufal. Contributions by established artists included a sculpture by Saloua Raouda Choucair, an abstract painting by Yvette Achkar, and a drawing by Aref El Rayess. While these works may not have been particularly ground-breaking in terms of artistic innovation, they bear witness to the artists' lifelong friendships with Janine Rubeiz and are important testaments to the cultural and social network she had been able to create and maintain, providing a supportive environment for artists during Lebanon's most tumultuous times.

The themes explored in the artworks, collected in a complete catalogue, varied greatly.[56] The display included paintings, videos, music performances, installations, and comics, as well as pieces of writings and video interviews displayed alongside the artworks. This underscored the multifaceted nature of the artists' responses to the war, blending visual and literary art forms to convey their experiences and reflections. The imagery of the Lebanese Civil War influenced the work of some artists, who depicted the devastated city through photos and paintings. An excerpt of Jad's comics featured a father carrying his child amidst ruins, while Ali Seif el Din's photograph captured damaged buildings through the shattered remains of a window. Mohamed Rawas's piece *Beirut Revisited* (1989) was rich in symbolic references, hinting towards a shared past, the international community, and the lived violence seen through the eyes of a child.

52. Khoury felt inspired by international comic artists and focused on establishing comics as an art form and reaching an adult audience—a pioneering mission for the Arab world. During the conflict, he worked as a political journalist on the foreign desk of the Lebanese outlet *An-Nahar*.

53. Interview with the author, May 2024, Beirut.

54. Press release of Dar al Nadwa and press release of Dar el Fan, both from the archives of Dar el Fan, preserved at Galerie Janine Rubeiz.

55. Faysal Sultan, "Hawla ma'rid 'Beirut Tab'an': Fikra naqisa li-turuhat ijabiyya" [On the exhibition 'Beirut Tabaan': An incomplete idea for a positive thesis], *As-Safir*, 31 October 1989.

56. I could access the catalogue of the exhibition through the private archive of artist Greta Naufal. One copy is now preserved in the archives of the Orient-Institut Beirut.

Other contributions were less direct in their aesthetic approach. Some artworks completely rejected the conflict's aesthetic, striving to revive some normality. Among these were Lulu Bassiri's *Oud* and Georgi Chaanine's *Café*. Other artworks aligned with the artists' trajectory, such as Choucair's abstract sculpture and Achkar's painting. Poems and texts in both Arabic and French, such as a passage from Elias Khoury's novel *The Journey of Little Gandhi*,[57] interspersed the visual artworks, adding literary depth to the exhibition.[58] Overall, a sense of nostalgia pervades the artworks, as they seem suspended in time, waiting for the vitality of Beirut to return. The city, its people, and its artists are the subject of *Beirut: Shahadat al-fannanin* [Beirut: Testimony of artists], a video shot by writer and poet Antoine Boulad while roaming the streets of the capital in October 1989.[59] The video shows spaces and individuals grappling with the memories of the war, attempting to make sense of that turbulent period. The artists interviewed reflect on Beirut's past and its prospects, sharing personal narratives that consider how the city embodies resilience and stressing the role of art as a place to find solace. Janine Rubeiz, who is featured in the video, underscores how *Beirut Tabaan* is the symbol of a city "which does not want to die despite all that has been done to it."[60] In her article in *L'Orient-Le Jour*, journalist May Makarem aptly describes the exhibition as "a diary where confidence mixes with chaos."[61]

Although it was not the only group exhibition praising artistic endeavours during the war, *Beirut Tabaan* received impressive press coverage. Local newspapers in Arabic, French, and English, including major outlets such as *L'Orient-Le Jour*, *An-Nahar*, and *Monday Morning*, reported extensively on it. Various sources, including interviews and newspaper articles, highlighted the overwhelming response to the exhibition's opening, which drew such a large crowd that the organizers had to extend the opening hours to accommodate everyone.[62] Attendees and journalists alike noted the vibrant atmosphere, with many people eager to experience the exhibition first-hand. The turnout reflected the sentiments of a population that lived for years between uncertainty and waiting, forced to seek refuge in shelters yet demonstrating a yearning for normalization by continuing artistic and cultural production. Photos in the press clippings portray mainly the "rituality" of drinks and chats at the exhibition's opening, which in the context of conflict took on an added layer of social significance, resonating as both a celebration and an act of unity. This sentiment

57. Published in Arabic in 1989, the story is set against the backdrop of the Lebanese Civil War and follows the life of a poor shoeshine boy nicknamed Little Gandhi. Through his experiences, the novel explores themes of war, displacement, and survival, reflecting on the human condition in times of conflict.

58. The connection between art and literature was not new in the Lebanese and larger regional scene but generally found space in cultural products for specific audiences of *connoisseurs*. Instead, exhibiting artworks and literary texts alongside each other in an exhibition space allowed access to a wider audience, and created a place for exchange and social relations between the actors that were part of such a cultural circle and community. Earlier initiatives included the modernist Arabic journals *Hiwar* and *Shi'r* or the series of precious books published by Dar an-Nahar. For a more thorough analysis of the intersections between art and literature in the long 1960s, see Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*.

59. The video was displayed during the exhibition.

60. The video was kindly shared with the author by Antoine Boulad.

61. May Makarem, "Pour 'Beyrouth évidemment': Samedi, à Dar el Nadwa… Rien que la mémoire affective," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 30 October 1989.

62. Note that the exhibition hall of Dar el Nadwa comprises a single room.

was enhanced by the concomitance with the Taif Agreement, which brought a sense of relief for the long-awaited, imminent end of the war. *An-Nahar* journalist Sami Ayad writes that among the reasons for the exhibition was "to honour the promised peace that was coming to us."[63]

Unlike *Liban 78*, where artworks, regardless of their quality, were prominently featured and celebrated as visual markers in the creation of a narrative of belonging, the narration of *Beirut Tabaan* shifted the focus from tangible objects to the intangible dynamics of participation and community. Media attention predominantly emphasized speeches and themes celebrating the city's spirit while a critical analysis of the artworks was lacking. Such absence in the press narratives surrounding *Beirut Tabaan* appears not as a void but as a deliberate statement, emphasizing the act of gathering as the core of the exhibition's impact. It highlighted the performative and relational aspects of the event, where the shaping of a civic belonging was rooted in shared experiences within a communal space. *Beirut Tabaan* succeeded in uniting artists and the broader public and distinguished itself as a social catalyst, fostering connection among people long separated by historical tensions that had fragmented the city (fig. 6).

Figure 6: Private screening of an ARD Cairo recording documenting the exhibition *Beirut Tabaan*, at the Orient-Institut Beirut, 2 June 2024. The still shows Elias Khoury on screen, next to visitors looking at the visual artworks displayed.

In spite of the positive response of the general audience, comments in the press conference and reviews of the exhibition were diverse. Makarem described it as "a slap in the face of the crisis," highlighting the "phoenix" aspect often associated with Beirut.[64] Faysal Sultan, with similar words,

63. Sami Ayad, "Lawhat wa-rusum wa-raqs wa-musiqa taqul fi-iḥtifal 'Beirut Tab'an'" [Paintings, drawings, dances and music speak in the celebration 'Beirut Tabaan'], *An-Nahar*, 29 September 1989.

64. Makarem, "Pour 'Beyrouth évidemment.'"

affirmed that Beirut was not dead because "it was still dreaming."[65] This notion of rebirth (often, as mentioned, captured in the enduring metaphor of Beirut as a phoenix rising from the ashes) speaks to a persistent cultural imaginary of the city as resilient, irrepressible, and perpetually self-renewing. While this metaphor evokes a sense of hope and continuity, it can also obscure the structural violence and cyclical nature of destruction by framing recovery as an almost mythic inevitability. Such narratives risk depoliticizing both suffering and survival, shifting attention away from responsibility, governance, and accountability. The phoenix metaphor, then, while emotionally resonant, may reinforce a kind of symbolic resilience that masks ongoing fragility, naturalizing disaster and making rupture appear as a constitutive, even necessary, feature of Beirut's identity. In this sense, the metaphor is not just poetic, but ideological: it allows for a celebration of endurance while sidestepping the political conditions that produce the need for it in the first place.

Journalist Vicken Cheterian, after attending the press conference, questioned the limits of an exhibition that aimed to be so celebratory. He pondered the role of artists and intellectuals in a wartorn country and whether it was problematic to try to "hide reality" behind the nostalgic and triumphalist tone that emerged from the speeches.[66] His critique points to a broader tension embedded in cultural production in times of crisis: the extent to which exhibitions like this one served as symbolic gestures of resilience rather than platforms for critical engagement or aesthetic innovation. Here again, as in the case of *Liban 78*, the quality of the selected artworks was not of primary importance; rather, the exhibition's purpose was to gather as many artists as possible and to foster a sense of reconnection. While this impulse toward collectivity was undeniably important in a fractured cultural landscape, it also meant that the artistic contributions were often subordinated to the event's commemorative and affective dimensions. The focus on celebratory narratives about Beirut, whether its cosmopolitan past, its mythic resilience, its phoenix-like rebirth, risked overshadowing deeper artistic inquiries into trauma, displacement, or the structural conditions that had shaped the postwar reality. In this light, Cheterian's intervention can be read as a challenge to the political utility of art when aesthetic considerations are instrumentalized in service of national or communal healing.

Despite the critiques about its artistic relevance, the collaborative efforts of Rubeiz and Khoury were instrumental in curating an exhibition whose actual goal was, once again, to forge a shared belonging and unity in a city amid conflict. *Beirut Tabaan* prioritized the social and symbolic dimensions of the act of assembly related to an artistic event, providing an opportunity to engage in the act of "being together," crucial for creating a collective memory during a historically significant moment.

Conclusion

This article has shown how Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's curatorial work during the Lebanese Civil War not only preserved artistic expression but fostered a distinctive form of sociality. More than exhibition venues, *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan* emerged as acts of collective memory and cul-

65. Sultan, "Hawla ma'rad 'Beirut Tab'an.'"

66. Vicken Cheterian, "Beirut… of Course?," *Monday Morning* 18, no. 887, 9–15 October 1989.

tural resistance, becoming moments when art functioned as a bridge between trauma and the possibility of communal regeneration. In the context of conflict, the exhibitions transformed from spaces of aesthetic contemplation into sites of civic and emotional engagement.

Drawing on Alpers's assertion that exhibitions produce "objects of visual interest,"[67] the essay has argued that the works presented in these shows were not evaluated solely for their aesthetic merit. Instead, they acquired meaning within the curatorial frame and the broader wartime condition. Both exhibitions allowed for a recalibration of artistic value, where emotional resonance, urgency, and social symbolism often took precedence over formal innovation or critical detachment. In *Liban 78*, the artworks became visual agents of remembrance and aspiration. In *Beirut Tabaan*, the very act of gathering took precedence, and the exhibition's impact resided less in the artworks themselves than in the communal performance of presence. Each exhibition thus fostered a form of cultural citizenship grounded not in institutions, but in the shared experience of survival, belonging, and hope. Rubeiz, as a curatorial figure, played a central role in this process. Her ability to convene artists, maintain networks, and harness the symbolic power of art in crisis made her a unifying presence in the fragmented cultural landscape of wartime Beirut.

These curatorial acts also served as mechanisms through which the memory of the war was processed, at times through images and narratives, and at others through their deliberate omission. The exhibitions contributed to a broader, often ambivalent, cultural response to the war marked by selective amnesia, mythic imaginaries of national unity, and the symbolic restoration of normalcy. Yet within this ambivalence, they enabled new forms of belonging. Through ritual, presence, and symbolic labour, they constituted the community necessary not only for cultural survival but for imagining postwar futurity.

Rubeiz's transformation of her home into a gallery and later the formal establishment of Galerie Janine Rubeiz offered an alternative model of cultural resilience. These more intimate initiatives provided economic and emotional support for artists and fostered intergenerational and intersectarian dialogue, even as they reflected a narrowing of access and a shift in audience. While they could not replicate the pluralistic ambition of Dar el Fan, they nevertheless sustained its spirit, reshaped through necessity.

Taken together, these initiatives reframed art not merely as a reflection of historical trauma but as a generative social agent in the construction of memory, identity, and solidarity. In a city marked by violence and erasure, Janine Rubeiz's curatorial strategies offered provisional spaces of continuity and collective healing and imagination. They underscore the potential of art to constitute a social bond and to develop narratives that are essential to the very endurance of a community shattered by years of violence.

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67. Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 25–32.

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Article

Against the Current

War Motifs and the Medium of Printmaking in 1980s Lebanon

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Abstract

In 1982, Jamil Molaeb exhibited woodcut prints in West Beirut, capturing life during the Lebanese Civil War. His series *Akhir al-zalam, awwal al-fajr* (The End of Darkness, the Beginning of Dawn) stood out for its portrayal of wartime experiences. Molaeb's work drew on regional artistic influences, particularly those of Palestinian artist Mustafa al-Hallaj, highlighting the interconnectedness of artists in the region affected by conflict. This exhibition stood out for its exploration of war themes through the medium of woodcut prints, a choice reflecting both artistic intent and the material realities of wartime Lebanon.

This paper examines the relationship between the visuality of black-and-white prints and the representation of war motifs in Lebanese art during the civil war. The prevalence of war-themed prints and posters shaped the visual culture of Lebanon, yet the genre faced limited commercial appeal, pushing artists and galleries back toward mainstream art. By analysing these dynamics, this paper reconsiders how Lebanese artists documented and engaged with the civil war through underrepresented artistic media.

Keywords

Printmaking, Lebanese Civil War, 1975–1990, Graphic Arts, Visual Culture

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Introduction

Art historical accounts often describe the civil war period in Lebanon (1975–1990) as an artistic standstill compared to the alleged Golden Age preceding it.[1] These accounts characterize artistic production of this period as being disconnected from regional aesthetic discourses and disengaged from the socio-political realities of the conflict. Contrary to this narrative, however, a notable amount of art was produced and shown throughout the war, evident in numerous exhibitions in a variety of media and themes.[2] Within the war-torn landscape, printmaking emerged as a powerful tool of expression, documenting the realities of conflict while engaging with a broader regional aesthetic discourse.

Representing one of the most compelling examples of this phenomenon were the woodcut prints by Jamil Molaeb (b. 1948). On 4 February 1982, within the walls of the Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste in West Beirut, viewers were drawn to a collection of black-and-white woodcut prints that gave an impression of the human experience during the war.[3] These evocative works from the series *Akhir al-zalam, awwal al-fajr* (The End of Darkness, the Beginning of Dawn) constituted the third in a trilogy of albums created since the outbreak of the civil war.[4] While Molaeb's exhibition received wide attention, the same did not apply to all artists engaging with war motifs. Beirut-based Palestinian artist Mustafa al-Hallaj (1938–2002), despite his pioneering contributions to Arab contemporary graphic arts, was relatively absent in Lebanon's mainstream artistic discourse of the time. Art critic Hassan Badaoui, for instance, considered Molaeb as integral to what he called "the Lebanese artistic movement," whereas he did not consider al-Hallaj to be a part of it.[5] His marginalization reflected not only the sectarian tensions of the civil war, but also the exclusionary nature of the Christian-dominated art market, which largely distanced itself from politically charged narratives.

Visual analysis reveals stylistic and thematic elements in Molaeb's works reminiscent of al-Hallaj. Both artists drew from overlapping struggles, including resistance to oppression and a shared cultural heritage, forging connections across geographic and ideological boundaries. Molaeb's engagement with printmaking paralleled that of al-Hallaj, whose work addressed themes of dis-

1. For an overview of the history of Lebanese art in the twentieth century, see e.g. The British Lebanese Association, ed., *Lebanon: The Artist's View. 200 Years of Lebanese Painting*, exhibition catalogue, London, Barbican Centre, 18 April–2 June 1989 (London: Hillingdon Press, 1989); César Nammour, *Naḥt fi-Lubnan* (Beirut: Dar al-Funun al-Jamila, 1990); Silvia Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe: L'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996); Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); César Nammour, *Amam al-lawha: Kitabat fi-l-rasm* (Beirut: Dar al-Funun al-Jamila, 2003); Nour Salamé Abillama and Marie Tomb, eds., *Art from Lebanon: Modern and Contemporary Artists. 1880–1975*, vol. 1, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Beirut Exhibition Center, 25 October–9 December 2012 (Beirut: Wonderful Editions, 2012).

2. This observation is supported by a comprehensive database the author has put together, documenting nearly seven hundred exhibitions during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990s). It includes information on dates, artists, media, and exhibition spaces, illustrating an extensive artistic activity that persisted despite the ongoing conflict.

3. For a full historical account on the civil war in Lebanon, see Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A Modern History of Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

4. *Daftar al-harb al-ahliyya*, 1977 and *Qariban min al-watan*, 1979. While the first two comprised drawings, the final album showcased black and white woodcut prints that hauntingly captured the realities of life amidst the turmoil.

5. Hassan Badaoui, "Fannan yahfir bi-l-khashab, wa-yatbaʿ, fa-yarfaʿ al-hiyad ʿan-al-misaha al-baydaʾ," *Al-Liwa'*, 7 February 1982.

placement and resistance, rooted in his experiences as a Palestinian artist in exile. While Molaeb's position as a leftist Druze in Lebanon brought its own complexities, both artists were deeply invested in depicting shared cultural and political themes.[6] Their use of printmaking was not coincidental; rather, it reflected a broader engagement with visual culture during the war. Newspapers, war-themed prints, and political posters played a central role in shaping the visual environment of everyday life during political upheaval.

Taking Jamil Molaeb's 1982 exhibition as a starting point, this article discusses what led to the production of prints during the civil war period. It argues that the themes of resistance and struggle, often expressed in war motifs, are closely tied to the aesthetics of printmaking and its links to other forms of visual culture. This is brought out further by an analysis of the aesthetic and ideological frameworks of the works of Mustafa al-Hallaj, whose presence in Beirut's art scene will first be described. A comparison of both artists' work shows how each was steeped in their own experience, despite aesthetic similarities, explaining their inscription into separate art worlds by some of their peers. Drawing on Zeina Maasri's concept of "translocal visuality," the paper contextualizes Molaeb's work as part of a network of visual practices that crossed boundaries between fine art and popular imagery.[7] Finally, the article demonstrates how the prints' aesthetic connection to leftist graphic design shaped their reception. The linkage between printmaking and graphic design ultimately alienated this art genre from the largely bourgeois-dominated art market and forced artists and galleries to return to the more commercially viable mainstream art.[8]

Jamil Molaeb's Exhibition of Woodcuts in 1982

Jamil Molaeb's 1982 exhibition at the Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste unveiled an impressive collection of thirty-four etchings and twenty-three woodcuts. Not only did he display his prints on the gallery walls, but also presented a collection of their reproductions in an album with the eponymous title "The End of Darkness, the Beginning of Dawn," with which he completed a trilogy of albums that documented life under the civil war. The previous two books contained compilations of drawings that directly referenced the war atrocities, expressed by graphic depictions and explicit titles, and were published and exhibited in 1977 and 1979 respectively. By the time Molaeb showed his woodcuts, he was already acclaimed in Lebanon's art circles for his adeptness in various painting techniques. One critic praised him as a young talent who followed in the footsteps of established Lebanese colourists like Shafic Abboud (1926–2004), Elie Kanaan (1926–2009) and Amine El Bacha (1932–2019).[9]

6. Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 16.

7. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 16.

8. In this context I refer to mainstream as artistic works, styles, or trends within the Fine Arts field that were widely accepted, recognized, and appreciated within the cultural scene in Lebanon spanning the period from the 1960s to the late 1980s. Among the most used media were oil and watercolour paintings, sculptures, and drawings encompassing both figurative and abstract content. The motives included landscape renderings, village scenes, depictions of the human body, abstract compositions, and calligraphic works. This definition further includes artists and their styles from the Lebanese canon that had already been established before the eruption of the civil war. Their status as canonical artists is based on the coverage and visibility on the main exhibition platforms in Beirut and abroad, and how they were represented in survey books and local press coverage.

9. May Makarem, "Lawhat Jamil Molaeb, Mohammad Al-Kaissi-, Husayn Jumʿa: Infitah basari wa-ghazarat ʿain wa-tajrubat infiʿal," *an-Nahar*, 1 March 1981.

The 1982 exhibition stood out in Molaeb's repertoire, both in terms of technique and by showing a wider range of themes with less graphic violence. While it was reported as his debut in printmaking, the Lebanese press overlooked that he had already exhibited engravings almost a decade earlier. In 1973, Molaeb had held his first solo show in Algiers, where he had been studying at the Académie des Beaux Arts the same year. While he exhibited mainly watercolours and gouache, which thematically explored Andalusia and its Arab heritage, his Algiers show also included twenty-seven engravings that were met with interest.[10] Prior to his studies in Algeria, he graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University, where he eventually became an art educator in 1977. At the beginning of his teaching career, he also managed the institute's printmaking studio.[11]

By the time of the 1982 exhibition, Molaeb's practice had evolved. Unlike his earlier depictions, which often portrayed the fight for collective struggle and the atrocities of the civil war's early years, his woodcuts reflected a shift in narrative focus. The images in the third album no longer seemed to show war in its immediate cruelty as an active agent of aggression, but rather as the completed act of a narrative and its reverberating effects on people and society. The scenes vary from landscapes to urban settings, including bustling streets with details of wrecked vehicles, abandoned structures, militiamen with weapons, jammed traffic, lively cafés, and pedestrians.[12]

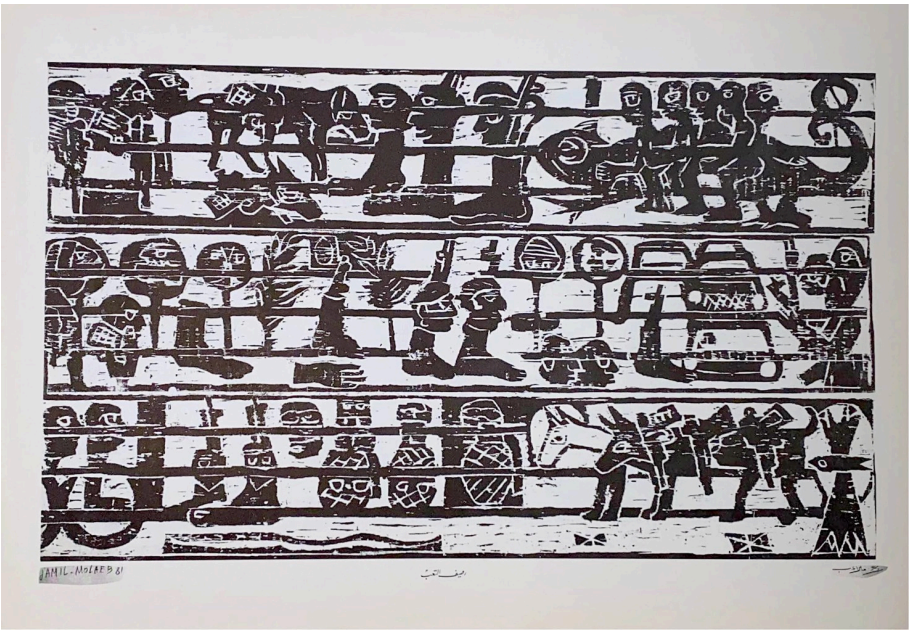

Figure 1: Molaeb, Jamil. *Rasif al-taʿab* [Pavement of fatigue]. 1981. Woodcut print. 76 × 56 cm. From the series *Akhir al-zalam, awwal al-fajr*, published in 1982. Saradar Collection, Beirut. Courtesy of the artist.

10. A. Mekhelef, review of Jamil Molaeb exhibition, Algiers, 1973, *Al-Ahdath*, 25 February 1973, n.p.

11. In his dissertation, Jamil Molaeb gives valuable insights into his practices as an art educator and artist during the Lebanese Civil War, see Jamil Molaeb, "Artists and Art Education in Time of War: Lebanon" (PhD. diss., Ohio State University, 1989).

12. Joseph Tarrab, *Jamil Molaeb: Xylographies, Woodcuts, 1980–2014* (Beirut: Les Éditions L'Orient-Le Jour, 2014), 21.

This shift is particularly evident in one of the woodcut prints exhibited, titled *Pavement of Fatigue* (fig. 1). The composition is divided into three horizontal sections, each showcasing a series of motifs. Most motifs are depicted in profile view, including cars, dogs, donkeys, feet, and hands. Some intriguing combinations are noticeable: feet with attached heads bearing weapons, positioned prominently at the print's centre, clearly allude to militiamen on the streets. Surrounding them are an isolated hand and a foot, alongside piled-up cars and trees. On the far-right end, two heads with torsos emerge, holding guns in their hands. In the upper right corner, a group of figures sits atop an oversized chameleon, with the last figure facing the chameleon's tail. The bottom section features two dogs, one with a white and the other with a black head, while the latter is equipped with three attached machine guns. They face the left edge of the print, confronting three similarly shaped objects resembling hand grenades. The woodcut's partitioning into horizontal sections implies a narrative sequence. Yet, unlike a linear narrative, each section appears disjointed. As author and art critic Joseph Tarrab remarks:

> [The sectioning] allows Molaeb to combine series of images that seem conjured up through free associations or, without associations at all, by sovereign decision. Although those effigies are in themselves perfectly meaningful in the overall context of the work, they sometimes seem enigmatically disparate, as if Molaeb, instead of making his thought explicit, were condensing it in rebus.[13]

This disjointedness reflects the complexities of the interwar and postwar periods and the aftermaths of intense armed conflicts, where realities were marked by fragmentation rather than coherence. The Lebanese Civil War was not a continuous conflict lasting from 1975 to 1990, but rather fragmented and unpredictable in reality. Periods of calm would spark hope that violence was over, only for fighting to resurge with greater intensity. This repeating cycle of relative calm and excessive violence created a sense of instability, as underlying tensions and grievances persisted, leaving the potential of re-emerging conflict high.

Consequently, the print's motifs convey a sense of chaos and turmoil on the streets. The imagery of piled-up cars and isolated body parts reveals a landscape of destruction and disarray, while the figures holding guns underpin militia violence. The oversized chameleon hints at the surreal and unstable nature of war, where reality seems distorted. The figure facing the reptile's tale suggests a sense of detachment from the chaotic world unfolding in the print. It seems almost like a metaphor for disturbed civilians who felt alienated from the events happening around them, and disillusioned by the brutality and destruction.

13. Tarrab, *Jamil Molaeb*, 21.

Figure 2: Molaeb, Jamil. *Fi-ahdan al-wahda* [In the arms of loneliness]. 1981. Woodcut print. 76 × 56 cm. From the series *Akhir al-zalam, awwal al-fajr*, published in 1982. Saradar Collection, Beirut. Courtesy of the artist.

In the print *In the Arms of Loneliness* (fig. 2), similar features are visible. Compositions are densely filled in vertical panels and feature abstracted, stylized human figures and patterns. The spaces between the woodblocks create white lines segmenting the overall structure of the composition. The figures are carved in a simplified, almost primitive style and include men, women, and children. Rather than focusing on detailed features, the emphasis lies on the interplay between the positive and negative spaces. The figures are in different poses—sitting, standing, or kneeling—and are adorned with simple but repetitive patterns. Creating a rhythmic harmony, this fea-

ture connects the different sections of the artwork. However, upon closer inspection the artist's depiction of village people becomes apparent, identifiable through their attire, likely representing a Druze village.

Regarding such woodcut motifs, Tarrab designates Molaeb as an "indigenous ethnographer" who "watches his familiar world with obvious affection and active sympathy, a world threatened by war, [...] in order to perpetuate its memory through a graphic approach imbued with hieraticism and sometimes solemnity which ennobles and idealizes even the minor aspects of peasant life."[14] Throughout his artistic career, Molaeb was bound to the depiction of village life and nature that stemmed from his strong connection to his native village Baysour, which became his refuge during the intense days of the civil war years.

An interview of the artist explaining his approach and the reason why he chose woodcuts was featured in the local newspaper *an-Nahar*. While he did not describe the iconography of his motifs, he elaborated at length on the meaning of the colours black and white. Accordingly, white was the vitality of life that was carved into the severity of life, as reflected by the black wood blocks.[15] Molaeb describes his approach as follows:

> One point is enough to disturb the neutrality in [the print's] area. There is no neutrality in my engravings. And so, I find my hand following it to the ends of its corners and the edges of its rectangles. Or is behind this rejection of whiteness a violent desire to say everything at once?[16]

In an article in *L'Orient-Le Jour*, Molaeb refers to these prints as "taqasim," drawing a parallel to solo recitals in music.[17] Just as in a solo recital where the performer takes centre stage and presents a programme of musical pieces, Molaeb offers his audience a focused experience on the abilities and artistry of the soloist. His "taqasim" are about life and death and perceived as depicting suffering and sorrow. Yet, as Molaeb describes, beauty is not limited to joy and happiness, and even the most desperate creation can be aesthetically pleasing when crafted with conviction. The journey through darkness holds value for the artist, who states, "after having lived through the darkness, which often is our common fate, I see more clearly."[18] He further explains his choice for this technique, contending that printmaking is not merely an expression, but rather a language.[19] It was a mode of communication, ideally suited for the articulation of thoughts and sentiments during the times in which he lived.[20]

14. Tarrab, *Jamil Molaeb*, 21.

15. Jamil Molaeb, "Jamil Molaeb haffar fi-kitab 'li-arfaʿ al-hiyad ʿan-al-misaha," *an-Nahar*, 30 January 1982, n.p.

16. Molaeb, "Jamil Molaeb."

17. Taqasim (تقاسيم) refers to a solo instrumental improvisation in Arabic music, introducing a specific melody type (*maqām*) and demonstrating the musician's musical and technical skills; "'Mes gravures sont des Takassim' sur la vie et la mort," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 3 February 1982, n.p.

18. "'Mes gravures sont des Takassim'."

19. "New" in this context does not imply that the technique had never been used in Lebanon before. Instead, the novelty lies in the attention and interest for Molaeb's execution of this technique rather than its absolute innovation in local artistic practice in Lebanon.

20. "'Mes gravures sont des Takassim'."

Molaeb's art show drew mainly positive critique. Art critic Hassan Badaoui refers to the exhibition as the first of its kind in Lebanon. He adds in parentheses: "except for the Palestinian artist Mustafa al-Hallaj, who produced masonite prints, but is not considered part of the Lebanese art movement."[21] This intriguing statement led me to explore a series of Hallaj's fine prints and poster prints, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Mustafa al-Hallaj in Beirut's Art Scene

In his accounts on Palestinian artists who lived in Beirut during the city's cultural peak, Palestinian artist and writer Kamal Boullata (1942–2019) discusses the artistic contributions of the first generation of Palestinian refugee artists following the Nakba.[22] He states that "Beirut may be invisible in the works of Palestinian artists who lived there for almost three consecutive decades."[23] He further asserts that, rather than drawing inspiration from the Lebanese environment, those artists were practising art in memory of Palestine. Based on these statements, the question arises to what extent Palestinian and Lebanese artists in Beirut inspired each other. Boullata's account suggests that they practised their work detached from each other in parallel societies, strictly following nationalistic groupings and political ideologies.

Boullata further discusses al-Hallaj's works in the context of two distinct groups of Palestinian artists in Beirut: those originating from refugee camps and those who were integrated into Beirut's bourgeois artistic circles, referred to as "Ras Beirut artists."[24] Yet Boullata views Mustafa al-Hallaj, a "camp artist," as an exception, as he was a trained artist who pursued a career in printmaking. His works were printed in multiple editions and known to a wide audience beyond the Lebanese borders. After his family was displaced from the Jaffa region in 1948, they moved first to Damascus then to a poor neighbourhood of Cairo, where he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts with the aim of becoming a sculptor—a career path he eventually dismissed. He then stuck to printmaking after moving to Beirut in 1974.[25] He spent eight years in the Lebanese capital, until the Israeli invasion in 1982 that expelled the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Beirut and made life for Palestinian artists particularly difficult.[26]

21. Badaoui, "Fannan yahfir bi-l-khashab." Masonite engraving involves carving into a hardboard to create a relief surface, which is then inked and pressed onto paper.

22. Nakba, meaning "catastrophe," refers to the mass displacement of Palestinian Arabs during and after the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, when they were expelled or forced to flee from the British Mandate of Palestine and the newly founded State of Israel, losing their land, homes, and property.

23. Kamal Boullata, "Artists Re-member Palestine in Beirut," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 4 (2003): 22–38, here 22, https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2003.32.4.22.

24. Boullata characterizes the artworks created by artists from refugee camps as figurative and typically depicting scenes influenced by the prevalent nationalistic themes addressing the Palestinian struggle. In contrast, the art from urban refugees is described as introspective, with subtle and often hidden references to political themes. Boullata further recounts that the camp artists' work was aimed at a general audience targeting their political sensibilities and linking to them through figurative political art. The so-called "Ras Beirut artists" of Palestinian origin conversely catered to the cultural sophisticates of the city; see Boullata, "Artists Re-member," 23.

25. According to Kamal Boullata, the change of medium after al-Hallaj's move to Lebanon was due to practical reasons in terms of transportation and cost efficiency. Further, the production made multiple copies for affordable prices possible, see Boullata, "Artists Re-member," 28.

26. Due to the destruction of his studio in Beirut, al-Hallaj lost 25,000 prints, see Samia Halaby, "Mustafa al-Hallaj: Master of the Print and Master of Ceremonies," *Jadaliyya*, 31 May 2013, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28691.

Al-Hallaj's works gained popularity in the Palestinian refugee camps, where his images were circulating. Coffee houses and streets were also covered by his posters and images that gained a wide reach.[27] His prints, however, were not only distributed for cheap, targeting audiences with political messages. While Boullata asserted that "[a]rt from the camps never entered Beirut's art market or commercial galleries," al-Hallaj's art did gain exposure within Beirut's artistic circles, although largely on the margins of mainstream galleries. He participated in the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* in 1978, for instance, held at the Arab University in West Beirut. The exhibition carried crucial political significance as support for the Palestinian cause and showed works composed as a collection for a Palestinian "museum in exile."[28] As a venue, the Arab University deliberately prioritized accessibility to a wide audience, underscoring the intersection of art and political activism. The inclusion of al-Hallaj's work in an exhibition of this scope highlights his cultural and symbolic importance. Similarly, his solo show at the restaurant-cum-gallery Smuggler's Inn in 1979 introduced his graphic works, including his woodcut prints, to a broader audience.[29] As these venues were more accessible than mainstream galleries like the Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste, this illustrates the potential of al-Hallaj's work to traverse political and artistic spaces.

A sidebar note in *L'Orient-Le Jour* mentions that his works were even permanently hanging in the Planula-Elissar Gallery that was founded by George Zeenny, owner of the Smugglers' Inn.[30] One of his masonite engravings exhibited there, untitled like most of the artist's works, is an apt example of al-Hallaj's signature style, which often incorporates elements of mythology of ancient Near Eastern civilizations and folklore (fig. 3).[31] In the composition, three layers of figures are depicted from the bottom to the top: in the foreground, two female figures are seated. The figure on the right, larger in size, holds a hoe in one hand with a raven perched on her outstretched arm. Her left hand gently rests on the other figure's leg. Both figures interact in a familiar and mutually supportive manner. Above them looms a menacing-looking beast resembling wild predators with bared teeth. A large hand protrudes against the dark horizon in the background. The combination of these elements—the hoe, the raven, and the size of the figure—hint at the personification of the motherland defending and nurturing her people. Equipped with the tool of labour and the raven symbolizing a bad omen, she shields the opposite figure from the beast, which represents threats to her land and culture. Given al-Hallaj's focus on themes of resistance within the context of the Palestinian struggle, this figure allegorizes the spirit of Palestinian resistance—deeply connected to the land and endowed with the foresight and strength to face adversities. Art historian

27. Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: 1850–2005* (London: Saqi, 2009), 133.

28. For a discussion of this exhibition, see Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti, *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity and Museums in Exile* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2018).

29. The Smuggler's Inn was a renowned restaurant in Hamra, Beirut, that attracted intellectuals and artists. Founded by George Zeenny, a cultural entrepreneur, it was part of the city's vibrant cultural scene but closed during the Lebanese Civil War. It became a venue for art exhibitions of established and amateur artists alike, especially during the war period.

30. "Un doublé d'accrochages," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 15 May 1981, 4.

31. Sources on al-Hallaj's exhibition are limited. Yet, a photo of the exhibition announcement in the English weekly magazine *Monday Morning* captures the artist in front of this print, serving as evidence.

Alessandra Amin characterizes his style as "animated by a sense of accumulation, of the layering of partial references to historical, mythological, and contemporary cultures within a realm of hallucinatory fantasy."[32]

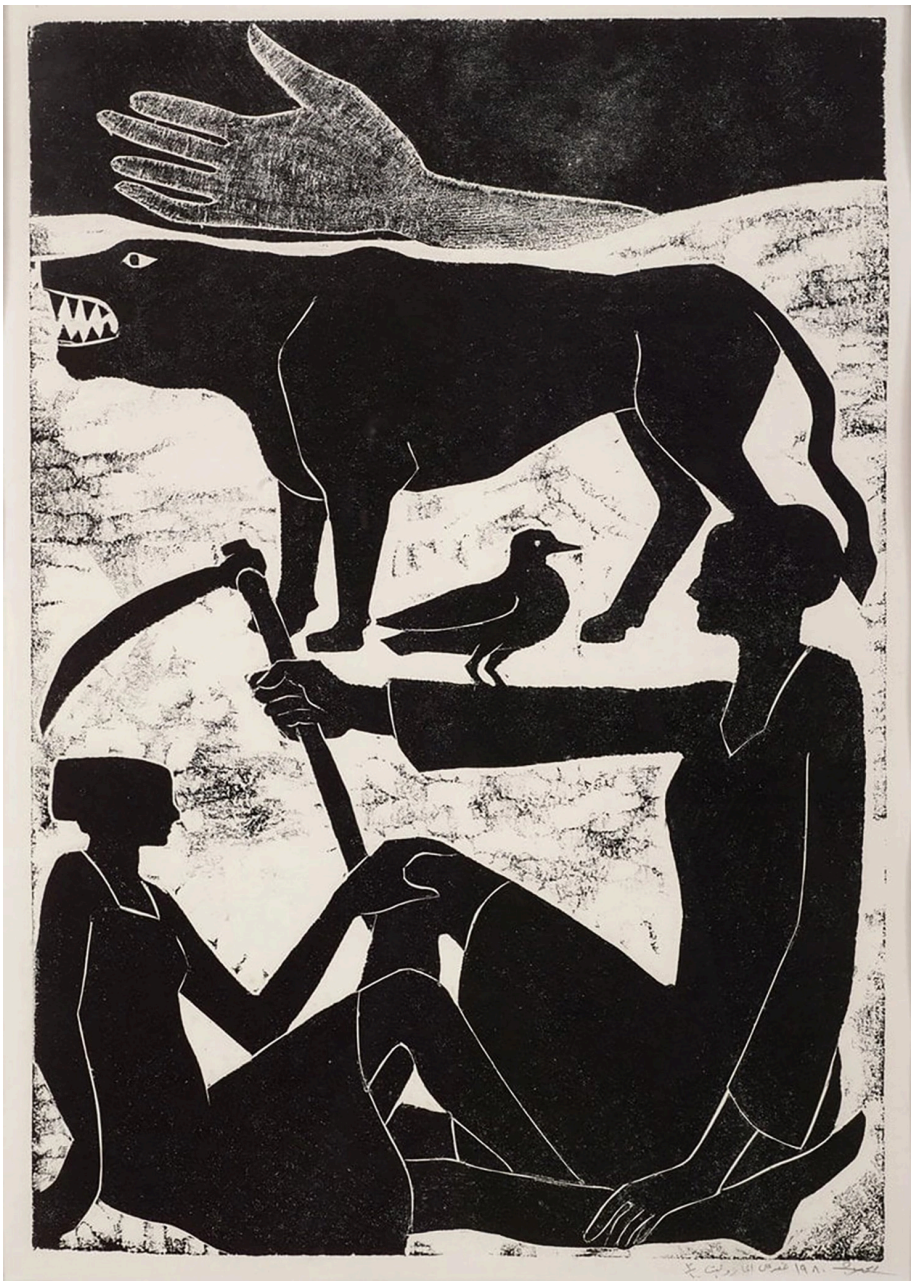

Figure 3: Al-Hallaj, Mustafa. *Untitled*. 1980. Masonite engraving, no. 3/10. 62 × 44 cm. Dalloul Art Foundation, Beirut. Copyright is held by the artist's estate.

32. Alessandra Amin, "Mustafa El Hallaj, Palestine (1938–2002)," Dalloul Art Foundation Beirut, accessed 10 April 2024, https://dafbeirut.org/en/mustafa-el-hallaj.

Another example among al-Hallaj's prints is the depiction of a dynamic scene with multiple human figures and animals, aligned in a continuous narrative format.[33] Arranged on a horizontal stripe, the composition guides the viewer's eye from left to right due to a linear progression of stylized figures, indicating movement. On the left side, a group of human figures stands closely together, their bodies overlapping, depicting the community. Towards the centre, large figures are engaged in an act of combat, pointing their weapons to the right side of the composition. Behind them, a winged horse protrudes in forward motion, adding a mythical element to the scene. To the right, another, yet smaller, horse is depicted, with a human figure seated on its back, suggesting leadership and control. The figures' limbs and bodies form a complex web of lines and shapes, instilling movement. The spaces between the figures are crafted with short, bold, and accentuated lines that create elaborate patterns. The boldness of these lines helps to define the contours of the figurative elements, making them stand out against the background. Al-Hallaj was known for his complex approach to printmaking. The technique of masonite engraving allows for stark, expressive lines and sharp contrasts, which are evident in this piece.

The textuality of the prints underscores the emotional and thematic intensity of the image. His works often include a rich variety of symbols, forming a powerful allegory of struggle, protection, and cultural endurance. They feature multiple themes to be explored simultaneously, each segment contributing a piece to the overall message. His prints were not produced for artistic reasons alone. He was one of the pioneering Palestinian graphic artists who was actively involved in the PLO's cultural production.[34] Indeed, he contributed to the "revolutionary aesthetic" in Palestinian poster design for Fatah and the PLO.[35] These posters were widely recognized and influential within Fatah's political publicity, especially in the late 1960s.

The Influence of Political Posters on Beirut's Visual Culture

In *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, Zeina Maasri investigates the "aesthetic emergence of Palestinian revolutionary struggle" by examining the "printscapes" reflecting Beirut's public culture through the "circuits of artistic solidarity."[36] As Beirut emerged as a centre for the convergence of political and artistic influences, a distinctively formed visual culture, which the author labels as "translocal visuality," effectively transformed the city into a symbol of Arab revolutionary identity. The author uses this term to define a "visual dimension of printed matter in transnational circuits of modernism and thus to account for: the movement of printed image-objects; artists, intellectuals and designers; and discourses about art and the realm of the visual, in its aesthetic dimension, as a force-field entangled with politics."[37] Maasri also voices critique over Boullata's sharp contrasting of the camp vs. Ras Beirut artists. She suggests instead that "one has to look at the printed

33. Please see Mustafa al-Hallaj's *Untitled* (1980): Samia Halaby, "Mustafa al-Hallaj: Master of the Print and Master of Ceremonies," *Jadaliyya*, 31 May 2013, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28691/Mustafa-al-Hallaj-Master-of-the-Print-and-Master-of-Ceremonies.

34. Fatah, also known as the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, is a faction within the broader umbrella organization of the PLO. For a study of the PLO's cultural production in the context of the organization's communication strategy for popular mobilization, see Dina Matar, "PLO Cultural Activism: Mediating Liberation Aesthetics in Revolutionary Contexts," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38, no. 2 (2018): 354–64, https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-6982123.

35. Matar, "PLO Cultural Activism," 354.

36. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 164.

37. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 20.

matter that circulated in between these spaces and navigated the frontiers that might otherwise separate them."[38] I would like to take Maasri's approach one step further and explore how the visual culture that was formed in the 1960s continued to influence fine arts production into the 1980s. In the following, I will demonstrate how this aesthetics extended beyond Beirut's "circuits of artistic solidarity" and entered commercial art spaces. Although I recognize the inherent differences in the forms of production and complexities in technicalities between fine art prints and posters, it is essential to explore their cultural narratives and semiotic impacts to understand the broader spectrum of visual expression. This approach allows for a critical examination of how different contexts and material conditions influence the reception and interpretation of art production. This exploration will provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which the revolutionary aesthetics of the 1960s were not confined to their original contexts but continued to resonate and find new expressions within the evolving art market of the early 1980s.

As Maasri accounts, the interplay between the artistic environment and political activism in Beirut facilitated the development of political posters as both an art form and a medium of political expression. Artists found an outlet for their creative practice that was not limited to commercial gallery spaces but had wider reach in the public realm. This was not confined to Palestinian and Lebanese artists, but included artists from other Arab countries as well.[39] Mustafa al-Hallaj serves as a compelling example for artists living in Beirut at that time who had dual roles as graphic designers and artists. His works were well received and significantly inspired a group of committed artists in Beirut.[40] His influence was notable even among those who had not personally seen his exhibitions, especially, as I argue, due to the widespread recognition of his designs for Fatah posters.

One of them will be discussed here.[41] A photograph of al-Hallaj's posters plastering the walls of a street in Algiers shows one of his designs that circulated the most. The central figure depicted is a fighter wearing a *kuffiyah*, a traditional Palestinian scarf. This identifies the figure as a representative icon of the Palestinian guerrilla fighter, known as *fida'i*.[42] In the bottom section "Fat'h" (Fatah) is named. The top section features the slogan "towards a new future" in both French and Arabic. This poster, initially a woodcut print, subtly embodies some characteristics of al-Hallaj's overall style, although it may not be immediately apparent. The name "Fat'h" is prominently displayed in white on a black background, occupying a quarter of the page. The image portion features an engraved guerrilla figure, emphasized by a strong contour line. To the right of him is a small, stylized bird depicted on a sphere, symbolizing a peace dove. Inside the sphere the name "Fat'h" is

38. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 165.

39. Palestinian posters expressed a revolutionary stance advocating for armed struggle and intense political and military efforts for national liberation. They were used since the 1960s and influenced poster production during the Lebanese Civil War in the following decades. This communication method set a precedent for various political parties in Lebanon. Especially the allies of Palestinian organizations, Lebanese left wing and Arab nationalist parties, followed their model and adopted the Palestinian approach to poster design to promote their shared political ideals as well their own messages, see Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 38–39.

40. Nasser Soumi and Amal Traboulsi, interview by author, conducted in October 2022; see also Halaby, "Mustafa al-Hallaj."

41. Please see the poster of Fatah through the streets of Algiers, photo by Guy Le Querrec/Magnum, 25 July 1969, "Algiers Sighting – 1969," Palestine Poster Project Archives (PPPA), last accessed 17 September 2025, https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/algiers-sighting-1969.

42. See more on the depiction of the *fida'i* in the context of Palestinian poster production in Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 181–90.

repeated. This dark section sharply contrasts with the upper third, where the slogan is positioned. The stark black and white contrasts seen in al-Hallaj's posters create visual impact and immediate readability, necessary for the communicative function of the message. Contrast remains a key element in his non-political pieces as well, where it serves to highlight emotional depth or to draw attention to specific elements within the composition. The dramatic interplay of light and shadow thus hints at underlying psychological tension. As previously shown, in his artistic prints, al-Hallaj often segmented his compositions to create a layered narrative. Equally in his posters, each segment focuses on a specific element of the message: the identity of the movement, the goals, and the symbolic representation of the struggle.

The inclusion of a foreign language, however, reveals that this poster was aimed at an international audience, particularly in French-speaking countries, to garner support and raise awareness for the Palestinian cause. This poster was designed at the time when Fatah participated in the first Pan-African Festival in July 1969 in Algiers, advocating for the Palestinian struggle. The photograph of the poster stands as one of the best-known examples of mass communication from that era. The repetition and saturation of the images on the wall highlight the urgent way these visuals communicated with their surroundings. Not only the slogans, but the entire visuality—the unity between image and text, almost forming a pattern that seems to extend infinitely in a chain of patterns—leave a powerful impression.

Figure 4: Al-Fatah-Conference at the Palais des Nations, Algiers. 27–28 December 1969. 23.3 × 29.2 cm. Algiers. bkp-Bildagentur, CC-BY-NC-ND Licence. Photographed by Abisag Tüllmann.

Posters became a visual staple for residents of politically charged cities like Beirut and Algiers, as "graphic signs and political rhetoric of posters became a prevalent sign/reading that shaped the cityscape."[43] Not only were al-Hallaj's posters visible for audiences on the streets of Arab cities but also to a broader readership of global newspapers, as one press photo from the Fatah conference at the Palais des Nations in Algiers in December 1969 testifies (fig. 4). These posters were reproduced in news articles and transcended their initial context. The original poster, intended for regional impact, gains new dimensions when it is photographed and published in global news media. This act of recontextualization transformed the poster from a static piece of street art into a dynamic symbol within international discourse. Each reproduction not only carried but also amplified its semiotic power, embedding it deeper into a collective consciousness.

Exploring the Intersection of Art and Politics in Beirut

In Beirut, al-Hallaj's atelier was situated in Hamra, a vibrant political and cultural neighbourhood. He likely interacted with local artists who were sympathizing with leftist parties and were politically engaged in anti-imperialist movements, socialist agendas, cultural policies, and the Palestinian cause.[44] There was a nucleus of Lebanese artists committed to these causes, who were closely associated with the Lebanese University.[45] The first generation of art educators were key in the development of the university's Institute of Fine Arts, and were guiding their students not only in terms of art education but also on socio-political matters.[46] Collaborations of artists created a broader network of political and artistic commitment in Beirut's intellectual circles during the wartime period, linking personalities from the cultural milieu.[47] This sense of comradery and social solidarity during his time as an art teacher is described by Jamil Molaeb in his dissertation:

> In 1978, artists and art teachers introduced new ideas to change the political situation and stop the war. They showed and talked about their ideological concerns. Students responded to their work in school, by organizing art demonstrations, participating in festivals, supporting theater presentations, and making sculptures. Collections of some artists' works were published in books between 1977–1979. These books expressed the civil war.[48]

43. Maasri, *Off the Wall*, 3.

44. Halaby, "Mustafa al-Hallaj."

45. In 1965 the Institute of Fine Arts was set up at the Lebanese University, but at the onset of civil strife was reorganized into four branches following the sectarian division of Beirut and Lebanon. Accordingly, the two divided parts of Beirut had each one branch with a third opening in Tripoli in 1980. Six years later, Deir El Qamar in Chouf became the location of a fourth branch, see Wafa Roz, "Fine Arts Education in Lebanon: Part 1," Dalloul Art Foundation Beirut, accessed March 2023, https://dafbeirut.org/literature/fine-arts-education-lebanon-part-1, and Bushra Fakhoury, "Art Education in Lebanon" (PhD diss., University of London, 1983).

46. Among the members of the first generation of educators were Nicolas Nammar, Jean Khalifé, Shafic Abboud, Yvette Ashkar, Nadia Saikali, Mounir Eido, Halim Jurdak, Rafic Charaf, Elie Kanaan, and Aref El Rayess. Later, Hussein Madi and Seta Manoukian were added to the teaching staff as well as Jamil Molaeb, who taught there from 1977 until 1986, see Wafa Roz, "Fine Arts Education in Lebanon: Part 2," Dalloul Art Foundation Beirut, accessed March 2023, https://dafbeirut.org/literature/fine-arts-education-lebanon-part-2; Jamil Molaeb describes how artists from the Lebanese Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors (LAAPS) and the Académie Libanaise des Beaux Arts (ALBA) obtained positions as art teachers; see Jamil Molaeb, "Artists and Art Education in Time of War," 5.

47. Maasri, *Off the Wall*, 39.

48. Molaeb, "Artists and Art Education in Time of War," 6.

In support of this assertion, Jamil Molaeb articulates how pivotal historical events, such as the Lebanon Crisis of 1958 and the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, fostered a significant shift in the landscape of Lebanese fine arts. His observation stresses how these events served as a force for the evolution of artistic expression, prompting artists to engage more deeply with socio-political themes.[49] By stating that Lebanese fine arts gained from other art sources such as poetry, theatre, and politics, Molaeb suggests that these interdisciplinary influences enriched and expanded the scope of artistic practice. The expression in diverse artistic forms allowed for a more holistic and nuanced exploration of social and political issues. This led to the promotion of a stronger engagement and expression within the artistic community. After the 1967 war in particular, fine arts began to reflect and to express a social and political consciousness.[50] This insight underscores the profound impact of these events on the trajectory of artistic expression. The heightened social and political awareness within the artistic community did not just appear with the beginning of the civil war but was a continuation of such practices from the unsteady prewar period. This commitment not only unified a group of Lebanese artists with the same socio-political views, but also facilitated connections with non-Lebanese peers, especially Palestinians, who shared similar aspirations. Through these connections, artists from Lebanon and Palestine collaborated, exchanging ideas and forging strong bonds of solidarity and mutual support.[51] Under the guidance of influential mentors like Aref El Rayess, Jamil Molaeb, Moussa Tiba, and Seta Manoukian, this collective dedication to social and political commentary flourished. Their participation in events such as the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* in 1978 further solidified their shared vision to use art as a platform for activism and solidarity with Palestinian artists, like Mustafa al-Hallaj.[52]

In this regard, Jamil Molaeb expressed his respect for al-Hallaj, acknowledging him positively among his peers.[53] Yet, in his writings, Molaeb primarily credits Lebanese artists like Aref El Rayess and Rafic Charaf as inspirations.[54] He mentions his participation in the 1978 exhibition at the Beirut Arab University, but omits connections to Beirut-based Palestinian artists, despite exhibiting alongside al-Hallaj in the same show. This highlights the discrepancy in writings and interviews by artists and critics from that time, who—unless it is for the same cause—clearly distinguish between a "Lebanese art movement" and a "Palestinian art movement."[55] This distinction is tied to the broader context of the Lebanese Civil War and the political role Palestinians played within it. The presence of the PLO in Lebanon, particularly after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the events of Black September in 1970, positioned Palestinian factions at the heart of left-

49. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 164–65.

50. Molaeb, "Artists and Art Education in Time of War," 22. On the impact of the 1967 war on cultural production, also see Flavia Elena Malusardi, "Committed Cultural Politics in Global 1960s Beirut: National Identity Making at Dar el Fan," *Biens Symboliques / Symbolic Good* 15 (2024): n.p., https://doi.org/10.4000/13kxy. The author examines Dar el Fan in Beirut as a hub of leftist artistic engagement that emerged in response to the Arab defeat.

51. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 173.

52. This exhibition was organized by the PLO and housed in the halls of the Beirut Arab University.

53. Ginane Makki Bacho and Nasser Soumi, interviews by author, October 2022.

54. Molaeb, "Artists and Art Education in Time of War," 32, 86.

55. Equally, the exhibition catalogue lists Jamil Molaeb and his Lebanese peers in the section "Lebanon," while Palestinian-born artists like al-Hallaj and Boullata are listed under "Palestine," see *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Beirut Arab University, 21 March–5 April 1978 (Beirut: PLO Unified Information Office, 1978).

ist resistance movements. Their crucial involvement in the civil strife, especially against Lebanese nationalist and right-wing factions, tightened political tensions. Many Palestinian artists in Beirut were engaged in these leftist movements. Their involvement, however, came at the cost of being outcast from the art world and the mainstream galleries. Cultural institutions, particularly those aligned with more nationalist or conservative ideologies, often hesitated to showcase their work. As a result, politically motivated spaces became the only platform for most Palestinian artists, such as the 1978 exhibition, where art was explicitly framed as an act of resistance. The lack of acknowledgement of Palestinian artists in Lebanese artistic narratives, as seen in this example, reflects these broader divisions—where solidarity existed in practice, but historical memory and institutional frameworks often reinforced national and political separations.

This is why the Lebanese Civil War, a shared experience among local artists in Beirut, did not contribute to a unified local artistic identity. The divergent perspectives underscore the distinct national and political contexts shaping each movement. Art critic Hassan Badaoui's praise of Molaeb's prints as "new, advanced, and unique stages in the Lebanese artistic movement" starkly emphasizes the fragmented identities elicited by such divisive influences.[56] Yet, this nationalistic lens obscures the broader impacts of the civil war on artistic expressions.

Looking at both artists' works, similarities are prevalent not only in the use of black-and-white images, but also in the narrative representation, figurative subjects with allegorical associations, and symbolic expressions. Al-Hallaj's artworks were primarily black-and-white woodcut prints. His themes are narrative and depict figurative subjects that convey allegorical meanings with surreal features. Human figures of various sizes are recurring elements in his compositions, seemingly floating and surrounded by a mysterious, dreamlike environment. They are often accompanied by horses, roosters, and mythical creatures. His figures are marked by their flatness, with limited details outlined by simple contours and put in a narrative succession.[57] Comparable characteristics are featured in Molaeb's works that illustrate the chaotic and surreal nature of the war-torn environment. Marked by a profound narrative depth, his work offers visual snapshots by critically analysing the impact of war. Visual analysis of both artists' works has shown how, despite their technical and aesthetic similarities, each is deeply rooted in their own context. For Molaeb, depicting the war required a certain aesthetic that was inherently shaped by the politically charged, realistic, and graphic visuality present in the artist's environment.

Molaeb continued to work on similar themes in woodcut prints throughout his career, although his focus on prints decreased in favour of more abstract compositions and media of painting. In 1984, the artist obtained a scholarship and deepened his knowledge in printmaking at the Pratt Institute in New York. One of his prints from the same year shows a more intensified expression and denser composition as opposed to the prints of the third album (fig. 5). This composition almost seems to be a culmination of his own artistic evolution, mingled with inspiration from the visual chaos and patterns found in the urban environment. The layering of posters, graffiti, and other street art elements can inform the creation of complex, textured artworks. Molaeb's fierce repetition of the same motif in each strip, sequenced in a series of stripes, evokes the fleeting

56. Badaoui, "Fannan yahfir bi-l-khashab," translated by the author.

57. Halaby, "Mustafa al-Hallaj."

impression of a wall littered with posters, which we glimpse momentarily as we pass by. The circulation of a politically charged visual culture leverages the interaction between public messages and artistic expression, leading to new forms of abstract art that reflect societal influences.

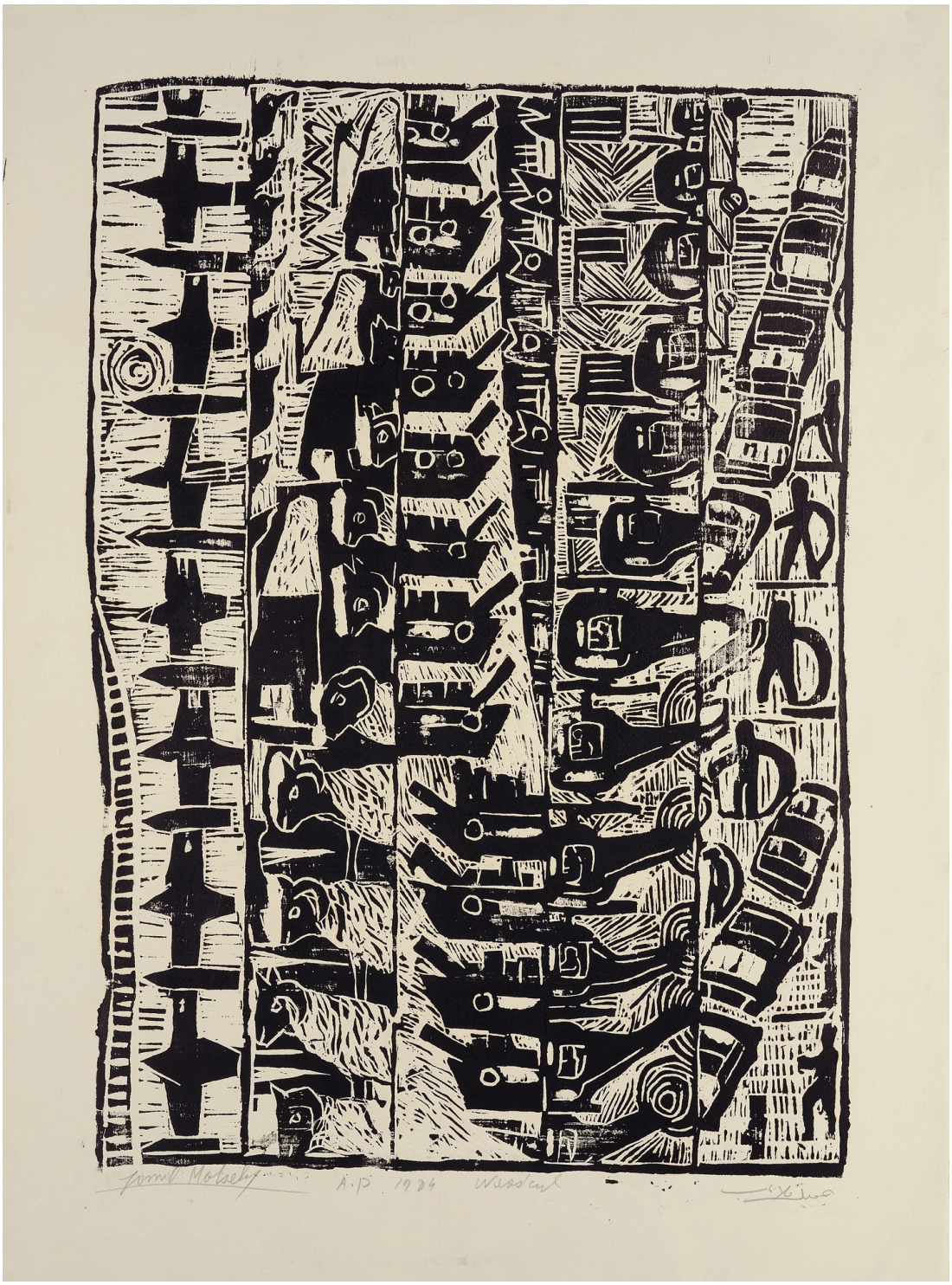

Figure 5: Molaeb, Jamil. *Untitled*. 1984. Woodcut print. 76 × 56 cm. Artist proof. Saradar Collection, Beirut. Courtesy of the Artist.

This politically charged imagery is further reflected in Molaeb's approach, which he explains in light of the civil war:

> The social conditions that we went through back then were not that different from today's. But there was also danger, surprises, and explosions. I expressed all these things at the time in a mythical way or in the Sumerian tradition of stonecutting or the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. I tried being myself because we all carry within ourselves a lot of cultures. I wanted to treat these works as if I were an ancient artist.[58]

This places him within the broader context of Arab artists who revisited ancient art forms from their regions, as did al-Hallaj, who drew on Egyptian folklore and ancient relief carvings and "appropriated suggestive symbols to eulogize the Palestinian martyr."[59] This approach carried an anti-imperialist dimension, utilizing regional artistic traditions—both ancient and vernacular—as means to assert cultural identity and heritage in the face of historical and contemporary western influence and imperialism. This was one of the reasons why Molaeb chose to study in Algeria at the time, instead of pursuing a European education.[60] His engagement with allegedly ancient Arab artistic traditions was more of a political act in the context of regional conflicts than a stylistic or historical decision. The emphasis on Arabness, especially through references to ancient civilizations, served as a counter-narrative to right-wing parties propagating a Phoenician identity.

War and Medium

In his review of Jamil Molaeb's 1973 Algiers exhibition, art critic Mekhelef addresses Molaeb's deeply rooted Arab identity and political views. He emphasizes how Molaeb's political awareness reinforced his connection to Arab heritage and shaped his artistic expression. His education and exposure to masterpieces in the countries of their origin led him to believe that many such works were inspired by earlier Arab creations, as Mekhelef further accounts. This belief was particularly influenced during his time in Algeria, where his political identity as an Arab was strongly formed. Armed conflicts were since then reflected in his works. The use of spare lines, as the critic continues, conveyed intense emotional depth, while stylized characters depicted a continual struggle for justice in face of the challenges of technological civilization.[61] Although these observations refer to his early work, Molaeb later returned to similar visual strategies during the Lebanese Civil War, when such visual adoptions were also employed by numerous artists who created political posters, addressing cultural sentiments and a sense of belonging.[62]

58. Saradar Collection, "Words on Works: Woodcuts by Jamil Molaeb," YouTube, 13 September 2017, video, 4:45, here 2:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9pkLECVChA.

59. Boullata, "Artists Re-member Palestine," 28.

60. Salamé Abillama and Tomb, *Art from Lebanon*, 383.

61. Mekhelef, *Al-Ahdath*, 25 February 1973.

62. Maasri, *Off the Wall*, 41–44.

The impact of Beirut's public visual culture on Molaeb's art, also shaped through graffiti scribblings and drawings, was already evident in his previous two albums.[63] The raw brutality of civil strife was vividly portrayed by anthropomorphic figures engaged in acts of torture and assault (fig. 6). Molaeb's use of stark, sharp contours in black-and-white ink and watercolour dramatically amplified the ferocity of the scenes. In the second book, the compositions grew more crowded, marked by endless repetitions of figures and elements that took on an almost ornamental quality. These works reached a broad audience due to their reproductions in albums.

Figure 6: Molaeb, Jamil. *Akbiat al Taazib* [Underground torture]. 1976. Around 34 × 44 cm. From the series *Daftar al-harb al-ahliyyah, 1975–1976*. Saradar Collection, Beirut. Courtesy of the Artist.

The flatness of figures depicted in sharp contours, especially in the first album of drawings are referred to as "child-like" renderings by local reviewers.[64] Art critic Fayçal Sultan saw the production of drawings as an "emergence of a realistic artistic current that depicts with tragic precision the convulsions of emotions in catastrophic times [...] an artistic current whose features we have seen in the production of more than one artist, Lebanese and Arab, and whose first start among us was known in the works of Aref El Rayess since his exhibition (Black and White)."[65] Aref El

63. For an analysis of street graffiti in Beirut during the so-called "Two-Year War," see Maria Chakhtoura, *Liban 1975–1978: La guerre des graffiti* (Beirut: Éditions Dar An-Nahar, 1978).

64. "Daftar al-harb al-ahliyya yarsum al-jahim munzawiyan, mukhtabiʾan, waraʾ shajara!," *Al-Kifah Al-Arabi*, 10 October 1977.

65. Fayçal Sultan, "Jamil Molaeb... 'qariban min al-watan': banurama mashhunah bi-l-tafaṣil," *As-Safir*, 10 April 1979, n.p; other artists who are also known for their drawings of the Lebanese Civil War include Laure Ghorayyeb, Rafiq Charaf, and Greta Naufal.

Rayess, both colleague and mentor to Jamil Molaeb, was not only a politically engaged artist but also a dedicated chronicler of wars.[66] He wrote, alongside art critic and calligrapher Samir Sayegh, the introduction to Molaeb's inaugural book, where he underscored the paramount importance of art in reflecting the socio-political landscape of war.[67] He firmly articulated that true creativity and originality in artistic endeavours could only be attained through an honest confrontation with the visual realities of conflict, a sentiment graphically echoed in Molaeb's works. By advocating for the social role of art, he celebrated Molaeb's artistic testimony.[68]

The connection between drawings and the practice of printmaking, however, extends beyond mere visual similarities; it delves into the profound significance of these media as coping mechanisms and documentation tools for artists grappling with the realities of conflict. For Jamil Molaeb, drawings initially provided a means of expression, yet he eventually found them insufficient for capturing the full depth of his experiences. Turning to the medium of woodcut prints, he sought to convey the gravity of war with greater forcefulness. This urgency transcended the visual realm, manifesting in the physicality of the medium itself. The process of carving woodblocks became a cathartic experience, as the repetitive motions it required provided an outlet for pent-up emotions. Beyond its personal significance, printmaking has historically carried a clear political dimension. Embraced by leftist artists worldwide, prints were used widely in revolutionary movements due to their accessibility, affordability, and reproducibility. By using this medium, Molaeb aligned himself with a long tradition of socially engaged art, reinforcing a broader ideological stance in his work. From carving to labour-intensive hand printing, every step in the process demanded patience and strength.[69] The artist linked his creative practice with the harsh reality by limiting the colour palette to black and white. What unifies drawings and prints is their graphic visuality, evident in both expression and motifs, and their accessibility outside traditional commercial structures, setting them apart within the Lebanese art scene of that era.

Yet, Jamil Molaeb's 1982 print exhibition presents a novel approach to promoting the social role of art, distinct from his earlier drawings. By reproducing fine prints in an album, he aimed to engage a broader audience beyond traditional buyers and collectors. Selling his original works in a commercial gallery at the same time underscores his effort to merge local artistic values with broader art market dynamics, thereby introducing "translocal visuality" into the commercial realm. Unlike his first two books, Molaeb carefully catalogued these works by number, title, dimensions, and techniques, demonstrating a strategic engagement with the art market that might not be immediately apparent. In the Lebanese context, obtaining titles or details about techniques and dimensions remains challenging. Even primary sources from various gallery archives, including the Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste's, often lack such information. This suggests that the artworks' social impact is manifested through Jamil Molaeb's deliberate approach to educate and connect with various audiences.

66. Aref El Rayess, *Tariq al-salam*, Algiers, 1978; the drawings were produced between 1973 and 1976 and tackled the Algerian War with references to the Lebanese Civil War.

67. Known for his committed artistic practices within the Arab world, El Rayess played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse surrounding art's engagement with socio-political contexts. For an extensive discussion on Aref El Rayess's commitment in art, see Natasha Gasparian, *Commitment in the Artistic Practice of Aref El-Rayess: The Changing of Horses* (London: Anthem Press, 2020).

68. Aref El Rayess, "Al-muqaddima," *Daftar al-harb al-ahliyya*, 1976, n.p.

69. Jamil Molaeb, "Muqaddima," *Akhir al-zalam, awwal al-fajr*, 1982, n.p.

In his dissertation, Molaeb quotes an interview of art teachers at the Lebanese University regarding the representation of war in Lebanese art. In it, artist and art teacher Rafic Charaf acknowledges the limited portrayal of the war in traditional media like oil painting, contrasting it with the more prevalent and impactful depictions found in posters, gouache pictures, and other popular forms of art. Charaf suggests that oil painting, often seen as academic and individualistic, tended to convey a sense of isolation and division, drawing on personal memories and imagination. He argues that media like photography, film, broadcasting, and posters, however, were more effective in capturing the essence of the war due to their immediacy and accessibility to a wider audience. Charaf proposes that the war is a rich subject for artistic exploration, particularly suited for media like movies and theatre, which can convey its complexity and historical significance more forcefully.[70] These insights show how the choice of artistic media in depicting war was reflected on by artists at the time.

Jamil Molaeb strategically embraced the use of prints, recognizing that traditional painting media often lacked the immediacy and communal resonance required to authentically convey the intense and multifaceted nature of war. Printmaking techniques were more suitable for both the transmission of "translocal visuality" and expression of the urgent and compelling nature of the war. Hence, Molaeb chose prints as a medium to bridge the gap between the fine arts and the collective engagement of political motifs. This choice allowed him not only to explore the complexities of war but also to amplify socio-political messaging through the accessible and distributable form of prints, ensuring a broader impact and deeper public reflection on the themes he depicted.

Conclusion

Although similarities in the visual language between al-Hallaj and Molaeb have been noted, it needs to be stressed that Molaeb's works stand in their own unique and local context. While al-Hallaj's figures are placed in an allegorical world, Molaeb situates his figures within the Lebanese context, whether it is Beirut or Lebanese villages, including his own. The events are tied to a specific location and, despite surreal suggestions, remain clearly definable. The scenes capture multiple aspects of life during the war and give insights into the memories and emotions of a war-torn society, revealing fears, fragmentation, and resilience.

Perhaps it is precisely this context that was too direct, too immediate for the audience, who could not process their experiences in the same way Molaeb did through his physical externalization of trauma into woodcuts. Addressing the war's profound impact extends beyond artistic output to the very fabric of cultural infrastructure and daily life, shaping artists' modes of expression and shifts in the decisions of gallery owners and collectors.

In the 1980s, galleries predominantly favoured art forms considered mainstream art, adhering closely to established paradigms of "high art." Amidst this conformity, subtle developments unfurled: the war itself remained conspicuously absent from artistic discourse, with few exceptions such as Molaeb's exhibition. While his prints resonated with critics, they faced challenges within the commercial art market. The Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste was one of very few platforms

70. "Al-lawha wa-l-harb," *Al-Mustaqbal*, 25 June 1988, 46–48, quoted in Molaeb, "Artists and Art Education in Time of War," 26–27.

where war themes were shown at that time. Given the task to fill a gap in the gallery landscape in terms of quantity and "quality," as stated by co-founder Amal Traboulsi, the gallerists were seeking works of artists who were tackling social topics and were less concerned about appealing aesthetics.[71] Yet, as the further trajectories of both the artist and the gallery show, fewer print shows were hosted by the owners who eventually had to comply with the audience's preferences for paintings, especially works in watercolour. This development may have been supported by the fact that prints resonated too closely with the ongoing realities of war.

Towards the end of the war, mainstream art dominated exhibitions, indicating a market that stuck to more traditional forms. Despite initial efforts by galleries to challenge this status quo, these attempts failed to sustain momentum. As a result, Molaeb limited the number of prints that he exhibited in Beiruti circles.[72] This analysis underscores that certain aesthetics, particularly those associated with immediate socio-political issues, struggle to find acceptance and hence marketability within certain temporal contexts.

In this regard, examining Molaeb's artistic trajectory alongside that of al-Hallaj provides a deeper understanding of how war, political struggle, and artistic media intersected across different contexts. The artistic conversation between Molaeb and al-Hallaj underscores the profound interconnectedness of regional artists, who shared and reshaped each other's visual languages in response to armed conflicts. Yet, beyond their aesthetic similarities, juxtaposing their works highlights how different political and national contexts shaped the role of artistic expressions of war. While al-Hallaj's prints engaged with Palestinian resistance through allegorical imagery, Molaeb's woodcuts reflected the immediate realities of the Lebanese Civil War. This comparison not only demonstrates how war informed visual expression across borders but also challenges rigid distinctions between Lebanese and Palestinian artistic movements, revealing a deeper network of solidarity, influence, and shared struggles.

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71. Amal Traboulsi, interview by author, Beirut, 14 October 2022.

72. Molaeb exhibited his prints in Washington in 1984, and in New York in 1987.

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Article

Tracing Lines, Forging Connectivity

The Tapestries of Amine El Bacha and Antoine Saadé (1984–1985)

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Abstract

Three colourful tapestries, made by Amine El Bacha and Antoine Saadé in 1984 and 1985, emphasize processes of creating connectivity in wartime Beirut. Their shared project of intermedial imagination and translation adapted Aubusson-style techniques to a modified loom embedded in a longer history of silk weaving in Lebanon. Their slow, creative process not only ensured the medium's continuance during the war but was also an enlivening force that deepened their artistic affinity and friendship. Forged within an experience of forced displacement, this bond speaks to the entwinement of artistic process and modes of social and ecological connection. Based on personal testimonies and collections, this article reconstructs an intimate art history gleaned from the layered processes of making and remembering, in which picnics in nature, shared meals, and loom building form an integral part of the engagement.

Keywords

Textile, Sensory Process, Collaboration, Interdependence, Memory

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Introduction

Three colourful tapestries, made by Amine El Bacha (1932–2019) and Antoine (Antoun) Saadé (1936–2012) in 1984 and 1985, emphasize processes of creating connectivity in wartime Beirut. Their shared project of intermedial imagination and translation adapted Aubusson-style techniques to a modified loom embedded in a longer history of silk weaving in Lebanon. A weaver from Zouk Mikael, Antoine was known for his aesthetic sophistication, versatility, and innovation, notably the adaptation of a type of horizontal floor loom that elevated the weaver above the floor.[1] Amine was an artist from Beirut for whom sensory experiences, notably in the genres of painting, literature, and music, converged in practice. Their slow, creative process not only ensured the tapestry medium's continuance during the war but was also an enlivening force that deepened their artistic affinity and friendship. Forged within an experience of forced displacement, this bond speaks to the entwinement of artistic process and modes of social and ecological connection.

Based on personal testimonies and collections of tools and materials preserved by the widows and daughter of the artists, this article reconstructs an intimate art history gleaned from the layered processes of making and remembering.[2] Picnics in nature, shared meals, and loom building form an integral part of the holistic engagement. Archival traces of tapestry-making among artists who left Lebanon early in the war situate the project and emphasize its relational nature. As artists Nicolas Moufarrège (1947–85) and Paul Wakim (b. 1949) affirm, it was the generative process that mattered most and retained shape in memory. Throughout the text, the use of first names rather than surnames is a gesture toward the intimate nature of friendship and close cooperation, and of engaging familial histories and fragments. The article's narrative structure takes place in three distinct settings to frame the collaboration before turning to the process of creating.

Zouk Mikael: Saada Hashem, Widow of Antoine Saadé, on Their Loom, August 2022

Saada sat behind a tall wooden structure, shielded from the sun in a back corner. Quiet, concentrating, fingers pulling the threads before her. The loom's long wooden beams feel soft and worn beneath her touch. The *nawl* (loom) is strung with unwoven fibre, looping in its continuous path above and through the device; the transformative motion of her hands and shuttle intersects their linear march. Sunlight pours into the cool dark sanctuary from an open doorway. The scent of the sea rolls in to mix with dust.

1. Antoine Saadé (also written as Antoun Saadé), the weaver from Zouk Mikael, was highly regarded among local weavers, as evidenced in testimonies taken from Antoine (Tony) Audi and Sanaa El Hani, personal communication, June 2018 and June–August 2022; he looms large in archival materials related to modern tapestry in Lebanon and is recorded in the history of weaving in the Musée du Nawl in Zouk Mikael. He is not to be confused with Antoun Saadé, the writer, philosopher, and founder of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP). It is possible that Antoine and Amine shared some of the latter's philosophical views, an affinity meriting further exploration. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, May 2025.

2. The conversations integrated into this article took place in French, English, and Arabic. All translations and paraphrasing are my own. I am grateful to Caroline Kinj and Sarah Sabban for their assistance with Lebanese Arabic in Zouk Mikael and their camaraderie in sharing these stories.

My presence disturbs her serene meditation. We exchange greetings, words, silences filled by the rhythmic beating of the heddle bar. My eyes rest briefly on small white bones, hanging sculpturally against the bare wood, tied through twists of braided rope (fig. 1). When I ask Saada about them, she reaches, almost automatically, to caress their smooth delicate structures. She smiles slightly, inwardly, a slow pause before she speaks. “They are bones from a shared meal,” she discloses, when, during the war, “we slaughtered and prepared our own sheep.”[3] We return to stillness as she weaves.

Figure 1: Loom of Antoine Saadé and Saada Hashem. Wood, bone, fibre, and metal. Zouk Mikael, Lebanon. Courtesy of Saada Hashem. Photographed by Jessica Gerschultz, 2022.

3. Saada Hashem, personal communication, August 2022.

Bones operate as joints, enabling the heavy, chest-height heddle bar beating weft into warp to move back and forth while affixed to the larger loom structure. Strong and enduring, they are better than manufactured metal parts, she says, and last longer. They do not damage the fibres. Left implicit is their reliquary function, traces of a family meal, the nourishment of a husband and son, now deceased, a distant daughter living abroad, the eyes of whom gaze at us from faded photos on a wooden shelf. Loom construction and human preservation are, in this space, indelibly connected, recalling the words of artist Paul Wakim, "when the wood is fragrant, the bond is stronger."[4] Paul's embodied, sensory memories of wartime forest walks, during which he gathered materials to make loom parts, inform my reading of this story.

Saada's loom was Antoine's invention. The family used to tease him for working above ground level, but his ideas spread quickly among the other weavers of Zouk Mikael who once used pit looms of a kind imported from Syria.[5] They wove across genres, prolifically and imaginatively. Fabric for cushions and slippers, luxury silk *abayas*, ecclesiastical cloths, "Aleppo purses," modernist tapestries. Antoine was a master weaver and teacher, renowned in Beirut and beyond.[6] He did not just instil knowledge from father to son, as was historically done in Zouk. He taught women, including Saada, his wife, during the war around 1986 when they lived in Beirut's Hamra neighbourhood; their loom overtook an entire bedroom. Antoine also, in those years of displacement, taught Amine El Bacha the laborious techniques of Aubusson-style tapestry, bringing the painter's melodious birds, suns, and stars to life with his hands.[7]

4. Paul Wakim, personal communication, March 2022. Paul is a Lebanese artist who, like Amine, experimented widely with materials: ink, watercolour, oil paint, clay, fibre, among others. In the 1970s, and well into the war, he engaged in weaving and loom construction, offering poetic descriptions fusing bodily and kinetic memory in our written correspondence.

5. Zouk Mikael, referred to colloquially as "Zouk," is a coastal town and municipality fourteen kilometres north of Beirut with a rich history of commercial trade (its name derives from its historic souq) and silk weaving that positioned its weavers in a nexus of textile exchanges that extended across the Levant and Europe. Zouk gained significance in the sixteenth century and formed part of the historic "Silk Mount" in the region of Mount Lebanon. It was home to several historic churches, including Saint George Church, a Melkite Catholic church, and Saint Doumit Church, a Maronite church, which patronized Zouk-produced textiles. I thank Sanaa El Hani, weaver and former apprentice of Antoine Saadé, for sharing her deep knowledge of this heritage, as well as Zouk resident David Kattan.

6. Sanaa El Hani, personal communication, June–August 2022; Tony Audi, personal communication, June 2018; Salim Saadé, personal communication, June 2018. Permanent exhibitions at the Musée du Nawl and municipal building in Zouk Mikael attest to Saadé's enduring status in the community.

7. I use this term here to refer to the twentieth-century practice of weaving pictorial tapestry on a horizontal loom with the aid of a numbered cartoon, in reference to approaches developed in Aubusson, France and adapted in Lebanon. See footnote number 24.

Lausanne: Fondation Toms Pauli, February 2022

A typewritten letter recovered in a Swiss archive casts a glimpse into the raw experience of one tapestry artist displaced from Beirut by the war. Undated, circa July 1978, it tells of loss, destruction, and suffering. In her account, Dale Egee (1934–2017), one of Antoine's apprentices and collaborators, wrote:

> In Lebanon we have lost everything. There is no tapestry weaving in the four villages where we worked together [Zouk Mikael, Nabha, Qab Elias, Aïnab]. Antoine Saadé's studios were blown up along with every piece of finished work. Antoine fled to Cyprus with his wife and baby and is weaving cheap carpets for the local trade. Selim Saadé [Antoine's brother, husband of Saada's sister] is working in a restaurant, Farouk Hashem [Saada's brother] is a bodyguard. All the weavers of Nabha have fled. In Qab Elias, Amal's father was machine-gunned to death and his home dynamited. Amal [Yamine] is a maid in the city now. Marie [Badr] works in a distillery, capping bottles. The atelier is dusty and abandoned. The Carons have left Aïnab without a trace. We have settled in Dubai on the Arabian Gulf, after a brief period in Rome.[8]

On its own, the letter crafts a narrative that the war was a definitive barrier to the medium's continuation. Dale mourns the dispersal of her associates, their lost plans (fig. 2). She speaks of an exhibition of their contemporary tapestry, which was in preparation for the Sursock Museum but regrettably cancelled, all possibly forgotten.[9] She could not have known that her letter, once opened and read by the jury of the ninth Lausanne International Tapestry Biennale in 1979, would be placed into one of hundreds of boxes on a shelf, and that these boxes contained thousands of other rejected applications, including from Lebanon.[10] She did not foresee that these archival, photographic, and fibre remnants might yield an alternative story, a retelling.[11]

8. Dossier of Dale Egee, application to the ninth Lausanne Biennale, archives of the Fondation Toms Pauli. Dale apprenticed at and worked with the Atelier Saadé Frères from 1969 to 1975. During this time period, she collaborated with weavers to create 145 tapestries in these four villages.

9. Dossier of Dale Egee.

10. Jean Lurçat and Pierre Pauli, the Swiss curator of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Lausanne, cofounded the Centre Internationale de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne (CITAM) in 1961. A non-profit organization supported by the government of Lausanne, CITAM assumed the primary role of organizing the biennales, from the first in 1962 until the last in 1995. It also compiled, between 1962 and 1995, an extensive archival record on modern tapestry which is now housed between the Fondation Toms Pauli and the Archives de la Ville de Lausanne.

11. Dale Egee's unsuccessful application was placed in CITAM's archive with those of rejected artists; the dossiers of successful applicants were housed separately in the same building. See Jessica Gerschultz, "Notes on Tending Feminist Methodologies," in *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*, ed. Ceren Özpinar and Mary Healy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 131–43. I am drawn to Tiya Miles's theorization of archives and the "archivally unknown"; Miles in turn builds on the scholarly work of Arlette Farge. Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021) and Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (Montrouge: Éditions du Seuil, 1989; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). My sensorial encounter with artists' rejected dossiers in the Fondation Toms Pauli forms the basis for my current book project *Fiber Art Constellations*.

Figure 2: Photocopy of a photograph with the typewritten caption, "Dale Egee with Antoine Saadé and Faroukh Hachem in her tapestry weaving studio in Zouk Mkael, Lebanon—1975." Dossier of Dale Egee, archives of the Fondation Toms Pauli. Courtesy of the Fondation Toms Pauli. Photographer unknown.

