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Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

"All is Not Glitter" Review of "Beirut and the Golden Sixties: A Manifesto of Fragility" Berlin, Gropius-Bau, 25 March – 12 June 2022
Lyon, 14 September – 31 December 2022

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ALL IS NOT GLITTER

Review of “Beirut and the Golden Sixties:
A Manifesto of Fragility”
Berlin, Gropius-Bau, 25 March – 12 June 2022
Lyon, MAC Lyon, ..., 14 September – 31 December 2022

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Abstract | The exhibition *Beirut and the Golden Sixties: A Manifesto of Fragility* highlights what the creator's argue is the fragility of the narrative around Beirut's “Golden Age”, the period in the run up to Lebanon's civil war. In this review, the exhibition genesis is traced and its display in Berlin's Gropius Bau and MAC Lyon presented. A number of works are showcased to demonstrate how the curators construct the five sections that focus on place, body, form, politics and the Civil War. The review provides some contextualization for an exhibition of rich and diverse artworks and archival material that contain a multitude of stories.

Keywords | Fragility – long 1960s – Beirut – Lyon Biennale – committed art – art for art's sake



Figure 1: Berlin installation view Section 1, *The Port of Beirut*, showing Khalil Zghaib's untitled work of 1958 in the middle, Helen Khal's *Seascape* on the left, Etel Adnan's *Leporello* in between, and Adnan and Simone Fattal's joint painting in the back. Above, a video clip of a New Year's Eve party at Dar El Fan is screening. Photo by Luca Girardini.

“Fragility” is an apt notion for thinking about Beirut and the long nineteen sixties, often remembered nostalgically as the city’s Golden Age. The image of a city of glamour and *dolce vita*, bikini-clad women enjoying its sun, crumbles once one starts scratching the surface, revealing the underlying tensions of a country host to contradictory visions of its identity. At the very entrance to the exhibition, “Beirut and the Golden Sixties: A Manifesto of Fragility,” curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath (assisted by Natasha Gasparian) confront the visitor with Lebanon’s parallel realities (Fig.1). A large-scale reproduction of a photograph showing smiling youth splashing in the sea neighbors Khalil Zgaib’s untitled painting of the 1958 invasion, depicting the landing of US marines on Khaldeh beach just south of Beirut, to assist President Camille Chamoun amidst

an internal political crisis embedded in the intensifying Cold War.¹ Zgaib's work yields much expressivity upon close study, but the looming over-dimensional photo stunts it, and, likewise, engagement with it. The invasion scene is one of four works on display by this self-taught artist, a professional barber, including one showing further the tension of the 1958 events, and two showing rural scenes from the early 1960s – the first a Palm Sunday procession and the second a red-roofed village feast with bonfires. The physical deterioration of the latter, and the choice to exhibit it nevertheless, demonstrates the reality of dealing with artworks from Lebanon of this period. With many works needing restoration in light of often sub-ideal storage conditions, fragility presents itself in symbolic and material terms.

Both of the latter works come from the Saradar Collection, a private art collection in Lebanon that played an important part in the evolution of this exhibition. Much research for “Beirut and the Golden Sixties” was originally done in the context of *Perspective* (planned as an annual invitation to a guest curator to engage critically with a theme inspired by the collection.) The first (and to date only) edition was curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath as *Perspective #1 “Witness to A Golden Age: Mapping Beirut’s Art Scene 1955-1975,”* an online database and mapping platform that charts Beirut’s art scene in the long sixties.² A vast amount of archival material was unearthed in the process of producing the site. Many of these posters, invitation cards, photographs, journals, and video clips were on display in the exhibition under review, an intricate documentation of the rich and diverse cultural life of the time. While the level of detail and sheer quantity of material may overwhelm those unacquainted with Lebanon’s art worlds, and certainly could benefit from further contextualisation, it is rewarding to see it all exhibited together.

