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A confusing profusion of stories



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BEIRUT: The latest exhibition to be extracted from the Sursock Museum’s permanent collection has been curated along narrative lines. The tales embedded in “Eight Stories from the Sursock Museum Collection” have been derived from the work of the 23 artists on show.

The museum’s collection galleries have been transformed into eight distinct cubicles – “Focus on Etel Adnan,” “Two Lonely Men,” “Towards an Oriental Abstraction,” “Thoughts on Naive Art,” “Research on Modern Tapestry,” “Pioneers of Modernism,” “Engaged Art,” “An Encounter around the Wheel” and “Recent Acquisitions and Donations.”

With the exception of “Etel Adnan,” most cubicles contain works by different artists, each proposing a common story or theme among the different artworks.

The works do seem to be in conversation with one another and form a cohesive narrative. “Thoughts on Naive Art,” for instance, illustrates politically distanced art, which focuses on the portrayal of naive subjects.

Sophie Yermian’s brightly colored oil “Flower Vase,” 1984, emphasizes stylized flower representation.

“The Bridge,” circa 1955-1975, by Khalil Zgaib, also portrays a cartoonlike world. It is centered on a bridge and the traditional customs of fishing, flower picking, and bathing. The one-dimensional perspective, the landscape and trees are similar to Islamic illustrations and albums. The work suggests the diverse cultural inspirations and influences of Lebanese art.

By contrast “Engaged Art” focuses on the politically engaged work of Aref al-Rayess and Laure Ghorayeb.

Rayess’ oil “Greetings to the Martyrs of the Resistance,” 1978, depicts Lebanese men

from different religious communities combatting an Israeli skeleton – represented in vivid reds and greens.

This shocking portrayal references Lebanon's Civil War and the brutal Israeli invasion of 1978.

Laure Ghorayeb's series "Beirut Calls the Future Generations," 2010-2011, recounts the history of Lebanon in three collages – "Cain and Abel or the Fratricidal War," "The Golden Era," and "Independence." The collages are made of Lebanese flags, photos, press releases of celebrities, drawings, bracelets and other materials.

"My three artworks," Ghorayeb explains, "illustrate the historical eras of Lebanon from the declaration of independence of the State of the Greater Lebanon, to the '60's Golden era, and to the Lebanese Civil War.

"'Cain and Abel' illustrates the geographical and historical emergence of the country," she continues.

"'The Golden Era' symbolizes the Lebanese cultural renaissance of the '60s with its international awareness, artistic innovations, cinematographic achievements and the prominence of Lebanese theater. I also portray Lebanon's avant-garde artistic role ... 'Independence' depicts the beginning of the war between the Palestinians and the Lebanese in 1975. It portrays Lebanon's destruction, death and cultural decline. The renaissance was cut short and the country was, and remains, irrevocably damaged."

Dedicated to the oeuvre of a single artist, "Focus on Etel Adnan" is a precis of the pioneering artist's life and work. It consists of her "Untitled," 2016, oil painting, her watercolor and ink-on-paper works and a video, in which the artist explains the material diversity of her work and her interest in Chinese ink, Japanese art and such.

"Eight Stories" summarizes a fragmented Lebanese historical and artistic canon.

Featuring works by Cesar Gemayel, Omar Onsi and Elie Kanaan, "Pioneers of Modernism" explores the "origins" of Lebanese modernism. Gemayel and Onsi are described as "members of the second generation of modernist artists" and, with their brushstrokes and emphasis on light and shadow, are associated to European impressionism.

In addition to self-portraiture, Cesar Gemayel's oil "Self-portrait," 1936, and Onsi's mirroring oil-on-wood panel "Self-portrait with Palette," 1934, reflect the awakening of artists as authors.

Both paintings play with light, shadow and earth tones. The brushstrokes are quick and striking. The backgrounds are monochromelike and propel each portrait into the center of attention.

Onsi and Gemayel become father figures of the narrative and make Elie Kanaan the successor of Lebanese modernism. Kanaan's "Untitled" oil is an abstract work with an undefined subject. It explores bright and dark shades of green with bold brush strokes and splashes. The clear subject of Gemayel and Onsi's work vanishes in Kanaan's canvas. The abstract figuration becomes his signature.

Though there is coherence in the works selected for individual cubicles, the layout of the exhibition space as a whole is confusing and the relationships among the cubicles often unclear.

"The eight sections or stories don't necessarily need to be read in any specific order," Surssock Museum Director Zeina Arida said. "Each can be explored separately, and independently of neighboring sections. An additional section is dedicated to recent acquisitions and donations, [whose] works ... will change every few months."

Despite the floor plan provided for "Eight Stories from the Surssock Museum

Collection," the exhibition space is hard to navigate. The transitions from cubicle to cubicle are often unclear and the explanations unifying each cubicle are not strategically placed. It requires several trips to fully examine and comprehend the nature of the fragmented space, and there is no explanation on the organization of the themes.

The effect is to create confusion rather than reflection.

The confusion is intensified by "Research on Modern Tapestry." Apart from featuring a tapestry by Etel Adnan, the cubicle's story seems to be a secondary part of the exhibition, and is in fact pushed aside.

Its works are Etel Adnan's "Playground" and Simone Baltaxe-Martyan's tapestry "Cedar," 1973. Martyan's work depicts a cedar tree, which suggests the Lebanese state. The works themselves are interesting, but, appearing toward the end of the show, these lonely tapestries appear afterthoughts and seem hidden.

Trapped between theory and its confusing layout, "Eight Stories from the Sursok Museum Collection" succeeds in its renewal of the permanent exhibition. The stories and artworks are engaging. They reflect the diversity and mixed-up notions of Lebanon's growing art scene and historical canon, which would have been more striking in a clearer or a clearly explained space.

"Eight Stories from the Sursok Museum Collection" is up at the collection galleries, Level 2, through the summer of 2018.

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