As part of his meticulous application to the ninth Lausanne Biennale, Nicolas Moufarrège (Mufarrij) submitted two sheets of colour slides encased in plastic with a handwritten list of artworks. His first slide was entitled *al Harb (un dimanche presque commes les autres, Sunday August 13, 1978)*.[12] Referencing the bombing of a nine-story apartment building in Beirut, which killed around two hundred people, Nicolas created a dark, ethereal fibrous landscape. This embroidered textile consists of blue and white floating rectangles, a mountain spiking like a seismic pulse, and red orbs flashing in the sky (fig. 3). Loose threads dangle from fiery discs and wriggle from the blue-brown rubble at the bottom of the work, twisted like hanging debris. Aside from its more literal depiction, the hanging threads also seem to suggest an un/doing which transcends the finality of completed work, casting shadows over any presumption of an object or event as detached or resolved. Fitting, then, that Nicolas's proposed tapestry, entitled *Phoenix*, was still a work in

12. The title translates as "The War (A Sunday Almost Like Any Other, Sunday August 13, 1978." This slide is the only known reproduction of this work, its blurriness a reflection of the rarity of (images of) tapestry made during the war, and the fragility of these records. Nicolas submitted slides of sixteen embroideries as part of his portfolio. He mixed Arabic, French, and English words in the title of *al Harb*. The artwork he proposed for display in the biennale was not *al Harb* but *Phoenix*, which was still a work in progress at the time of application. Dossier of Nicolas Moufarrège, application to the ninth Lausanne Biennale, archives of the Fondation Toms Pauli. The digital catalogue *Nicolas Moufarrège: Recognize My Sign* presents an invaluable record of the artist's work. I thank curator Dean Daderko for sharing his insight on this image with me. Jennifer Kikoler, ed., *Nicolas Moufarrège: Recognize My Sign*, exhibition catalogue, Houston, Contemporary Arts Museum, 10 November 2018–17 February 2019 / Queens, Queens Museum, 6 October 2019–17 February 2020 (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2018), https://issuu.com/thecamh/docs/moufarrege_pages, last accessed 22 October 2025.

progress at the time of submission, traced in pencil on needlepoint canvas, only one eye of the rising creature fully stitched (fig. 4). “The work has been born, and transforms as the days pass,” he wrote in an addendum to his application form.[13]

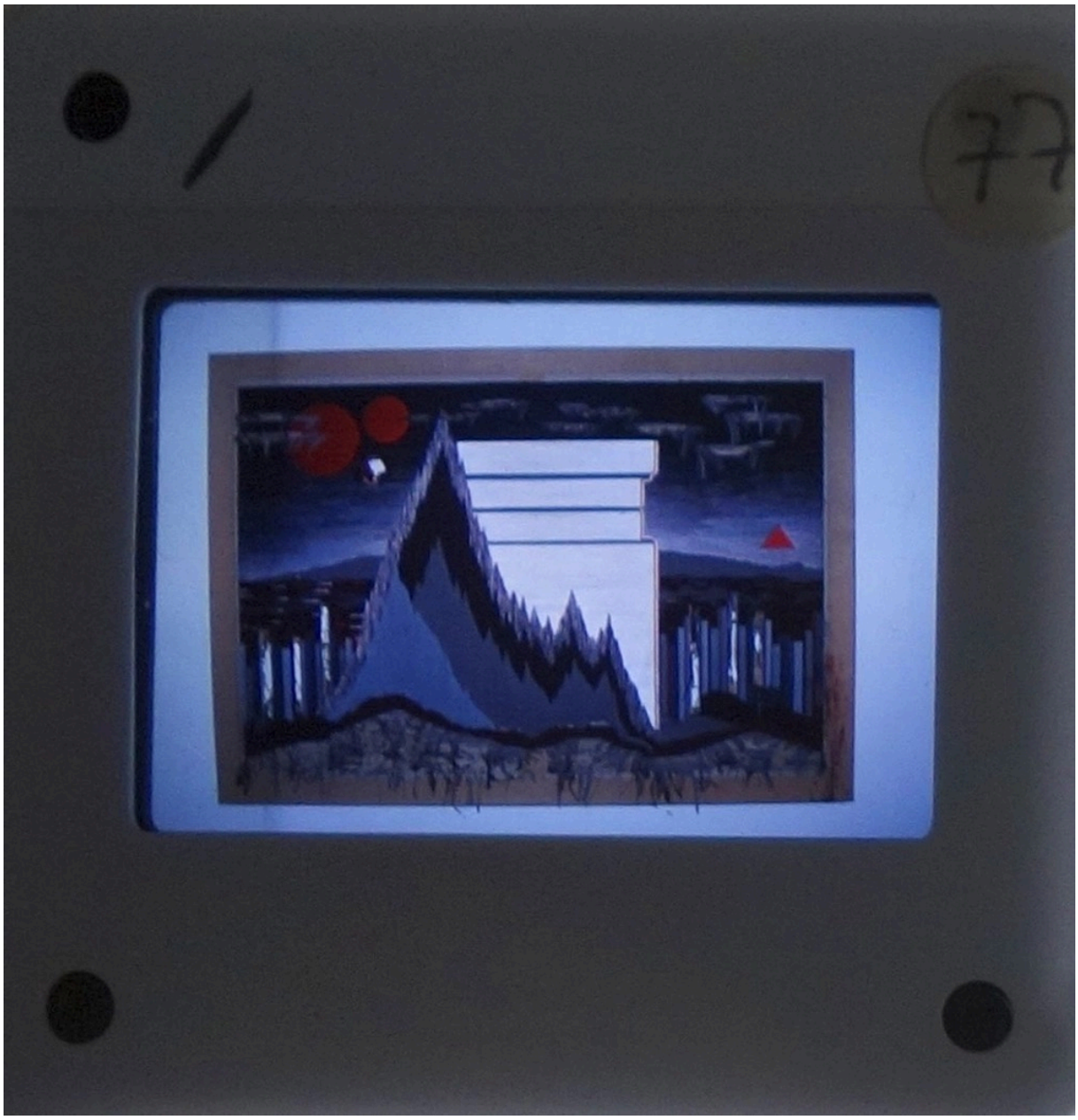

Figure 3: Moufarrège, Nicolas. *al Harb (un dimanche presque comme les autres, Sunday August 13, 1978)*. 1978. Needlepoint embroidery. 162 × 114 cm. Slide from the dossier of Nicolas Moufarrège, archives of the Fondation Toms Pauli. Location of the original artwork unknown. Photographer unknown, possibly the artist.

13. Dossier of Nicolas Moufarrège. This photograph affords a rare glimpse into the artist’s work in progress, illustrating his reflections on his processes of creation.

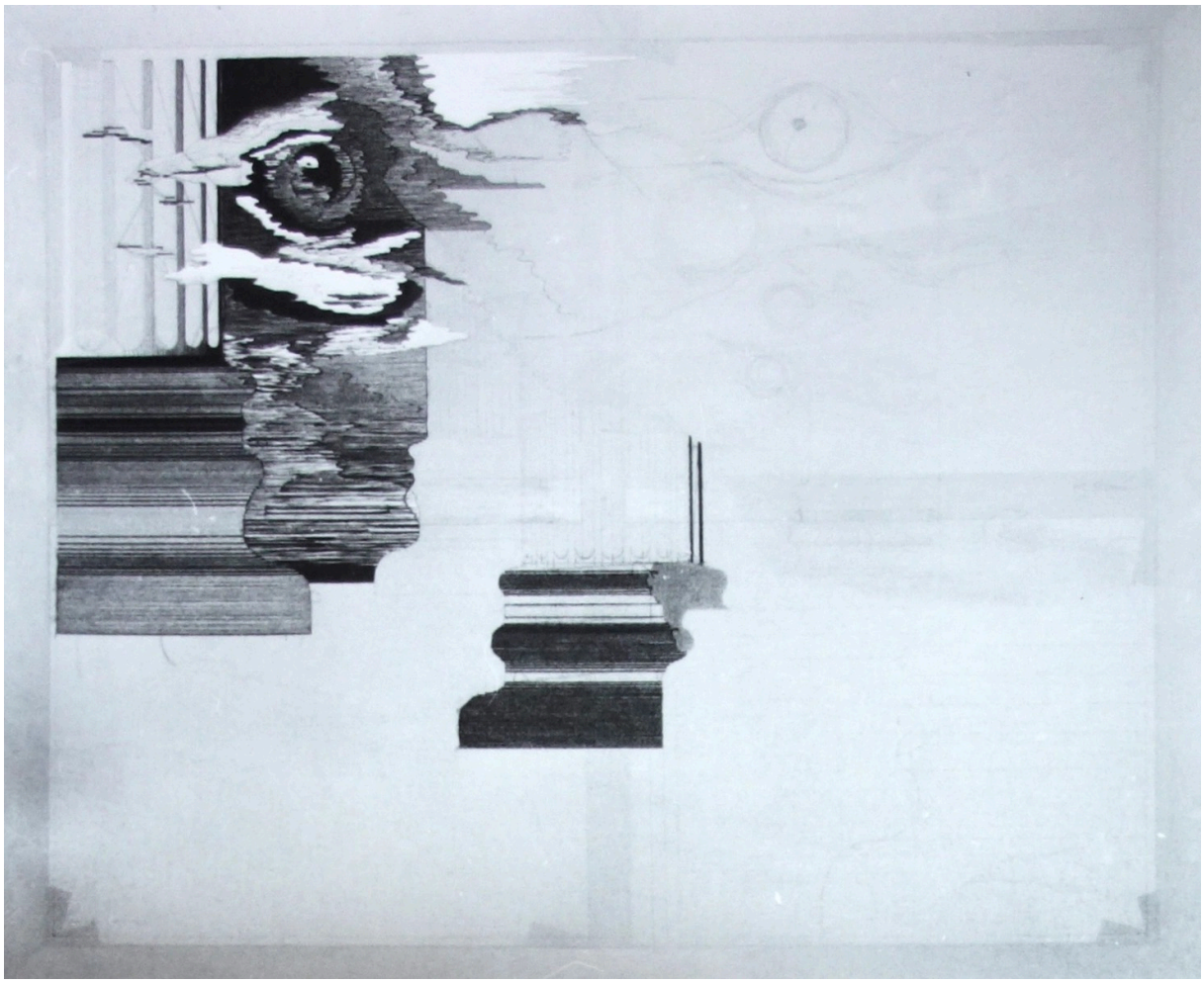

Figure 4: Moufarrège, Nicolas. *Phoenix* (in progress). Ca. 1978. Needlepoint embroidery in progress. Measurements unknown. Black and white photograph from the dossier of Nicolas Moufarrège, archives of the Fondation Toms Pauli. Photographer unknown, possibly the artist.

Like many works in fibre made during the 1970s and 1980s, *al Harb* and *Phoenix* are not tapestries in a strict technical sense. In the biennale forum, the nature of the tapestry medium and the appropriate terminology for its various expressions were fiercely debated and contested for more than two decades.[14] Some exhibiting artists engaged historical practices of cartoon-making and wall tapestry, while others experimented with fibre's pliability, softness, and spatial parameters to create textured, dimensional works equated with what critic André Kuenzi called "new tapestry."[15] By the 1980s, artists like Nicolas were creating fibre and cord installations, textile assemblages, or woven environments emphasizing the tactility of art forms deemed outside the realms of high art and traditional tapestry. At the same time, some artists and critics based in Europe and North America rejected what they perceived to be the rote, mechanical processes of pictorial tapestry,

14. Archives of CITAM and the Lausanne Biennales, shared between the Fondation Toms Pauli and the Archives de la Ville de Lausanne, preserve records of diverging discourses. For a history of the Lausanne Biennale and its debates, see Magali Junet and Giselle Eberhard Cotton, eds., *The Lausanne Biennials, 1962–1995: From Tapestry to Fiber Art* (Milan: Skira and Lausanne: Fondation Toms Pauli, 2017).

15. André Kuenzi, *La nouvelle tapisserie* (Geneva: Les Éditions de Bonvent, 1973).

deriding a division of labour that often separated the artist-painter from the weaver-labourer; in this conjecture, the weaver "executed" a painting from a cartoon (a full-scale numbered model) with little imagination or insight. Collaborative making and shared creativity were frowned upon in dominant discourse in favour of the exaltation of the singular artist-genius liberated from the constraints of craft.[16]

While Nicolas's practice combined embroidery, collage, and painted cloth, he identified this early needlework as tapestry (though humbly noting he was an "autodidacte [de la] tapisserie" on his biennale application). He likened his artistic process to a reconciliation, a conjoining of roles, using metaphors derived from his graduate training in chemistry. "A tapestry is like a chemical reaction," he once explained to readers of the Lebanese weekly magazine *La Revue du Liban*. "It is the brain that directs the hand's action. But at the same time, it is the hand that tells the brain what it can do. *It's a kind of balance between two spaces or several individuals or even the inner compartments of a person*" (emphasis added).[17] At its heart, then, tapestry comes into being through the forming of relations. It entails a bonding and the establishment of transformative connection.

Trauma, loss, and amnesia pervade some reflections about this period of Lebanese history, but contrary to Egee's grief-stricken letter, tapestry and collective making continued during the civil war. Of these practices, few sought to depict deadly imagery or specific violent events like Moufarrège's *al Harb*. As represented by the submission of the *Phoenix* (in progress), it was the very process of becoming, of tracing, of tending, of creating that mattered and retained shape in memory. Artists and families remembered endeavours to preserve a balance, an equilibrium. They recounted a form of reciprocity created through the slow processes of loom building and preparing tapestry cartoons, in connecting socially and with nature, even before winding the threads onto the loom beams and into the shuttles, well before interlacing weft with warp.

Hamra: Angelina El Bacha, Widow of Amine El Bacha, in His Studio, June 2022

Stacked on tables in thin papery layers, hand-drawn images stretch across the expanse of the long narrow room. Rolls of unused tracing paper keep the sheets in place, although no breeze stirs the humid air today. We approach the piles: brown, slightly ruffled, some pages with lightly torn edges (fig. 5). Clear tape fastens certain pieces together like a paper patchwork quilt. Leaning closer, we detect faint pencil lines beneath marker. It appears that a hand holding a black, sometimes blue, marker has traced over and around the finer markings; these thicker lines overlay the contours and widen the edges of each shape, a reinforcement. The dark lines have a fortifying visual effect, strengthening the design for the eye's ease in interpretation. A number floats in each distinct shape, one per field.

16. In the twentieth century, hierarchical distinctions like art/craft and high/low riddled the terms of tapestry and related fibre arts and destabilized their reception as "art" in various geopolitical and cultural contexts. See Junet and Eberhard Cotton, *The Lausanne Biennials*, as well as Elissa Auther, "Classification and Its Consequences: The Case of 'Fiber Art'," *American Art* 16, no. 3 (2002): 2–9; Giselle Eberhard Cotton, "The Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials (1962–1996): The Pivotal Role of a Swiss City in the 'New Tapestry' Movement in Eastern Europe after World War II," *Textile and Politics: Textile Society of America 13th Biennial Symposium Proceedings*, Washington, DC, 18–22 September 2012, Paper 670, http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/670; Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972); Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Jessica Gerschultz, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender, and Power* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

17. Victor Hakim, "Marian Claydon et Nicolas Mufarrij: A la Galerie 'Triad Condas International'," *La Revue du Liban*, 1973, 76. I thank Monique Bellan for sharing this article.

Figure 5: Tapestry cartoons made by Antoine Saadé and Amine El Bacha. Ca. 1984. Ink and pencil on paper. Measurements unknown. Studio of Amine El Bacha in Hamra. Courtesy of the Amine El Bacha Foundation. Photographed by Jessica Gerschultz, 2022.

"Whose handwriting is this?" I wonder aloud, in reference to the numbers (fig. 6). They appear as numerical digits, and occasionally, in word form. Angelina moves closer, bending down to scrutinize the small shapes. A red ink number hovers above a pencilled one in these scores of numbered fields. It is difficult to discern, she admits, sifting through the pages, "I need to see a five." After initial hesitation, she concludes, "it is Antoine."[18]

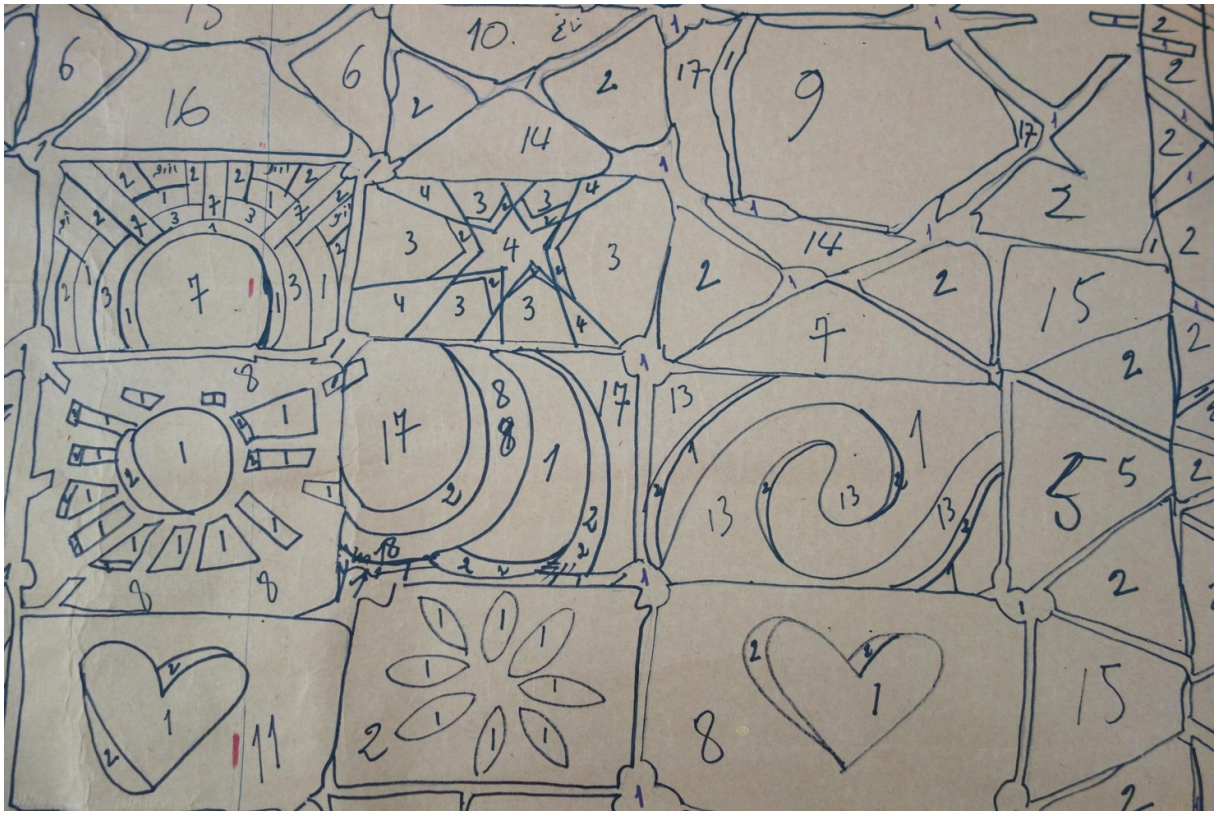

Figure 6: Tapestry cartoon made by Antoine Saadé and Amine El Bacha. Ca. 1984. Ink and pencil on paper. Detail. Studio of Amine El Bacha in Hamra. Courtesy of the Amine El Bacha Foundation. Photographed by Jessica Gerschultz, 2022.

Between 1984 and 1985, Antoine and Amine engaged in the long, slow process of creating a series of tapestries drawn from the material and symbolic repertoires of both artists. Together, the two men discussed, drew, envisaged, and transformed Amine's designs into multiple *cartons* (cartoons) and three large-scale weavings. Their shared project entailed shifting between paint, paper, pencil, ink, wool, and cotton, as well as between modes and scales of working. The faint tracings on the brown papers covering the tables of Amine's studio in Hamra form the initial outline of what would eventually become a section of woven tapestry, while the numeric notations encode the colour palette. The reinforcements in marker and ink finalize the two-dimensional input that Antoine deployed in reimagining his friend's paintings in wool; all the while he never lost sight of the floral, vegetal, and abstract shapes inhabiting the silk textiles of his own design.

18. Angelina El Bacha, personal communication, June 2022.

The resulting tapestries materialize the careful, protracted processes of creating art and connectivity in the changed cartography of Beirut. Undoubtedly, the 1980s saw disruption to arts events and institutions as people experienced ongoing devastation, separation, and uncertainty. Dale's letter and Nicolas's *al Harb* speak to these disturbances in different ways, and both artists submitted their applications to the ninth Lausanne Biennale only after fleeing Beirut for Dubai and Paris.[19] Yet, the 1980s were also a time in which creative practices developed despite, and even because of, this divided terrain and forced mobility. As Saada's delicate yet powerful bones indicate, hidden art histories can be gleaned from the layered processes of making, which in turn form and are formed by bonds. Nature walks, family picnics, neighbourly bonding, and creative collaboration at the loom: these all took place during the war and were at once artistic and community lifelines.

Angelina remembers that "in the war, at a point, there were people one discovered, people who were known through their friends. It was like that. People grouped in new ways."[20] Movements of people whose lives had not formerly crossed enacted bonds of friendship. When Antoine and Saada returned from Cyprus after years abroad, resettlement in Zouk Mikael was not possible. Rather, in 1984 they found an apartment in Ras Beirut near Hamra Street that was incidentally located near Amine's studio and intermittent family residence during the war.[21] They moved in with at least one loom. A mutual friend and neighbour introduced the painter and weaver, who had learned about each other through word of mouth. Angelina recalls how Antoine "brought an atelier with him."[22] Restricted in mobility and spending long periods indoors, the two men embarked on a multi-year collaboration spanning the war's third and fourth phases, which saw the aftermath of the Israeli invasion, the war of the mountains, and heavy internal fighting.[23]

Cartoon-Making and Loom Preparation

Amine and Antoine created tapestries based on Amine's paintings, generating them via the slow, meticulous process of cartoon-making. This intermediary stage facilitates an intermedial transformation, one in which a painting metamorphizes into a weaving on the loom. In the mid-twentieth century, cartoon-making became known in France and the Francophone world following a

19. Egee and Moufarrège took up residence in Dubai and Paris, respectively, though these cities would not be their final destinations.

20. Angelina El Bacha, personal communication, June 2022. In her book *Baghdad Diaries*, the artist and writer Nuha al-Radi describes a similar occurrence in Baghdad during the first Gulf War, when families and neighbours grouped in new ways as they coped with destroyed infrastructure and created new communities and solidarity networks. She wrote, "Everyone now knows their neighbours, children and grown-ups alike [...] In fact, the city of Baghdad has turned into little pockets of villages." Nuha al-Radi, *Baghdad Diaries: 1991–2002* (New York: Saqi, 2003), 29–30.

21. The family home of Amine and Angelina was located on the seventh floor of an apartment building near the Green Line dividing East and West Beirut. Because the flat and garden terrace were exposed to snipers and could be dangerous, when violence flared, the family would temporarily live in Amine's studio. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, July 2025.

22. Angelina El Bacha, personal communication, June 2022.

23. See Nadia von Maltzahn's introduction to this special issue for a timeline of the long 1980s in Lebanon. Nadia von Maltzahn, "Introduction: Lebanon's Visual Arts in the 1980s Defying the Violence," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 2–19, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.1. Monique Bellan notes in her contribution that exhibitions were at their lowest at the Galerie Damo in 1984 and 1985 due to the prevailing circumstances; she asserts that collaboration became a primary means of restoring connection among Lebanese artists and collectors at this time. Monique Bellan, "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 21–56, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.2.

collaboration between Jean Lurçat (1892–1966) and François Tabard (1902–69) in the historic village of Aubusson.[24] Building on earlier networks of artists and institutions seeking to reform and reclaim the valour of French tapestry, Lurçat popularized his techniques and approaches through writing and promotional activities.[25] He led the Association des Peintres-Cartonniers de Tapisserie for artists engaged with the translation of their paintings via the *carton numeroté*.[26] The group exhibited widely in France and internationally, including in Lebanon and Syria in 1951.[27] Ten years later, Lurçat cofounded the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennale, which would, following his death in 1966, become a site in which the use of cartoons (and attendant issues of labour, craft, and reproduction) became contested.[28]

Jean Lurçat first exhibited his tapestries in Beirut in 1949, attracting Lebanese patrons who collected the monumental works for their homes.[29] His associate Roger Caron (1925–91) began teaching tapestry design in the 1950s at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) as part of its decorative arts curriculum. To encourage the medium's uptake, the Sursock Museum (with Roger Caron) organized a competition among young artists in 1963.[30] The museum also hosted an homage to Lurçat in 1967, displaying artworks signed by the artist as well as commemorative tapestries woven in Zouk and Aïnab, two of the weaving villages mentioned by Dale in her letter.[31] In the years leading up to the war, Roger and his wife Monique, an Aubusson weaver, established the "Lebanese Aubusson" in Aïnab in a Druze community in the Chouf mountains, where they trained Paul Wakim in 1975.[32] The couple fled to France by the late 1970s, where Roger, too,

24. During the Second World War, Jean Lurçat, a French tapestry artist and François Tabard, director of the centuries-old Ateliers Tabard, collaborated in Aubusson, the site of historic workshops and national manufactories. Believing that tapestry had fallen into "decadence" and was in servitude to easel painting, Lurçat sought to reshape design approaches for the era of reconstruction. He advocated for thinking monumentally and numerically in black and white to create a new kind of composition. Lurçat's interest in restoring tapestry's former relation to architecture following the Second World War gained favour in postcolonial Francophone Africa among artistic and political leaders seeking to define new national and cultural industries and develop their countries' infrastructures. Private archives of Jean Lurçat, Paris. For an account of his brokerage in Tunisia, see Gerschultz, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École*.

25. Lurçat sought to "liberate" tapestry from the "tyranny of painting," calling for a return to superior craftsmanship via a refined selection of raw materials and limited colour palette, modifications in the production process, and a stylistic and thematic repertoire pertaining to humanity and the cosmos. Roger-Armand Weigert, *French Tapestry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962). Lurçat's mid-century writings include *Designing Tapestry: Fifty-Three Examples Both Antique and Modern Chosen by the Author* (London: Rockliff, 1950). However, Marie Cuttoli preceded her colleague Lurçat in initiating a project of pairing painters (including Lurçat) with weavers in Skida, Algeria, who interpreted their designs. Cindy Kang, ed., *Marie Cuttoli: The Modern Thread from Miró to Man Ray* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

26. For additional background on cartoons and tapestry in Western Europe and the United States, see K. L. H. Wells, *Weaving Modernism: Postwar Tapestry between Paris and New York* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

27. Association des Peintres-Cartonniers de Tapisserie, exhibition lists 1949–51, Archives de la Ville de Lausanne.

28. See, for example, press clippings related to the third biennale in 1967 in RMI Musée des arts décoratifs 1 Série C 5450, Archives de la Ville de Lausanne.

29. Lurçat exhibited with Marc Saint-Saëns in Beirut in 1949. His tapestries continue to decorate many homes in Lebanon. My current book project integrates the history of modernist tapestry in Lebanon and traces transregional networks, in which creators in Lebanon participated.

30. Press clippings and archival materials in the Library and Archives of the Sursock Museum. I thank archivist Rowina Bou-Harb for her invaluable assistance in locating these sources.

31. Press clippings and archival materials in the Library and Archives of the Sursock Museum.

32. Paul Wakim both studied and taught at ALBA in the 1970s, facilitating his relationship with Roger and Monique Caron. He formally studied with them in Aïnab in 1975. Paul Wakim dossier, Library and Archives of the Sursock Museum.

sought to apply to the ninth Lausanne Biennale, even as his collaborating weavers from the Shaar family remained in the Chouf for the war's duration. Weavers in Zouk knew and practised "Aubusson" techniques alongside other genres of weaving, as exemplified by George and Elias Audi, Selim Saadé, and, of course, his brother Antoine.

The multitude of drafty cartoons in Angelina's collection counter any preconception of Amine and Antoine's work as routinized labour. Laid out before us in these papery layers are the tools and stages of translation, adapted for the Zouk loom. Each number designates a specific thread colour; each cartoon corresponds to a different section of tapestry. Sometimes a hand-drawn arrow points to the continuation of a colour into the next band, overriding a linear divide. Erased pencil lines squiggle into visibility beside cross-outs and corrections. If we strain our eyes, multiple iterations of the design appear, one traced on top of the other. We can almost hear an accompanying dialogue, the voices of Amine and Antoine musing and chatting, "This shade of blue needs to extend over here as well," or "I reworked your heart to better suit the wool." It is a messy, creative process that played out over the course of weeks and months.

Organized horizontally across the tables, the cartoons for the three tapestries form a puzzle that Angelina and I try to piece together as we envision the completed work. This mental task is difficult because colour is represented by number only, which requires a unique way of picturing. As novices, we struggle in our attempt. Antoine, however, would have inserted the requisite paper into his loom behind the unwoven warp thread for guidance as he worked, facing one encoded section at a time. As he wound bobbins and wove, Antoine pictured what came before and after the section at hand in memory only. He would need to continuously recalibrate, visually and texturally, the different mediums and the representation of colour and form in each, moving back and forth in his mind as with his hands, which rhythmically guided the shuttle and beater.

In addition to cartoon-making, we are left to imagine the various stages of fibre and loom preparation, undertaken in tandem, which would have spanned months. The two men procured the threads, selecting wools saturated with dyes. Sitting with the painting, they might spend whole mornings looking, drinking coffee, assigning a number to each shade of paint and its colour counterpart in wool. They prepared at least one device, a rainbow chain of threads, a colour key tagged to denote each number; Angelina had preserved this chain, a fibrous archive often stored with cartoons, a trace that could be held, or hung, or touched like Saada's bones.[33] "What size are you envisioning, Amine?" Antoine might have asked as he shared with the painter his careful process of calculation and measurement. "What length do you want the finished pieces to be?" The size of the massive wooden loom helps determine the tapestries' maximum scale. Angelina recollects the loom was three metres. We do not know if Antoine brought wool with him from Cyprus or if he purchased it locally, or from where he sourced the sturdy cotton warp threads that support Amine's images.[34]

33. This chain was hung in the Sursock Museum in 2018, displayed next to a cartoon and one of the finished tapestries (fig. 9) in the exhibition *Stories from the Sursock Museum Collection 1934–2017*, curated by Yasmine Chemali with Sarah Rogers.

34. Before the war, Antoine used locally sourced, hand-spun and hand-dyed wool for many of his tapestries, so it is possible such material was used in his collaboration with Amine. Dossier of Dale Egee. Mahita El Bacha recounts that Amine loved art materials and constantly searched for them, keeping on hand a large collection bought in shops in Beirut and Paris. He would have purchased the materials for this collaboration. Mahita El Bacha, personal communication, September 2025.

Agreeing on the specifications, Amine drew cartoons to scale, spending many hours picturing, measuring, pencilling. Antoine chose a warp thread strong enough to withstand great tension, and began the rhythmic process of winding a warp, measured to the length of the tapestry-to-be. As one continuous thread, it must be wound around and around different posts, looping back on itself to make a cross for the shed ("this is the most critical part, Amine, creating the structure and space for the weft to pass"). Every final turn must be counted. It is at once a kinetic and cerebral process, as the brain makes a notation with each physical turn. Amine would have developed a deep appreciation for the musicality of the movements and the counting, one of many acts that occur before the weaving even starts.

Weaving

> In my mind's eye, I see a fish, a head and a clock; a leg, a tree and a bottle. I'm interested in putting these forms together, to arrive at a harmony. And that harmony is a story, a story without a subject, without an end or a beginning.[35]

So said Amine about his paintings before the war in 1972. He presented his intricate, thread-like drawings and vivid, lyrical imagery in the first exhibition of Contact Art Gallery, which also published a small booklet on the artist; colourful gouaches of patchwork landscapes and a bowl of fruit on a patterned tablecloth adorn its pages.[36] The work seems ripe for the slow orchestration of cartoon-making, loom preparation, and weaving, not the least because of Amine's compositional approach, his practice of listening to music while painting, his attunement to kinetic and sensory process.[37] The different stages of his collaboration with Antoine would mark the passage of time, a kind of lyricism in practice.

Missing from the studio today are Amine's original painted *maquettes*, although Angelina has unfurled two of the finished tapestries in an adjacent room (fig. 7 and fig. 8). Strung across easels, these works fill the space with bright, energetic imagery that seems to celebrate their very existence. We admire the softness of the wool, the seamless textural blending as the threads and colour change, the technical mastery of form, the harmony. "Antoine was exceptional," remembers Angelina. "Look how he handled colour; what nuance!" She admires Antoine's translation of Amine's forms and symbols, his deft handling of abstraction, and attributes this virtuosity to his embeddedness in Zouk's history of silk weaving. Angelina's knowledge of Lebanon's artisanal heritage spills out as she elaborates on how the textile industry had proliferated in Zouk and Mount Lebanon, and among weaving communities in Syria. Levantine silk production flourished

35. Amine El Bacha, in Joseph Fitchett, *Amine El Bacha* (Beirut: Contact Art Gallery, 1972), n.p. Library and Archives of the Sursock Museum.

36. Fitchett, *Amine El Bacha*.

37. Fayçal Sultan writes about Amine's "interweaving" of painting and music in his essay "Amine El Bacha: Memory in the Palm of His Hands," in *Partitions and Colors: Homage to Amine El Bacha, 15 September 2017–12 March, 2018*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Library and Archives of the Sursock Museum, 15 September 2017–12 March 2018 (Beirut: Sursock Museum, 2017), 5–11.

with nineteenth-century developments in agricultural production, commerce, and trans-Mediterranean exchanges extending to Lyon.[38] Angelina's respect for Antoine's lineage would have likely been shared by Amine as their project slowly materialized.[39]

Amine organized his vibrant compositions into horizontal and vertical registers that seemingly play with the undergirding fibre structure (plain weave) and technical process of construction (fig. 7, fig. 8, fig. 9). Yet rather than creating the appearance of a static grid, each surface teems with energetic flowing lines and symbols of life in bold primary colours. In their patchwork seas appear a world of natural elements and abstract forms: fish, flowers, wavy lines, spirals, moons, stars, rays of light flashing. Hearts pulse, waves ripple, birds chirp. A red scorpion-like creature crawls while a blue bird confronts a disembodied head, lips open like a classical bust awakening. Clouds, a lemon, and loaves of bread intersect columns of straight, squiggly, and diagonal lines. There are eggs, pebbles, the letter X. A pseudo-inscription in the upper right-hand corner feigns Arabic text. Amine's forms wander freely in a poetic space animated by scenery drawn from cherished gardens and landscapes. Playful yet controlled, the pieces submit to their tightly organized woven environs. The three tapestries were signed El Bacha and dated 1984 and 1985. They do not appear to have titles. Amine and Antoine might have referred to each work in progress by a name or certain characteristic when speaking to each other, but their descriptors are unknown to us.

During the long hours of collaborative making, Amine and Antoine developed a close affinity for one another. Amine visited Antoine frequently to see and discuss the weaving process. Conversations about their project morphed into wider ones that reinforced their friendship and solidarity.[40] Amine's daughter Mahita remembers "the energy of that moment, the room, the tapestry that took over the whole [space] [...] it was very big, an installation."[41] Her father would sometimes take her to see the progress. Although she was a child at the time, the convivial and contemplative atmosphere left a deep impression on her, as she recounted, "It wasn't just the artistry; there was more to it. They were aligned philosophically, politically. Antoine really listened [to my father]; he was a very good listener. I think my Dad felt comfortable around him. It was a harmonious relationship."[42] Their slow method of working reflected a growing kinship, an allowance for

38. Brochure and didactic text of the Musée du Nawl in Zouk Mikael, where local historians credit the nineteenth-century revival to the reforms of Fakhreddine II Maan. Lebanese silk thread was exported to Lyon. The collection of Zouk-made textiles in the municipal building of Zouk Mikael (on display beneath the public library) constitutes a valuable record of twentieth-century practice and material knowledge.

39. Amine also experimented with painting on silk with the intention of making limited editions of painted silk scarves. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, May 2025.

40. Michelle Obeid writes about the forging of friendships and other non-kinship relations in Lebanon in her article "Friendship, Kinship, and Sociality in a Lebanese Town." While she focusses on Arsal, it is a useful source for thinking about spaces of collaboration in a changing context marked by war. Obeid notes that during the Lebanese Civil War people left Beirut to seek refuge in Arsal; political solidarities and economic pressures during and after the war created spaces for new relationships including friendship. Obeid, "Friendship, Kinship, and Sociality in a Lebanese Town," in *The Ways of Friendship: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Amit Desai and Evan Killick (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 93–113. Ceren Özpinar examines artists' familial and friendship relations, forms of care and collaborative work, and interpersonal bonds in Turkey in her book *Art, Feminism, and Community: Feminist Art Histories from Turkey, 1973–1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

41. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, May 2025.

42. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, May 2025.

the other's pace. "I remember there was real conversation, rich conversations during the weaving process, a bonding."[43] The tapestries, she remarked, were not a rendition, a lifeless reproduction of a painting, but imbued with "the soul" of each creator.

Figure 7: Untitled tapestry designed by Amine El Bacha and woven by Antoine Saadé. 1984. Wool and cotton fibre. Measurements unknown. Studio of Amine El Bacha, Beirut. Courtesy of the Amine El Bacha Foundation. Photographed by Jessica Gerschultz, 2022.

43. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, May 2025.

Figure 8: Untitled tapestry designed by Amine El Bacha and woven by Antoine Saadé. 1985. Wool and cotton fibre. Measurements unknown. Studio of Amine El Bacha, Beirut. Courtesy of the Amine El Bacha Foundation. Photographed by Jessica Gerschultz, 2022.

Figure 9: Untitled tapestry designed by Amine El Bacha and woven by Antoine Saadé. 1985. Wool and cotton fibre. Measurements unknown. Sursock Museum, Beirut. Courtesy of the Amine El Bacha Foundation. Photographed by Jessica Gerschultz, 2018.

As Mahita noted, Amine painted similar imagery prior to the war, reflecting a stylistic and thematic continuity.[44] Antoine, in the Zouk tradition, had previously woven abstract and vegetal motifs: rosebuds, cats, crosses, butterflies, boats, curling tendrils, leaves, and triangles scattered across pillows, *abayas*, the toes of slippers. Amine's controlled compositions of whimsical objects and creatures enliven their plain-woven structure and suited their translation. Undertaken in a spirit of mutual appreciation, the project renders incongruous externally imposed hierarchies surrounding tapestry and degrees of creativity while illuminating the transformative possibilities of cartoon-making. The friendship, fuelled by a sustained adherence to aesthetic beauty and tolerance, offers a story of connectivity that transcends artistic boundaries; it moves beyond questions of attribution and the division of labour to foreground practices of bonding and interdependence.

The ties forged by Antoine and Amine exhibit an intentionality, a mode of working and living, an upholding of social values during a protracted war. Not only do the weavings materialize a stylistic synergy and aesthetic sensibility, but they also express shared commitments. To Amine, an important aspect of seeing, of understanding a painting (or other work of art), was to *like* it.[45] He wished for his audiences to feel joy, a sense of vitality and lyrical wonder. It seems probable that he, too, felt, and indeed *created*, joyfulness when he visited Antoine to observe the weaving of his designs, and when he brought his young daughter to watch their animated discussions at the loom.[46] It would have been a festive occasion when, toward the end of the process, Antoine meticulously tied the ends of the warp before cutting it, when he unrolled the tapestry from the wooden beam to reveal the whole for the first time. A sense of fulfilment may have infused the two makers as they remarked upon the finished colours and textures of their work, as they acknowledged a continuation and expansion of their artistic practices, as makers, teachers, and neighbours.

Connecting

> Amazingly, we have incredible memories from our time during the war. When East and West Beirut were split, we would go on picnics with friends as a form of resistance. We would drive to the Green Line, park, cross the border, meet our friends in Achrafieh, drive up with them to the north and have a picnic. It was like there was no war. Time felt suspended. We would then cross the Green Line with a suntan, a few new paintings by Dad, a bunch of wildflowers and many great memories. There are a lot of 'picnic drawings' that he made.[47]

Amine and Antoine's collaboration is one striking example of the highly creative patterns of social and ecological connection in the 1980s. Alongside visits to Antoine's studio, Amine's daughter Mahita retains joyous memories of picnics with her father, which she describes as a deliberate curation of beauty by her parents and family friends. They cultivated a rich sensorial relation

44. For an analysis of El Bacha's continuities, see also Bellan, "Ruptures and Continuities," and Flavia Malusardi, "The House Stands Tall: The Social Dimension of Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's Curatorial Activities during the Civil War in Lebanon," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 83–107, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir .2025.7.4.

45. Fitchett, *Amine El Bacha*.

46. See also Monique Bellan's quotation of El Bacha on his belief in happiness (1972) and representing the passage of time (1982), Bellan, "Ruptures and Continuities," 43 and 44.

47. Mahita El Bacha Urieta in Myrna Ayad, "Remembering Amine El Bacha," *The National*, 19 May 2020.

between art and life in and beyond the studio and loom space. The families' culinary activities, social gatherings, nature walks, and gardening reveal an interconnected form of artistry that infuses meaning into the vibrant imagery of the three tapestries and their collaborative making.

Mahita recalls the care and attentiveness shown by Amine and her family members when together they embarked on the lengthy process of cooking and preparing food, assiduously wrapping and packaging their cherished bundles. "We would cross two different borders and checkpoints [...] walking, while carrying the most complicated cakes and tarts."[48] Their sense of delight at their creative autonomy emerged with these extensive joint preparations, taken before arriving in the forested areas. Once there, they would spread blankets and share elaborate meals with close friends.[49] Mahita collected wildflowers and listened to birds, which Amine rendered (fig. 10). While the physical movement was not without risk and at times could be stressful, the communal effort and energy restored a sense of balance. Back at home, Angelina, too, would maintain a lush plant-filled terrace despite its precarious position overlooking the Green Line, which rendered the balcony garden vulnerable to snipers. Even when the family sheltered in the lowest part of the building, Angelina would ascend to water the delicate leaves and potted roots, tending the botanical sanctuary of Amine's compositions. "In the midst of chaos, they [Amine and Angelina] would do their own thing," or, in other words, they would "curate moments of beauty and connection, joy and delicacy."[50]

This convergence of, and reverence for, artistry and nurturance are reminiscent of the looms that Antoine crafted, transported, and maintained. He and Saada set aside bones from family meals to clean, carve, and integrate for sustained tension and flexibility, a custom to which Saada adhered after his death. Returning to the rhythmic sway of the heddle bar, Saada preserves a shared and embodied practice. These memories and touchstones draw attention to less visible systems of care and interdependence, in which Antoine and Amine participated and which they valued so deeply. "That's the trace," Mahita says of their collective efforts, "the impact left with me."[51]

48. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, May 2025.

49. The cover image of this special issue features one of El Bacha's picnic paintings as reproduced on the poster of his exhibition in Galerie Damo in Antelias, 9–20 December 1986. Contributing authors Monique Bellan and Flavia Malusardi discuss this work and the continuities, hope, and resilience it represented.

50. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, May 2025.

51. Mahita El Bacha Urieta, personal communication, May 2025.

Figure 10: Untitled tapestry designed by Amine El Bacha and woven by Antoine Saadé. 1985. Wool and cotton fibre. Detail of fig. 9. Sursock Museum, Beirut. Courtesy of the Amine El Bacha Foundation. Photographed by Jessica Gerschultz, 2022.

Conclusion

In *The Promise of Happiness*, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed writes, "We are moved by things. In being moved, we make things."[52] She elucidates that an object can be affective "by virtue of its own location" and "the timing of its appearance," and that to "experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object but to what is around that object, which includes *what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival* (emphasis added)."[53] Through this lens we might perceive the affective value of bones attached to a wooden loom and the tracings of lines and numbers on paper, and to reflect on what is behind and around the rainbow-coloured chain of fibre samples, which compose the three tapestries with their pulsing hearts and harmonious creatures, the flickering stars and suns that refuse to be blotted out.

Such charge resonates with the words of artist Paul Wakim, whose recollection of weaving and war drew forth a vibrant world of associative flashes. In the late 1970s, Paul brought his work to the forests of the Matn (Mount Lebanon). He had moved his atelier to the town of Baabdat, where he transported various materials and tools, including one of three looms he had built near the

52. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 25.

53. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 25.

Damour river in Jisr el Kadi.[54] Surrounded by trees and branches, he felt attuned to the sensorial and kinetic processes of loom-making and fibre preparation. He also applied this artistry to repairing household objects. Different looms and frames for furniture could be carved from different types of wood, he recounted, each emitting a characteristic scent.[55] On long nature walks he gathered branches for use as materials.

Paul describes the project of constructing a loom and repairing a chair as a kind of poetic and temporal journey, "I took pleasure in stretching raw linen threads, in lining a structure with pine branches [...] The wood and the weaving mixed, in two and three dimensions."[56] Natural materials, in turn, activated memory, reconnecting the artist with distant places, activities, and people, "When the wood is fragrant, the bond is stronger, especially juniper cade [...] the scent is so deep and takes me back to my childhood."[57] These scents prompted him to reimagine the balls of wool knit by his sister and mother, and the village fishermen mending nets. He also pictured, "the kites that I made, with reeds, coloured leaves and cotton yarn, balls rolled up on the stick held by both hands [...] as well as spinning tops thrown with thick cotton thread, the crosses of the chain [...] putting on my buttons of my linen jackets, which I sewed with the help of my sister."[58]

Perhaps, as Nicolas Moufarrège elucidated, the making of a tapestry is about creating "a kind of balance" between the hand and the brain, between individuals, extending to "even the inner compartments of a person."[59] Its processes engendered new relationships, facilitating the forging (and repairing) of bonds in a changed environment. They also continue to elicit strong, tactile memories, enacting a form of recovery and cultural preservation. As conveyed in the different settings of retelling, creators placed weight on connectivity, on processes of making and becoming, and on restoring a sense of balance, rather than on finished or autonomous pieces.[60] Social and ecological connection assumed multiple, layered forms through processes of making and recollection. In addition to those forged in real time, the slow preparation of cartoons, looms, and fibres strengthen, in perpetuity, bonds across temporalities. Tapestry, in form, movement, and memory, endured Lebanon's civil war as a constructive practice, leaving its multisensorial imprints as testimony.

54. Paul withdrew to his studio in Baabdat in 1977 while teaching in Beirut at ALBA. He brought with him loom parts (notably the beam) of one of his looms. His workshop in Jisr el Kadi was on a riverbank. Paul Wakim, personal communication, March 2022.