The exhibition was conceived for the 16th Lyon Biennale as one of three main layers of a “manifesto of fragility” that “positions fragility at the heart of a generative form of resistance.”³ Initially set to take place in 2021, the Biennale was postponed by one year, which meant that the exhibition launched at Berlin’s Gropius Bau (25 March to 12 June 2022) before opening at MAC Lyon (14 September to 31 December 2022). Whereas the subtitle of the exhibition was self-evident in Lyon as part of the Biennale, the concept of a “manifesto of fragility” lacked explanation in the Berlin edition. While the exhibition architecture is guided by the works exhibited, including the display of artworks and posters as well as the titles for the five sections that focus on place, body, form, politics, and the Civil

1- The crisis of 1958 is often cited as the beginning of a series of events leading up to the Civil War. For further details, see Salibi Kamal, *Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958-1976* (Beirut: Caravan Books, 1976).

2- See <http://www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/perspective>; <http://saradarperspective.com/perspective1/map>, respectively.

3- Bardaouil Sam and Till Fellrath, “manifesto of fragility: Curators’ Foreword” in *Beirut and the Golden Sixties: manifesto of fragility* (Milan: SilvanaEditoriale, 2022, p. 15_.

War respectively, these components do not add up to a manifesto on their own, however fragile. Simone Baltaxé Martayan’s monumental painting *The Workers* (ca. 1950-1959) inspired the overall exhibition display, with its building into the clouds, the unfinished labour alluding to the unfinished project of nation-building and Beirut as a city forever under construction (Fig. 2). It works well with the concept of fragility, although we do not learn anything about what motivated the painting, done by an artist best known for her tapestries. The light and purposely unfinished-looking display feels much better in the bright and spacious exhibition halls of the MAC Lyon than it did in the Gropius Bau’s heavy, elongated space. The poster display makes reference to Aza Hadidian’s poster *the haunted climb* with its concentric red circles spiralling out of the center, its psychedelic feel clearly alluding to the 1960s (Fig. 3). The whole architecture makes sense once one has grasped these references, but to the uninitiated, they are not obvious.



Figure 2: Lyon installation view of Simone Baltaxé Martayan’s *The Workers* (ca. 1950-1959) next to three untitled works by Georges Doche from the early 1960s. Photo by the author.

Egyptian artist Mahmoud Said’s *Le Port de Beyrouth* (1954) gives its name to the first section of the exhibition, which highlights the physical space of Beirut. Said’s painting provides a view of the city framed by the mountains behind it. Lebanon’s mountains had long been the main draw for regional tourists and were only just being replaced by the sea at the time of painting.⁴ The painting is placed before a dreamy, subtle sea-view by Helen El Khal, which in turn hangs next to a Leporello of charcoal on paper by Etel Adnan also entitled *Le Port*

4- For a discussion of this shift, see the first chapter of Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of the Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

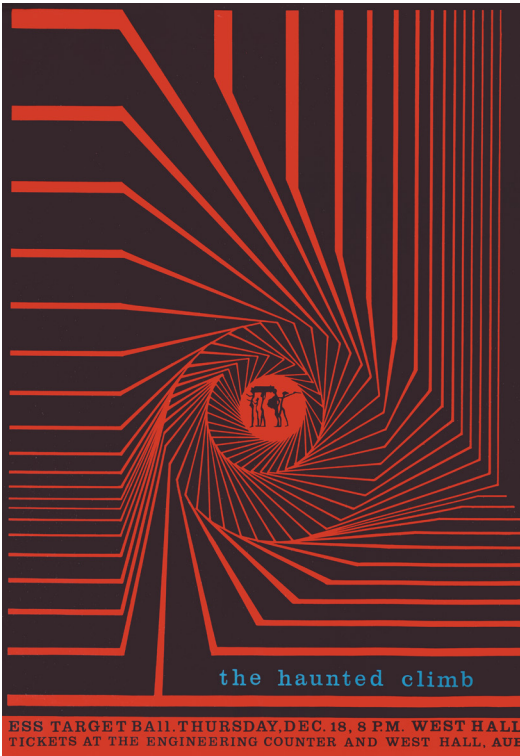


Figure 3a: *The haunted climb*. Poster designed by Aza Hadidian. Photo by Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts.