55. Paul Wakim, personal communication, March 2022. Our exchange took place over email while Paul was in southeastern France, where the scents of trees mixed in memory with those of Lebanon.

56. Paul Wakim, personal communication, March 2022.

57. Paul Wakim, personal communication, March 2022.

58. Paul Wakim, personal communication, March 2022.

59. Dossier of Nicolas Moufarrège.

60. In their introduction to *Women's War Stories*, Malek Abisaab and Michelle Hartman remark that every story has a life before and after the event, that it is "not only rooted in one time period." Malek Abisaab and Michelle Hartman, *Women's War Stories: The Lebanese Civil War, Women's Labor, and the Creative Arts* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2022), 7.

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Article

Fadi Barrage, an Artist's Diary

"To Think Things Out in Painting"

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Abstract

This article examines the artistic practice of Lebanese painter Fadi Barrage (1939–88), focusing on the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period marked by his displacement during the Lebanese Civil War and his subsequent exile in Athens. Drawing on an intimate archive of unpublished diaries, sketches, and personal correspondence, the article explores how Barrage's paintings functioned as both a refuge and a reflective process for navigating trauma, memory, and marginalization. Rather than depicting war-induced violence and desire directly in his paintings, Barrage developed a deeply personal visual language rooted in abstraction, which he referred to as "paint-feeling"—emotive compositions that concealed often erotic and affective content beneath layers of texture and form. Central to the discussion is Barrage's conceptualization of "Fleisseh," a term drawn from his childhood that came to denote both a real and imagined space of emotional safety, creative freedom, and queer desire. By engaging with Jill Bennett's theory of empathic vision and Kirsten Scheid's concept of *taswir*, the article situates Barrage's practice within broader debates on representing trauma and the interactive creation of meaning through image-making. His paintings offer insight into how experiences of violence and queer desire are encoded in visual form, particularly when open expression is constrained by social or political contexts. This article brings new attention to an overlooked modernist trajectory in Lebanon, showing how Barrage's personal notes and sketches reveal the ways artistic practice can serve as a means of emotional survival and a process for transforming trauma, displacement, and marginalization into an affective visual language.

Keywords

Exile, Fadi Barrage, *Taswir* (Image-Making), Art and War, Queer Abstraction

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Introduction

> Better, after many days or weeks of restlessness, liquor, changes of weather, sleeplessness, heat, cold, misery. And the necessity to think things out in painting. Has it all borne fruit finally? I seem if not quite settled, settling, down to some approach to things, to the materials, the manner, the matter of my life, by which I can explore & develop myself & my work with a modicum of serenity.[1]

Thus writes Lebanese artist Fadi Barrage (1939–88) in his diary entry of early October 1982 in Athens, where he had found some kind of peace after a number of restless years following the destruction of his studio in Downtown Beirut in the early phase of the Lebanese Civil War seven years earlier.[2] It was to be short-lived, as he was forced to leave Greece in 1985 and sailed to Cyprus. Weakened by illness, in mid-1987 he returned to Lebanon, where he died on 26 January the next year. Drawing on the artist's diary entries and notes from the late 1970s and early 1980s, drawings, sketches, and an unpublished manuscript by one of his friends, this article explores how the context of exile and precarity affected Barrage's artistic production, and to what extent Lebanon and the early stages of war he witnessed continued to be present in his work and thinking.[3]

"To think things out in painting" infers a direct relationship between the subjects preoccupying the painter and what he expresses through the medium of paint. Barrage was confronted with societal pressures throughout his life, not least due to being gay, and painting for him became a kind of refuge. It was a process through which he came to terms with reality—not through straightforward depiction, but through the material and affective possibilities of abstraction. As Jill Bennett has argued, visual art that engages with trauma or marginalization does not necessarily represent these experiences directly. Instead, it can work through affective resonance, evoking what remains unspoken or incomprehensible. Barrage's painting practice aligns with what Bennett calls empathic vision: an approach that allows trauma and memory to emerge through texture, form, and material rather than through explicit content.[4] Significantly, Barrage creates

1. Fadi Barrage, diary 82-X-XI-Oct.-Nov., entry from 3 October 1982.

2. In many of the short biographies given in exhibition booklets or biographical compilations, as well as in two official papers, his year of birth is given as 1940. In his diary entry of 3 December 1980, he writes he is forty-one that day, which would mean he was born in 1939—a date given by some sources such as the Sursock Museum's fourteenth *Salon d'Automne* booklet and an unpublished manuscript by the writer Soraya Antonius in the author's collection. I assume he was born on 3 December 1939, but only formally registered in 1940 as sometimes happened. For illustrated short biographies, see Michel Fani, *Dictionnaire de la peinture au Liban* (Paris: Éditions Michel de Maule, 2013), 79–98; Nour Salamé Abillama and Marie Tomb, *L'art au Liban: Artistes modernes et contemporains 1880–1975*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Wonderful éditions, 2012), 340–49; British Lebanese Association, *Lebanon – The Artist's View: 200 Years of Lebanese Painting*, exhibition catalogue, London, Concours Gallery, Barbican Centre, 18 April–2 June 1989 (London: Quartet, 1989), 96–97.

3. The principal sources of this essay are the personal diaries and notes of Fadi Barrage, which are in the possession of the author. These documents were left to me by my godmother Soraya Antonius, who had written a manuscript on Fadi Barrage's last series of works that was never published, referred to here as Soraya Antonius, unpublished manuscript. She was working on the manuscript in 1989–90, which was to serve as the text of a catalogue for an exhibition Barrage's family and friends were planning to hold in Beirut, showing his last corpus of over 400 India ink drawings that he had started in Nicosia and completed in the Kyperounda sanatorium in Cyprus. The exhibition never came to fruition.

4. Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 7–10.

space to explore affective experience and interpretation, which speaks to Kirsten Scheid's notion of *taswir*, or the interactive creation of meaning through image-making, where the "sura [image] demands interaction to form into visions not otherwise seen."[5]

"To think things out in painting" thus captures how painting became a reflective process for navigating personal precarity, memories of violence and love, and social marginalization. The article traces Barrage's journey from Beirut to Athens, highlighting the influence of war-induced trauma, physical displacement, and precarity on his work. A key focus is his development of "Fleisseh," a term derived from the name of his high-school boarding house denoting both a real place from his youth and a conceptual framework for abstract expression. Fleisseh works embody what Barrage called "paint-feelings," emotional compositions that concealed often erotic content under layers of abstraction. This strategy of visual masking aligns with queer artistic practices, offering protection and layered meaning in a hostile social environment. The article foregrounds Bennett's theory of empathy and Scheid's notion of *taswir* as guiding frameworks for understanding his artistic responses to trauma, exile and marginalization, while recognizing that there is much room for future readings.[6]

Having access to the artist's diaries and notes is a great privilege and opens up new ways to understand his art. For Barrage, writing was a way to structure his thinking; he was "not interested in the product" of his notes as such; "someone else, my hapless biographer to whom I hereby apologize for the tortuous ways, will use them," he writes in May 1984.[7] In this article, I take on part of that challenge. Bringing out the voice of the artist allows us to draw connections between his ideas, thoughts, the social environment and artistic production, and get a sense of the reality of living in war-imposed exile while drawing on memories. It also enables us to map out the artistic trajectory of an artist who to date is little understood.

Barrage's Early Trajectory and Bab Idriss (1972–75)

Fadi Barrage was born in Beirut as the eldest child of Bashir Barrage, a grain merchant who lived a comfortable life until faced with bankruptcy. Barrage had a complicated relationship with his father, and after completing high school as a boarder at Brummana High School, a British Quaker school in Mount Lebanon, and working for a brief period in the family business, he left to the United States to study classics at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s.[8] This was followed by three to four years in Paris, where he allegedly turned night into day and enjoyed his freedom with his friend the artist Georges Doche (1940–2018). He returned to Beirut in June 1967, but left again intermittently before settling in his hometown in November 1968 after the death of his

5. Kirsten L. Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects: Art and Sociality from Lebanon, 1920–1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 6.

6. There is new scholarly and creative work emerging in the region related to Arab understandings of queerness, gender, and sexuality, and it will be interesting to read Barrage's work in relation to these materials. See for instance Yasmine Rifaii and Nadim Choufi, eds., *I Will Always Be Looking for You – A Queer Anthology on Arab Art* (Beirut: Haven for Artists, 2025). I thank Jessica Gerschultz for pointing me in this direction.

7. Fadi Barrage, note mounted on paper as part of a collection of loose sheets, note from 30 May 1984.

8. Most accounts state he stayed in Chicago from 1960 until 1964. His official university transcript shows he studied from autumn 1960 to spring 1963; he in fact left the university before receiving a degree. I thank the Office of the Registrar at the University of Chicago for sharing his transcript with me. In a note attached to her unpublished manuscript, Antonius writes that he left Chicago before his exams, staying in Chicago from 3 October 1960 to 8 June 1963.

father.[9] He had his first two solo exhibitions at *L'Orient*, one of the main Lebanese daily newspapers whose headquarters also served as an active exhibition space at the time, in March 1968 and February 1971.[10] In 1972 he exhibited at *Dar El Fan*, a vibrant member-run cultural space founded by cultural activist Janine Rubeiz.[11]

In April that year, he left his family's house where he had been living with his mother, and moved into an apartment in Bab Idriss, the commercial centre of the city which was lively during the day and quiet at night, as few people actually lived there. As Barrage's friend, the writer Soraya Antonius, notes,

> one of the owners of the [building] was a close friend and rented him the flat on a basis of friendship; it was the first place of his own in Beirut and he was ecstatic about his freedom. […] He was probably the happiest soul alive in that richly self-satisfied town. There were problems occasionally, caused by his way of life, but perhaps the brief periods of fear accentuated pleasure. At any rate, this was a golden age. Hard work, productive; exhibitions, visits from buyers and critics; pleasant living, friends, lovers, adventures. He believed he was laying the foundations for a life of some success in his work, spinning a web of future strength.[12]

"His way of life" refers to living out his homosexuality in a traditional society, where there was no easy path to follow.[13] Barrage seemed to have found his way to navigate this life, however. After leaving Lebanon, he frequently referred back to his happy days in Bab Idriss, and an allusion to elements of his apartment are found in his drawings and paintings. In a sketch of August 1982, he studied the railing of his house in Bab Idriss (fig. 1), for instance, and later that year drew an abstraction referencing his kitchen there. The railing, drawn just after Beirut had been intensively bombed by the Israeli army in the summer of 1982 to force the eviction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), is a tool to protect, but it also separates. The particular shape of this railing evokes a penetration, which can be read in both an erotic and a war context. The same day of the sketch, he writes in his diary: "P.L.O. beginning pullout of Beirut this morning. I am tired, tired.

9. Barrage's complex relationship with his family comes out clearly in some diary entries, for instance in this note: "Evening, to stop aching at loss of this paradise, thinking of father + what he must have suffered with his world collapsing about him, bankruptcy + shame, insecurity, his house now an old and shabby near-fénement (like this?), and his wife, my mother, and Fawzan then a little child to start life in some decency and his bitter disappointment in me. I was thoughtless and unfeeling, and to him cruel." Fadi Barrage, diary Dec. 80-1981/20-11-80-6.2.81, entry from 23 December 1980.

10. For exhibition reviews, see Mirèse Akar, "Ce soir à L'Orient, vernissage de l'exposition Fadi Barrage: Un prince de la couleur," *L'Orient*, 27 February 1968; Victor Hakim, "Fadi Barrage à 'L'Orient'," *La Revue du Liban*, 9 March 1968; "Fadi Barrage: Demain soir, ce sera sa deuxième expo à 'L'Orient'," *L'Orient*, 16 February 1971; Victor Hakim, "Fadi Barrage à 'L'Orient'," *La Revue du Liban*, 20 February 1971.

11. For an exhibition review, see Victor Hakim, "Fadi Barrage à 'Dar el-Fan'," *La Revue du Liban*, 19 February 1972. On Dar el Fan, see Flavia Elena Malusardi, "Committed Cultural Politics in Global 1960s Beirut: National Identity Making at Dar el Fan," *Biens Symboliques / Symbolic Goods* 15 (2024): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.4000/13kxy.

12. Soraya Antonius, unpublished manuscript, 19.

13. The artist Ziad Abillama did a report on homosexuality in Lebanon in the early 1990s, where an anonymous interviewee noted that it was very difficult to live one's homosexuality in Lebanon at the time, being condemned for a long time of being "strange beings." Ziad Abillama, "L'homosexualité," *Femme Magazine*, ca. 1995, 6–21, here 10. A photocopy of the article was preserved by Ziad Abillama without further metadata. It seems the issue came out in 1995, but I have not been able to verify the exact date. I thank Ziad for sharing the photocopy with me.

I don't think I will ever go back there."[14] Tainted by memories of war, he continued dreaming of Bab Idriss as a refuge, however, "where [he] would discover in the ruined passages and moulderly remains a set of sunny rooms hidden from war, secret and all [his] own."[15]

Figure 1: Barrage, Fadi. *Diary Entry* ("Approximately the Railing in Bab Idriss"). 21 August 1982. Watercolour on paper. 16 × 25 cm. Private collection, Berlin. Courtesy of the Barrage family. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn, 2025.

14. Fadi Barrage, diary 82-VIII-Août, entry from 21 August 1982.

15. Fadi Barrage, diary 83-IV-April, entry from 16 May 1983. "Moulderly" likely means mouldy.

His last solo exhibition before leaving Beirut took place at the gallery Modulart in March 1975, just a month before the formal outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. Art critic Dorothy Parramore Eggerickx, a close friend of Barrage, starts her review of this exhibition with the following observation:

> As Fadi Barrage was explaining his work to me, I couldn't help regretting that he is the only painter I have known in years who could do so in such a lucid manner. That is because Barrage, besides being an original and totally dedicated painter, is an intellectual with a difference. The Camus definition of an intellectual holds for Barrage: the man who is simply more interested in ideas than anything else.[16]

This observation is confirmed in the artist's diary entries, in which his dedication to his art as well as his reflections on his approach to it are well articulated. He writes in February 1979, for example, that he "must distance himself from the visual approach and go more towards a mental one. Only in that way can [he] really paint everything, like [his] balcony in Bab Idriss, the bed with scrambled sheets, light, the sniper, Jamal."[17]

His approach to painting revolved more around an idea rather than something concrete. "This is the interest of this sort of painting and drawing whereby no longer a formal translation of an object as in cubism, but a graphic informal swift 'unpremeditated' strike at an idea, a feeling, a mood, through an object, and beyond it."[18] This emphasis on capturing feelings and moods through abstraction resonates with Bennett's theorization of art's capacity to evoke trauma and affect. As she argues, such art does not offer straightforward representation, but instead invites an empathetic engagement through sensory and emotional registers that gesture toward experiences often too complex or painful to depict directly.[19] In this vein, let us turn to how Barrage experienced and processed the early phase of the civil war.

War-Time Beirut (1975–76) and Processing the War from Athens

In October 1975, the fighting that had started in different locations in Lebanon earlier that year reached Bab Idriss. Downtown Beirut was especially affected by the initial phase of the war, the so-called two-year war.[20] Barrage had to leave his apartment, and after attempting to return, he was evacuated during the second round of fighting there later that year. When he revisited Bab

16. Dorothy Parramore Eggerickx, "Barrage at Modulart This Week: A Continuous Embrace with Mortality," *Gallery*, March 1975, 56–57.

17. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-I.31-II.6/7, entry from 4 February 1979. In her review of Barrage's *Modulart* exhibition, Yolande Agémian describes how the last of the four exhibition rooms was dedicated to "Gamal et sa famille" [Jamal and his family], which indicates the centrality of Jamal as a subject. Y. A., "Fadi Barrage," *Le Soir*, March 1975 [exact date missing; the exhibition was held 11–23 March 1975 according to its poster]. Jamal was one of Barrage's lovers who frequently appears in his diary entries, and who inspired Barrage's figurative drawings.

18. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-III.4, entry from 7 March 1979.

19. Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 7–10.

20. The "two-year war," the initial phase of the civil war, lasted from April 1975 to November 1976. The centre of Beirut was destroyed in December 1975, and divided by a demarcation line into a predominantly Muslim West and essentially Christian East. Dima de Clerck and Stephane Malsagne, *Le Liban en guerre: De 1975 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2025), 73–76.

Idriss briefly in the spring of 1976, he found his studio pillaged and destroyed.[21] During this time, he rented a small place in the West Beirut quarter of Raouché. The violence he experienced first-hand did not leave him indifferent. On 30 December 1975 he writes:

> The only way to paint all, throat-slitting in Bab-Edriss[22] & all. What I have to say, what has to be said, what has to come through one day before it chokes, the horror of a sunny afternoon in Bab-Edriss when three young men rang my downstairs bell asking who lives here.
>
> The boy in the hands of a sick man, a maniac, who had lowered him naked into an empty bathtub, his hands tied behind his back.
>
> Kill something not only sentient, but aware & responsive. Kill your own kind.
>
> Their war is bloodier than they realize. What has to come through itself makes the idiom, modifies the language well-rehearsed to the message. Colour tempera, transparent & opaque, colour not line.[23]

His repulsion at the war comes out clearly, as does Barrage's distancing itself from it; it is "their" war. The deep impact the brutality of violence committed during the war has had on him can be strongly felt; it is almost as though Barrage chokes while writing these lines. The references to the "throat-slitting" and "the boy in the hands of a sick man" refer to a scene of torture he witnessed, and that he describes in gruesome detail in a rough undated diary entry in February 1976, preceded by a pragmatic "same action and texture as in the small torture paintings."[24] The scene as described in this later entry has a clear homophobic dimension to it, which must have accentuated its traumatic effect on Barrage. His reflection on how to digest through his work what he has been witnessing and suffering—the "horror of a sunny afternoon in Bab-Edriss"—, as well as on the method of representation—"what has to come through itself makes the idiom"—indicates an acute awareness of how artistic language must adapt to convey trauma and violence. Painting through idiom is shaped by the emotional weight of the subject matter, resisting literal depiction.

War motifs preoccupied him for a couple of years, not continually but periodically. The 1976 massacre of Tall al-Za'tar, in which Palestinian civilians were killed by Christian militia after a months-long siege, was one of the themes he treated when already living in Athens.[25] Barrage

21. Antonius, unpublished manuscript, 19–20. An exhibition of works from his destroyed studio took place in January 1981 at Galerie Rencontre, when he had already been living in Athens for a few years. The gallery belonged to the brothers Michel and Antoine Fani, with whom Barrage had stayed in touch after leaving Beirut, as evident from both his diaries and material published on Antoine Fani's Instagram page (@fani_antoine). See https://www.instagram.com/fani_antoine/, last accessed 23 May 2024. For an exhibition review, see Joseph Tarrab, "Le fumeur et la fumée: Fadi Barrage à la Galerie 'Rencontre'," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, January 1981.

22. Barrage spelled place names like Bab Idriss or Dhour Choueir inconsistently; in the quotations they are rendered the way he spelled them in each instance.

23. Fadi Barrage, diary Monday 15 December 1975, entry from 30 December 1975.

24. Fadi Barrage, diary Monday 15 December 1975, entry undated (following entry from 5 February 1976).

25. The siege of Tall al-Za'tar, a Palestinian refugee camp in north-eastern Beirut, from January to August 1976 ended in a massacre of Palestinian civilians by Christian militias. It was one of the landmark massacres of the civil war. The siege has been treated as a subject by other artists, such as Etel Adnan in her book *The Arab Apocalypse* (Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo, 1989), Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata, or Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi. On Azzawi and Boullata's interpretation of the events, see Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 204–9.

had left Beirut in July 1976, first moving to Alexandria (July–October 1976), then Istanbul (October 1976–January 1977), before settling in Athens in January 1977. Early notes from Greece reveal his struggle to depict such scenes:

> Woman running forward, screaming, two children in her arms, one of them looking straight at me, terrified, photograph Tall al-Zaatar, how to paint this without sentimentality, or bravura, or too much detail, merely a hint of horror and tragedy.[26]

In his diary, Barrage described recurring symbols—in an entry he labelled as "frames for different portions of an idea" (fig. 2)—such as cupboards, mirrors, jars, niches or refuges. The entry includes ones specific to the experience of war, such as "barbed wire" and "wedge as war engine." He writes about another sketch of the same day (fig. 3):

> 1/4 sheet of Schoeller of this, reduced to the simplest: warrior's face an archaic Greek helmet, her hand much less imperious, more helpless, her expression too. Very satisfactory combination of 'abstract' triangle wedge and helmet with the good realism of the mother & child.[27]

In this pencil drawing composed of overlapping profiles and structural divisions, the gridded format serves as both framing and fragmentation. The central figure that fills three quarters of the overall frame, the mother with child, comes across as both vulnerable and assertive, trying to protect her child by raising her oversized hand. The multiple rectangles the mother and child are placed in can be read as a niche or refuge, as decoded in fig. 2, while the wedge containing the warriors is described as a war engine. There is a tension between the geometric rigidity of the grid and the profiles of the two warriors on the one hand, and on the other the emotive mother clutching her child, which started to become more abstract. This interplay between form and subject suggests how empathy can be embedded in art: the drawing does not simply illustrate suffering but evokes the emotional textures of vulnerability and protection, inviting viewers into an affective encounter rather than a straightforward narrative.

26. Fadi Barrage, diary 1979-July-October-1-86, entry from 22 September 1979. He mentions drawings of Tall al-Za'tar also in his diary entries of 4 and 5 March 1978.

27. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-II.13-19, entry from 13 February 1979.

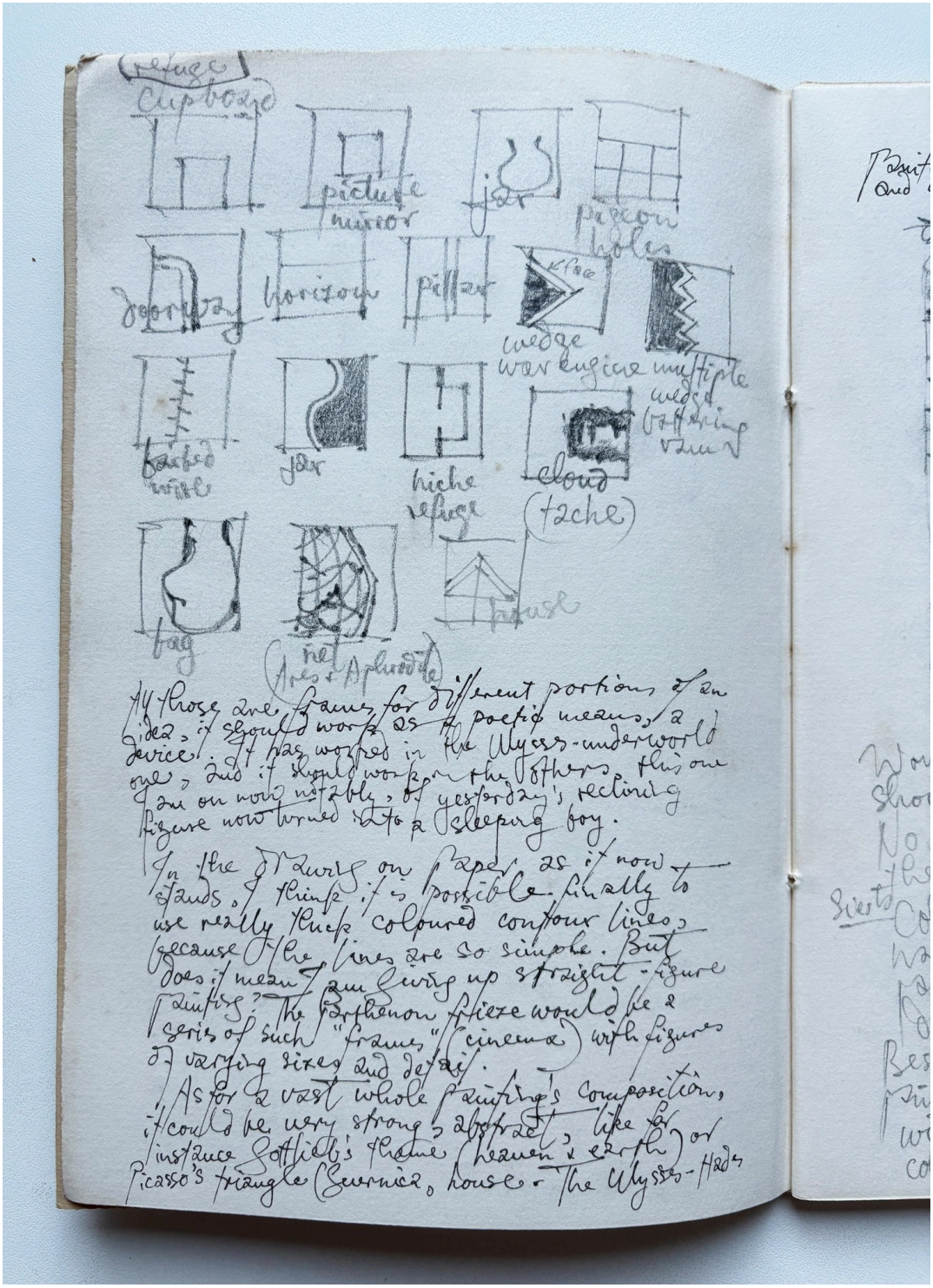

Figure 2: Barrage, Fadi. *Diary Entry* (“Frames for Different Portions of an Idea”). Diary 79-II.13-19, entry from 13 February 1979. Pencil and ink on paper. 16.4 × 25 cm. Private collection, Berlin. Courtesy of the Barrage family. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn, 2025.

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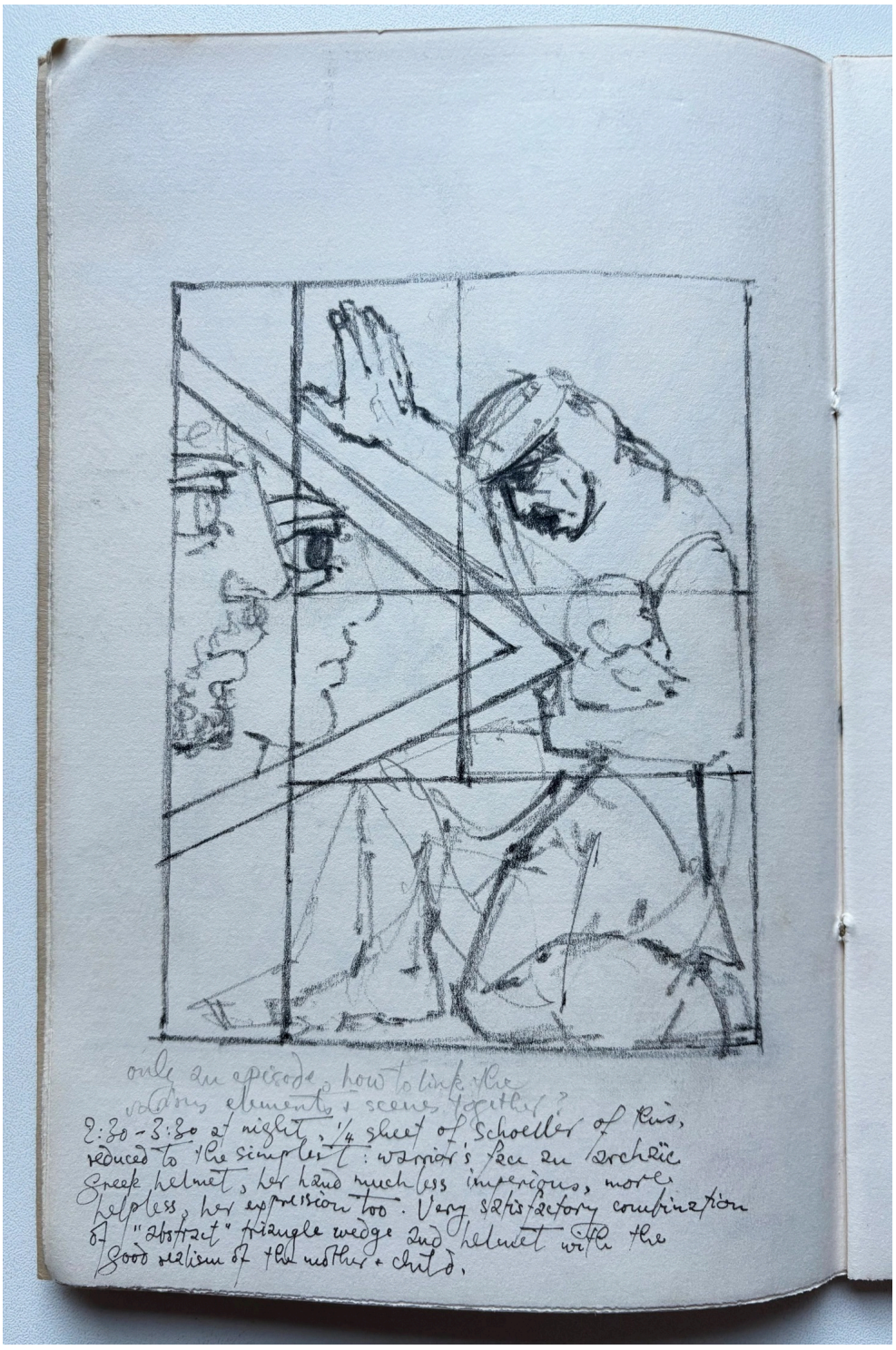


Figure 3: Barrage, Fadi. *Sketch and Notes in Diary*. Diary 79-II.13-19, entry from 13 February 1979. Pencil and ink on paper. 16.4 × 25 cm. Private collection, Berlin. Courtesy of the Barrage family. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn, 2025.

Barrage was deeply concerned with translating his more figurative drawings into abstract paintings. He believed figuration worked best in drawings or in small format paintings, with the exception of portraits.[28] Reflecting on the mother and child motif, he elaborates:

> But I am wondering about one further step to take, in the direction of yet greater abstraction: Not merely abstraction in the sense of a simplification of the figure into a calligraphic design, but an abstraction further of this design into real uninhibited brushstrokes: I no longer mean what I used to do in Raouché, that is a strictly figurative idea worked to abstraction of brushwork & colour, but only a further abstraction into paint of a drawing already completely abstract [...]. What would have happened in the case of this painting would be that the mother & child would have become less literal; possibly more powerful? This is the sort of thing I must try for this evening. And to begin with some very free drawings here (fig. 4).[29]

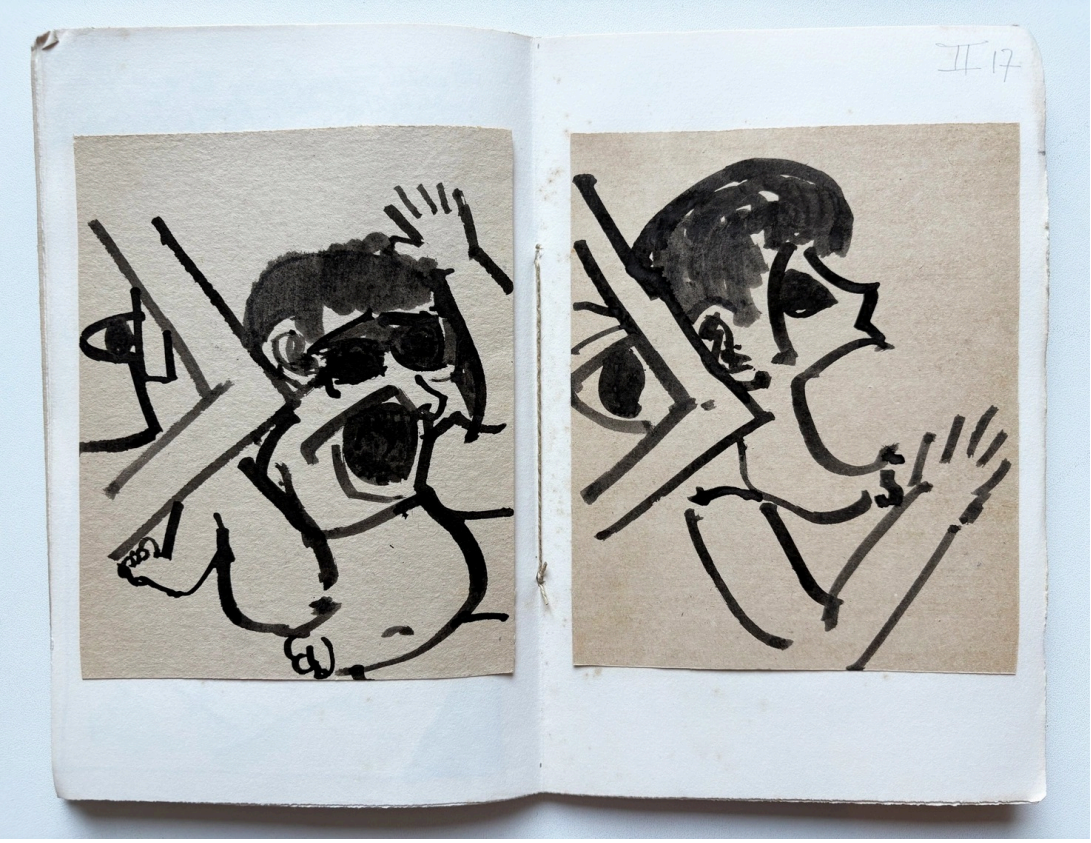


Figure 4: Barrage, Fadi. *Sketch in Diary, double-page*. Diary 79-II.13-19, entry from 17 February 1979. Watercolour on paper. 32.8 × 25 cm. Private collection, Berlin. Courtesy of the Barrage family. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn, 2025.

28. "Keep all figurative painting very small indeed. No large canvases with figures in them unless monochrome anatomy-types or portraits (which is the same sort of work)." Fadi Barrage, diary 82-X-XI-Oct.-Nov, entry from 4 October 1982.

29. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-II.13-19, entry from 17 February 1979.

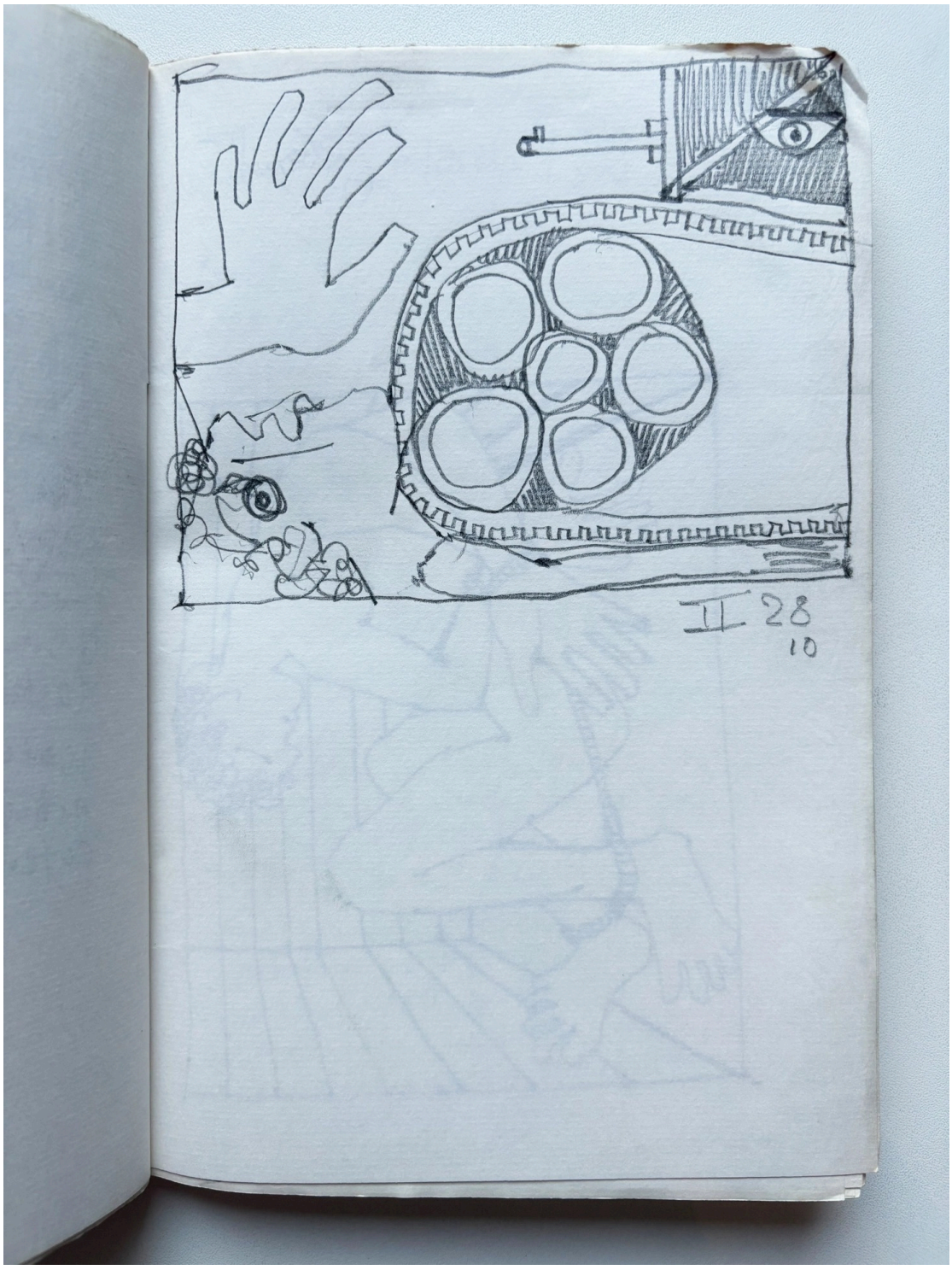


Figure 5: Barrage, Fadi. *Sketch in Diary.* Diary 79-II.24-III.4, entry from 28 February 1979. Pencil on paper, 16.4 × 25 cm. Private collection, Berlin. Courtesy of the Barrage family. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn, 2025.

Figure 6: Barrage, Fadi. *Study of the Sleeper*. 15 December 1982. Tempera on paper. 17 × 25.7 cm. Private collection, Berlin. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn, 2025.

He distinguishes in his work between drawing and painting, the former often being well-rehearsed sketches that could then be transformed into much more spontaneous and experimental paintings.[30] He wonders whether his depiction of the mother and child, by becoming less literal, would become more powerful. This again aligns with the idea that art engages viewers through affective cues that open space for emotional reflection.[31]

The last explicit war sketch I have seen in his diaries dates from February 1979, depicting a tank rolling over a hapless youth grasping for help (fig. 5).[32] The same day, he sketched out some of his recurrent motifs, including feet, an abstracted garden, a sleeping boy. While he clearly followed what was happening in Lebanon, he always returned to his conviction that life, art, and goodness would prevail over destruction.[33] He writes in 1978 that "the affirmation of life [was] more important than anything else. No attempt at all sorts of massacres, it is not necessary to destroy in this way, rather by stating the opposite, life, love, sleep."[34] In a series of studies on the sleeping boy (fig. 6), Barrage contemplated further on how his drawings would translate into paintings. I have focused on this practice elsewhere, arguing how Barrage's work on the sleeper and figurative drawings of the male nude depended on how confident he felt in relation to his surroundings, in material, emotional and security terms.[35]

Landscapes were not one of his motifs, and he was explicit about differentiating his work from his peers in Lebanon who had turned to this genre during the war.[36] The following passage from March 1979 reveals some of his deliberations about processing the war through painting in relation to the market and his peers:

> And to hell with their drawing-rooms, mosaics of shimmering colour, soft transitions, blurred vague statements, mêlé-fondu, chassé-croisé and the rest. I could have done it if I had been a landscape-painter.
>
> And I could make them now by giving them deliberately abstract paintings […], simply to paint without ever really attempting to depict or delineate the subject in any way […] letting it come forth if it can […] end up with absolute rubbish like everyone else's 'terres d'ombre' and other shit.
>
> Figures in a landscape, Fleisseh garden, water lilies!!

30. Unfortunately, I have not yet seen any paintings of the subjects described in these war sketches; there is still much work to be done to document the whereabouts of Barrage's paintings.

31. Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 7–12.

32. The next page of his notebook, which shines through in the reproduction, depicts a young man in an enclosure with his hands tied behind his back. It is an idiomatic depiction of what Barrage writes about on 30 December 1975, quoted above, "the boy in the hands of sick man […], his hands tied behind his back," a reappearing motif in his work.

33. Fadi Barrage, diary 1979-July-October-1-86, entry from 1 September 1979, writing about how Schubert's "Trout" was his song of victory.

34. Fadi Barrage, diary 478, entry from 10 March 1978.

35. For a detailed analysis of this series in relation to a notion of living in precarity, see Nadia von Maltzahn, "1982: Fadi Barrage, Sleeping Boy Drawings," in *Chronicle of the 1980s: Representational Pressures, Departures, and Beginnings in the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey*, ed. Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, forthcoming).

36. For a discussion of the practice of landscape painting in 1980s Lebanon, see Monique Bellan, "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 21–56, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.2.

> *But*:
> if I were to think of Goya's *almost* incomprehensible drawings, and proceed from there [...]
> horrors of war
> ruins of Bab Idriss, ruin in general
> no pretty colour
> That might be paint as paint, and leave the other subjects for drawing.
> Jamal in my bedroom for instance [...][37]

This passage highlights Barrage's contempt for some of the work produced at the time primarily to satisfy market demands and decorate drawing rooms. His sarcastic dismissal of "mosaics of shimmering colour," "soft transitions," and "chassé-croisé" critiques the tendencies of painting that had become widespread in Lebanon's commercial art scene during the war, where gallerists often sold decorative works. His suggestion that he could have made "them now by giving them deliberately abstract paintings" reads as a critical comment on artistic compromise. At the same time, the passage presents a deeper reflection on the representational capacity of painting itself. While he imagines "paint as paint," stripped of "pretty colour," painting for him holds the potential to engage with the horrors of war, but only if it resists both aestheticization and literal depiction. Figurative depictions are left for drawing. The idea of paint as paint is reinforced in a diary entry later that year:

> If I am to be absolutely honest then paint must be just paint, with no attempt at 'saying' anything that can be said in any other way, or even thought in any other way, therefore I must have no thought in my head when approaching the canvas [...] Any thought that will come through will be most necessarily a painter's thought, not a novelist's or poet [sic] or anything else.[38]

What he values is a form of visual language that is suggestive, materially grounded and "almost incomprehensible," recalling the emotional ambiguity and affective force of Goya's war drawings.[39] Rather than depict ruins or bodies in explicit terms, painting becomes a space where the trauma of war might be registered indirectly, through texture, tone, and abstraction, allowing its presence to emerge through the medium itself. For Barrage, it comes back to a differentiation between painting and drawing, abstraction and figuration, which we will look into further now when analysing one of his main entry points to painting, what he refers to as Fleisseh.

Fleisseh

Barrage turned to abstraction not only as a strategy for coping with trauma, but also as a means of safeguarding emotional and erotic content within his work. Central to this was the conceptual and affective method of Fleisseh. In a July 1979 letter to restorer and newly minted gallerist Antoine Fani, Barrage attempts a chronology in which he sketches out seven different "manners"

37. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-III.4, entry from 6 March 1979. On Jamal, see also FN 17.

38. Fadi Barrage, diary 1979-July-October-1-86, entry from 27 August 1979.

39. In his series of eighty-two etchings, *The Disasters of War*, produced between 1810 and 1820, Francisco Goya (1746–1828) portrayed the violence resulting from the Spanish War of Independence.

of his work of the past fifteen years, moving between (1) rigorous figuration ("figuration linéaire très rigoureuse, très primitive"), (2) rigorous abstraction ("abstraction linéaire très rigoureuse"), (3) more nuanced abstraction ("Refuges etc. Abstraction linéaire plus nuancée"), (4) abstract calligraphy ("Peintures calligraphiques abstraites"), (5) abstract figuration ("Figurations 'abstraites'"), (6) figures ("Figures (portraits, mangeurs d'olives, etc.)"), and (7) what he refers to as Fleisseh, a combination of (3) and (4) ("'Fleisseh', entre 3 et 4"). At the time of writing, he was practising manners (5), (6), and (7), Fleisseh being the only manner he practised throughout all fifteen years documented (1964–79).[40] So what was Fleisseh?

Let us consider these selected passages from his diary:

> Too now therefore Fleisseh, divisions, quarters of a city, rooms in a house, the refuge and finally now the Fleisseh garden [...]
> Tomorrow studies of the house for Fleisseh, maybe even individual studies for the different quarters. [...]
> And in Fleisseh Circe's house there is a room with woven fabric on its stripes! [...]
> Remember sleeper with refuge and the "Socrates" with Fleisseh.[41]

> Some abstracts with room for free 'figurative' brushwork, Fleisseh, handwriting, 'figures' in a 'refuge' garden [...] with the Fleisseh 'flower beds' and the room in the back of Teta's [grandmother's] garden where the 'madwoman' lived.[42]

> Fleisseh the only subject for painting and now make the best of it
> dark or clear, blood or sperm or saliva on the lips
> But it must never be *directly* of Fleisseh, but in fact of anything else, set up in that context for contemplation.[43]

This last statement is important. There was a real Fleisseh: it was the name of his boarding house at Brummana High School, where he was sent age eleven. Unhappy at first, he settled down and grew to love the place.[44] At times in his notes, Barrage referred to the "real" Fleisseh, which principally denoted the garden around the house (the Fleisseh flower beds, the Fleisseh garden as mentioned in the quotes above), sometimes the house itself (the "golden stones of the actual Fleisseh"[45]). But mainly Fleisseh stood in for a deeply felt emotion that was translated into largely abstract painting. It is, he writes, "not a theme, it is a process, a manner, an approach to something. It is not itself an object of meditation, except in very philosophical terms."[46] It was born

40. Antoine Fani (@fani_antoine), "Lettre de Fadi Barrage à Antoine Fani, 29 juillet 1979," Instagram, 30 January 2024, last accessed 23 May 2024, https://www.instagram.com/fani_antoine/. Fadi Barrage refers to writing this letter in his diary entries of 27 July and 30 July 1979.

41. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-II.19-23, entry from 20 February 1979.

42. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-II.19-23, entry from 21 February 1979.

43. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-III.4, entry from 8 May 1979.

44. See Antonius, unpublished manuscript, 5.

45. Fadi Barrage, diary 1979-November-1980-March-87-132, entry from 24 January 1980.

46. Fadi Barrage, diary 1982-27 January-5 August, entry from 5 May 1982.

out of a memory of Barrage's boyhood in the real Fleisseh, connected to happiness, pure emotions, love, and some kind of gardens of paradise, "the secret garden."[47] He writes about one of his paintings in progress in April 1980:

> the statement is there, a trifle hard and bare and unaccompanied (will remedy later) but there quite definitely. Turpentine marvellous dries almost instantly will use no other medium. This is true Fleisseh once again. All the way back beyond Bab-Idriss and Dar el Fan, to Paris and the first remembrance of Fleisseh, the image born out of a despair of happiness.[48]

He explained that "the starting point of Fleisseh was the pencil drawing of the garden at Fleisseh. Can all drawings begin as drawings of Fleisseh? As a paint-feeling? Objectified? Realized in figures? Or left as abstract musicality?"[49] In this sketch (fig. 7), one can clearly see how the floor plan of the garden in Fleisseh structures the composition, which is then taken to a metaphorical level.

Fleisseh represented an idea. In March 1980 he had written about starting a canvas

> with an exploration of Fleisseh, not other 'ideas' in mind, refuge, delight and even now the need to find a safe hiding-place at the heart of things, his breathing all through the night, my head on his chest, that, defined, lived-through again not in recollection merely but as the only way to really know or feel it, the actual event was too brief for such knowledge.[50]

Fleisseh was thus also a refuge, a recurrent motif of Barrage.[51] The perceived need for a safe hiding place was linked to being a gay man in the Eastern Mediterranean at the time, be it in Lebanon or Greece, in which he considered Fleisseh a small niche he had carved out for himself, a "precarious hideout." He was deeply unhappy about not being able to find a "simpler happier relation between [his] work & life," in which he did not have to take refuge in abstraction.[52] Not feeling comfortable openly depicting male nudes in his painting, he looked for ways to mask or diversify his subjects. An example for diversification was to show men "through a cycle of their days," such as when they bathed, dressed, or played billiards (fig. 8).[53] While this diversification was expressed in figurative work, mostly small-scale, masking was done through abstraction. Masking one's subject has been associated with queer tactics of camouflage, in which abstraction "both conjures new visualisations and rebuffs viewers' impulses to recognize and categorize."[54]

47. Referred to as such in his diary entry of 25 February 1980, diary 1979-November-1980-March-87-132.

48. Fadi Barrage, diary 1979-November-1980-March-87-132, entry from 5 April 1980.

49. Fadi Barrage, diary 1979-July-October-1-86, entry from 12 August 1979.

50. Fadi Barrage, diary 1979-November-1980-March-87-132, entry from 25 March 1980.

51. Sometimes he also referred to Fleisseh as an enclosure, see Fadi Barrage, diary entries 4 June 1979, 2 September 1979, 10 October 1979, 29 September 1982. On 1 April 1984, he writes "Fleisseh is no longer a cubist-Klee matter of enclosures."

52. Fadi Barrage, diary 81-August-September, entry from 22 August 1981. For an elaboration on this, see von Maltzahn, "1982: Fadi Barrage, Sleeping Boy Drawings."

53. Fadi Barrage, diary Dec. 80-1981/20-11-80-6.2.81, entry from 6 February 1981.

54. See David J. Getsy, "Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction," in *Queer Abstraction*, ed. Jared Ledesma, exhibition catalogue, Des Moines, IA, Des Moines Art Center, 1 June–8 September 2019 (Des Moines, IA: Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65–66. I am grateful to Anneka Lenssen for sharing this reference with me.

Figure 7: Barrage, Fadi. *Fleisseh Sketch in Diary Entry and Shopping List*. Diary 83-II-III-February-March, entry from 9–10 March 1983. Pencil on paper. 16.4 × 25.2 cm. Private collection, Berlin. Courtesy of the Barrage family. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn, 2025.

Figure 8: Barrage, Fadi. *Untitled Sketch*. 28 August 1982. Private collection, Beirut. Courtesy of the Barrage family. Photographed by Nadia von Maltzahn, 2025.

His Fleisseh works are clear examples of this masking, which worked more or less successfully. Barrage's friend Ellen Sutton, in a letter to Soraya Antonius, describes the painting she acquired as follows:

> Faadi's Garden (my title for it [...]) was roughly 18 × 24 inches. The colours were chiefly grey-green, non-blue pinks, browns, pinky-beige stones. It was not a representative painting. I saw a kind of building in the R-top, and L and centre-front 'stones'. After a few days these stones became rather more suggestive of a part of buttocks and a phallus. The rest was a few tree trunks and foliage. It was the fact that I couldn't see the picture without the anal sex which made me eventually part with it again. I had originally chosen it for its pleasing colours and composition in terms of mass + colour. The later specificity of some of these masses detracted from the picture (for me). F. did say it was the garden of his boyhood. (Perhaps he lost his innocence there?).[55]

55. Letter Ellen Sutton to Soraya Antonius, undated. In the author's collection.

After Sutton returned the painting to Barrage, he gave it to one of his lovers.[56] Similar to "Faadi's Garden," this work (fig. 9a), which can also be seen behind Barrage in his studio (fig. 9b) gives a good idea about Fleisseh.[57] While the erotic content cannot be overlooked anymore once one has seen it, it is suggestive enough to enjoy the painting for its composition, colour, and movement if one does not expect or look for any underlying motif. If Barrage's war drawings asked how horror might be represented, Fleisseh asked how love and longing might be felt—and concealed—through the very material of paint.

Figure 9a: Barrage, Fadi. *Untitled* (Fleisseh work). Undated. Tempera painting. Image courtesy of Marianna Perry. Photographed by Fadi Barrage, 1980s.

56. Barrage mentions this anecdote in his notes of 29 May 1984, when he was sorting through his work: "Later black-line ones of which few uncoloured I am keeping, destroyed many, then tempera paintings, of which 'Faadi's garden' as Ellen Sutton called it, who bought it, then returned it when she was pruning her existence. I am giving it to blue-eyed Costaki." Note mounted on paper as part of a collection of loose sheets.

57. A photograph of the work, depicted here, was sent by Fadi Barrage to his friend Marianna Perry, with a handwritten note on its back reading "Had a great black boy—in my window last night, came to tell you all about it. F Faaaaaadi"—he used to make fun how Marianna and Ellen spelled his name with multiple "A"s. The photograph was sent to Soraya Antonius and preserved with her papers.

Figure 9b: Fadi Barrage in his studio in Athens with *Fleisseh* works in the background, extract from original. Courtesy of Marianna Perry. Photographer unknown, 1980s.

Taswir or Paint-Feeling

Other than being a tool of masking, Barrage's Fleisseh paintings thus represented a "paint-feeling." He writes in April 1980:

> Later, fascinating seeing, guessing, doubting, supposing, half-seeing what is continually hidden and revealed, provided it never becomes a sort of striving for a form of anatomical accuracy, to maintain it at the level of feeling, even at the cost of not communicating anything directly, the passion to see is enough.[58]

Barrage initiated an image, which depended upon the viewer to be completed. He thus consciously wanted to prompt imaginal striving in the sense of Kirsten Scheid's notion of *taswir* (image-making), which keeps us in the interaction between an entity's coming into being and becoming meaningful.[59] As Barrage writes in December 1982:

> [A]lways begin with an image of some kind, and, since the paintings are not going to be elegant 'unfinished' sketches anymore, I can modify, obliterate, rediscover it in the process of work. The composition will be more interesting if based upon an image, more discovery. Let the image conceal and reveal itself.[60]

And in the same vein three months earlier:

> [T]wo days working on tiny watercolour on R.W. of reclining nude, cushions, ornate divan, testing out theories: it works perfectly, except that the conception of this nude is too obvious. Rather more mystery, little showing, no face necessary, brushwork more free. This was juvenile + ambitious. Abstracts too, with a definite intention. I mean a definite emotional content, Fleisseh usually.[61]

While Barrage's drawings are worked out in detail, his paintings had to be free, suggesting their content without stressing the image.[62]

Taswir according to Scheid is an interactive process, "actively molding sense perception into social meaning. It invites the audience to undertake imagining so as to reach an emotional state and achieve cognizance of otherwise removed, banished, or disappeared events with full awareness of the horror, anger, or shame to be aroused."[63] Scheid gives the example of Jean Debs's famine sculptures exhibited at the Beirut Industrial Fair in 1921. Barrage prompts an emotional response to his work, but for him this response is navigated not so much within a nation-building project,

58. Fadi Barrage, diary 1979-November-1980-March-87-132, entry from 8 April 1980.

59. Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*, 6.

60. Fadi Barrage, diary 82-XII-Dec., entry from 19 December 1982.

61. Fadi Barrage, diary 82-IX-Sept, entry from 21 September 1982.

62. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-II.13-19, entry from 17 February 1979: "Painting will have to be much more free, a suggestion of all this, without stressing the image: that is why it is worked out in drawing so completely."

63. Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*, 60.

as in Scheid's example, but rather within the space negotiated by a gay artist living in precarity, in a context where there was no civil rights movement and he had to test the lines.[64] He thus reflects about one work in 1984: "removed the 'penis', it is still very much present without being there."[65]

Barrage also refers to art as experience, speaking to the idea that an artwork is located within a network of making and reception. The interaction is intentional and reflected. He writes in September 1981:

> So that it has taken about a month (very little less) to paint this 'approach to Fleisseh'. I cannot any longer bear the strain of this type of improvisation, I must reintroduce a minimum of craftsmanship into my approach; 'art' may be 'experience', but preferably not as immediate as this. Some rehearsal of effects should probably enrich the experience, both at the stage of preparation in the study of choices & means and mood and manner, and in the final free performance in which it culminates.[66]

The audience is part of the process; Barrage thinks about the effect his works will have—also in material terms. About one series of abstract works in early 1979 he writes, "that is better for sales in Beirut, where they will only see colour,"[67] implying that the viewers see what they want to see. Whether rooted in trauma, memory, or desire, Barrage's paintings pursue an aesthetic of evocation rather than representation.

Precarity and Leaving Athens

Beirut, and Lebanon more generally, were never far from Barrage's mind. His stay in Greece was precarious, as it depended on his residency status being renewed every six months. In addition, he suffered from financial uncertainty, as he lived exclusively from the sale of his works, only at times supported by his brother who sent him money from Saudi Arabia where he was working. This precarity clearly affected his artistic production, as some works required a certain level of relaxation and feeling of security. As he ponders in 1980:

> How do you paint when you're insecure? Not, certainly, in the leisurely fashion required by these figurative drawings.
>
> Afternoon, took my first good walk since the 2nd of December, to the Acropagos. Athens glorious. Green everywhere, red of sunset on the ruins. When I leave here, I will have left everything behind. I am not departing from Dhour-

64. On the gay rights movement in Athens at the time, see Brian Riedel, "The Movement That Was Not? Gay Men and AIDS in Urban Greece, 1950–1993," in *AIDS, Culture, and Gay Men*, ed. Douglas A. Feldman (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 231–249. For a discussion of sexuality in Greece of the 1980s, also see James D. Faubion, *Modern Greek Lessons: A Primer in Historical Constructivism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), Chapter 8. Also see von Maltzahn, "1982: Fadi Barrage, Sleeping Boy Drawings," in which the above is discussed.

65. Fadi Barrage, note mounted on paper as part of a collection of loose sheets, note from 4 November 1984.

66. Fadi Barrage, diary 81-August-September, entry from 12 September 1981.

67. Fadi Barrage, diary 79-II.19-23, entry from 21 February 1979.

> Choueir again. Not this time. Never. I took leave of mountains & pine trees & childhood and goodness in 1959 or 60. Now twenty years later I have found them again.[68]

He had found happiness in Athens, but the uncertainty of how long he could stay there distressed him and comes up repeatedly in his diary entries. In 1984 he contemplated making up his mind to leave on his own freewill, before being told to do so. He wavered as to whether it made sense to return to Lebanon, primarily concerned about his productivity. One day he wondered, "Where shall I go to? Where shall I find colours, canvas, certainly not in Lebanon"; the next moment thinking "I would probably work better in Beirut, probably because of the dreadful atmosphere there," continuing: "I am of there, after all, and in my most distress have thought of Fleisseh which (the place itself, no longer) is still there. And today I was thinking of [...] Dhour Choueir."[69] He believed he could make more money in Lebanon, too, and felt his stay in Athens was drawing to a close. His reflections express a feeling of belonging, ambivalent though it was. Despite writing predominantly in English, a legacy of the Lebanese education system, and his war-imposed exile in Greece, he was firmly rooted in Lebanon.[70] It is interesting to note that one of the factors that seemed to hold him back from returning to Lebanon was the uncertainty of being able to obtain the needed material to work, reminding us of the very concrete obstacles artists faced in 1980s Lebanon.

In September 1985, Barrage could no longer extend his stay in Athens, and left not for Lebanon but for the island of Cyprus. "They have finally caught in to what I was engaged in, corrupting the youth of Athens, and now am looking forward to do the same to the Cypriots," he writes half-jokingly to his friend Marianna Perry in Greece.[71] In two subsequent letters he reports he was working hard, and that he was "getting his teeth into Nicosia."[72] He ended up spending less than two years on the island, part of which in a sanatorium in the mountains suffering from severe tuberculosis (TB). As Soraya Antonius writes about her friend:

> Ten days earlier [in late March 1987] he had learnt that TB was not all that was wrong with him, he was in a state of acute distress—and there was none of the counselling, the psychiatric support, that is widely offered in the West to help people through the immediate shock—on the contrary, he was alone, day after night, except for a few hours. His suffering was evident and there are no drawings for those ten days, then this recapitulation of happiness begins. [Quoting Barrage:] '[...] my coffee cup [in Bab-Idriss] handpainted with gross flowers in deep reds and strong greens [...] the curtain material we used to have in our

68. Fadi Barrage, diary Dec. 80-1981/20-11-80-6.2.81, entry from 27 December 1980. The effect of this precarity on his work is further discussed in von Maltzahn, "1982: Fadi Barrage, Sleeping Boy Drawings." Dhour Choueir refers to a mountain area in Lebanon where Barrage spent his childhood summers; references to it come up sporadically throughout his diary entries.

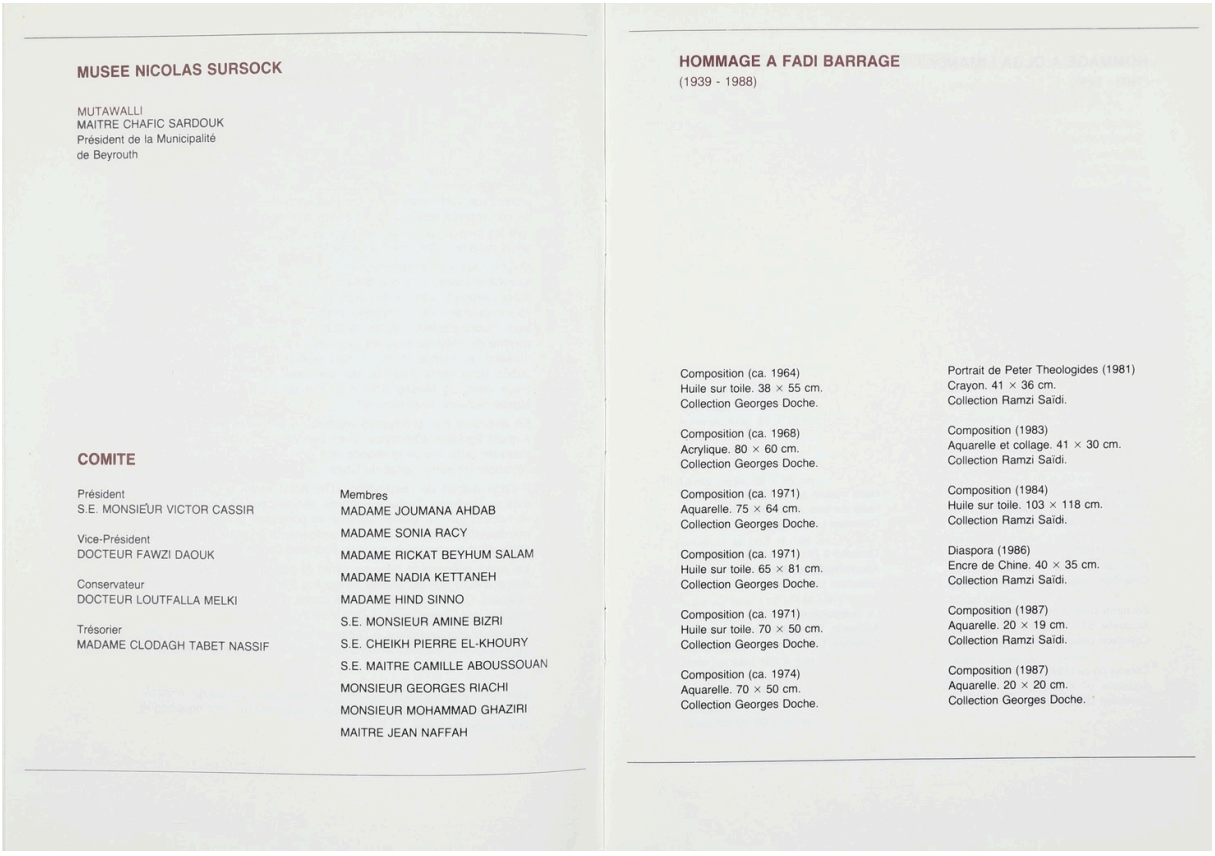
69. Fadi Barrage, note mounted on paper as part of a collection of loose sheets, note from 4 May 1984.

70. On writing in English as a result of colonial education, see Soraya Antonius, "The Day of Outside Education," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 20 (January 2000): 257–68.

71. Letter of Fadi Barrage to Marianna Perry, Nicosia, 29 October 1985. A copy of this letter was sent by Marianna Perry to Soraya Antonius on the latter's request as part of her research on the artist, which I am taking forward.

72. Letters of Fadi Barrage to Marianna Perry, Nicosia, 21 November 1985 and 2 February 1986.

summer house ages ago [...] this sort of image is the very stuff of happiness for me.' [...] The scenes shown seem not so much actual depictions of a, or various homes, as a distillation of their essences.[73]



MUSEE NICOLAS SURSOCK

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MONSIEUR GEORGES RIACHI
MONSIEUR MOHAMMAD GHAZIRI
MAITRE JEAN NAFFAH

HOMMAGE A FADI BARRAGE
(1939 - 1988)

Composition (ca. 1964)
Huile sur toile. 38 × 55 cm.
Collection Georges Doche.

Composition (ca. 1968)
Acrylique. 80 × 60 cm.
Collection Georges Doche.

Composition (ca. 1971)
Aquarelle. 75 × 64 cm.
Collection Georges Doche.

Composition (ca. 1971)
Huile sur toile. 65 × 81 cm.
Collection Georges Doche.

Composition (ca. 1971)
Huile sur toile. 70 × 50 cm.
Collection Georges Doche.

Composition (ca. 1974)
Aquarelle. 70 × 50 cm.
Collection Georges Doche.

Portrait de Peter Theologides (1981)
Crayon. 41 × 36 cm.
Collection Ramzi Saïdi.

Composition (1983)
Aquarelle et collage. 41 × 30 cm.
Collection Ramzi Saïdi.

Composition (1984)
Huile sur toile. 103 × 118 cm.
Collection Ramzi Saïdi.

Diaspora (1986)
Encre de Chine. 40 × 35 cm.
Collection Ramzi Saïdi.

Composition (1987)
Aquarelle. 20 × 19 cm.
Collection Ramzi Saïdi.

Composition (1987)
Aquarelle. 20 × 20 cm.
Collection Georges Doche.

Figure 10: "Hommage à Fadi Barrage," in *XIV Salon d'Automne*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Sursock Museum, December 1988–January 1989 (Beirut: Sursock Museum, 1988), n.p.

A distillation of essence. This describes Fadi Barrage's work very well. The essence of his boyhood, of simple happiness in Bab Idriss, of war countered by love, thinking things out in painting. Barrage returned to Beirut at the end of May 1987, where he died in January 1988.[74] While he often noted fevers and wrote of feeling unwell during his time in Athens, it was only in Cyprus that he discovered he had AIDS, the shock of which comes out clearly in Antonius's manuscript.[75] At

73. Antonius, unpublished manuscript, 25–26.

74. For an obituary, see Faisal Sultan, "Ghiyab Fadi Barraj: al-fannan al-shahid wa-l-fannan al-dahiya" [The departed Fadi Barrage: The artist who was a witness and the artist who was a victim], *As-Safir*, 29 January 1988, n.p.

75. On 16 June 1998, an art auction was organized by the Société Libanaise du SIDA at the Centre Culturel Français in Beirut, with all profits going to the work of the association. Barrage's sister, Nada Barrage Beydoun, donated two works to this auction, one of which a tempera by her brother evaluated at 7000 USD, the highest of this auction. See Armand Arcache, *Catalogue des œuvres pour la vente aux enchères le mardi 16 juin 1998 au profit de la société libanaise du SIDA* (Beirut: Centre Culturel Français, 1998).

the time of his death, his work was part of the Kufa Gallery exhibition in London.[76] The Sursock Museum, Beirut's main museum of modern and contemporary art, dedicated a small section to him in their homage section of the fourteenth *Salon d'Automne* in 1988–89 (fig. 10).[77]

Conclusion

This article has explored how Fadi Barrage's artistic practice in the late 1970s and early 1980s responded to memories of war and love, and to conditions of exile and personal precarity. Through a close reading of his diaries, sketches, and paintings, it has shown how abstraction functioned not only as a formal strategy but as a mode of negotiation, a way of working through emotional and social pressures. His concept of Fleisseh captures the convergence of feeling and artistic process. More than a thematic motif, Fleisseh became a recursive space, embodied, emotional, and sensorial, through which Barrage returned to early experiences of happiness and desire.

Barrage's notion of "paint-feeling" blurs boundaries between figuration and abstraction, revealing and concealing. Concerning *taswir*, we might say that Barrage's work not only invites the viewer into the interactive process of meaning-making, it also enacts this process upon the artist himself. The act of painting becomes a site of transformation, where memory is not only represented but relived. Empathic vision is thus a mode of artistic engagement in which affect is transmitted through the texture and material ambiguity of the work. Painting for Barrage was a way of feeling his way through loss and love, violence and vulnerability.

His work opens onto broader questions about how queer desire takes shape visually, especially in contexts where open articulation remains fraught or impossible. This is something to be further explored. His personal notes and sketches offer not only insight into a largely overlooked artistic trajectory in Lebanon, but also a case study in how artists create interior worlds of refuge in the face of external instability. His practice of processing the violence he witnessed during the Lebanese Civil War with a temporal delay and geographic distance echoes the wider practice of Lebanon's visual artists at the time.[78] By bringing Barrage's voice into dialogue with his artistic production, this article has foregrounded the significance of personal archives in reconstructing art histories where little written analysis exists. It underlines the layered strategies through which artists like Barrage responded to violence, displacement and the socio-political conditions of Lebanon and the broader Mediterranean.

76. For a discussion of this exhibition, see Nadia von Maltzahn, "Roundtable Discussion with Rose Issa and Mohammad El Rawas on the Exhibition Contemporary Lebanese Artists at London's Kufa Gallery in Early 1988," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 248–65, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.10.

77. *XIV Salon d'Automne*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Sursock Museum, December 1988–January 1989 (Beirut: Sursock Museum, 1988).

78. See Nadia von Maltzahn, "Introduction: Lebanon's Visual Arts in the 1980s Defying the Violence," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 2–19, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.1.

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Article

Mona Hatoum's Other Story

"Third World Post-modernism" in 1980s Britain

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Abstract

During the upheaval of the early civil war months in Lebanon in 1975, Mona Hatoum (b. 1952) found herself stranded in London, where she decided to study art. In the early 1980s, she graduated from the Slade School of Art, where she immersed herself in postmodern thought and the concurrent development of critical theory in the United Kingdom. Inspired by artistic movements challenging the norms of contemporary British art, she shaped her artistic approach by blending the artistic, social, and political realms. The ideas of Rasheed Araeen gave her a conceptual framework, exploring his reflections on Third World art, postcolonialism, questions of identity, and the notion of "black artist" in the United Kingdom. This article aims to examine Hatoum's involvement in British Black Arts through her activities with Rasheed Araeen, presenting a fresh analysis of key works that assess their critical impact. While she is now a globally recognized artist, there has been limited research dedicated to the phase of her life when she existed on the fringes of art history during her youth in Beirut, then working in the then-contested field of performance and video, and often being considered a migrant artist, or as she once wrote: a black one. Drawing from an exclusive interview with the artist, this article offers an intersectional approach to both western art history and that from the SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) region, shedding new light on this crucial period in her artistic development and its broader implications for understanding diverse artistic narratives.

Keywords

Mona Hatoum, British Black Arts, Third World, Third Text, Rasheed Araeen

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Introduction: Reopening the British Black Arts Loop

Long ignored by canonical art history, artists associated with the British Black Arts movement have gained significant visibility in scholarship since the early 2000s.[1] Emerging as a deliberate political project during the Thatcher years (1979–90) in the aftermath of widespread civil unrest across British metropolitan centres, this movement erupted onto the cultural landscape with unprecedented intellectual force.[2] Encompassing artists of Caribbean, African, and Asian heritage working throughout the United Kingdom (UK), the movement was profoundly influenced by post-civil rights, Black Power movements in the United States of America and anti-apartheid activism in South Africa—such as BLK Arts Group and Pan-Afrikan Connection[3]—and retrospectively by cultural theorist Stuart Hall's pioneering work on race and media representation.[4] They systematically challenged imperial paradigms within institutional frameworks, fundamentally transforming both the constitution and perception of British cultural identity in enduring ways.

The British Black Arts movement was not a unified entity but rather a heterogeneous collective with multiple leaders and divergent strands. Its historiography consequently presents a complex tapestry. Early accounts on the movement were authored by active participants such as Eddie Chambers (b. 1960), Lubaina Himid (b. 1954), Maud Saulter (1960–2008) and Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935). These protagonists-artists-historians began documenting and theorizing their collective struggles even before the conclusion of the decade in which they emerged, establishing contemporaneous frameworks that have shaped subsequent scholarly discourses.

This article employs a microhistorical approach to excavate Mona Hatoum's overlooked connections to this movement, constructing an alternative narrative that challenges her relegation to the periphery in canonical accounts. While her Palestinian and Lebanese roots are frequently discussed, what remains underexamined is that she once identified as a black artist and was affil-

1. See, for example, in chronological order: David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce, eds., *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, "Coming into View: Black Artists and Exhibition Cultures 1976–2010" (PhD diss., Liverpool John Moores University, 2015); Sophie Orlando, *British Black Art: Debates on Western Art History*, trans. Charles La Via (Paris: Dis Voir, 2016); Leon Wainwright, *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017); Salah M. Hassan and Chika Okeke-Agulu, eds., "Black British Art Histories," special issue, *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art* 49, no. 2 (2019); Riana Jade Parker, *A Brief History of Black British Art* (London: Tate, 2021); Alice Correia, ed., *What Is Black Art? Writings on African, Asian and Caribbean Art in Britain, 1981–1989* (Dublin: Penguin Books, 2022).

2. The term "Black Arts Movement," like the period, has no fixed terminology; it is also referred to as the "British Black Arts Movement," as found in the Tate's online glossary: "British Black Arts Movement," Art Terms, Tate, accessed 1 April 2025, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/b/british-black-arts-movement. In this article, I use "British Black Arts" (plural) to emphasize the heterogeneous nature of the movement and the multiplicity of artistic practices, voices and approaches it encompassed, rather than suggesting a monolithic or unified field.

3. See the chronology (1941–1989) at the end of *The Other Story* catalogue that outlines lots of developments along this axis: Julia Engelhardt, "Chronology," in *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, ed. Rasheed Araeen, exhibition catalogue, London, Hayward Gallery, 29 November 1989–4 February 1990; Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 10 March–22 April 1990; Manchester, Manchester City Art Gallery and Cornerhouse, 5 May–10 June 1990 (London: South Bank Centre, 1989), 128–41.

4. From his groundbreaking work *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978) through his theories on "new ethnicities" and "the politics of difference," Hall's writings have transformed race research methodology. In *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (2021), editors Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore compile Stuart Hall's essential essays on race, identity, and diaspora. The collection includes influential texts like "The Whites of Their Eyes" and "Race, the Floating Signifier," demonstrating Hall's commitment to concrete rather than merely descriptive analysis of race and its intersections with culture, consciousness, and social structures.

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iated with the British Black Arts movement in 1980s London. How did Hatoum's encounter with Araeen—and his conceptualization of British Black Arts as a politically charged, anti-imperialist framework—give her a conceptual framework and nurture her artistic trajectory? To what extent did she embrace this affiliation and how did it influence her subsequent practice?

Lubaina Himid's drawing *Thin Black Line(s): Moments and Connections* (2011) offers a revelatory entry point for this investigation (fig. 1). Resembling the London Underground map, this visual cartography catalogues the interconnected artists, institutions, exhibitions, and publications that constituted the movement's ecosystem. Himid organizes these connections specifically around women artists' movements between 1983 and 1985, centring figures like Sonia Boyce (b. 1962), Claudette Johnson (b. 1959), Maud Sulter (1960–2008), Houria Niati (b. 1948), Ingrid Pollard (b. 1953), and herself while displacing male-dominated histories to the margins. Significantly, Hatoum appears along what Himid labels the "Other Artists" tube line—a secondary trajectory alongside figures like Isaac Julien (b. 1960) and Keith Piper (b. 1960), positioned between David A. Bailey (b. 1961), Mowbray Odonkor (b. 1962), and Rasheed Araeen, to the upper left of the drawing.[5]

This marginalized positioning merits deeper investigation, particularly given Hatoum's own acknowledgement of Araeen's influence. When asked about the politicizing of her cultural difference, she responded: "When I met Rasheed Araeen in the mid-1980s, it was a revelation. He was someone who had rationalized and theorized issues of Otherness."[6] This connection is crucial for understanding Hatoum's engagement with concepts of "Third World arts" and postcolonialism during this formative period.

Araeen's conceptual framework and activist practice profoundly reshaped discourses on art in postwar Britain through multiple channels: conceptual art, critical writing, exhibition curation, and editorial work on journals like *Black Phoenix* (1978–79) and *Third Text* (since 1987). His strategic redefinition of "black"[7]—as well as the proposition of the term "Afro-Asian" which emerged from grass-roots black and South Asian political organizing in the 1970s—as a political rather than racial designation created a form of collective resistance encompassing individuals from the Global South who shared experiences of colonial subjugation and cultural marginalization.[8] Simultaneously, he critiqued institutional approaches that confined black artists within an "imposed otherness" or tokenistic multiculturalism.[9]

5. Her name has been misspelled "Odonka" in the drawing.

6. Michael Archer, "Michael Archer in Conversation with Mona Hatoum," in *Mona Hatoum*, 2nd ed., rev. and expand., ed. Michael Archer et al. (London: Phaidon, 2016), 10.

7. Throughout this article, I have chosen to use the lowercase "black" when referring to racial identity. Whilst I acknowledge the ongoing debate surrounding capitalization practices and recognize that many style guides now recommend capitalizing "Black" to denote shared identity and cultural heritage, I align with perspectives that resist prescriptive rules on blackness itself. No single authority should impose orthographic rules on how blackness is expressed or written, as this risks constraining the fluid, multifaceted nature of black identity and experience. The lowercase form reflects a deliberate choice to resist the homogenization of diverse black identities under a single typographical convention.

8. Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto," *Black Phoenix* 1 (Winter 1978): 3–12, reproduced in *Black Phoenix: Third World Perspective on Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Rasheed Araeen and Mahmood Jamal (New York: Primary Information, 2022).

9. Sou-Maëlla Bolmey, "Discours divergent chez Rasheed Araeen: 'L'écriture et la publication comme travail artistique conceptuel,'" in *Quand l'artiste se fait critique d'art: Échanges, passerelles et résurgences*, ed. Ophélie Naessens and Simon Daniellou (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 101. Bolmey also refers readers to Araeen's contributions to *Third Text*, in which he wrote about this idea: Rasheed Araeen, "From

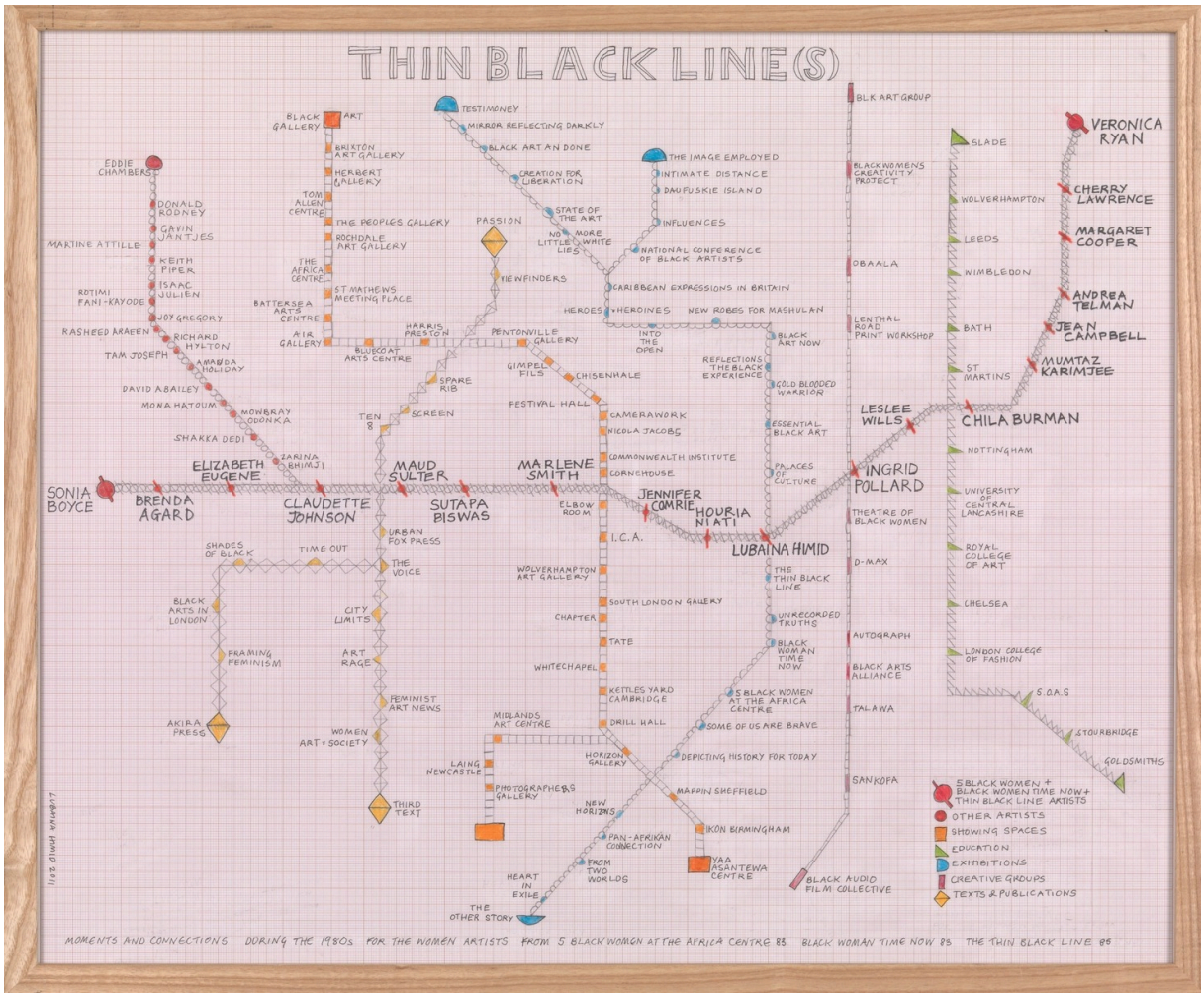

Figure 1: *Thin Black Line(s): Moments and Connections*, 2011, Lubaina Himid, coloured pencil on paper, 747 × 620 mm, Tate Britain, London © Lubaina Himid. Photo: Tate.

This article begins by examining Hatoum's formative experiences in 1970s Beirut before focusing on her art education in London—a crucial period that shaped both her aesthetic approach and political consciousness. Through analysing her participation in key exhibitions, publications, and networks associated with the British Black Arts movement—coupled with an exclusive interview with the artist centring on these formative times of her life[10]—I will demonstrate how Hatoum's artistic path intersected with and diverged from its central concerns. The paper challenges simplified narratives about her artistic development, revealing instead a transnational trajectory where

Primitivism to Ethnic Art," *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 6–25; Rasheed Araeen, "The Other Immigrant: The Experiences and Achievements of Afro Asian Artists in the Metropolis," *Third Text* 5, no. 15 (Summer 1991): 17–28; Rasheed Araeen, "How I Discovered My Oriental Soul in the Wilderness of the West," *Third Text* 6, no. 18 (Spring 1992): 85–102; Rasheed Araeen, "A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics," *Third Text* 14, no. 50 (Spring 2000): 3–20.

10. Mona Hatoum, interview by Joan Grandjean, 2 July 2024. Whenever there is a quotation from the artist without a footnote referring to a specific source, it will be taken from this interview in order to facilitate the reading.

her practice evolved through dialogue across diverse geographic, cultural, and conceptual contexts—ultimately resisting the very categorizations that have marginalized her contribution to this significant moment in various nationalistic and nationalist art histories.

A Step Sideways into 1970s Beirut

Mona Hatoum's artistic identity emerges from multiple displacements, making her work a powerful meditation on belonging and exile that would later distinguish her from many British black artists. Born in 1952 to Palestinian parents who had fled Haifa during the 1948 Nakba, Hatoum grew up in Beirut with the peculiar status of having a British passport through her father's employment with the British administration, yet never obtaining Lebanese citizenship. This early experience of existing between identities—Palestinian by heritage, Lebanese by upbringing, British by documentation, woman by gender binary—established themes of displacement and belonging that would become central to her artistic practice and differentiate her approach within British art circles.

Figure 2: Faris, Waddah. *Portrait of Mona Hatoum at the Baalbek Festival*. 1973. Black and white photography. 42 × 35 cm. © Waddah Faris. Courtesy the photographer estate.

Pre-civil war Beirut of the early 1970s provided Hatoum with an active artistic environment that shaped her later engagement with art in the UK. While often mythologized as merely a Mediterranean playground for the wealthy, Beirut harboured a sophisticated cultural scene documented by figures like Waddah Faris (1940–2024), whose photographs captured Hatoum at twenty-one during the 1973 Baalbek Festival (fig. 2)[11]—a moment when she stood at the threshold of her artistic journey.

Hatoum herself described this period as artistically vibrant. Beirut boasted half a dozen new galleries showcasing both local and international contemporary art.[12] The Contact Gallery in Hamra, co-founded by Faris, became particularly significant in Hatoum's artistic formation. As an experimental space showcasing both local and international contemporary art, it exposed Hatoum to cutting-edge practices that transcended national boundaries—an internationalist perspective that would later inform her nuanced position between the identity-based focus of the British Black Arts movement and the formalist concerns of British contemporary art.

Her social circle included creatives from various disciplines—art, design, fashion, and photography—including the aspiring art dealer Edward Totah (1949–95) and painter Fadi Barrage (1939–1988). The city's cultural dynamism was further enhanced by numerous international cultural centres and the annual Baalbek Festival, which attracted global artists, musicians, and performers.[13] Her immersion in Beirut's diverse creative community established a first pattern of cross-cultural dialogue that helps to understand her navigation in London's art world and others.

The year before Faris pressed the button, Hatoum had graduated from the Beirut College for Women (BCW)[14] with an Associate of Applied Science degree in graphic design.[15] This path represented a compromise with her father, who refused to support her through a four-year art programme, insisting instead on a more "practical" education. Though focused on graphic design, Hatoum seized every opportunity to pursue her true passion, enrolling in art classes whenever

11. Most of these photographs were first printed as part of the exhibition *Beirut, The City of the World's Desire: The Chronicles of Waddah Faris (1960–1975)* that took place at the Saleh Barakat Gallery in 2017. See Saleh Barakat Gallery, ed., *Beirut – The City of the World's Desire: The Chronicles of Waddah Faris (1960–1975)*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Saleh Barakat Gallery, 19 May–29 July 2017 (Beirut: Salim Dabbous, 2017), accessed 13 December 2024, https://salehbarakatgallery.com/Content/uploads/Exhibition/4938_Saleh%20Barakat%20Gallery%20Waddah%20Fares%20Catalogue%20low%20res.pdf.

12. See Monique Bellan, "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 21–56, accessed in pre-publication format 22 May 2025, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.2.

13. Nadia von Maltzahn, "Heritage, Tourism, and the Politics of National Pride: The Baalbeck International Festival in Lebanon," *Quaderni storici: Rivista quadrimestrale* 2 (2019): 371–89, accessed 17 December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1408/96904.

14. Recognized as a liberal arts institution, BCW served the educational, social, and economic needs of the region, attracting women from across the Middle East. In 1970, the Lebanese government recognized BCW's BA and BS degrees as equivalent to the national Licence. The college then became more inclusive, admitting men and changing its name to Beirut University College (BUC) in 1973. In the 1990s, it officially became a university and was renamed Lebanese American University (LAU) after receiving approval from the Board of Regents in New York. See "History," Lebanese American University, accessed 11 September 2024, https://www.lau.edu.lb/about/history/.

15. An Associate of Applied Science degree (AAS) is a type of degree typically awarded by community colleges and technical schools. The AAS is designed to provide practical, career-oriented skills and training in a specific field, such as information technology, healthcare, or engineering. Unlike some other associate degrees that may focus more on general education, the AAS is more specialized and geared towards preparing students for immediate entry into the workforce.

possible. As she recounted in interview, she particularly cherished a "Drawing from the Human Figure" class taught by Samia Ouseiran Junblatt (1944–2024) and developed an early interest in photography.