Figure 3b: Installation shot: Berlin installation view of the archival display inspired by Aza Hadidian's poster. Photo by Luca Girardini.

de Beyrouth (1974). Two stunning and intricate city views painted in 1968, one by Assadour, the other by Huguette Caland, speak to each other. Through the wooden beams of the installation architecture, with a video of a new year party at Dar El Fan — one of Beirut's most active cultural spaces of the late 1960s and early 1970s — screening on top, one can glimpse *La Montagne Liban* (early 1970s), a rare joint work by Adnan and her partner, Simone Fattal, that beautifully and poetically merges their different styles (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, *La Montagne Liban* (early 1970s), Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. Photo by Luca Girardini.

Simone Baltaxé Martayan's tapestry *Poème orientale* (1976) dazzles with its lights and domes and dancing movement. The curators further enhance this effect by setting behind it a large-scale photograph of a Hamra nightlife scene dominated by neon-light advertising. Around the corner, a background photo of a 1972 film poster reflects the same spirit of Beirut's nightlife. A vegetable vendor pushing his cart in the foreground of the photo provides the first hint that leading a life of leisure is not for everyone. The poster is juxtaposed with three dark pieces by Baalbeki artist Rafic Charaf. The trio clearly show that all is not glitter: Leafless

trees, broken electricity cables, barbed wire, birds and the full moon are set in grey scales with splashes of eerie bright red – red roofs in one, blood of a bird caught in barbed wire in another, a red window in the third – that only deepen the desolation (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Rafic Charaf, *Paysage*, ca. 1968, oil on canvas, 46 x 62cm, Saleh Barakat Collection, Agjal Art Gallery, Beirut. Photo by Luca Girardini.

In the same vein, three works by Paul Guiragossian echo the dire conditions in popular quarters and an Armenian refugee camp. Two of these are placed on an enlarged photograph of a refugee camp in the suburbs of Beirut. Borrowed mostly from the Beirut-based Georges Boustany Collection, such large-scale photographs introduce some context of the local setting of the time. The often implicit provocation of the junctures works better in some cases than others. Here, the Lyon edition improves the matching of photographs to artworks. Take the Georges Doche paintings of warriors from the early civil war years that hung on a plain wall in Berlin but in Lyon are superimposed on a photo depicting a wartime Phalangist paramilitary procession (Fig. 6). The paintings have a completely different effect. A work by Helen El Khal pops out from an enlarged photograph showing the vernissage of her works at Contact Gallery in May 1974 and giving the visitor an idea of its original setting (Fig. 8).

In a review of this May 1974 exhibition, Helen El Khal writes that “except for color, [she] was not trying to say anything,” by way of response to two young art students interrogating her during the exhibition about her “human commitment.”⁵ Beirut at the time sponsored two main aesthetic tendencies, a politically committed art on the one hand and, on the other, what scholar Zeina Maasri terms a “liberal modernist project”. The second tendency, as Maasri argues, found a home in the journals *Hiwar* and *Shi’r*. The latter was founded by Helen’s then husband Yusuf al-Khal who partnered with her to establish Gallery One (1963-1976) in the same spirit. Throughout the exhibition, we find both

5- The review is reproduced in *Perspective* #1, <http://saradarperspective.com/perspective1/gallery/contact>, in the Gallery section of *Monday Morning*. I thank Monique Bellan for drawing my attention to it.



Figure 6: Lyon installation view of three untitled works by Georges Doche from ca. 1976-1977. Photo by the author.

aesthetic tendencies well represented. The archival display presents some of the media in which the aesthetic debates took place, including posters in solidarity with Palestine, volumes of both *Hiwar* and *Shi'r*, exhibition booklets, and posters of Gallery One, Dar El Fan, the Sursock Museum, and Contact Gallery, as well as one of the Baalbeck Festival catalogues. Here, too, we can find many of the era's important artists for whom no artwork as such is included in the exhibition, such as Amine Elbacha, Fadi Barrage, Muhammad Sakr, and the Syrian artist Louay Kayali, amongst others.