After graduation, Hatoum worked at Young & Rubicam, a major American advertising agency in Beirut. Despite the company's prestige, she found the eighteen months there deeply unfulfilling. While she gained valuable technical skills in printing, photography, and filmmaking—which later enabled her to take on better-paying freelance work—she grew increasingly troubled by the ethics of advertising. To nurture her creative spirit during this period, she enrolled in evening classes, including drawing with Hassan Jouni (b. 1942) and ceramics courses with Dorothy Salhab Kazemi (1942–90) at what had become Beirut University College (BUC). Kazemi became a significant mentor, encouraging Hatoum to pursue further art education abroad.

In June 1975, what was intended as a brief visit to London became an indefinite stay when the Lebanese Civil War intensified. With Beirut's airport closed for nine consecutive months, Hatoum remained in Britain, eventually establishing herself there permanently. The initial two-year war (1975–77) was followed by a series of related conflicts between shifting alliances of Lebanese groups and external actors, who destabilized Lebanon until 1990 and beyond. With the turmoil in Lebanon, Kazemi's suggestion would materialize sooner than expected. Moreover, this abrupt and forced departure from Beirut would mark a significant turning point in Hatoum's life and artistic trajectory, transforming her relationship with place, belonging, exile, and creative expression—themes that would become central to her internationally acclaimed body of work.

Unlike artists born in Commonwealth countries who formed the core of the British Black Arts movement, Hatoum's experience of double displacement—through her Palestinian heritage and then her prohibited return to Lebanon—gave her approach a distinctive complexity in addressing questions of belonging. This complexity would both align her with and distinguish her from Araeen's theoretical frameworks, which primarily addressed postcolonial identity within the British imperial context at large rather than the intricately layered displacements characteristic of the Israeli colonization and the Lebanese Civil War experience beyond the British imperial realm. Hatoum's formative Beirut years thus provided not just biographical background but the essential conceptual foundation for her later artistic interventions in the UK—establishing a transnational perspective that would both contribute to and complicate the discourses of the British Black Arts movement.

A One-Way Ticket to London: A Decisive Journey

Hatoum's arrival in London in 1975 on what was meant to be a short visit—soon permanent due to the Lebanese Civil War—positioned her uniquely within Britain's artistic landscape at a pivotal moment when identity politics were beginning to reshape British art discourse through what Hall called "the black experience,"[16] which emerged as a hegemonic identity framework that critiqued the positioning of non-white communities as the invisible "other" within predominantly white British aesthetic and cultural discourses. By then, Hatoum had already left her position at Young & Rubicam, having made the decision to return to BUC to pursue a BA degree in Fine Art.

16. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities [1988]," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 246–56, here 246, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hhj1b9.16.

She had registered for her first term, confident that her acquired freelance design skills would sustain her financially during her studies. Her long-term vision included applying for postgraduate studies in London afterward, and her 1975 visit to the British capital was partly to explore suitable programmes. When violence escalated in Lebanon, she adapted quickly—viewing this unexpected turn as an opportunity to accelerate her artistic education. Having missed application deadlines for government-funded art schools, she enrolled in a foundation course at the private Byam Shaw School of Art,[17] an institution whose traditional approach would both inform and ultimately provoke her movement toward the politically engaged art practices that would later align with aspects of the British Black Arts movement.

The traumatic circumstances of Hatoum's early London years critically shaped her artistic development in ways that would later distinguish her work within British political art circles. Living in "a cold and harsh environment" while carrying the emotional weight of war in Lebanon—she was "too concerned about the war and felt a constant fear of losing [her] parents who lived very close to the green line where most of the fighting took place"—Hatoum experienced what Edward Said would later term "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place."[18] This existential condition of exile provided her with a lived experience of marginality that would position her work at a critical intersection with British black artists' concerns, even as her specific experience differentiated her from British-born artists of colour and those from former colonies.

Hatoum's encounters with traditional art education at Byam Shaw (1975–79) became instrumental in her eventual rejection of western artistic conventions. The school's insistence on traditional forms and dismissal of photography ("I buried my Nikon camera in a bank vault for a long time") represented precisely the Eurocentric artistic hierarchy that Rasheed Araeen and other black artists and theorists would critique. Despite this traditionalism, the foundation year introduced her to diverse methods and materials, differing significantly from the American-style education she had experienced in Beirut. She particularly valued the British tutorial system, which provided dedicated studio space and one-on-one guidance from instructors whenever needed. Her initial compliance with these traditions—progressing from life drawing to abstract expressionism's "strange cathartic effect"—became almost ritualistic: painting through the night until physical exhaustion overtook her, surrendering completely to the creative act in a profound emotional and intellectual journey. Followed by her intellectual rebellion against them, it paralleled the broader movement in British art toward questioning canonical western, racist, and misogynistic art representations from non-western perspectives.

This broader questioning of artistic traditions influenced the artist's engagement with kinetic and performative practices, which can be traced to a pivotal encounter in 1977, when David Medalla (1942–2020) visited the Byam Shaw to deliver a lecture on his work alongside that of several Brazilian and South American artists, including Hélio Oiticica (1937–80), Lygia Clark (1920–88), and Tunga (1952–2016). This presentation proved formative, introducing concepts that would influence Hatoum's artistic approach. At the time, she was experiencing dissatisfaction with the static

17. The Byam Shaw School of Art—commonly known as Byam Shaw—was an art school in London founded in 1910 by the artist John Byam Shaw (1872–1919) and Rex Vicat Cole (1870–1940). It was well known for its focus on fine art and traditional art techniques, with a curriculum that included painting, drawing, and other classical disciplines. The school gained a reputation for its teaching style, which emphasized craftsmanship alongside creative freedom.

18. Edward Wadie Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 137.

nature of painting and had begun experimenting with a large-scale work that documented the daily transformations occurring within her studio environment. Medalla's observation that her painting appeared dynamic, with nothing seemingly fixed within its composition, affirmed her intuitive move towards more fluid artistic expressions.

Another turning point came with her discovery of Marcel Duchamp's work and Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*,[19] which became her "bible." This intellectual encounter catalysed a decisive reorientation toward conceptual practice, as she began "making 3D objects, using industrial materials and playing with what [she] called invisible forces like light, electricity and magnetism." This shift represented not merely a stylistic evolution but a political one—anticipating the formal strategies through which she would later engage with issues of displacement, power, and exile while maintaining her distinctive artistic vocabulary.

Hatoum's transition to the Slade School of Art (1979–81) marked her entry into circles more directly engaged with critical theory and postmodern thought.[20] At this prestigious institution, her artistic development benefited from encounters with key mentors whose influence transcended technical instruction to shape her political consciousness. Mary Kelly's (b. 1941) visit during Hatoum's first year proved transformative, as Kelly "turned [her] on to feminist theories, especially the discussions around the gaze and the representation of the female body." These feminist perspectives provided Hatoum with critical tools to analyse power relations embedded in visual representation—theoretical concerns that paralleled the British Black Arts movement's critique of racial representation while adding a gendered dimension often underdeveloped in Araeen's frameworks.

Stuart Brisley's (b. 1933) "antiestablishment attitude" further radicalized Hatoum's approach, offering a model of institutional critique that complemented her growing political awareness. Through these mentorships and her engagement with performance-oriented student peers, Hatoum developed an artistic practice increasingly centred on "women's and minority rights through artistic, social, and political discourse"—a focus that positioned her work in productive dialogue with surveillance and Michel Foucault and Jeremy Bentham's idea of ever-visible inmates, echoing the British Black Arts movement's concerns while maintaining her distinctive perspective as an artist from the Mashreq navigating complex displacements.

Hatoum's educational journey thus represents a crucial evolution that positioned her at the intersection of multiple artistic and political currents in 1980s Britain. Her progression from traditional training to conceptual and performative practice, informed by feminist theory and institutional critique, equipped her with a sophisticated artistic language through which to address issues of power and belonging while maintaining a perspective shaped by her specific transnational journey. This particular trajectory established the foundation for her later engagement with Araeen's theoretical framework, as her work increasingly negotiated the politics of identity—which Hatoum considered not as something fixed but as forever changing, rendering point-

19. Lucy Rowland Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973).

20. The Slade School of Fine Art, founded in 1871 as part of University College London, is renowned for its rigorous fine arts programme, producing numerous influential artists in painting, sculpture, and multimedia practices.

less any attempt to engage with rigid definitions of identity, as these inevitably lead to clichés and stereotypes from which she sought to distance herself[21]—and representation from her unique position of double displacement.

From "Free Experimentation" to "Issue-Based" Work

Art critic Guy Brett (1942–2021), in a comprehensive monograph on Hatoum's work, identified three distinct phases in her artistic evolution.[22] The first—brief but formative—encompassed her "free experimentation" during her art education in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Between 1982 and 1988, Hatoum transitioned into what Brett termed her "issue-based" period, expressed through performances and videos exploring themes of violence, gender, alienation and exile.[23] Brett marks the third phase from the creation of *The Light at the End* (1989), an installation signalling Hatoum's return to the minimalist language she had explored during her education, which became infused with subtle political connotations. This final phase led to her now-renowned installations and sculptural objects.

These artistic phases unfolded against the backdrop of significant upheaval in British art during the late 1970s and early 1980s—a period defined by feminist movements, postcolonial critiques, and growing awareness of institutional power structures. As a British-Palestinian artist navigating a predominantly white, upper-middle-class British art environment, Hatoum developed a uniquely powerful, intersectional artistic voice. Her early 1980s performances investigated the complex relationships between body, technology, and audience perception through visual illusions and multisensory experiences.

Artworks like *Don't Smile, You're on Camera!* (1980) (fig. 3) revealed her early intellectual engagement with Foucault and Bataille, alongside feminist reinterpretations of Freudian "master narratives," as she explored surveillance, bodily representation, and technological manipulation. In this piece, Hatoum deployed a live video camera as a provocative instrument of scrutiny. By slowly panning across the audience and focusing on intimate body parts—faces, torsos, crotches—she challenged traditional boundaries of personal space and visibility. The performance was technically sophisticated: shirts seemingly faded to reveal ghostly images of bare skin, jackets turned transparent, and bodies appeared overlaid with X-ray-like representations. This complex visual experience, created with three unseen assistants using multiple camera feeds, questioned fundamental notions of privacy, consent, and the gaze.

Hatoum's early performances were guided by a purist vision of live art as inherently ephemeral—existing only in the moment of enactment. For her, the audience's experience and memory—inevitably distorted over time—constituted an integral element of the work itself. Practical constraints reinforced this approach; lacking resources to organize her own documentation, the few existing records of these performances were facilitated by hosting venues, emphasizing the intangible nature of her early practice.

21. Mona Hatoum, email correspondence with Joan Grandjean, 16 June 2025.

22. Guy Brett, "Survey," in Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 36.

23. Mona Hatoum always made a distinction between a video artwork, of which she produced a handful, and video documentation of performances, which she considered as the document of a performance and not an artwork. Mona Hatoum, email correspondence with Joan Grandjean, 16 June 2025.

Figure 3: Hatoum, Mona. *Don't Smile, You're on Camera!* 1980. Live action with two live video cameras, three monitors, one dissolve unit, x-ray images, technical assistant, and two live models. 40 mins (duration). First performed at *Five Days at Battersea*, Battersea Arts Centre, London, on 26 March 1980, in collaboration with Paul Jackson. © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist.

A year after graduating from the Slade, Hatoum participated in the Women Live festival at London's Film-Maker's Co-op in May 1982. In a performance lasting seven hours, she covered her naked body in clay and confined herself within a small transparent polythene structure, repeatedly struggling to stand, slipping and falling. This action was accompanied by a cacophony of sounds—revolutionary chants and news bulletins in Arabic, English, and French—and a distributed leaflet stating:

> As a Palestinian woman this work was my first attempt at making a statement about a persistent struggle to survive in a continuous state of siege. [...] As a person from the 'Third World', living in the West, existing on the margin of European society and alienated from my own [...] this action represented an act of separation [...] stepping out of an acquired frame of reference and into a space which acted as a point of reconnection and reconciliation with my own background and the bloody history of my own people.[24]

Presented on 30 May 1982, *Under Siege* was performed a week before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, on 6 June 1982, that led to the siege of Beirut. In fact at the time, she thought that her performance was a premonition for what happened a week later. It also marked her first performance explicitly denouncing the Israeli government's violence, the issue of otherness in the UK, and expressing her Palestinian identity to a British audience. The work received serious critical engagement, with some commentators drawing parallels to the Irish prisoners' hunger strikes of the previous year.[25] It proved controversial both for its medium—rejecting the traditional art object in favour of concept—and for its approach to body, gender, and political identity.

Under Siege was performed again at Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth, on 2 October 1982, and lasted three hours (fig. 4). The media response revealed more about societal prejudices than the performance itself. Hatoum later reflected: "All the fuss that was made about this performance came out before it even took place at the gallery in Portsmouth. It was all based on a false assumption that the performance contained nudity." The sensationalist headline in *The Sun*—"Naked in Red Slime"—triggered a national controversy, transforming her serious artistic statement into tabloid scandal. Forced to defend her artistic integrity, she held a press conference to articulate her intentions. Ironically, despite numerous photographers present at the performance, no substantive reporting emerged—the clay-covered structure so completely obscured her form that the sensationalist premise collapsed. This media reaction exposed the complex landscape of performance art in early 1980s Britain, where the press seemed more comfortable sensationalizing the work than engaging with its profound political commentary on Palestinian and Lebanese resistance under Israeli oppression.[26]

24. "Mona Hatoum: Under Siege," Re.Act Feminism: A Performing Archive, accessed 13 December 2024, http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=65&wid=292&e=t&v=&a=&t=.

25. The 1981 Irish hunger strikes were protests by republican prisoners in Northern Ireland's Maze Prison demanding political prisoner status. Led by Bobby Sands of the Provisional IRA, ten prisoners died between March and August 1981 after the British government refused their demands. The strikes generated international attention and became a defining moment in the Northern Ireland conflict, significantly boosting support for Sinn Féin.

26. This consideration of performance art at the time mirrors that of video art and photography as artistic media in their own right, as Rose Issa observes in this volume: "Imagine, the video of Mona Hatoum that I showed in 1987 was acquired twenty years later by the Tate. That same video. At that time, neither Mona Hatoum nor me knew that we could sell video, nor photography. I had her 'Over my dead body,' the beau-

It also aligns with the broader approach of Black Arts in interrogating the white gaze, where artists like Adrian Piper (b. 1948) similarly questioned dominant institutional structures, and as Amina Kayani emphasizes, both Piper and Hatoum's work "directly interrogates the complicity of white audiences in the imperialist structures" they denounce.[27] Furthermore, this performance exemplifies the shift Brett identified as Hatoum's second phase of work. What he termed "issue-based" work, she herself called "time-based work" of the 1980s—art operating through metaphors that positioned the body as a representation of broader society.

Although Hatoum had presented several solo performances, including *Don't Smile, You're on Camera!* at the Battersea Arts Centre in 1980 (fig. 3) and at the Institute of Contemporary Arts' *New Contemporaries* in 1981, followed by the 1982 performance *Under Siege* mentioned above (fig. 4), the mid-1980s trajectory of Hatoum's practice was significantly shaped by international opportunities beyond the constraints of the British art scene. In 1983, a pivotal invitation from the artist-run centre Western Front in Vancouver marked a transformative moment in her career. Western Front not only facilitated her first Canadian performance tour but inaugurated a series of annual international engagements that expanded her artistic horizons, resulting in works such as *So Much I Want to Say* (1983), *The Negotiating Table* (1983), *Changing Parts* (1984), and *Variation on Discord and Divisions* (1984). These international networks proved crucial for her.[28] By 1984, her performance and video work had begun circulating through significant alternative spaces, including New York's Franklin Furnace.

The year 1984 proved central for Hatoum beyond her transatlantic endeavours. The initial connection with Medalla at the Byam Shaw in 1977 led to a significant opportunity in 1984, when he was serving as curator of the Second International Festival of Performance at South Hill Park Arts Centre in Bracknell and invited Hatoum to perform *Them and Us … and Other Divisions* (1984) (fig. 5). It was at this festival that she encountered both Rasheed Araeen and Guy Brett: "Meeting those three individuals [Medalla, Araeen, and Brett] was not only a very significant moment for me but it connected me for the first time with like-minded people who became my support system and like family to me." By this period, she had already begun creating installations that explored what she termed "invisible forces"—magnetism, light, and electricity—while incorporating kinetic elements into her sculptural practice, exemplified by works such as *Self Erasing Drawing* (1979), which subsequently evolved into the large-scale installation + *and* – (1994). Brett, whose book on kinetic art aligned with her artistic investigations,[29] demonstrated keen interest in her performative work, attending several of her Brixton performances the following year and subse-

tiful photograph, behind my desk. And nobody asked, can we buy a photo or can we buy a video? This was not at all fashionable then. So we have to think that the word curator did not really exist, the word video art did not exist, even photography did not have a market, really." In Nadia von Maltzahn, "Roundtable Discussion with Rose Issa and Mohammad El Rawas on the Exhibition *Contemporary Lebanese Artists* at London's Kufa Gallery in Early 1988," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 248–65, accessed in pre-publication format 22 May 2025, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.10.

27. Amina Kayani, "Stranding the Audience: On the Performances and Installations of Mona Hatoum and Adrian Piper," *Full Bleed* 5 (2021): n.p., accessed 22 May 2025, https://www.full-bleed.org/stranding-the-audience.

28. To read about the development of her performance in Canada, see Sara Diamond, "Performance: An Interview with Mona Hatoum," *Fuse Magazine* 10, no. 5 (1987): 46–52, accessed 21 April 2025, http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1792/.

29. Guy Brett, *Kinetic Art* (London: Studio-Vista; New York: Reinhold Book Corporation, 1968).

quently reviewing them. Their professional relationship developed into a lasting friendship that endured until Brett's death in 2021, with his continued support proving invaluable to her artistic career.

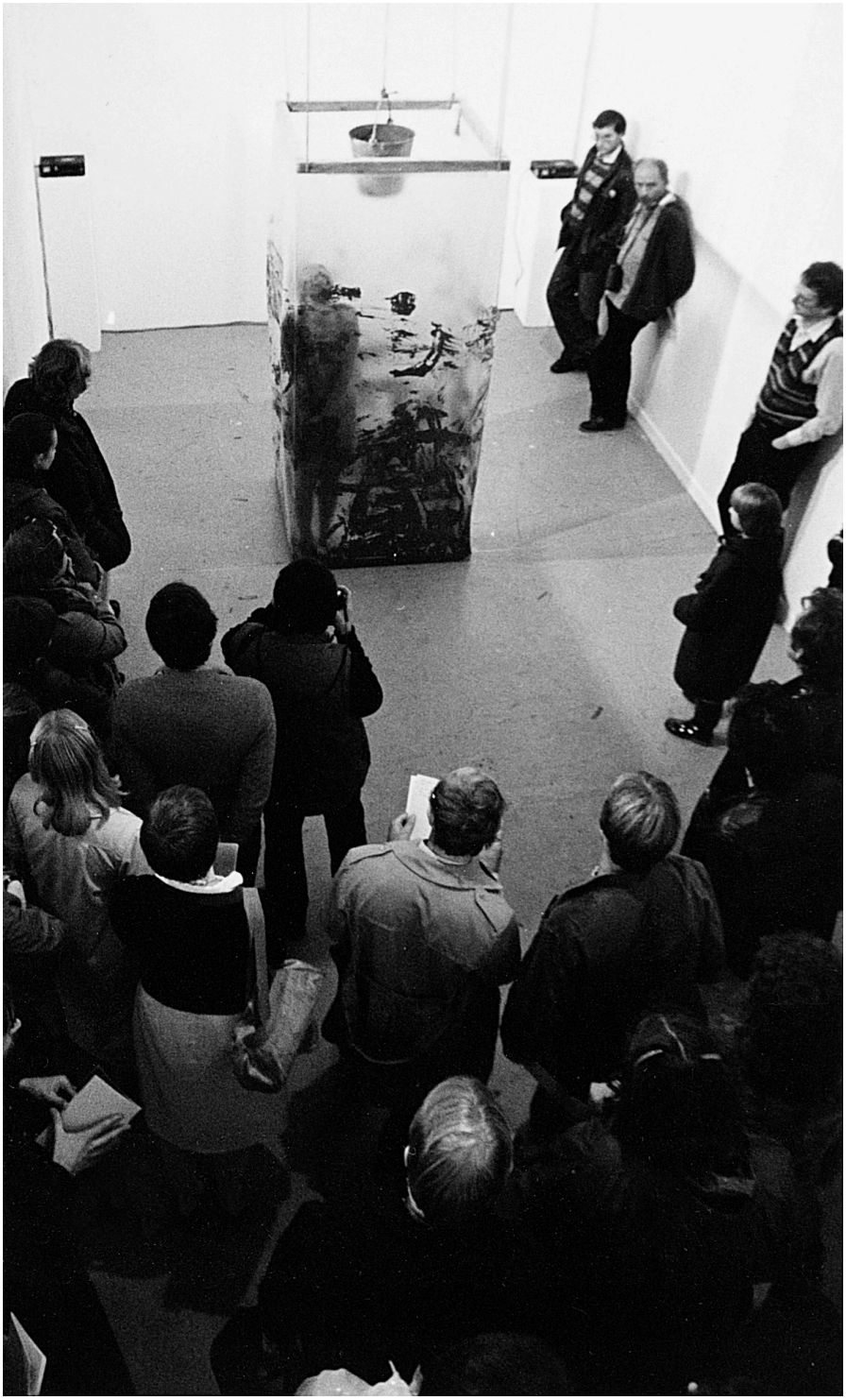

Figure 4: Hatoum, Mona. View of the performance *Under Siege* as part of the group exhibition *Reflections – 9 Women Artists*. 2 October 1982, 3 hours (duration). Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth. Photographed by John McPherson.

Figure 5: Hatoum, Mona. *Them and Us... and Other Divisions*. 1984. Live action with black hood, bucket, brush, red paint, newspapers, and wire mesh. 23 June 1984, 50 mins (duration). Performed at the 2nd International Festival of Performance, South Hill Park Arts Centre, Bracknell, Berkshire. The image features David Medalla on the right and Guy Brett on the left. © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist. Photographed by Robin Morley.

While these four did not collaborate formally altogether, their encounters fostered a shared artistic sensibility that emphasized independent thought and personal subjectivity, transcending both national narratives—Britishness—and overarching discourses on postcolonialism or "black artist" and "Third World arts." This constellation presented expanded possibilities for negotiating "transnationalism" as both perspective and artistic method in Britain between the 1960s and 1980s. Known for their stance against the endemic racism and discrimination in British art institutions, this constellation provided Hatoum with like-minded individuals who made her feel less isolated. It was at this juncture that she found in Araeen's conceptual framework a verbal language to define the issues she had been grappling with concerning the notions of "Third World arts" and the "black artist."

Rasheed Araeen's definitions of these concepts were intrinsically connected to the political and social dimensions of the category "Black British"—a category with significance beyond the art world.[30] This classification emerged partly from massive labour organizing efforts in the 1980s protecting immigrant workers recruited from South Asia and the Caribbean to rebuild British manufacturing, who upon arrival faced treatment as second-class citizens.[31] Because this "Black British" category actively drove political demands, it resonated powerfully within the art world as well, representing "other artists" organizing against colonial power structures.

"Third World" and *Third Text* as a Third Place: Alternative Spaces of Artistic Resistance

During the 1980s, class struggle and worker organization in Britain provided critical historical context for artists of colour, establishing frameworks for racial confrontation that transcended purely aesthetic concerns. The concept of a "third place"—neither fully integrated into the mainstream art world nor limited to ethnic community art—emerged as a vital alternative space where artists like Hatoum could develop work that challenged colonial power structures while engaging with western artistic traditions.

While neither Hatoum nor Araeen were directly involved in grass-roots political movements or resided in Brixton—an area where youth of colour had risen against systemic police brutality—their artistic practices were deeply informed by political consciousness. Araeen had been active in the Black Panther Movement since the 1970s, a connection that significantly shaped his approach to art and cultural activism. This political engagement manifested in his work with the Brixton community,[32] particularly through the Brixton Art Gallery (BAG),[33] where both he and

30. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

31. While Gilroy provides the broader theoretical framework for understanding the cultural politics of race in Britain, the assertion about labour organizing efforts specifically can be read in Ambalavaner Sivanandan's work: "From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain," *Race & Class* 23, no. 2–3 (1981): 111–52, which documents in detail how these immigrant communities organized politically against discrimination in the workplace and society at large.

32. Collective, "Rasheed Araeen," in *Roadworks*, exhibition catalogue, London, Brixton Art Gallery, 18 May–8 June 1985 (London: Brixton Art Gallery, 1985), n.p.

33. The Brixton Art Gallery was housed in three railway arches on Atlantic Road in Brixton's commercial district. Operated by the Brixton Artists Collective—a limited company and registered charity—the gallery received funding from Lambeth Council and the Greater London Council (GLC), with subsidized rent from the British Rail Property Board. Its democratic governance structure allowed any artist to participate in decision-making. The gallery hosted diverse exhibitions, including annual Members Shows featuring approximately two

Hatoum collaborated with the collective between 1984 and 1986. These connections represented more than professional associations; they were strategic alliances in creating counter-institutional spaces where marginalized artists could present work outside the white-dominated mainstream.

On 23 March 1984, the Brixton Artists Collective (BAC) invited Hatoum to participate in the *Multiples* exhibition—a showcase specifically designed for serially produced works including photographs, prints, videos, and posters. Her contribution, *"Under Siege" Summer 1982. (Series One)*, comprised photographic documentation of her earlier performance at the London Film-Makers Co-op (fig. 3).[34] This marked her first engagement with art spaces explicitly organized around racial politics. Araeen was similarly invited to participate in the second open exhibition organized by Creation for Liberation (CfL)[35] from 17 July to 8 August 1984, where he presented *How Could One Paint a Self-Portrait?* (1978–79),[36] a work directly addressing the complexities of identity in a postcolonial context.

The following year, both artists deepened their engagement with marginalized communities through participation in *Roadworks* (18 May–8 June 1985). This initiative, organized by artist Stefan Szczelkun (b. 1952), deliberately positioned artistic interventions outside conventional gallery contexts, bringing them directly to Brixton's predominantly black working-class neighbourhood.[37] In one documented performance, Hatoum walked barefoot through Brixton's streets with heavy Dr. Martens boots—footwear symbolically associated with police authority and skinhead subculture—tethered to her ankles (fig. 6, top left). This created a powerful visual metaphor juxtaposing vulnerability with oppressive power, making visible the everyday violence experienced by racialized communities. In a companion performance with Szczelkun, both artists appeared barefoot, dressed in black with mouths sealed by tape, enacting a sequence wherein they alternately outlined each other's prone bodies with white markings reminiscent of crime scene demarcations—a powerful commentary on the criminalization of black bodies in British society (fig. 6, bottom right).

hundred artists utilizing its extensive wall and floor space. This grassroots arts venue exemplified community-driven cultural initiatives in 1980s London. See the Brixton Art Gallery Archive by Andrew Hurman, accessed 17 April 2025, https://brixton50.co.uk/.

34. See Andrew Hurman, "Multiples – Photography, Xerox & Edition-Based Media," catalogue of the Brixton Art Gallery Archive, accessed 17 April 2025, https://brixton50.co.uk/multiples/.

35. *Creation for Liberation* was a black artists' cultural organization based on Railton Road, Brixton, established in the 1980s to support black artists and confront institutional racism in the arts in Britain.

36. See Andrew Hurman, "Creation for Liberation: 2nd Open Exhibition by Black Artists," catalogue of the Brixton Art Gallery Archive, accessed 17 April 2025, https://brixton50.co.uk/creation-for-liberation/.

37. "… because the Brixton community is predominantly a Black community, I found myself in this rare situation of creating work which although personal/autobiographical, had immediate relevance to the community it was addressing. I found that I was working 'for' the people in the streets of Brixton rather than 'against' the indifferent, often hostile audiences I usually encounter in the art world." In Diamond, "Performance," 49.

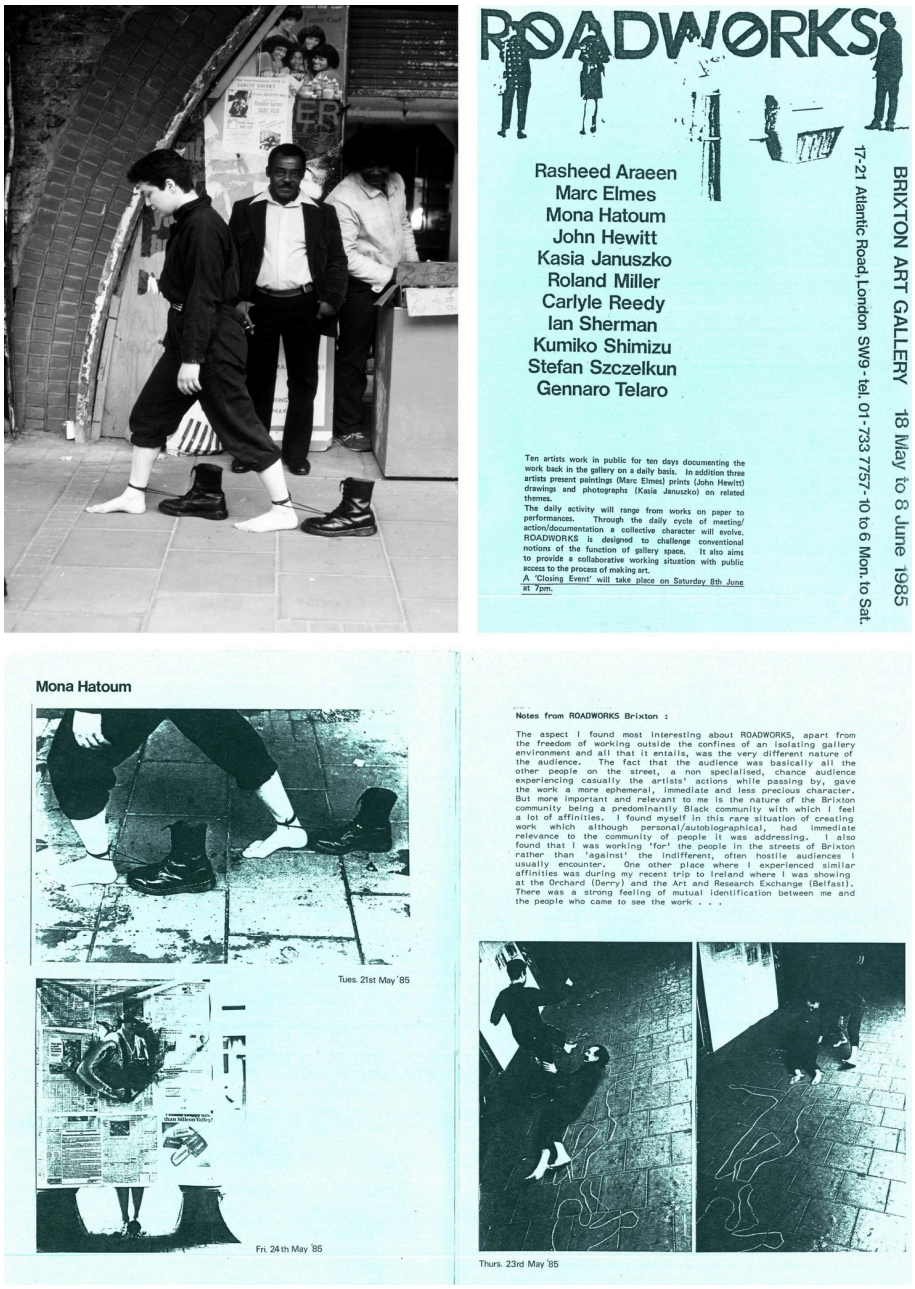

Figure 6: Top left: Hatoum, Mona. *Roadworks*. 1985. Live action with Dr. Martens boots, performed in Brixton, 21 May 1985, London © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy Brixton Art Gallery. Photographed by Patrick Gilbert; the following images are from Collective, ed., *Roadworks*, exhibition catalogue, London, Brixton Art Gallery, 18 May–8 June 1985 (London: Brixton Art Gallery, 1985), n.p.; top right: Catalogue cover listing participating artists and exhibition concept; bottom right: Hatoum's reflections on engaging with Brixton's "chance audience" and predominantly black community, alongside documentation of her collaborative performance with Stefan Szczelkun, 23 May 1985, London; bottom left: Hatoum, Mona. Street performance. 21 May 1985. London © Mona Hatoum and Stefan Szczelkun. Courtesy the artists.

A pivotal moment in this developing "third space" came in March 1986, when funding cuts from the Greater London Council (GLC) forced the cancellation of the proposed *Essential Black Art* exhibition. In response, Araeen quickly organized an alternative exhibition titled *Third World Within* at BAG (fig. 7), where Hatoum hung the artworks, as Araeen was away at his father's funeral.[38] Running from 31 March to 22 April 1986, this exhibition showcased works by Afro-Asian artists in the UK, including Hatoum's video *So Much I Want to Say* (1983)—a work that powerfully expressed the silencing of marginalized voices through a series of images showing a woman's face with male hands covering her mouth. The exhibition aligned with the objectives of Black Umbrella, an organization Araeen established in 1984 to document the overlooked contributions of black/Afro-Asian contemporary artists to British culture. This initiative represented more than mere documentation; it was an act of historical intervention against systematic erasure and division.

Figure 7: Scan of the Brixton Art Gallery's monthly newsletter showing people attending the *Third World Within* private view. From top left to bottom right: Saleem Arif plus unknown, Houria Niati, unknown plus Kumiko Shimizu, Lubaina Himid plus unknown, unknown plus Teri Bullen (one of the co-directors of Brixton Art Gallery), Merdelle J-Irving plus unknown. Date unknown. Courtesy Andrew Hurman and the Brixton Art Gallery archives. Photographer unknown.

In his accompanying press release for *Third World Within*, Araeen offered a critical redefinition of "Black Art" that would prove influential. He argued that it was not merely art produced by black people, but rather a specific contemporary art practice emerging directly from the struggle

38. Andrew Hurman, email correspondence with Joan Grandjean, 24 June 2025.

against racism and explicitly addressing the human condition of black people in western society.[39] This definition provided a theoretical framework that transcended essentialist notions of identity, focusing instead on political positioning and critical engagement.

It was within this intellectual and political framework that Hatoum situated herself in the latter half of the 1980s. Her involvement extended beyond exhibition participation to active theoretical engagement through Araeen's journal *Third Text*, which sought to create a "third space" of critical discourse outside mainstream art publications. Her membership—alongside David A. Bailey, Guy Brett, Mahmood Jamal, Gavin Jantjes, Sarat Maharaj, and Partha Mitter—on the editorial advisory committee positioned her inside a platform developing postcolonial art theory. In the journal's landmark first issue in 1987, Hatoum contributed the article "Body & Text," articulating her artistic approach in conversation with Araeen's critical thinking (fig. 8).[40] This theoretical contribution demonstrated how her practice was not merely responding to identity-based expectations but actively reshaping the discourse around art and politics.

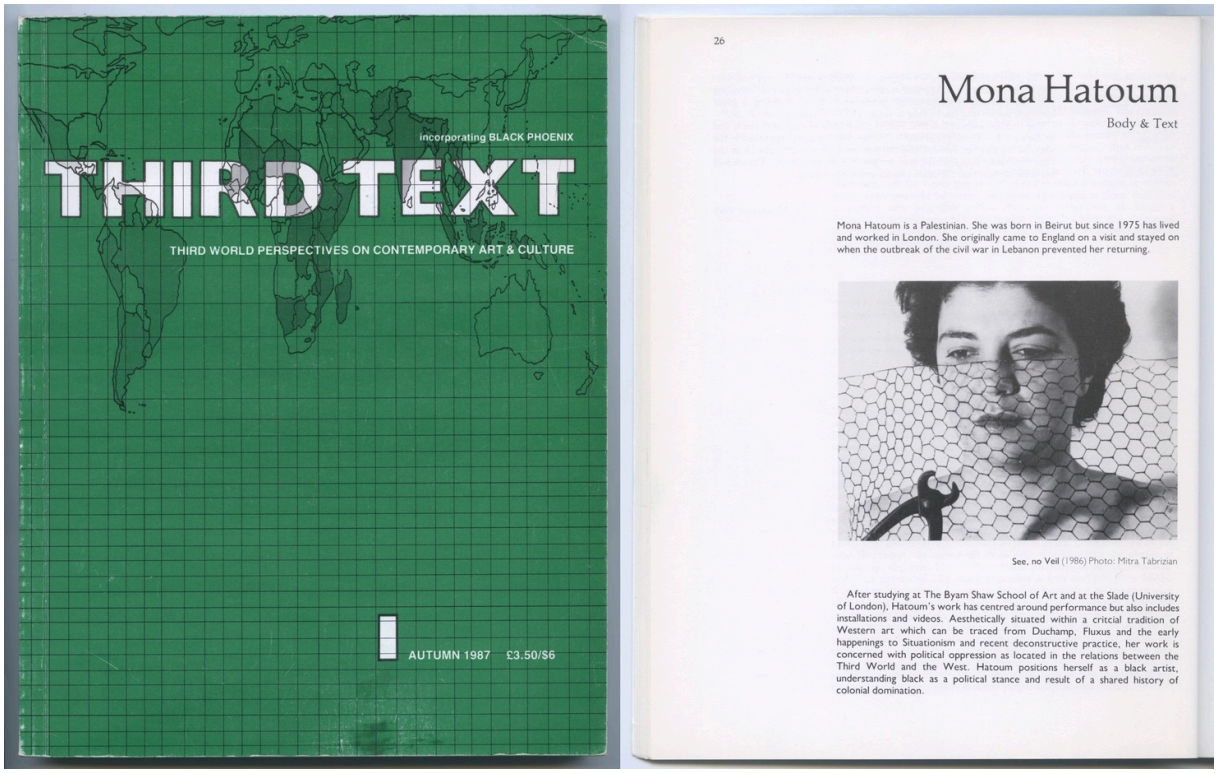

Figure 8: Left: Cover of *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1987), edited by Rasheed Araeen; right: extract of Mona Hatoum's article, "Body & Text," *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 26–33, here 26 © Mona Hatoum and *Third Text*. Courtesy the artist and *Third Text*.

39. See Andrew Hurman, "Third World Within: AfroAsian Artists in Britain," press release and catalogue of the Brixton Art Gallery Archive, accessed 17 April 2025, https://brixton50.co.uk/third-world-within/.

40. Mona Hatoum, "Body & Text," *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 26.

Hatoum's artistic strategy during this period was sophisticated and multi-layered. She positioned her work within the lineage of western avant-garde movements—citing influences from "Duchamp, Fluxus and the early happenings to Situationism and recent deconstructive practice"[41] (fig. 8)—while simultaneously reframing these traditions through the lens of postcolonial critique. Rather than simply adapting western artistic languages, she transformed them by centring the political dynamics of oppression, particularly the complex power relations between the Global South and the west. This approach represented not mimicry but radical reinterpretation and critique. By simultaneously engaging with western artistic traditions while identifying as a black artist as defined by Araeen, Hatoum occupied a unique position that allowed her to challenge established hierarchies from both within and outside dominant structures. This dual positioning enabled her to critically redefine British modern and contemporary art in a postcolonial context while also contributing to political and feminist art discourses.

Araeen's own experience illuminated the necessity of this strategic positioning. Prior to advocating for an emancipatory arts movement across the Third World, he had been denied recognition as a minimalist sculptor and excluded from the British artistic sphere due to his non-western origins.[42] This exclusion led to his work being interpreted solely through the lens of his cultural background rather than in conversation with the western minimalist tradition it clearly engaged with.[43] Hatoum's alignment with Araeen's critical framework helped her navigate similar potential pitfalls in the predominantly white British art world of the 1980s.

Her conscious adoption of the term "black artist" functioned not as a limiting label but as a political stance challenging racial hierarchies in art institutions. This identification served multiple strategic purposes: it provided a protective framework against potential marginalization while simultaneously creating space for a critique of systemic racism in the contemporary art world. By rejecting narrow definitions based on national or ethnic origins while embracing political solidarity, Hatoum positioned herself within a broader, more nuanced artistic discourse that effectively dismantled restrictive categorizations of "ethnic art" and "primitivism."

Through these strategic associations, Hatoum participated in two additional landmark exhibitions curated by Araeen. *The Essential Black Art*, running from 5 February to 5 March 1988, at the Chisenhale Gallery, showcased her work alongside other significant artists including Piper, Biswas, and Himid. The exhibition's catalogue featured Hatoum's 1984 performance *Variation on Discord and Divisions* on its cover—a work that powerfully addressed fragmentation, conflict, and the politics of representation (fig. 9).[44] This visual prominence underscored her growing significance within black artists.

41. Hatoum, "Body & Text," 26.

42. Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala, 1984).

43. Rasheed Araeen, "How I Discovered my Oriental Soul," 85–102.

44. Rasheed Araeen, *The Essential Black Art*, exhibition catalogue, London, Chisenhale Gallery, 5 February–5 March 1988 (London: Chisenhale Gallery and Black Umbrella, 1988).

Figure 9: Left: Invitation card for the exhibition *The Essential Black Art*, curated by Rasheed Araeen, Chiesenhale Gallery, London, 5 February–5 March 1988; right: cover of Rasheed Araeen, *The Essential Black Art*, exhibition catalogue, London, Chisenhale Gallery, 5 February–5 March 1988 (London: Chisenhale Gallery and Black Umbrella, 1988), featuring Hatoum's 1984 performance *Variation on Discord and Divisions* © Chisenhale Gallery and the artist. Courtesy the artist.

The Essential Black Art served as precursor to Araeen's most ambitious curatorial project, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, presented at the Hayward Gallery from 29 November 1989 to 4 February 1990, where Hatoum presented three videos—*So Much I Want to Say* (1983), *Changing Parts* (1984), and *Measures of Distance* (1988)—and *Over My Dead Body* (1988), a metro billboard project hung outside the Hayward Gallery (fig. 10).[45] As the first comprehensive retrospective of British African, Caribbean, and Asian modernism in a major institution, the exhibition represented a significant intervention in British art history. However, its polarized critical reception—simultaneously attracting both derision and acclaim—revealed the deep-seated resistance to integrating these artists into mainstream historical narratives.[46]

Despite its groundbreaking nature, *The Other Story* did not immediately transform institutional practices. Only in recent decades have scholars begun systematically interrogating the meaning of "black" as a political category and engaging meaningfully with the historical stakes involved. This newer scholarship has illuminated important ideological divisions within British Black Arts movements: between Black Power art (with its explicit political agenda serving black communities), Third World solidarity models advocating cross-communal organization against colonial structures and broader cultural affirmative approaches embracing all artistic production by black creators without imposing political requirements.[47]

45. Araeen, *The Other Story*. The show iterated at Wolverhampton Art Gallery from 10 March to 22 April 1990; and Manchester City Art Gallery and Cornerhouse, from 5 May to 10 June 1990.

46. See for example Amanda Sebestyen, Homi Bhabha and Sutapa Biswas, Reviews of *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, 1981–1989*, curated by Rasheed Araeen, in Correia, *What Is Black Art?*, 288–300.

47. See the history of these divisions in Sophie Orlando, "British Black Art," in *British Black Art*, 18–42.

Figure 10: Installation view at Hayward Gallery, London, 1989, featuring Hatoum, Mona. *Over My Dead Body*. 1988. Black and white billboard. 204 × 304 cm. © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy the artist.

A revealing aspect of this complex landscape emerges when examining how certain exhibition spaces were treated in artists' professional narratives. According to Szczelkun, both Hatoum and Araeen notably omitted the BAG from their official curricula vitae despite their significant involvement with the gallery.[48] This interpretation appears questionable, as Hatoum has explained that the BAG was consistently included in her extensive CVs, and omissions in certain catalogues were due to space constraints and editorial decisions to focus on her installation work from 1989 onwards.[49] However, Araeen's landmark *The Other Story* exhibition made no mention of his earlier *Third World Within* show.[50] Beyond the facts, this episode illuminates the precarious position

48. "I should mention that both Mona and Rasheed, who quite quickly became well-known and did well after their Brixton shows, both omitted to list Brixton Gallery on their CVs. Such as the big show that Rashid [*sic*] organized at Hayward in 1989—'The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain'. It shows you the kind of difficulty we were facing in terms of acceptance. People felt that because there was no formal selection committee and they just put themselves forward for shows, the art was not seen as having that official quality assurance!" In Stefan Szczelkun, "Panel 3 – Archive and Contexts (Followed by a Discussion)," plenary session at the symposium Activating Brixton Art Gallery, 1983–86: Archives and Memories, University of Westminster, London, 5 June 2010, proceedings updated June 2023, accessed 21 April 2025, https://stefan-szczelkun.blogspot.com/2012/05/activating-brixton-art-gallery-1983-86.html.

49. Mona Hatoum, email correspondence with Joan Grandjean, 16 November 2025, and notably in her Tate retrospective catalogue. See Archer et al., *Mona Hatoum*, 213.

50. Kate Fowle, "Missing History," in *Rasheed Araeen*, ed. Nick Aikens (Gateshead: BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art; Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art; Geneva: MAMCO, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain; Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2017), 298.

of alternative exhibition spaces within art world hierarchies. Without conventional selection committees—where artists instead self-nominated for exhibitions—these venues apparently carried less professional capital despite their cultural significance. These dynamics reveal how deeply entrenched notions of institutional validation can render important platforms for diverse artistic voices effectively invisible in official histories.

Hatoum's own reflection on these dynamics, articulated in her 1987 statement, offers crucial insight into her strategic navigations:

> There is also the issue of community arts. There is a lot of pressure on Black artists to work within their own community. We are being told, "The most useful contribution you can make is to work with your own 'ethnic' art within your own 'ethnic' community." In other words, "Leave the mainstream art space for the 'more important' Western white male figures to project their fantasies in." It seems to me that this is a deliberate attempt to keep Black people in their place. What I'm hearing then is marginalization, and there is an implicit racism in this attitude. The implication is that we do not have full creative potential and we are not capable of participating in art activity at all levels. I am not saying that there is something wrong with community arts, but it will never be my main area of activity. I would like to use every platform available to me to fight for access to those spaces that are denied me.[51]

This statement crystallizes Hatoum's refusal to be confined to prescribed artistic territories. Her insistence on accessing all platforms—from community spaces to mainstream institutions—reflects a sophisticated understanding of power within the art world. Rather than accepting a binary choice between assimilation and separation, Hatoum carved out a third position that maintained critical distance while engaging with dominant institutions. This approach would prove foundational to her subsequent artistic development as she transitioned toward installation work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, eventually achieving international recognition while maintaining her political commitments.

Hatoum's navigation of these complex terrains during this formative period demonstrates how the creation of "third spaces"—whether through alternative galleries, critical journals, or strategic identifications—provided crucial platforms for artistic development outside restrictive categories. Her experience illuminates not just personal artistic evolution but broader structures of exclusion and resistance that continue to shape contemporary art discourse. By understanding these historical dynamics, we gain deeper insight into how artists from marginalized positions have actively shaped artistic traditions rather than merely responding to them—creating alternative spaces that transform the very meaning of contemporary art.

51. Diamond, "Performance," 50.

Conclusion: Reframing Mona Hatoum's Artistic Trajectory in 1980s Britain beyond Categorization

Through the employment of a monographic approach, this article has traced the multifaceted complexity of Hatoum's artistic evolution throughout the 1980s. This detailed portrait constitutes a critical microhistory that challenges established narratives, revealing precisely how her formative experiences shaped the conceptual foundations of her subsequent international practice.

Hatoum's artistic development emerges as far more complex than conventional narratives suggest. Her formative period in Beirut's experimental artistic milieu—particularly through her interactions with spaces like Contact Gallery—provided crucial conceptual, international, and political groundwork that predated her London training. Similarly, her engagements in Canada from 1983 onwards represented transformative opportunities that allowed her to develop her distinctive voice within new institutional frameworks. By recognizing these multiple, interconnected centres of influence, we can challenge Eurocentric art historical frameworks that position London as the exclusive catalyst for her artistic maturation, instead revealing a transnational trajectory where her practice evolved through dialogue across diverse geographic and cultural contexts.

Revisiting Hatoum's participation in *Third Text*, the BAG, and Araeen's exhibitions illuminates not only Brixton's significance as a nexus for politically engaged art practice but also chronicles the early collaborations between Hatoum and Araeen that would prove influential. This historical contextualization reveals how terms such as "Third World," "British Black Arts," and "Black British" underwent continuous redefinition during this decade, reflecting the fluidity of cultural identities within Britain's postcolonial artistic landscape. Notably, Hatoum's critical positioning as a "black artist" in these contexts has been systematically marginalized within art historical narratives—a neglect evident even within British black artists' discourses and in her subsequent artistic statements.

Hatoum's engagement transcended mere affiliation with the British Black Arts movement. She strategically positioned herself within a precisely delineated symbolic space—a networked constellation of intellectual and artistic solidarity. Through nuanced associations with figures like Araeen, she navigated the complex terrain of institutional critique not by subscribing to a monolithic collective identity, but by cultivating a sophisticated, interconnected discourse of resistance and artistic autonomy. This distinctive positioning explains her placement among the "Other Artists" in Himid's conceptual mapping of the movement (fig. 1).

The trajectory of Hatoum's career underwent a decisive transformation in 1989 when she secured a position as senior fellow in fine art at the Cardiff Institute of Higher Education. This institutional appointment marked what she characterized as "a full stop" in her performance practice, catalysing a return to object-making that would propel her from the margins of British art into its mainstream.[52] The security of a regular salary and access to a dedicated studio space for the first time liberated her from the financial precarity that had constrained her earlier work. This shift coincided with a growing disillusionment with performance art, prompting her to reconnect with

52. Rachel Cooke, "Mona Hatoum: 'It's All Luck. I Feel Things Happen Accidentally,'" *The Guardian*, 17 April, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/17/mona-hatoum-interview-installation-artist-tate-modern-exhibition.

the conceptual frameworks and minimalist language that had initially shaped her practice. This strategic reorientation proved remarkably effective in establishing her institutional recognition: her first solo museum exhibition at the Pompidou Centre followed in 1994, a Turner Prize nomination in 1995, and her inaugural show at Tate Britain in 2000. This rapid ascent from marginal performance artist to internationally acclaimed contemporary one demonstrates how Hatoum's nuanced navigation of artistic and institutional contexts ultimately enabled her to achieve the visibility and influence that had remained elusive during her more explicitly political performance period. While maintaining personal connections to Lebanon, her artistic engagement with the region's contemporary scene only materialized around the late 1990s and early 2000s, when she began to connect with local artists like Akram Zaatari (b. 1966) and Walid Raad (b. 1967) when they participated in the Ayloul Festival in Beirut in 2000.

The 1980s, while characterized by resistance to far-right policies, also saw a problematic tendency to fetishize works associated with the British Black Arts movement, often reducing them to mere documents of the era[53] or simplistic expressions of non-white identity.[54] Hatoum's practice fundamentally resists such reductive categorization by refusing confinement to singular narratives, categories, or geographies. This nuanced understanding not only enriches our appreciation of her artistic development but also broadens our conception of how artistic movements and identities formed across borders during this pivotal period, inviting a more complex framework for understanding transnational artistic trajectories within postcolonial contexts.

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53. Eddie Chambers, "Re-reading Black British Artists' Practices: Black Artists and the Fetishization of the 1980s," lecture at the Knight Foundation Art + Research Center, 13 May 2021, posted 8 November 2021, by the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, YouTube, 1:11:38, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZMbO-JvEQQ8.

54. Rasheed Araeen, "The Success and the Failure of the Black Arts Movement," in Bailey, Baucom, and Boyce, *Shades of Black*, 21–34.

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About the Author

Joan Grandjean is an art historian specializing in contemporary art from the Arab geocultural space. He earned his PhD from the University of Geneva, focusing on "Arab futurities" in contemporary art, exploring how artists from the region envision and construct imagined futures. From 2017 to 2024, Grandjean served as an academic assistant at the University of Geneva before joining the University of Rennes 2, France, as a teaching and research fellow at the department of Visual Arts and associate member of the research unit Practices and Theories of Contemporary Art (PTAC EA 7472). His research examines the intersections of contemporary art, globalization, and speculative imaginaries. His notable publications include co-editing the double issue "Photographie et Politique" for *Tumultes* journal (2023) and the exhibition catalogue *Arabofuturs: Science-fiction et nouveaux imaginaires* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 2024). He is an active participant in the ARVIMM research group in Paris, France, and co-founded the Manazir platform in Switzerland.

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“I Have a Friend Named Time”

Interview with Greta Naufal

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Abstract

In this interview, Lebanese artist Greta Naufal (b. 1955) looks back at her beginnings as an artist during the 1980s, reflecting on her education and early exhibitions within the context of the ongoing war in Lebanon. Initially drawn to science, her passion for art had already taken root during her teenage years through painting workshops at ALBA, where she studied under Guvder. The practice of painting became an intuitive form of expression, later deepened by her engagement with theoretical texts and visits to museums in Europe. Despite societal and institutional challenges, she pursued Fine Arts at the Lebanese University’s Raouche campus, where she was mentored by prominent Lebanese artists such as Aref El Rayess, Yvette Achkar and Amine El Bacha. Naufal recalls both moments of inspiration and instances of gender discrimination. Her formative years were shaped by resilience, passion and a deep connection to painting. In 1985, the artist travelled to Paris to pursue a PhD at the Sorbonne under Marc Le Bot, with a research proposal on the impact of war on Lebanese artists. Despite her efforts, Le Bot never responded, and she returned to Beirut due to escalating violence. Over the following years, her art continued to respond to her lived experience, shaped by war. Exhibitions like *The Way of the Cross* (1986) and *Nine Months* (1987) focused on survival, maternity and loss. She was part of pivotal events like *Beirut Tabaan* (1989), which fostered cross-sectorial artistic collaboration. Her works evolved into installations and performances, such as the 1993 happening in a ruined cathedral. She sees herself as a link between generations, concerned by the erasure of artists who remained during the war, emphasizing the lasting relevance of resistance and time.

Keywords

Painting, Lebanese Civil War, Maternity, Shelter, Goethe-Institut, War Generation

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This interview is an edited version of a conversation with Greta Naufal in French on 23 May 2025 by Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan (on Zoom). It was edited and translated by Nadia von Maltzahn and reviewed by Greta Naufal.

Born in Beirut in 1955, Greta Naufal is a visual artist and art educator. Her work was featured in a number of exhibitions in the Arab World as well as overseas, and is part of various public and private collections including the Royal Museum of Stockholm, Millesgarden Museum, Sursock Museum, and the BeMA collection. Greta Naufal has also been teaching art in several educational institutions in Lebanon since 1983, mentoring many emerging artists. Often reflecting on the environment that surrounds her, Greta Naufal experiments with various media including painting, collage, drawing, photography, lithography, video, and installations. In 1982, after the Israeli invasion of Beirut, Greta Naufal produced a body of work on the theme of displacement and survival. This established her as an influential artist of the so-called "war generation" with a distinctive expressionist style. Throughout the 1990s, she became one of the first artists to document post-war Beirut by conducting extensive field research on the vanishing architectural heritage, its impact on collective memory, and the personal narratives of the inhabitants of the city. Whether through her interrogations of her fluctuating relationship with Beirut, her explorations of the human condition through portraits of great musicians and intellectuals, or her denunciations of violence in all its forms, Greta Naufal's artworks remain strongly rooted in the contemporary space and time we live in.[1]

We would like to start in 1976, with your shift from studying Chemistry to Fine Arts at the Lebanese University. Can you tell us more about what motivated you to study Chemistry, and what then made you switch to Fine Arts?

Why did I choose to study Chemistry at first? You know how experimental we can get at such a young age! Actually, before starting my university degree at the Lebanese University, I was already very interested in art. I went to ALBA, the *Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts*, which at the time was in the area of Msaytbeh in Beirut. I was fifteen years old and keen to enrol in a painting workshop. My parents encouraged me because I always enjoyed drawing and the use of colours. I joined a class with Jean Guvderelian, more famously known as Guvder.[2] He is no longer with us today. He was the first one to initiate me into painting. It was a great discovery for me because I was painting intuitively. I obviously did not have much technical know-how, nor an understanding of the process that governs the discipline of painting. Painting was a way of expressing myself, of responding to an urge for visual representation. When I started painting with Guvder, I realized that there was a whole new world opening up for me. Practice was essential, but there was also

1. For a detailed biography, see "Artistic Journey & Highlights," Greta Naufal, accessed 30 July 2025, https://gretanaufal.com.

2. Jean Guvderelian (1923–2016) was a Lebanese artist of Armenian origin who was known for his qualities as a teacher. He had an art school in his studio before teaching at ALBA.

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knowledge to be acquired from looking, reading, and researching. One has to instruct oneself through books and documentaries, by visiting museums and art galleries and so on. The experience of others is enriching and can be a great source of inspiration.

It must be said that, at the time, it was not easy to choose the path of art. Neither the country nor the society would support artists as we see happening a bit more today. Therefore, I needed to take care of myself. Maybe I could have started with physics or biology, but I went into chemistry. Science fascinated me in school. However, a year later, I decided to change and focus on Fine Arts because I saw that this is where my passion truly lies. Some books were formative for me during these early years, such as Pierre Pizon's *Le rationalisme dans la peinture* (1978) [Rationalism in painting] or Xavier de Langlais *La technique de la peinture à l'huile* (1959) [The technique of oil painting].

And were these books available at the university?

No. I bought these books during my trip to France in 1979. I was in my third year of undergraduate studies and a visit to Italy was organized by the university. At that time, they had a budget for cultural trips. We travelled to Rome and Florence along with the students of architecture, accompanied by the art critic Faycal Sultan and others (fig. 1). I continued the journey to Paris on my own, impatient to visit the museums and acquire books on painting. I remember seeing an exhibition of Salvador Dali at the Centre Pompidou. The *Musée de l'Homme* had a profound impact on me as well.

Figure 1: Group photo of Lebanese University class, 1979. Vatican, Italy. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Can you tell us more about the Lebanese University at that moment, and the Institute of Fine Arts (Branch 1 in Raouche)?

The Lebanese University was located in a building opposite the famous rocks of Raouche in Beirut, not far from Galerie Janine Rubeiz. The location was appealing because it overlooked the sea. I remember how the rooms were spacious, but we had no lockers! We needed to carry our heavy material back and forth every time we went to class. This was particularly challenging. The main advantage of the Institute of Fine Arts was that the most prominent figures of modern art in Lebanon were teaching there. We were very lucky because we could benefit from a pool of masters in the field.

Aref El Rayess was teaching us composition, Rafic Charaf landscape representation, Mounir Eido sculpture, Seta Manoukian and Amine El Bacha painting, Yvette Achkar drawing, and Jamil Molaeb printing. Aref El Rayess would lend his students his own printing machine since the university did not have any (fig. 2). He had already published his book on the drawings of the war[3] using this same machine. He was a very generous artist, especially with his students, and we later became good friends. There was also Simone Baltaxé with whom I took one course of painting, and Nadia Saikali, who had just arrived from France. I also took one course with Hassan Jouni, another with Hussein Madi, and one more with Rashid Wehbe. This is to say that all these influential artists were collectively transforming this place into a laboratory of creative thinking and making.

I must admit that with some teachers, the chemistry immediately clicked. While with others, it did not. With Yvette Achkar, for example, it was very pleasant. There was a lot of encouragement; the relationship was equal. She lived near my house, so we went back home together sometimes and became friends later on. She had a beautiful way of teaching. She observed the whole process of our work, waited until the end, and when she felt that she could intervene as a teacher, she would do so with just one line. It was final. She was the one who put the finishing touch on our work.[4] Amine El Bacha had a similar approach.

With Hussein Madi, however, it did not really click. There was also Moussa Tiba with whom it did not click at all. I remember how we had to submit a thesis during our last year. I and another student (who was absent for most of the year!) received the same grade of nineteen out of twenty. The jury suggested splitting the scholarship between the two of us. Tiba, who was a member of the jury, rejected this on the grounds that I was a woman, married, and going to have children which, in his opinion, meant that I did not need a scholarship. He was planning my future for me like a "*bassara*" (Arabic word for fortune teller).

3. Aref El Rayess published *The Road to Peace* in 1976.

4. On Greta Naufal's recollection of Yvette Achkar, also listen to *The Moving Biographies Podcast*, launched by the Institute of Art in the Arab World, in collaboration with Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad (LAWHA) and with the Lebanese American University (LAU), moderated by Yasmine Nachabe Taan, episode 2, "Greta Naufal on Yvette Achkar / On Women by Women in Art," YouTube, 29 September 2023, video, 13:35, https://youtu.be/maVV8234Qqg?si=d7AL8oT2UbN9HsVQ.

Figure 2: Naufal, Greta. *The Press*. 1979. Oil painting. 70 × 100 cm. Artist Collection, Lebanon. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

I remember one more dramatic incident with my classmates during those years. I don't know if I should mention it, but actually I want to. We were a small group of students at the time, seven in total, with five young men and two women. I don't recall the name of the other woman, but she got harassed, which forced her to leave the university.

So I was the only woman in class. Out of the five men, two used to attend irregularly and I forgot their names. The other three were Hamada Zaiter, Abdallah Kahil, and Ali Chamseddine. Zaiter later took care of the collection of mosaics in the palace of Beiteddine, which he did with much devotion. Kahil went to New York on scholarship to study Islamic Art, and then came back to teach at the Lebanese American University (LAU) where we became colleagues. Chamseddine was a very particular young man, he had an interesting touch as an artist. His work was subtle. He was a shy person who did not speak much, yet everything was expressed through his work!

The Institute of Fine Arts of the Lebanese University was established in the mid-1960s in the Grand Serail building in Downtown Beirut. Following the outbreak of the war in 1975, it opened Branch 1 in Raouche, which you have described to us. It also set up a second branch in Furn al-Shebak in 1977, which moved to its current location in 1979. Did you have any relationship with Branch 2 at the time?

We were disconnected from the second branch; at that time everyone was in Raouche. All the artists teaching were there. We did not think much about the division between regions, but the war had divided the country and its people. At first, I did not believe in it much. I noted this division during the 1989 exhibition of *Beirut Tabaan*. The exhibition aimed to bring together the artists who were actively working during the war; however, the absence of the artists from East Beirut was obvious. They were participating, but they were not physically present. This division between East (*sharqiyyeh*) and West (*gharbiyyeh*) remained in people's psyche. I will share an anecdote on the subject. In 1999, nearly a decade after the civil war had ended, I was collaborating on a book in tribute to Louise Wegmann,[5] the founder of the Collège Protestant Français. I held the position of Professor of Visual Arts there since 1982, and was therefore invited to design the book. We were printing this book in a press located in the eastern part of the capital and I was having a conversation with the employees who kept asking me, "Are you really from West Beirut? Do you come here all the way from the West, what happens there? We will never go there." Some people living in the eastern part of Beirut were afraid to come to the western side. We moved more easily in this part of the city. The country was politically and socially divided and continues to be.

In 1980 you completed your master's degree in fine arts on the aesthetics of comics at the Lebanese University. What attracted you about the medium of comics?

When I started university in the early 1980s, I discovered the Art of Comics with a capital "A." We were used to the French term "la bande dessinée." It had been recognized as an artform since the 1960s, but we did not have access to such publications in our part of the world.

5. The book *Louise Wegmann au Liban* was written by Janine Tannous and published by the Présence Protestante Française au Liban, 1999. Greta Naufal was in charge of the design direction of the book and its archival photography.

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In Lebanon, comics were not appreciated as an art, they were associated with magazines for children. I started discovering the world of comics for adults with my husband back then who went on to specialize in it, setting up the first collective of comics artists in Lebanon and the region.[6] One day, one of my teachers came back from Europe with a stack of art books including various comics albums. Those were not magazines but extraordinarily illustrated books. He proposed that I pursue my research on the subject as a way to introduce it to the local artists. I gladly accepted and he started sharing with me all the resources he had. I remember that the work of Spanish artist Esteban Maroto caught my attention in particular. His sense of composition, his cinematographic vision, his mastery of human anatomy, and the intense black and white scenes were captivating. I learned through him how some painters chose to shift to comics in order for their work to reach a wider audience.

Then why did you not continue in comics?

I didn't even start there to continue! I have been drawing all my life and my drawings were used as illustrations in various publications. I have taught drawing classes for nearly four decades at the Lebanese American University (and other Lebanese universities as well), but I was and still am dedicated to painting primarily. My research as a student helped me clearly understand the role of painting, as it was being challenged by new forms of visual art.

I did video art and I continue to experiment with this medium because I love the spontaneous aspect of it. However, nothing compares to painting. It is of a completely different nature. It connects us to matter and the elements. It can be touched, it can be smelled, it is skin and surface. It is of the now, of the instant. Each stroke captures this essence. Painting captures the intensity of my experience best, it makes me sit with a subject in a completely new way. Occasionally, I have painted diptychs or triptychs, but in my painting, my intention is not to narrate a story, there is no sequence of imagery. Painting is the story. I could express it this way: in my experience, painting is the translation of the consciousness of our existence.

In May 1982 you held your first solo exhibition, at the Goethe-Institut in Manara, entitled *Beyrouth Ma Ville*. What did you exhibit there?

Beyrouth Ma Ville was an important milestone for me (fig. 3). It was my very first solo exhibition at a time when I witnessed many people leaving the country. The city felt empty. Those who could leave during the war did not hesitate. I wanted to mark my presence, my belonging to this city. When we had an hour of calm, especially in the afternoon, we would walk near the Corniche—Beirut's seaside. I would take photographs and paint people there (fig. 4). The exhibition was about a sense of place, the city and the sea, the horizon. It was an escape. This is what I aimed to depict. I also painted portraits of people from the city because when you paint a face, you feel a presence, everything is there. Everything is written on this person's face, everything they feel. Eye contact is paramount for me. It connects us.

6. George Khoury (Jad) established JAD Workshop in the 1980s which was a collective of comics artists from Lebanon.

Figure 3: Photograph from the exhibition *Beyrouth Ma Ville* at the Goethe-Institut in Manara with Elham Kallab (left), Amine El Bacha (far right) and Mounir Eido (second from right), 1982. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Figure 4: Naufal, Greta. *The Orange Seller*. 1982. Oil on canvas. 300 × 250 cm. Private collection, Lebanon. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Can you tell us more about how this exhibition came about, and the role of the Goethe-Institut at the time?

I came to the Goethe-Institut thanks to my friend Barbara Kassir who was the head librarian there at the time (fig. 5). First, she suggested that I use one of the rooms as a studio. Then, she offered to display my work in their exhibition space.

Figure 5: Greta Naufal (right) with Barbara Kassir (left) at the Goethe-Institut, 1990. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

In 1982, we had a shortage of water and electricity. It was a time of war; there were bombshells on a daily basis. I had my first child that year and I needed a safe place to work. Barbara suggested to me to transform one of the rooms into an atelier for painting. Two artists had already worked there; a Palestinian and a Lebanese. The first was Nasser Soumi and the second was Paul Wakim. There was a printing machine and a large water tank where I could wash my painting material. It was an informal space, open and full of light. I found it conducive to work there. I could go down to the library as well as communicate with the various visitors and students of the German cultural centre. Sometimes they screened films. The institute was active during those days. It was a dynamic and vibrant place.

How did you perceive the art scene at the time?

It must be said that in 1982, the newly elected president Bashir Gemayel was assassinated. This was followed by the massacres in the two Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila. The political scene dimmed the light of any other scene. The silence that reigned over the city was really indescribable. It was frightening. It felt as if this city was swallowed by the inside of the earth.

You are asking about the art scene… At that time, I only remember attending an exhibition by Mona Saudi at Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste. There was the *Salon d'Automne* at the Sursock Museum that year too. I don't think I went there. And then there were all these political events. I took my daughter and left the city to spend some time in the mountains. I remember that there was an exhibition by Naziha Knio in the Shouf. I couldn't see it. I did not move. There was also Lulu Baassiri at the Smugglers' Inn in Hamra. There were sculptures that Alfred Basbous exhibited at Gallery One in Zalka. I did not go [to that] either. I did not want to move. And then there was Zaven Khedechian in Kaslik. It was out of the question that I move. I did not want to be traumatized further by the snipers or the bombshells.

Were there still activities, or possibilities, to exhibit in Hamra? You know the Muntada, for example. Did you sometimes go to see exhibitions there?

Yes, I went to the Muntada. I remember attending an exhibition of Amine El Bacha there.

It was also a meeting place, where there were other events.

Yes, but at the time, we mainly met in the cafés on Hamra street, especially the HorseShoe café. Sitting in open air was important, we avoided closed spaces. I would meet the writer Rachid Daif, the artist Rafic Charaf, and the art critic Nazih Khater among many other intellectuals and artists. Hamra was really the heart of the city at that time.

You exhibited at the Galerie Chahine in the Solemar Beach Resort in 1984. Many exhibitions took place in the coastal area north of Beirut at the time. Did exhibiting there feel different, or was the public similar to that in Beirut?

Richard Chahine had two galleries, one in Beirut and another in Jounieh. I was not very much connected to the scene outside of the capital at this point, so he invited me to exhibit in Jounieh for the first time. I had other exhibitions in later years outside of Beirut but in those years, it was very important for me to exhibit in the heart of the city which inspired all of my work. In 1984, Chahine was keen to have my work in Jounieh where he had invited a minister. The most interesting encounter I had during this exhibition, however, was with a poetess whose name was Nohad Salameh.[7] The conversations with her were very engaging. This exhibition was dedicated to the Nuba community in Kau; much was written about it in the newspapers of the time. More than where I exhibited and the audience, I could tell you about the work itself. I was a mother of two daughters by then and I became increasingly more interested in ancient social structures. I

7. For her exhibition review of "The Nuba of Kau" at Galerie Chahine, see Nohad Salameh, "Greta Naufal: 'Les mémoires d'un corps et d'une conscience'," 1984, *Le Reveil*, exact date unknown.

was inspired by the photographs of the Nuba by the German film director Leni Riefenstahl and decided to draw and paint them. I was experimenting with various media, oil, acrylic, ink, and watercolour (fig. 6 and fig. 7).

Figure 6: Naufal, Greta. *Nuba of Kau*. 1984. Oil on canvas. 100 × 100 cm. Lebanon / Artist Collection. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Figure 7: Naufal, Greta. *Nuba*. 1984. Ink on paper. 21 × 29 cm. Lebanon / Artist Collection. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

In 1985 you travelled to Paris to enrol at the Sorbonne University as a PhD candidate under the supervision of Marc Le Bot. Tell us more about what came of this.

I left for Paris with my project proposal. The topic I wished to write about was the scars of war on Lebanese artists. I had a list of artists in mind starting with Seta Manoukian. She had left Lebanon in 1985 after two exhibitions (in 1979 and 1984). I was fond of the work she had done with children as well and which she had published in books. Next on the list was Imad Issa. He had travelled to Spain, then came back during the war. He started sculpting once back. I liked his sculptures using cement. His approach was unique and avant-garde. He produced this work in his village in the south of Lebanon, away from the city, where he stacked blocks on top of each other with iron rods inside them. I found this work extraordinary. Then, I also had in mind Mohammad Rawas because I had seen his exhibition at Galerie Rencontre in 1979. Rawas had sent work from London, where he was doing his studies before coming back to Lebanon.

Today, I would probably add to this list Hamada Zaiter, who used to be my classmate and who had taken up the restoration of Byzantine mosaics during the war. Another artist who did very interesting work during the war was Aram Jughian. He was the first to do a "happening" in Lebanon. At some point, he had to leave his house and came up with the genius idea of using the *Salon d'Automne* at the Sursock Museum as his shelter. He brought his carpet and slept in the museum! This act was very bold and impactful. Many people found it distasteful because they probably resisted contact with homeless people in the streets. For me, he was an artist in the true sense of the word. His intention was to trigger our reflection on the conditions artists live in. Provocation in art can be on point. He was inviting everyone to think about those who are producing the work which we see, devoid of context, in the space of a museum. I started appreciating his work since he did an intervention in Amal Traboulsi's Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste. Aram was one of the few artists who travelled back and forth between East and West Beirut, accompanied by his dog. He came to the art gallery with two kilos of bananas during an exhibition—I forgot which artist was exhibiting at the time. He scanned the exhibition, then started speaking about the business of galleries and did a spontaneous public performance where he started to eat bananas in the middle of the space. Amal Traboulsi was shocked. I loved it! I also agreed with him about the fact that galleries in time of war cannot continue their business as usual. In fact, I would find it more considerate that galleries close rather than show art which does not denounce the atrocities of war. I think that today with all that is going on, art shows in galleries tend to make my heart ache. There is a famine just a few kilometres from us. I thought a lot about what to do. We have to be aware of what's going on in the world. It can't go on as if nothing is happening. This really upsets me.

Anyway, I have digressed! Back to my research proposal. The last person on my list would be Fadi Barrage. His studio in the city centre was pillaged while he was in Greece. Galerie Rencontre saved parts of his work and exhibited it. It was very interesting because it was a quest. I will not say more because you have to get curious enough to find out for yourself![8]

8. Ed. note: For more on Fadi Barrage's artistic practice, see Nadia von Maltzahn, "Fadi Barrage, an Artist's Diary: 'To Think Things Out in Painting'," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 160–89, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.7.

So I had prepared a draft paper, but Marc Le Bot did not answer. I paid for the trip to France during this black moment of Lebanon's history, but he was away and unreachable. I waited a week for him to come back. He did not come back. I left my paper and wrote a letter. He never answered. I knew that I had to go back to Beirut because the situation back home was getting worse. This was in 1985.

In your 1986 exhibition, *The Way of the Cross*, which was again held at the Goethe-Institut in Beirut, you focused on the themes of survivors of war and maternity. Can you tell us more about the title and subject of the exhibition? Also, who was the public, and how did they receive your works?

It had been almost ten years since the civil war had started. It was not stopping. It was like a haemorrhage! Something had to end; I stopped painting with colour. I used black and white ink and felt the urge to draw the image of survivors of war (fig. 8). I also did a few pieces using the *grattage* (scratching) technique, where layers of coloured pastel were covered with black ink. I could not help but keep alive the faint hope that the war would stop. At the same time, I felt like it would never stop. I had to live with it. It's like when you live with a bacterium in your body. I had hope left, though. It wasn't all black. There was always white and a sense of light in each artwork. I remember when a collector by the name of Ramzi Saidi came to this exhibition. This was the first time he visited the Goethe-Institut and the first time we were introduced. After a quick tour, he comes to me and tells me: "I will take one of them." He started negotiating the artwork's value. So I said to him: "If you want us to continue to live, if you really care for artists to continue to exhibit in this city, you have to accept." He accepted and I asked him: "So which one did you choose?" He had chosen an ink drawing of a father and a child—"Paternity."

Figure 8: Photograph from the exhibition *The Way of the Cross* at the Goethe-Institut, Beirut, 1986. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

In 1987, you elaborated on the subject of maternity in your exhibition *Nine Months* at the Alumni Centre of the American University of Beirut (AUB) (fig. 9 and fig. 10).

The central theme of this body of work was maternity too. I was invited to teach a drawing class at the American University of Beirut which had an Alumni Centre. The subject of "mother and child" is central to the history of art as we all know, and I was pregnant again during this year. There is a reference in this work to what I saw when I was young, because I was in a religious school in Achrafieh. It was an Orthodox school where we had to attend mass every morning. There were extraordinary icons in the school's church. It was full of icons of the Virgin Mary with the child Christ. That is something which stayed with me—there is always an unconscious side to our work which surfaces at times. I did not really pray with words; my prayer was looking at these icons. It was a very beautiful collection.

Figure 9: Poster at the Alumni Centre of the American University of Beirut (AUB) Alumni exhibition, Beirut, 1987. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Figure 10: Crowd at the Alumni Centre of the American University of Beirut (AUB) Alumni exhibition, Beirut, 1987. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

In the late 1980s you met Janine Rubeiz and took part in her collective exhibition *Beirut Tabaan* in 1989. How do you remember this exhibition? What did it mean to come together for an exhibition at that moment?

Janine Rubeiz was a very energetic woman. She worked a lot with artists and encouraged them to continue their art no matter what. We always saw her with paintings in her arms. She was aware that artists needed to continue producing, and that support was essential for them to continue. She was right. She fought a lot. She had learned that we were a group at the time including the owner of Galerie Rencontre, Antoine Fani, Imad Issa, Barbara Kassir and her husband Majid Kassir (who was working with the German television channel WDR and documenting on his camera the work of artists at the time). Janine Rubeiz came to us and told us: "I will bring the artworks and you take care of the rest." And that's what happened. The exhibition was conceived in an innovative way. Artworks were not just hanging on the walls, they were suspended from the ceiling, there was a whole scenography designed by George Khoury. There was also a large screen showing the writer Elias Khoury doing an interview about Beirut. Most of the active artists at the time participated in this collective endeavour, which acted as a bridge between the eastern and western parts of the city, between artists from various fields and different generations. Amine El Bacha and Rafic Charaf did not participate, but Aref El Rayess and Yvette Achkar did. I met Farid Mansour for the first time. The event connected us to writers and poets and fostered the meet-

ing of visual arts, literature and crafts. I met the painter and ceramist Samir Muller then. It also included the work of illustration artists who had created comics about the war. There are exhibitions that we really have to talk about, and this is one of them.[9]

***Beirut Tabaan* took place during the same period of the "War of Liberation" (March 1989–October 1990), when you ended up spending a month in the shelter of your building in the *Watwat* area in Beirut. Did the exhibition take place at a moment of calm? Was it in between?**

Beirut is full of contradictions and opposites coexist at all times. Calm. War. Tension. There is always tension somewhere. It doesn't stop. It is like a box of wonders. It's a city that can surprise you any minute. Maybe that's why people like Beirut in spite of it all, it's never boring. There is always something to keep you on your toes.

Al Jazeera did a documentary about artists during the war where I talk about my experience in the shelter. The recordings give a first-hand account of this period.[10] In 1989, I discovered the films of Pina Bausch at the Goethe-Institut; Barbara had requested them from Germany. I really wanted to see *Café Müller*.[11] I watched it a dozen times. It spoke to me a lot, and even to my children. It must have resonated with us because we had to go down to the shelter almost every afternoon during this period, and everyone had to carry their own chair, and there was this repetitive action of going up and down and movement of running back and forth. Every afternoon, around 4 pm, the shooting would start. Bombs were dropped from the east onto the western region. They came from everywhere. Even in the shelter, we weren't safe. Some people died in their shelters. I had a small sketchbook with me that I filled with sketches of people who were coming into the shelters whenever it was possible to sit and draw.

This was the only underground shelter in our neighbourhood. It was there because the basement of our building had an Armenian printing house. It had several rooms. The first time I went down there it was like going down to hell, I will never forget. It was in my building, but no one had gone down there before. During the earlier years of war, we would not need to go down to the shelter. This year, however, we had to. I had to do it for the children. I had three of them. The balcony of my house was hit by a bombshell one day, so I had no choice. For a month, every day, we had to rush down to the shelter. The people in the neighbourhood started to leave Beirut. In the end, there were only very few families left. We couldn't sleep at night. We had to stay awake because we didn't know what was going to happen. We didn't know where the bombs were going to fall. We had to stay alert and listen to the news on the radio. People were going down to the shelter with the radio. They had little transistors. One night, the inhabitants of the third floor, who were Greek and usually did not come, came down as the bombing was too intense. They had the biggest tape recorder among us. I went up very quickly and fetched a tape of Greek music from my apartment, and we spent the night dancing to ease fear and distract our children. It was an

9. Ed. note: See Flavia Malusardi, "The House Stands Tall: The Social Dimension of Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's Curatorial Activities during the Civil War in Lebanon," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 83–107, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.4 for a discussion of the exhibition.

10. Al Jazeera Documentary, "Al-rishe tihki al-hurub," YouTube, 26 April 2016, video, 55:45, https://youtu.be/postxV5w_Lo?si=rjZHTm_EBsYs_UNb.

11. *Café Müller – A Film of a Piece by Pina Bausch*. This is the official Pina Bausch film. It was recorded in August 1985 at a performance in Wuppertal. See "Café Müller – A Film of a Piece by Pina Bausch," Pina Bausch, accessed 30 July 2025, https://www.pinabausch.org/post/café-müller-film.

extraordinary night. It was after this night that I would start painting on a large roll of paper the work inspired by Pina Bausch (fig. 11). There are Greek inscriptions on this painting which was done as a mural. I asked my neighbours about the Greek words for shelter and bombshells and inscribed them on this piece.

Figure 11: Photograph of Greta Naufal drawing in the underground shelter, Beirut 1989. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

So this tribute to Pina Bausch was then exhibited at the exhibition *Behind the Wall* at the Carlton Hotel, organized by the Goethe-Institut just after the Taef Agreement. What did the title signify?

This three-metre roll (fig. 12) was exhibited for the first time at Carlton Hotel in 1990. I worked a lot during this period. Barbara Kassir suggested that the Goethe-Institut sponsors an exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in Raouche. And that is how it came to be (fig. 13). This event was a culmination of the extensive body of work I had produced during the last couple of years before the war ended. I decided to call it *Behind the Wall* because this is where we had to live when there was bombing. This became the title of a piece with a woman standing and screaming. I did litho-

graphic prints of this piece because I did not want it to be confined to one house and several people who attended the exhibition requested it. Later, I used these prints to develop a series of works, each overlapping with other drawings or paintings (fig. 14). We compiled them in a book of poems by Marie-France Naufal.

Figure 12: Naufal, Greta. *L'abri homage à Pina Bausch*. 1989. Mixed media on galvanized paper roll. 150 × 300 cm. Lebanon / Artist Collection. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

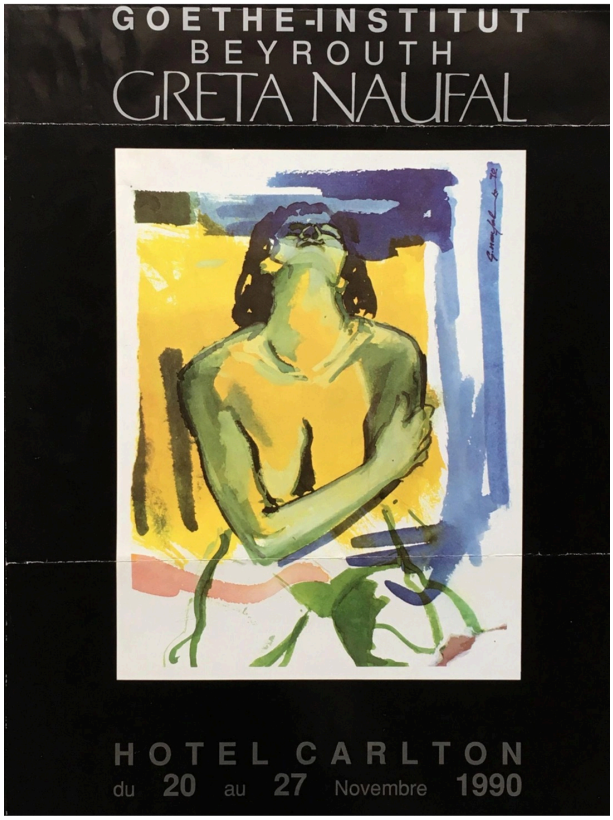

Figure 13: Exhibition poster for Greta Naufal's exhibition *Behind the Wall* at the Carlton Hotel, Raouche, Beirut, 1990. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Figure 14: Naufal, Greta. *Bolero Ravel I*, from the series *Danser sa Vie*. 1989. Mixed media on galvanized paper. 60 × 75 cm. Lebanon / Artist Collection. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Were you generally following artistic trends elsewhere at the time?

At the Goethe-Institut, I immersed myself in the world of Käthe Kollwitz, Pina Bausch, Joseph Beuys, Carl Orff, Werner Herzog, and many others. Otherwise it was through art magazines. There was an Iraqi review, *al-Funun al-tashkiliya* (Plastic Arts), and another one published here, *Afkar* (Thoughts). At the Collège Protestant Français, we had a good library with books and magazines regularly being shipped from France.

Can you tell us more about the happening you and Imad Issa did in the abandoned cathedral in Downtown Beirut in 1993, and what motivated you?

How can I express this—I could not see myself in 1993. I had started to get a sense of "the end of painting" in a way. I was processing many things within myself. The happening of 1993 was the first of its kind in Lebanon. I felt the need to be in an open space after experiencing the underground shelter. I did not see myself doing anything in a gallery, I wanted an open space that belonged to this city in ruin. There was a cathedral with a long history that had been looted and destroyed. I was there, taking pictures (fig. 15).

Figure 15: Postcard of St George's Cathedral, Downtown Beirut. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal. Photographed by Greta Naufal, 1992.

This cathedral had extraordinary stained-glass windows, but there was nothing left but rubble. The space was destroyed, without a roof, left open to the sky. I remember thinking that it felt more real, in direct connection with the sky. Then there were all these empty niches from where icons were stolen. The ground floor had broken slabs that had survived. There is always something that resists. Many things were stolen but they couldn't take everything away. Again, there were things that resisted and survived.

The second floor was destroyed, but it had a ramp which I used to hang large paper rolls I had written and drawn on. In the evening, there was a little breeze, and they started to float. The candles were Barbara's idea, we lit them together at night. I did mural collages, with the word *hayat* (life), and these seven hanging banners which spoke about time. During this period, all my work was done on paper, metres upon metres of paper rolls unfolding (fig. 16). They became a metaphor for the passage of time. The continuous wars that do not stop. Here I was, I will not stop either. My art will not stop to speak about life.

Figure 16: Photograph of Greta Naufal painting *Artists in Ruins*. 1993. St George's Cathedral, Downtown Beirut. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

I did a brief performance as well, I opened my arms and stood there at the altar, to the side where there was a statue of the Virgin Mary (fig. 17). Majid Kassir filmed both artist Imad Issa and myself during this happening. *Artists in Ruins* was the title of the documentary for the WDR television channel. You know, there is always a gaze that dominates and threatens but we always find a way to escape it. This is why I always made sure to document with photography and keep evidence.

Figure 17: Photograph of Greta Naufal during the *Artists in Ruin* happening (performance) at night. 1993. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Do you think there was a divide between artistic practices before, during, and after the war, and consequently a generational gap? If so, how would you explain this? Do you consider yourself part of a generation of artists in Lebanon?

I'm going to try to position myself. I can't say that I belong to the generation of artists before the war such as those modern artists who taught at the Lebanese University. I can't say that I belong to the movement of conceptual artists who came after the war either. I am somehow positioned

in the middle; I could be the link. That's why I said before that, for me, it felt that the end of the war brought with it the end of an era for painting. It was not the end of painting but the end of a certain way of tackling painting.

I can't place myself among the modern painters of Lebanon because I didn't just paint (fig. 18). I have worked on several installations (fig. 19).[12] I did video art[13] and I have conceived a few short films.[14] It was a need I personally had. I integrated video into some of my installations. So, I was not only painting. This is not to belittle painting; on the contrary, I had to experiment with other media to see how this would bring me closer to painting again, and how it would bring freedom back to painting. When I say painting, it is in the complete sense of what this word means. It is not just about taking colours and expressing yourself. I see what some people are doing today, but they did not "study" painting—not just what it is but what it does to you as a human being. And by study, I do not just mean learning a technique but experiencing a process that requires one's full involvement. I am talking about painting in the real sense. Painting is not necessarily the act of painting, there is much more to it than the act. You have to study life in a way in order to do good painting. Modern artists have studied, they painted all their life. That's what I mean.

Figure 18: Naufal, Greta. *Beirut Fragments*. 1994. Photographic prints, collage, and mixed media. 70 × 120 cm. Artist Collection, Lebanon. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

12. Greta Naufal did various installations including *Thread of Life* (Galerie Janine Rubeiz, 2017) and *Conspiracy of Silence* (Beirut Art House, 2020). For more installations, see "Installations & Collaborations," Greta Naufal, accessed 30 July 2025, https://gretanaufal.com/installations/.