The Lyon version benefitted from having a larger and more open space at hand to display works that at times Berlin cramped. Yet cramping did not distract from some works, such as Farid Aouad's epic triptych *Metro Scene* (1960-1970), where one walked right into the crowd in the Berlin display. The work was first exhibited at Beirut's Galerie l'Amateur in November 1971, and was cited as the show's center piece in an exhibition review, which can be found on the *Perspective #1* platform.⁶ In a letter to his gallerist, Odile Mazloum, in September 1971 while preparing for this exhibition, the Paris-based artist explains his theme. He had been working on the metro for several years as he felt it particularly characteristic of a big city crowd, and was sure the Lebanese public could relate to the crowd even without knowing a metro. He further explained that his use of color compensated the "sadness" of the subject (Fig. 7).⁷

6- « Aouad travaille sur un même thème : celui de groupes compacts de personnages invariablement debout, perdus dans une foule plus dense qu'eux, aliénés dans une attente qui est presque d'ordre métaphysique, la pièce fondamentale de l'exposition étant un immense triptyque, fresque grouillante de gens, superbement composée avec ses pleins et ses vides, ses emphases et ses chutes de tension. » Mirese Akar, « Farid Aouad, sublime 'chroniqueur' social », *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 20 November 1971.

7- Letter by Farid Aouad to Odile Mazloum, 5 September 1971, courtesy of Odile Mazloum.



Figure 7: Farid Aouad, *Metro scene* (1960-1970), 195 x 390cm. Courtesy of Hala Wardé. Photo by Luca Girardini.



Figure 8: Lyon installation view of Helen El Khal's painting superimposed on an image of similar works in a prior exhibition opening.

Most of the above-mentioned works are part of the first section that dealt with “the place.” It sets the tone for the exhibition and its structure, and also highlights the show’s richness and variety. The second section, *Lovers*, which focuses on the body, takes its title from a superb painting by Mona Saudi, an artist generally known for her sculptures. It also features beautiful works by Cici Sursock that had first been exhibited in the Sursock Museum’s *Salons d’Automne*, as well as evocative drawings and aquarelles by Juliana Séraphim, and sensuous ceramics by Dorothy Salhab Kazemi that were very popular with my fellow visitors (Fig. 9). These and other artworks in this section, such as Huguette Caland’s works from the *Bribes de Corps* series or George Doche’s flowery depictions of sexual organs, have something very playful about them. They show the humor and liberty with which the artists approached the body, especially its intimate parts, and a sense of experimentation. In Simone Fattal’s video *Autoportrait* (1971/2012) one can witness one such experiment.

The next section, *Takween* (Composition), taking its name from a work by Iraqi artist Hashim Samarchi, clearly demonstrates to what extent artists experimented with form in the long sixties. It is also the section that draws most explicitly on Beirut as a cultural hub for artists from the region. Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi, for instance, regularly exhibited at Gallery One and Contact Gallery, as did the Syrian Fateh al-Moudarres. Both feature in this section with works that resemble those that appear in some of their Beirut exhibition reviews. This is not apparent in the exhibition display, however, and one is left to wonder why these artworks were selected. It is also the most eclectic section, albeit with fascinating works such as Saloua Raouda Choucair's plexiglass, stainless steel and nylon sculptures, Nadia Saikali's kinetic art or John Hadidian's cube sculptures. The section features, amongst others, Aref El Rayess's machine-inspired series of the mid-1960s, Laure Ghorayeb's ink on paper works of idols, as well as Rafic Charaf's series of *Antar*, supported by a brief video showing the artist in his studio. The displayed video clips from the archives of the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI) presenting the artists at work or in exhibition openings of the time are a real treat.

The fourth section, *Monster and Child*, takes its title from Fateh al-Moudarres' 1970 painting which, in Lyon, is unfortunately drowned in the bustle of the enlarged background photo (Fig. 10). This section centers politics, especially the Palestinian cause in the wake of the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967. A very powerful work by Chafic Abboud most struck me here. Dominated by black and purple, the starting date of the war, 5 June, typed in white bold letters inscribes itself into memory, never to be forgotten (Fig. 11). Beirut had become a center of revolutionary anti-imperialism with the Palestinian cause at its heart, a condition further cemented when the PLO base moved from Jordan to Beirut following Black September in 1970. Some archival material in this section attests to this centrality.



Figure 9: Berlin installation view showing two of Cici Sursock's works, *corps et âmes* (1966) to the left and *untitled* (1972) [nu rouge?] in the middle. It also demonstrates some of the limitations of the space. Photo by the author.



Figure 10: Lyon installation view of Fateh al-Mouardres, *Monster and Child* (1970). Photo by the author.