13. See for instance Greta Naufal, *Irony* (2007), YouTube, 4 December 2013, video, 3:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mo4nigNGjoY.

14. See for instance Greta Naufal, *Black Tulip* (2007), YouTube, 21 November 2013, video, 3:41, https://youtu.be/Topy1v72mWQ?si=1RqmfYyeesVrFlz6. For a full list, see "Videos & Interviews," Greta Naufal, accessed 30 July 2025, https://gretanaufal.com/videos/.

Figure 19: Naufal, Greta. *Conspiracy of Silence*. 2020. Installation including leporello art books, ArtHaus Beirut. Image courtesy of Greta Naufal.

Could we say that this alienation comes from the new generation who had studied abroad and who were not in Lebanon?

Those who were in the United States or in Europe started coming back to Lebanon and marginalizing those who were here, those who remained here. Some even went to the extent of making a tabula rasa of what preceded them, just like the war did. It felt at times as though we had never existed. They did not want to make the link. All of a sudden, they considered that art, what started to be labelled as "contemporary art," was born in Lebanon with them.

This was simply not true. We cannot ignore the people who were there and who worked. We cannot say that installations started with the young generation of postwar artists, many had done it before them but there was lack of awareness and lack of documentation and visibility.

Today, everything is shared on social media. This was a time when we did not even have mobile phones. When I do an exhibition, hardly any young artists come. Why? I go to all the significant exhibitions. I am interested in everything that is happening in my city and my country. The new generation lacks curiosity, I thrived all my life to engage my students and nurture their sense of curiosity.

I say to myself that everything happens in due time. Nothing disappears in this life. Everything comes in its own time. It's much more important when something happens in due time. It has more impact. Maybe things take more time because of the situation in Lebanon and everything that is happening in the region, where the geopolitics are very complex. Much effort is required to assimilate all that has passed but time is our friend. I have a friend named time. I really believe in it. I have faith. I am not afraid of anything. Because there is faith in humanity. There is faith in time.

About the Author

Nadia von Maltzahn is the principal investigator of the ERC-funded project “Lebanon’s Art World at Home and Abroad: Trajectories of artists and artworks in/from Lebanon since 1943” (LAWHA), based at the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) where she previously held the positions of Deputy Director and Research Associate. Her publications include *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London 2013/2015), the co-edited volume *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making* (Beirut 2018), and other publications revolving around cultural practices in Lebanon and the Middle East. She holds a DPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from St Antony’s College, Oxford. Her research interests include cultural politics, artistic practices and the circulation of knowledge. LAWHA examines the forces that have shaped the emergence of a professional field of art in Lebanon in local, regional, and global contexts.

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Roundtable Discussion with Rose Issa and Mohammad El Rawas on the Exhibition *Contemporary Lebanese Artists* at London's Kufa Gallery in Early 1988

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Abstract

In December 1986, Kufa Gallery opened in London's Westbourne Grove. After exhibitions of *Old Maps of the Arab and Islamic World* (3–30 June 1987), three Europe-based Kurdish artists *Walid Mustafa, Tahir Hamid and Karim Azad* (15 July–8 August 1987), and an exhibition in memory of the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al Ali shortly after his assassination in London on 29 August 1987 (29 October–4 November 1987), Rose Issa dedicated an exhibition to *Contemporary Lebanese Artists* (15 January–24 February 1988). This exhibition took place during a period of war in Lebanon and in parallel with preparations for the landmark exhibition that was to take place at the Barbican Centre the following year, *Lebanon—The Artist's View* (15 April–4 June 1989). *Contemporary Lebanese Artists* not only aimed to raise awareness about Lebanon's artists and the country's plight, but also to raise funds both for the artists and for the Lebanese Red Cross, which received part of the gallery's commission. In this roundtable discussion, the main protagonists behind *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*, gallerist Rose Issa and artist Mohammad El Rawas, discuss the creation and reception of the exhibition.

Keywords

Rose Issa, Mohammed El Rawas, Kufa Gallery, London, Contemporary Lebanese Artists

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Figure 1: Cover from *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*, exhibition catalogue, London, Kufa Gallery, 15 January–24 February 1988 (London: Kufa Gallery, 1988). Courtesy of Mohammad El Rawas © Kufa Gallery.

This is an edited version of a roundtable discussion with gallerist Rose Issa and artist Mohammad El Rawas that took place at the Orient-Institut Beirut on Friday, 10 May 2024, in the presence of gallerists Nadine Begdache and Saleh Barakat and scholars Ashraf Osman and Nadia von Maltzahn.

Participating artists (fig. 1): Shafic Abboud, Samir Abi Rached, Yvette Achkar, Maliheh Afnan, Ida Alamuddin, Rima Amyuni, Ginane Bacho, Fadi Barrage, Henrig Bedrossian, Ali Chams, Saliba Douaihy, Fatima El Hajj, Mohammad El Rawas, Paul Guiragossian, Hassan Jouni, Halim Jurdak, Samia Osseiran Junblat, Sumayyah Samaha, Moussa Tiba, and—not included in the printed catalogue[1]—Suheil Suleiman, Willy Aractingi, and Imad Abou Ajram.

1. See *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*, exhibition catalogue, London, Kufa Gallery, 15 January–24 February 1988 (London: Kufa Gallery, 1988).

Rose Issa: I was telling Nadia that this exhibition in London happened thanks to you, Mohammad. Because you were the organizer, the curator, the publisher, everything was on you. I did not do anything.

Mohammad El Rawas: You were the director of the gallery.

Rose: Yes. And I collected Ida Alamuddin because she was in London, and I went to Paris and collected works from Shafic Abboud.

Mohammad: You see, these are the missing points, because I was wondering, how did I manage to collect all these works?

Rose: I went to Paris to see Shafic Abboud in his studio, to collect works from him. He told me, you are half Iranian, you should meet my friend who is also half Iranian. And he introduced me to Maliheh Afnan, who was not Lebanese but had lived in Lebanon for years. So we included her. I loved her very much.

Nadia von Maltzahn: Let us start at the beginning. What was the idea behind the exhibition?

Rose: It started by talking. Mohammad was in London six months before the exhibition. Next to Kufa Gallery was Saqi Books, and he was friends with its founder André Gaspard.[2] There was war in Lebanon. And we did not know what to do to support the Lebanese. We said, the only thing we can do is to present some art and culture. We were talking and said, why don't we do an exhibition in the middle of the war? The war was getting worse and worse. We thought maybe it would stop. But it never stopped. And Mohammad said, "You know, we can do that. I can collect many of the artists." I did not know them personally. Because when I left Lebanon in 1977, I left as a mathematician, as a historian, as a journalist, not as a gallery owner. I started looking for support. I approached the British Lebanese Association, but they did not help at all. That was strange, as they were rather rich people of London. I asked to use their mailing list to mobilize and bring people. Myrna Bustani came and asked me who my father was. I said, "I'm not selling my father, I'm selling artworks."

Mohammad: But, Rose, you managed to get all these sponsors at the end, which is quite a significant achievement![3] When I came back to Beirut after having talked to Rose about this project, I started collecting artworks. What I believe did help was that I held the position of secretary-general of the Lebanese Artists Association, a post which I held between 1983 and 1992. Hussein Madi was the president, Moussa Tiba was there, and myself. As a new committee, we had started in 1983. You know, there were no telephones. We used to hold the apparatus, hoping that it would get a line. It was so difficult. Until now, I am astonished. How did I manage to bring the works? I had a little flat in Clemenceau. It was occupied by the Amal Movement and I was kicked out. A friend of mine, an architect, wanted to migrate to the United States. He told me, "Please stay

2. Saqi Books is a leading independent publishing house specialized in the Middle East and North Africa, see https://saqibooks.com/.

3. At the back of the exhibition catalogue, the following sponsors are listed with advertisements: Contact Middle East, Byblos Group of Banks, Intercontinental Insurance Services Limited, IPD Consultants, Fendi, Gorgissima Ladies' Boutiques. In the acknowledgements, the following are thanked: the Lebanese Ambassador General Ahmed El-Haj, the National Council of Tourism in Lebanon and its director, Nasser Safieddine, Middle East Airlines (MEA), Saudi Arabian Research Institute (SARI), The British Lebanese Association; followed by three sponsors: S. Nassar & Sons (London) Ltd, Thames Trust Ltd (London), Future Management Services (London). See *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*.

in my house." Because he was afraid that somebody would occupy it. I told him, "What perfect timing." So I had this place and started accumulating the works there. But how did I manage to contact the artists and pick up all these works? I don't have a clue.

Nadia: Did you know all of them?

Mohammad: Of course. The only ones I did not know, and who I was happy to meet, were Ida Alamuddin and Maliheh Afnan. Because they were in London. And apparently the catalogue was printed missing three more participants.

Nadia: Yes, Suheil Suleiman, Willy Aractingi, and Imad Abou Ajram. In one of the exhibition reviews it said there was a separate side exhibition in the studio of Suheil Suleiman.

Rose: Yes. Suheil Suleiman was in it also. Because he lived in London.

Mohammad: I actually kept a few press cuts. This is *al-Hawadith* (29 January 1988). This is *al-Majalla* (January 1988). This is *al-Qabas al-Dawli* (8 March 1988). And this is *al-Dustour* (25 January 1988) (fig. 2).[4]

Rose: It was a great moment in London, because all the press moved from Beirut and elsewhere to London. London became truly an Arab capital. The magazines were working. Whatever you did, everybody covered it.[5] It was a very buzzing time for the Arab press to be in London. Everybody who could no longer work elsewhere came to London or Paris, and mostly to London.

Mohammad: I remember two anecdotes that happened while we collected the works and contacted artists. The first person I thought of was Hussein Madi. I was seeing him almost every day. He told me, "Who are these artists? How do you want me to show with these? What are the criteria? With all my due respect to you, Kufa Gallery, André and Rose, I don't want to be part of this."

Nadia: What did he object to?

Mohammad: He objected because he thought that he was of a higher calibre. The other artists were not up to his level. He was not humble enough to show with them.

Rose: And they were more important than him.

4. Nuri, "al-Bahth 'an al-hawiya min khilal al-ahzan!," *al-Hawadith*, 29 January 1988, 56–57; Lisa Jebara, "Ghiyab lubnan fi m'arad lil-fananin al-lubnaniyin fi London," *al-Majalla* 416 (27 January–2 February 1988), n.p.; Nazira al-Tamimi, "Muhamad al-Rawas: Laisa matluban min al-fanan an yarsum hasab al-talab," *al-Qabas al-Dawli*, 8 March 1988, n.p.; Mohammad Makhlouf, "Ma'sah 'al-fan' al-lubnani! M'arad bidun qadiya," *al-Dustour*, 25 January 1988, 52–53.

5. Other than the reviews cited by Mohammad El Rawas, the exhibition was covered in Arab newspapers and magazines including "Tard al-hayat min fada' al-lawha," *al-Ufuq*, 10 March 1988; *al-Alam*, 20 January 1988, *al-Tadamun*, 23–29 January 1988; "al-Alwan al-musafira la tuhibu… al-harb!," *al-Sayyad*, 25 February 1988; "London tashhad thalath munasabat fanniya lubnaniya," *al-Arab*, 19 January 1988; "Londres a l'heure de 20 'artistes libanais contemporains'," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 14 January 1988.

Figure 2: Mohammad El Rawas discussing exhibition reviews of the exhibition *Contemporary Lebanese Artists* at the roundtable discussion held at the Orient-Institut Beirut, 10 May 2024. From left to right: Nadia von Maltzahn, Mohammad El Rawas, Saleh Barakat, Nadine Begdache, Rose Issa. Image courtesy of Ashraf Osman.

Mohammad: Well, some. At least as important. The other person, funnily enough, was Nadia Saikali. Some of the artists had been my teachers at the Lebanese University. I called her in Paris—don't ask me how I found her number—saying, "This is Mohammad Rawas. We are organizing an exhibition at Kufa Gallery in London. The director is Rose Issa. It is next to Saqi Books London." And she said, "Who is that?" I said, "Mohammad Rawas, I used to be your student." She said, "I'm sorry, I don't recall you." I said, "I was with Maroun Hakim, Christian Boussière, Imad Abou Ajram." She said, "Oh, maybe. Why are you contacting me?" And then she said, and it really hurt me a lot, that "Listen, I am now in Paris, married to a French person, and have nothing to do with Lebanon. So, please, don't call me anymore. I don't want to be part of this." It was heartbreaking to me. And that's why she was not in the exhibition.

Rose: Very few Lebanese came and bought works at the exhibition, the ones who bought were Palestinian women, or British. They were not Lebanese. I was very shocked.

Nadine Begdache: Don't be shocked. When we were opening galleries, since Dar El Fan, the Lebanese did not buy Lebanese artists. It started later. They buy as an investment now, to sell in auctions later.

Saleh Barakat: And don't forget, in this period, in 1987, 1988, 1989, or we can say starting in 1983, Lebanon was really in a dire condition. Far worse than now. There was this crazy inflation. And then the crazy General Aoun. And a lot of people travelled. Many were living abroad during this period. Particularly from 1986 to 1989. I think you definitely inspired something with this exhibition, it was important to hold it.

Rose: I don't know if we inspired anything. I felt like this was a necessity. When I saw you, Mohammad, six months before the exhibition, we talked and I was like, "Let's do something for Lebanon that has a positive image, and maybe we can give some money." Because truly, the works were so cheap.

Nadia: In one of the articles, it said they sold between 25 GBP and 3,000 GBP.

Rose: Imagine.

Nadia: 3,000 GBP for a Paul Guiragossian.

Rose: That's it. The most expensive was Paul Guiragossian.

Saleh: I can tell you who was there with prices. Aractinji had two paintings. Ida Alamuddin had three. Ginane Basho had two. Suheil Suleiman had one. Another Basho, two Suleiman. Abu Ajram, three Rawas. Three Jurdak. Two Afnan. Sumayya Samaha, two. Guiragossian, two. Fatima El Hajj, three. Barrage, three. Abboud, five. Ashkar, two. Abu Ajram, again. Tiba, Abi Rashed, each had one. Rima Amyouni, one. Samia Osseiran had four. Henrig Bedrossian had two. Ali Shams, three. Jouni, two. And Tiba, another one (fig. 3).

Nadia: One thing about the reviews is that most of them were from Arab newspapers. And all of them were mentioning the absence of the war in the works, and then also comparing the artworks to Palestinian art.

Rose: That was the main critique at the time. There was lots of abstraction. I felt the only one, strangely, who talked about war was Ida Alamuddin, because her work was in charcoal, black. And she painted bitter lemons, they were like two lemons in a bag, but it looked like testicles, like you have castrated us. It was a beautiful series of paintings she did, I must say. And the darkest one also. That is why I put one of her works on the poster of the exhibition (fig. 4).

PRICE LIST

'LEBANESE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS EXHIBITION'
(Prices include Frames and V.A.T)

NO.	Price	No.	Price	No.	Price
1.	£ 345	23.	£ 460	45.	£ 350
2.	£ 345	24.	£3000	46.	£ 350
3.	£ 650	25.	£2500	47.	£1200
4.	£ 900	26.	£ 800	48.	£1200
5.	£ 800	27.	£ 750	49.	£ 920
6.	£ 250	28.	£ 650	50.	£1000
7.	£ 250	29.	£ 550	51.	£1050
8.	£ 25	30.	£ 550	52.	£ 750
9.	£ 250	31.	£ 550	53.	£ 750
10.	£ 25	32.	£ 850	54.	£1600
11.	£ 25	33.	£ 960	55.	
12.	£ 400	34.	£1230	56.	
13.	£ 575	35.	£ 850	57.	
14.	£ 575	36.	£ 180	58.	
15.	£ 575	37.	£2200	59.	
16.	£ 350	38.	£2200	60.	
17.	£ 350	39.	£ 260	61.	
18.	£ 550	40.	£1600	62.	
19.	£ 350	41.	£1380	63.	
20.	£1600	42.	£ 850	64.	
21.	£1600	43.	£ 350	65.	
22.	£ 460	44.	£ 350	66.	

Figure 3: Price list of works featured in the exhibition *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*. Image courtesy of Rose Issa © Kufa Gallery.

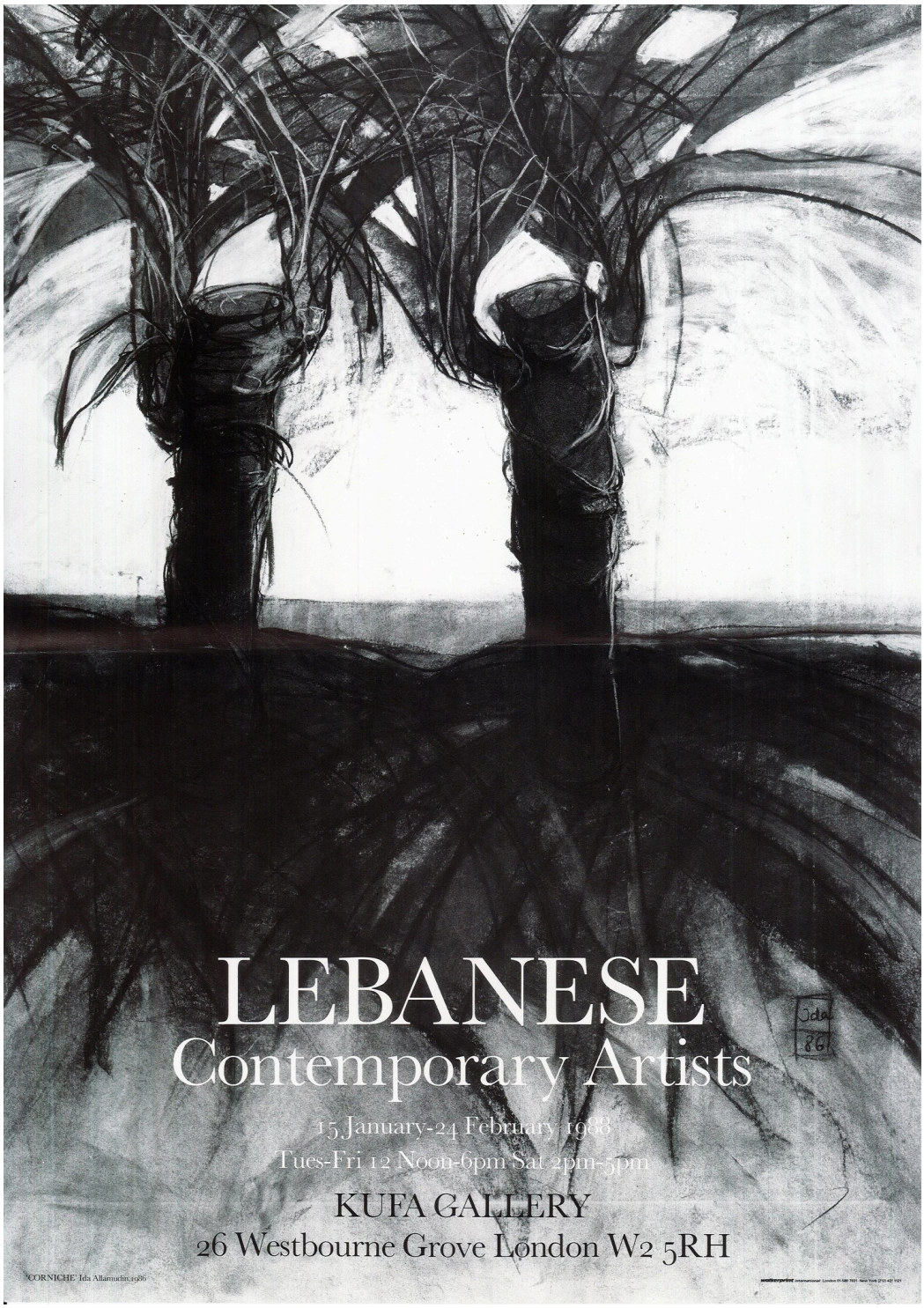

Figure 4: Exhibition poster for the exhibition *Lebanese Contemporary Artists*, held at the Kufa Gallery, 15 January–24 February 1988, featuring Alamuddin Ida. *Corniche*. 1986. Paper. A3. Orient-Institut Beirut. Courtesy of Rose Issa © Kufa Gallery.

Nadia: Let's take this article by *al-Dustour* (25 January 1988), in which we read that "despite the efforts of Kufa Gallery, the exhibition was not a success." The correspondent criticized that one did not see anything about what Lebanon was suffering at the time, nor the "Arab resilience in front of the Zionist bullets," continuing that "we are not against imagination and beauty and freedom of artistic expression, but even Picasso escaped the world of hallucinations to create *Guernica*," concluding that "in truth, we saw in this exhibition the tragedy of Lebanese 'art,' and not the tragedy of the Lebanese 'people'." It was subtitled "An exhibition without a cause" (fig. 5).[6]

Figure 5: Review of the exhibition *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*, held at the Kufa Gallery, 15 January–24 February 1988, in Mohammad Makhlouf, "Ma'sah 'al-fan' al-lubnani! M'arad bidun qadiya," *al-Dustour*, 25 January 1988, 52–53. Image courtesy of Mohammad El Rawas.

Rose: This is Suleiman next to me, and next to that the novelist Hanan al-Sheikh. A lot of writers came to Kufa, it was a gathering place. They called it *Diwan Kufa*, bringing together all the Arab intellectuals of London at that time. We did not have any Institut du Monde Arabe, it was just opening that year in Paris. That was Ida Alamuddin. Do you see her there on the bottom right?

Nadia: In front of one of her works, yes.

Saleh: Actually, the papers are criticizing that it was somehow non-curated, but obviously it was more related to the conditions of Lebanon, trying to gather artworks that were available to you in order to help the artists.

Rose: In 1988 nobody used the word curator.

6. Mohammad Makhlouf, "Ma'sa 'al-fann' al-lubnani! M'arad bidun qadiya", *al-Dustour*, 25 January 1988, 52–53.

Saleh: I know, but I am just looking at the names and I am trying to understand how they were selected.

Mohammad: When I see this article signed by Mohammad Makhlouf, I don't know who he was, but look, most journalists had this mentality. When he says that he visited the exhibition with a friend, and that this British friend was so angry because he saw nothing about Lebanon's war, asking "Where is the tragedy of Lebanon?" [the title of the article]. Makhlouf writes:

> Considering that what he saw does not express the people of Lebanon and its issues, I don't blame him. The exhibition does not in any way point to what is happening in Lebanon. [...] So instead of seeing paintings that talk about the faces of hungry Beiruti children or the victims of the Israeli bombing, instead of that, they showed the bodies of naked women in a vulgar way. Dead flowers.[7]

With the dead flowers he is probably referring to Ida's work, and the naked women to my work (fig. 6).

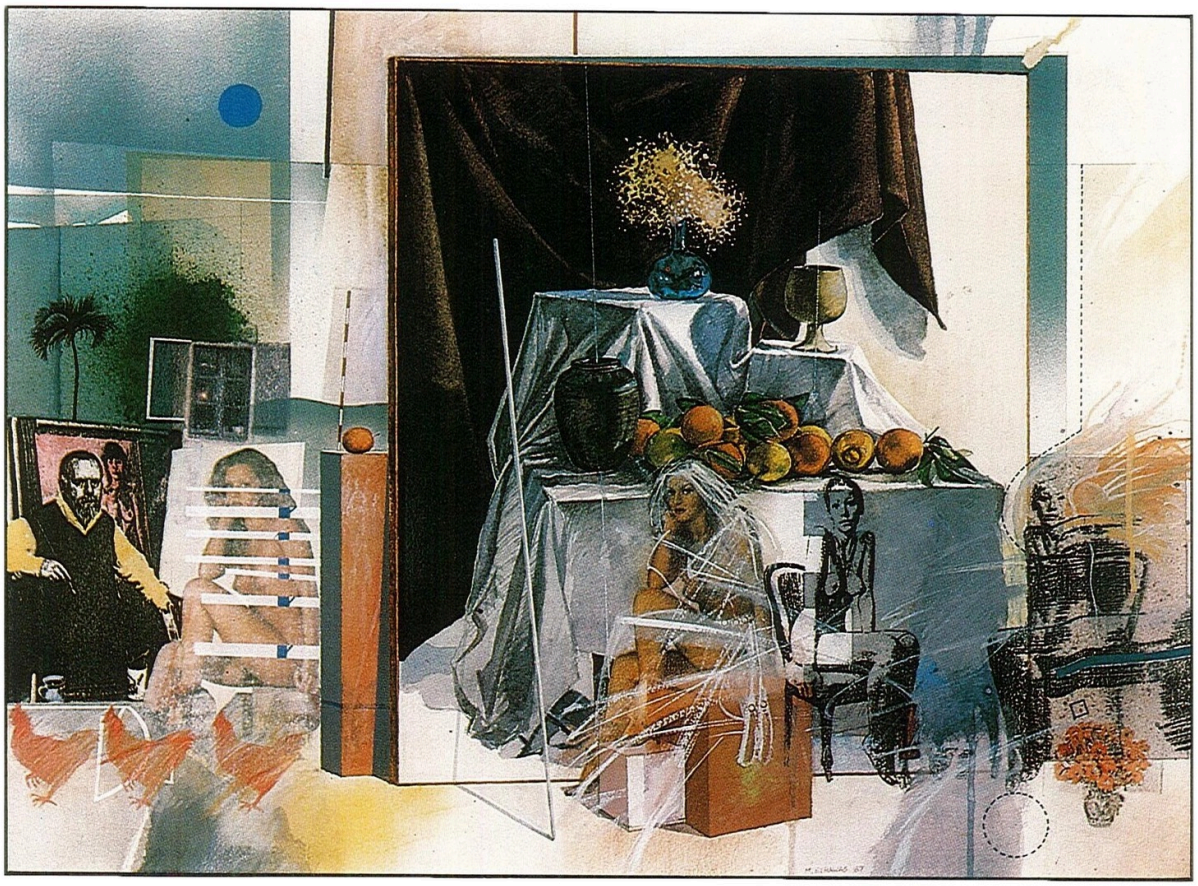

Figure 6: El Rawas, Mohammad. *Altered Realities with Their Hero*. 1987. Mixed media. 51 × 70 cm. In *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*, exhibition catalogue, London, Kufa Gallery, 15 January–24 February 1988 (London: Kufa Gallery, 1988), 29. Image courtesy of Mohammad El Rawas © Mohammad El Rawas.

7. Makhlouf, 53.

Saleh: This is a stupid writer. I am saying that I can understand the situation. You want to export artworks to London. Back then it was not like a museum was working on the idea of curation. The artists sent their nicest works. Because when you paint the war, nobody wanted to show it back then, at least in Beirut. The artists used to paint the war and put these paintings on the side, and nobody saw them. Aref El Rayyes has never shown his war paintings. Amine El Basha has a series about the war, but until now it has never been shown. So I understand that in this exhibition, the war was not present. And the Londoners are coming to this exhibition to see colourful, nice works that are meant to be sold in order to support those artists.

Rose: We did not put it as a criterion that it should be colourful and saleable. No, this was not a criterion.

Mohammad: The level of those people who covered the exhibition, who knew nothing about art, astonished me. One article says about Paul Guiragossian, for example, "he is still sleeping in abstraction." Give me a break. You are somebody who is coming to write a critique on an art exhibition.

Rose: We don't have art critics, I can tell you.

Mohammad: Listen, or "Samir Abi Rashid, he is still drowning in the Surrealist world full of hallucinations and sweet dreams [...] the taste of which the people of Lebanon have forgotten." Then "Another artist," now he comes to me, "Mohammad El Rawas paints for us strange atmospheres far from our heritage. Tens of canvases repeat the English painter David Hockney." I could not see any relation between my work and his work! "And in one of these works, we see naked girls"—his problem is nudity, you see—"sitting close to the English painter called Peter Blake." That's true, I did put Peter Blake in this painting. Listen to what he says. "And we ask: Who is Blake, Rawas?!! What did he offer to the Arab cause? And we ask with a broken heart: Why did he not paint for us (for example) or point us to the Palestinian artist Ghaben."[8] Anyway, this sums up, actually, the attitude in all this press.

Nadia: And quite a lot are comparing Lebanese to Palestinian art, saying that Palestinian artists were actually showing the struggle. This article in *al-Arab* (19 January 1988) also includes another reference to *Guernica*, writing that "of course we don't expect a Lebanese *Guernica*, but we expected to see something that tells us about the terrible things happening in Lebanon," discussing how in comparison to what most Palestinian artists present in their works, they saw the exact opposite in this exhibition.

Rose: Well, the Palestinian struggle started well before, in 1948. They had time, by 1988 it was forty years. In Lebanon, it was different. I mean, you cannot go to Paris and see Shafic Abboud and tell him to do a painting about war. You ask, "What are you doing?" And if it is quality, we take it.

Ashraf Osman: But what do you think about the hesitation about making war art during the war, because as Saleh said, it was here as well as abroad that artists did not generally want to show their works about the war.

8. Peter Blake (b. 1932) is an English pop artist. Fathi Ghaben (1947–2024) was a Palestinian self-taught artist and educator from Gaza.

Saleh: I would not say they did not want to. Let's look at today, and imagine somebody comes to you with a series that is absolutely black and full of cadavers. Maybe as a gallerist you would say it's a very strong series, I should show it. But I will tell them, not now, wait a little bit. I always think showing violent works should be during times of peace, where people have some distance. If you show it today, probably many people will appreciate it, but you will not sell a single painting. It's a question of context. You are under the bombs. People need some escapism in what art they want to buy during a period of violence.

Ashraf: Yes, the mention of escapism is very present in the press clippings of the 1980s.

Saleh: I understand it. Imagine I am an artist in 1988. Mohammad Rawas proposes to me to give him some paintings to put them in an exhibition in London, and I don't have a penny. The Lebanese lira at the time went from 2.253 for the dollar to 3,000. So Mohammad proposes to me, I want to take two paintings from you. I give him two paintings full of bodies and blood that nobody wants to buy. Of course not, I will give him a nice painting that I would say can sell. I mean, I'm talking about why they look rather happy. The exhibition was not asking artists to give something that represents the war today. But for me, the exhibition is important because it is probably one of the first instances where the idea of exporting art to outside Lebanon was proposed as an idea.

Rose: It truly was, Saleh. We did not sell much, actually, which was a very sad thing for me. The gallery was new. We tried to lobby a lot. Still, the mentality of buying among collectors was practically non-existent. The main thing was that we wanted to do an event, talk about Lebanon, and if possible, support the Lebanese financially.

Mohammad: Personally, when I went to London to study at the Slade School of Fine Art between 1979 and 1981, all the work I did was about the war in Lebanon. All the prints, silk screens, etchings, everything. When I came back here in 1981, I did not want to do so anymore, because then I was living the war again. When you are taking a distance from it, you can reflect on it and express it with a space of artistic effort, or creativity, or professionality. But when you are living in the event, the event is eating you. All the works that I did after my return were a sort of escapism. And the one I exhibited at Kufa in 1988 is one of them (fig. 6).

Rose: I will tell you another example. We introduced Maliheh Afnan to the public. All her work was about destruction and cities, see for instance *Beirut* (fig. 7). She was of Iranian-Palestinian origin, and all her work was about burning and exile. It did not look like war, but it was about loss. It was about cities that were gone, places you lived. Everything was charcoaled on the back. But those critics, of course, did not see it this way.

Saleh: They were not actually art critics, they were just journalists, using jargon.

Rose: It was difficult. They used to come to the gallery and wanted only to photograph the beautiful girls, as if they wanted to find them a husband. I said, no, if you photograph somebody, it has to be next to a painting. I don't want an article without an artwork. It was always a fight, almost, to make sure that there was some painting behind everybody they photographed.

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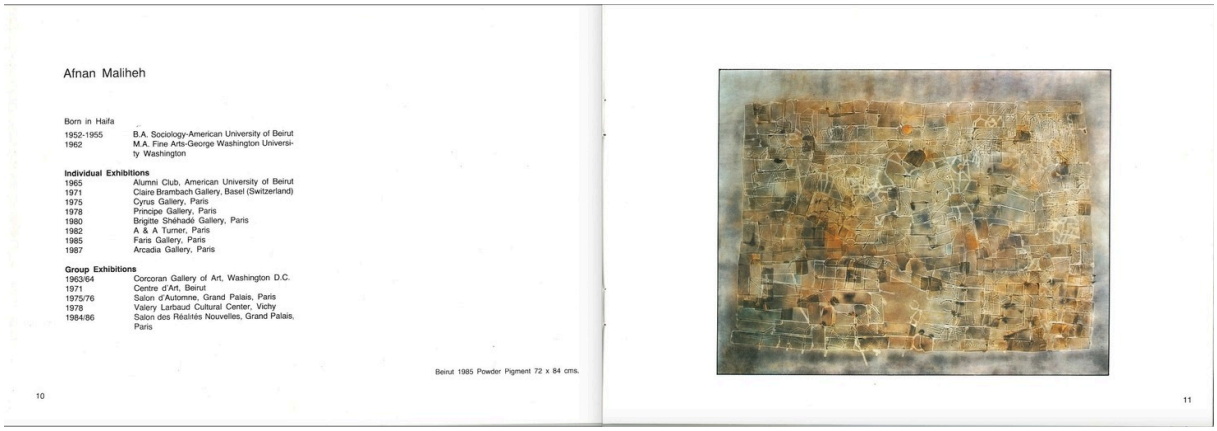

Figure 7: Catalogue entry on Maliheh Afnan, featuring her work *Beirut*. 1985. Powder pigment. 72 × 84 cm. In *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*, exhibition catalogue, London, Kufa Gallery, 15 January–24 February 1988 (London: Kufa Gallery, 1988), 10–11. Courtesy of Mohammad El Rawas © Kufa Gallery.

Nadia: Can I read you an excerpt of an interview with Hugh Casson, who was on the jury of the exhibition *Lebanon—The Artist's View* (London, Barbican Centre, 15 April–4 June 1989), which came just after the Kufa exhibition?[9] He said of the Barbican exhibition:

> I was surprised at how few paintings of war scenes there are, unlike wartime Britain; no protest, no horror, no ruins. At first I suspected escapism but I wonder if it isn't that the war is too much under their feet? Or perhaps there was a purpose in the Second World War that inspired the likes of Piper, Sutherland and Nash that doesn't exist in the Lebanon? Or is it a reflection of the miracle of normality that also seems to be part of the Lebanese?[10]

Rose: Casson lived very close to Kufa Gallery, maybe two hundred metres away. He used to come to the gallery. His friends were all bankers of the Middle East, so he knew a little bit the history of the region. The problem is that he does not mention that the war paintings of the British were largely commissioned.[11] In Lebanon, there was no state commissioning any artists to produce records. But in Britain and in America, everything was recorded by the governments who commissioned artists to record. It was not that people in London were simply painting war, no.

Saleh: Actually, all artists are sensitive to what is happening around them. But sometimes they would reflect on their surroundings, put the work on the side and want to show something else. And contextually, at that time in 1988, there was no idea of a curated show. And the West was very self-centric. For them, there was no art in the periphery.

9. This exhibition was organized by the British Lebanese Association; preparations were underway from at least early 1987, as documented by correspondence between the Association and potential lenders. There was no connection between the two exhibitions.

10. Hugh Maxwell Casson (1910–99) was a British architect and artist. He was the president of the Royal Academy from 1976 to 1984. "Exhibition at the Barbican, 15th April 1989 to 4th June 1989, 'Lebanon: The Artist's View'," loose pages on the exhibition from the archives of Joseph Tarrab hosted by the Orient-Institut Beirut.

11. John Piper (1903–92) and Graham Sutherland (1903–80) were official war artists during World War II. Paul Nash (1889–1946) was an official war artist during both World Wars I and II.

Rose: Yes, Tate Modern did not exist. London had only one museum, that was Tate Britain. And Tate Britain only collected British artists. I remember once they had an exhibition on British Orientalists and they asked me, can you come and help us, and do an answer to that?[12] This was later, in 2006 or 2007. I said, yes, I will come. But every time I proposed somebody, they said, "We don't know them, how many monographs do they have?" This is why I started working on publications, because unless you have three monographs of an artist, they wouldn't even consider them. They liked the work that I was proposing, but I did not have three monographs on each artist.

Saleh: In 1988, they were very Western-centric. The rest of the world were considered underdogs. So I think what is extremely important about this exhibition is that it opened a door, actually, to making them look and know there is something else out there. At that point in time, probably they looked at it in a very condescending way. But eventually, twenty, thirty years later, things have changed. Now there is more openness.

Rose: Now they feel guilty. If they don't do global art, they are backward. If they don't open up to other cultures and others, they are backward. They know that they are obliged to do black art, they are obliged to do gay art, they are obliged to do old ladies, and so on. The fashion moves on. And they know that they will stay backwards if they don't open up, because lots of other institutions have opened up.

Nadia: Mohammad, you studied in London in the late 1970s, early 1980s. How did you feel there in terms of your surroundings?

Mohammad: There was no interest whatsoever in what was going on outside London. At the Slade School of Art, colleagues knew I was from Lebanon, but I wasn't sure if they knew where Lebanon was. One of the technicians, a silk screen technician, was helping me with my work. He said, "What is this crazy leader you have, Qaddafi?" I said, "Qaddafi? Qaddafi is from Libya." He said, "Libya? Where are you from?" I said, "Lebanon." He said, "I don't know the difference."

Nadine: What's the difference…

Rose: I wanted Nadine to come today, because it is interesting to know also what was happening in Lebanon in the 1980s. Dar El Fan was still functioning, your mother was still doing things, although the building was damaged.

Nadine: The building was gone. But in 1989, my mother did an exhibition at Dar El Nadwa, a very big one. It was *Beirut, Tabaan* (Beirut, of course).[13] It was her bye-bye, like a testament. You also had exhibitions at the Carlton Hotel, and at the Goethe Institut. The Goethe Institut was marvellous, really.

Mohammad: *Beirut, Tabaan* was covered by German TV, I have a video.

12. "The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting," Tate Britain, 4 June–31 August 2008, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/lure-east-british-orientalist-painting#.

13. For more on *Beirut Tabaan*, see Flavia Malusardi, "The House Stands Tall: The Social Dimension of Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's Curatorial Activities during the Civil War in Lebanon," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 83–107, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.4, and Nadia von Maltzahn, "'I Have a Friend Named Time': Interview with Greta Naufal," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 222–47, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.9.

Nadine: It was the last exhibition of my mother. And in this exhibition, she really wanted to introduce young, emerging artists. She started with Jad (Georges) Khoury, who did comics. This was one of the first exhibitions in Lebanon where you could find comics and this kind of work. You also had very new artists, like Greta Naufal. My mother put the new, the young, the emerging, and the others.

Nadia: And the idea was to reaffirm Beirut.

Nadine: She wanted very much to say, "I'm leaving, but there are a lot of things to do."

Nadia: And for Kufa Gallery, *Contemporary Lebanese Artists* was one of the first exhibitions, at the very beginning of the gallery.

Rose: Yes. Just afterwards, I did an exhibition with Arab women artists in the UK, because I wanted to know how many there were. Can you believe it? There were more than twenty Arab women artists in the UK, none of them knowing each other. For me, it was an occasion to introduce them. It was the first time I exhibited Mona Hatoum. Imagine, the video of Mona Hatoum that I showed in 1987 was acquired twenty years later by the Tate. That same video. At the time, neither Mona Hatoum nor me knew that we could sell video, nor photography. I had her *Over My Dead Body*, the beautiful photograph, behind my desk.[14] And nobody asked, can we buy a photo or can we buy a video? This was not at all fashionable then. So we have to think that the word curator did not really exist, the word video art did not exist, even photography did not have a market, really. It was for me an occasion for all of us to meet each other.

Mohammad: Where did you have this exhibition?

Rose: At the Kufa Gallery. *Arab Women Artists in the UK*, from 25 March to 14 April 1988. If you go to my website, you can see it.[15] The poster was the work of Sabiha Khemir. And with every exhibition we tried to build up a community, in fact, because there was no community. Kufa became so important by 1988 that even Indians, Africans, everybody wanted to exhibit in the gallery. I did not have a penny to do catalogues. I usually did a very good press release, in black and white.

Nadine: So you wanted to build a gallery on the basis of quality and create a community around it.

Rose: Yes, the community aspect was important.

Nadine: It was not easy in the 1980s.

Rose: No. To give one example: You see, Mona Hatoum was in this exhibition, with video work, at the time when she was doing performance. I remember that even my close friend said, "What is this video? People are not going to like it." So I even had opposition among my friends against including the video.

14. For an account of Mona Hatoum's trajectory in 1980s London and an image of this artwork, see Joan Grandjean, "Mona Hatoum's Other Story: 'Third World Post-modernism' in 1980s Britain," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 190–220, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.8.

15. It featured the works of Ida Alamuddin, Suad al-Attar, Huda Awad, Nadira Azzouz, Jess Berouti, Bushra Fakhoury, Maysaloun Faraj, Mona Hatoum, Patricia Kahil, Raya el-Khatib, Sabiha Khemir, Selma al-Khuri, Elham A. Malak, Hania Marrash, Dalal Mufti, Houria Niati, Huda Ogaily, Sundus Omar Ali, Fitna al-Orfali, Leonie Pilart, Selma Rayes, Khairat al-Saleh, and Laila Shawa. See "Arab Women Artists," Rose Issa Projects, last accessed 11 June 2025, https://www.roseissaprojects.com/gallery-individual/1987---1989---arab-women-artists.

Nadia: Had you thought about including Mona Hatoum in your exhibition of *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*?

Rose: Not really. At that time, she was more known in London as a Palestinian artist, Palestinian-Lebanese, and she was doing performance art and video work.

Nadia: You knew her from the Slade, Mohammad, because you were there at the same time, weren't you?

Mohammad: Yes. I was doing printmaking, she was doing experimental art. We did not become friends, just acquaintances. Sometimes, when I was going to Lebanon, she asked me to send her parents a letter or something. This kind of thing.

Rose: Anyhow, she is a very discreet person, not a sort of social animal. She waited a long time before engaging herself with a gallery. She was very patient. She said, I am not going to engage myself with any gallery before I find the right one. She waited almost twenty years before going with the White Cube. For so many years, she was on her own.

Nadia: Was this unusual for London at the time?

Rose: Not really, because there were very few people who really understood. You know, Zaha Hadid, it took her also twenty years before they showed her paintings, let's say at the Metropolitan in New York. When they showed the drawings she had, they put her down as a British artist. I went and complained to the Metropolitan. I said, no, she is Iraqi, she always presented herself as an Iraqi artist. But they would not associate Arab names with anything positive. So even Mona Hatoum is in the Tate labelled as [a] British artist. They would never put British-Palestinian, let's say.

Nadia: This gives us an idea about the environment the exhibition took place in. Your work is really important, Rose. Thank you so much to all of you for taking the time to reflect on this exhibition and the context in which it took place.

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About the Author

Nadia von Maltzahn is the principal investigator of the ERC-funded project "Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad: Trajectories of artists and artworks in/from Lebanon since 1943" (LAWHA), based at the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) where she previously held the positions of Deputy Director and Research Associate. Her publications include *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London 2013/2015), the co-edited volume *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making* (Beirut 2018), and other publications revolving around cultural practices in Lebanon and the Middle East. She holds a DPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from St Antony's College, Oxford. Her research interests include cultural politics, artistic practices and the circulation of knowledge. LAWHA examines the forces that have shaped the emergence of a professional field of art in Lebanon in local, regional, and global contexts.

About the Roundtable Participants

Rose Issa is a curator, writer and producer who has championed visual art and film from the Middle East and North Africa in the UK for more than thirty years. She has lived in London since the 1980s, showcasing upcoming and established artists, producing exhibitions with public and private institutions worldwide, and running a publishing programme.

Mohammad El Rawas is a Lebanese painter and printmaker. He studied arts at the Lebanese University, then moved to London and studied printmaking at the Slade School of Fine Art. He currently lives and works in Beirut, where he taught at the Lebanese University and the American University of Beirut.

Saleh Barakat is a Beirut-based gallerist and art expert. He runs Agial Art Gallery and Saleh Barakat Gallery in the Ras Beirut area.

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