Figure 11: Chafic Abboud, *guerre de six jours*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 234x89 cm. Courtesy Chafic Abboud estate. Photo by Luca Girardini.

War does not erupt out of nowhere, and the underlying tensions that we started to see in the first section (and that intermittently erupted) came to the fore in 1975, with the outbreak of the Civil War on 13 April 1975. Amidst growing unrest, the Beirut bus massacre that is depicted in Jamil Molaeb's *Civil War Notebook* (1975-6), on display in the last section of the exhibition, marked the official starting date of the war (Fig. 12). It is one of the rare published artist-chronicles of the war, together with Aref El Rayess's *The Road to Peace* (1976) also on display. The section is called *Blood of the Phoenix*, from the title of Nicolas Moufarrege's 1975 needlepoint on canvas – one of the surprises of this exhibition as the artist is not often grouped with the others. The violence of war was expressed in different means. Simone Fattal's *The Last Moon the Fida'i Saw* (1978) evokes the horrors of war in a subtle and very moving way. In Cici Sursock's *La Cathedrale* (1980), a distorted multi-layered icon of Virgin Mary haunts the viewer, in particular the empty eyes at the center (Fig. 13). These same empty eyes can be found in Huguette Caland's seminal *Guerre incivile* (1981), a striking work that captures the mutilating, indeed uncivil, effects of war (Fig. 14).



Figure 12: Jamil Molaeb, *April 13*, from the series *Civil War Notebook* (1975-1976), watercolor and ink on paper, 34 x 44 cm. Saradar Collection. Courtesy Ribal Molaeb. Photo by Luca Girardini.

While “Beirut and the Golden Sixties: A Manifesto of Fragility” could have closed here, the curators commissioned a contemporary work in two parts that link to the present. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *As night comes when day is gone [Part one]* (2022), shows the CCTV recordings of the Sursock Museum at the moment of the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020. The explosion, coupled with the unprecedented financial crisis, certainly left the city in a more fragile and desolate state than ever before. Meant to show the cyclical nature of history, the video installation does not speak to the rest of the exhibition



Figure 13: Cici Sursock, *La cathédrale* (1980), oil and gold leaf on wood, 60 x 40 cm.
 Courtesy Samir and Rosine Sursock Collection, Beirut. Photo by Luca Girardini.

and comes unmediated, feeling like an afterthought in the Berlin installation. Meanwhile, I completely missed the same duet's *But my head is still singing...* [Part two] (2022), a sound installation streaming fragments of poems around Orpheus.

So is fragility today at the heart of a generative form of resistance? This remains to be seen. What the exhibition has clearly shown is the breadth of expression in which Beirut's artists have responded to and engaged with their environment. It is important to question the narrative of the Golden Sixties, as is increasingly happening, and see artistic production as a critical component in the writing of history. Each of the works exhibited has its story to tell. The exhibition would



Figure 14: Huguette Caland in front of her painting *Guerre incivile* (1981) in Paris ca. 1982-83. Courtesy Huguette Caland Estate. The painting had never been exhibited until the 2013 retrospective at the Beirut Exhibition Center.

have benefitted from showing fewer works and giving the viewer more time to take them in; that would have spotlighted the stories embedded within both the artworks *and* the archival material on display. For, visibly, they have the potential to write history. This is especially important since “Beirut and the Golden Sixties” introduces many of the artists to publics in Berlin and Lyon for the first time.

Having said this, I was very moved by seeing the works, many of which had been tucked away in storage spaces and private collections for decades or only very recently displayed for the first time, as in the case of Huguette Caland’s *Guerre incivile* (1981) that was first shown in the artist’s retrospective at the Beirut Exhibition Center in 2013. In this sense, the exhibition fights another kind of fragility, that of fading memory. Showcasing a selection of Beirut’s modern art world is thus an important contribution to encouraging further engagement with its history.

Notice biographique | Nadia von Maltzahn is Research Associate at the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB), where she leads the research project LAWHA “Lebanon’s Art World at Home and Abroad: Trajectories of artists and artworks in/from Lebanon since 1943”, funded by the European Research Council. She holds a DPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from St Antony’s College, University of Oxford. Her recent publications include *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making* (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), co-edited with Monique Bellan.