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Tanbak and the monochrome of mass tragedy



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Jim Quilty | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: After spending some minutes absorbing the latest series of the Lebanese artist named Tanbak, you begin searching for minute traces of diversity. These mixed-media installations are the stuff of "In Transit," the solo show now up at Agial Art Gallery.

"In Transit" is, in most respects, a minimalist exhibition.

The works that make up the series are numerically titled – "1," "5," "10," etc. – and the predominant media are paper and wood. Most all the forms Tanbak has crafted are square and rectangular, though "3" has an irregular circular structure.

“ I find the whiteness of these pieces provides a nice distance from messiness of the events behind them

The pieces entitled "1" and "2" are fairly representative of the exhibition's aesthetic – though they are unique, insofar as they're unusually similar to one another in composition.

Packed within their two 100x100cm frames are a profusion of paper cuboids ("rectangular cubes") of approximately the same size. Bisecting "2" at a diagonal angle are a number of longer, thinner cuboids.

All the forms in "1" and "2" have been painted a uniform shade of white gray evocative of whitewash.

The wooden frame about "2" has been left unpainted, while the frame of "1" has had white slapped upon it as well.

"There is composition at work here," Tanbak says.

"It's not just random. I tried to make an ordered disorder in each piece in the series."

For the casual onlooker, particularly anyone fond of poring over maps of pre-20th-century urban quarters (or the ad hoc settlement of the contemporary shantytowns) the ordered disorder in these installations are scale models – sculptural representations of human settlement, as seen from above.



The artist says the “In Transit” series emerged, in part, from the challenge to create work upon a tragic historical theme, pieces that move beyond the common figurative restrictions that usually constrain that kind of work.

“About two or three years ago, someone commissioned me to do something on the [Armenian] genocide,” Tanbak recalls.



“I didn’t want to make something on blood and murder.”

Her gaze drifts over to the side of the gallery housing works “1”-“3.”

“I find the whiteness of these pieces provides a nice distance from messiness of the events behind them. Anyway two of the original pieces were exhibited on April 24, the anniversary of the genocide.”

+ Enlarge

The urban topography-cum-formalism of this series stems from the artist’s historical reading of the disaster afflicting Ottoman Armenians during World War I: The pattern of dislocation the Armenian genocide has come to represent keeps being repeated, and repeated on Lebanese soil.

“I started working on these forms in 2011,” she recalls, “after the Syrian refugees began arriving in numbers.

“I was moved by this overflow of humanity – first the Armenians, then the Palestinians. Now the Syrians. I sometimes think that nowadays more people are living in camps than are living in houses.”

The formal diversity in this series is narrow but rewarding.



+ Enlarge

In the work entitled “5,” for instance, not all the objects assembled within its frame have been whitewashed. Standing out from the monochrome background, some paper cuboids have been wrapped in fabric and aluminum foil, like wee Christmas presents.



Complementing these are a number of found objects – shirt buttons, electronic radio components and miscellaneous fragments of tubing, plastic washers, and the like, some whitewashed, others not.

“You can tell this is one of the earliest pieces,” Tanbak says, turning to face “5,” “because it hasn’t been completely whitened. You can see some of the materials used.”

+ Enlarge

"The silver [tin foil] is meant to evoke the tannak [corrugated zinc used as roofing material in some makeshift refugee houses].

"My mother used to tell me, 'Never throw things away because you'll find you can always use them,' she gestures to the buttons. "This is the junk that I used to assemble these early pieces. Life is like this, a mixture of everything.

"These elements evoke the labor refugees must perform to make a little money," she continues after a moment. "The women tend to sew. The men work as electricians, plumbers and such."

She says only the later works have been denuded of any color or found objects, becoming monochromes of whitewashed cuboids.

"Distance does have a way of making things more abstract," she says. "That's one thing. For another, people here don't want to be reminded of these traces of the camps. They don't want to see."



+ Enlarge

The work titled "5" is among the works in this series whose frame has been all but hidden by the surfeit of white forms bursting from it.

Tanbak explains that the earliest pieces in this series were made on wooden boards, but that medium made each work too heavy. "The art itself is made of paper, so it made no sense for each piece to be so difficult to move around."

That's why the artist began working with framed canvases – not the front bits, on which artists conventionally paint, but its backside, where the wooden frame and canvas provide a receptacle for her array of forms.

Assessing the cluster of works "7" through "10," each frame betrays traces of the whitewashed canvas that's the nearly invisible medium of each piece.

"But those works that are most-obviously framed," she points to works "1" and "2," which are closest to being mirror images of one another, "there's no canvas backing there, just a wooden frame."

She pauses again and seems to nod briefly into the gallery.

"I dislike frames," she frowns. "Usually I want to work outside the frame, since these [refugee] camps do have a way of bursting out of their barriers.

"And I hate having frames in my own life."

This remark resonates later in the conversation as the artist rolls her eyes at the Lebanese custom of using a surname as the marker or framework to make presumptions about someone's identity. It's to sidestep some of this business, she says, that she chose to take a pseudonym.

"Journalists insist on using my family name anyway of course," she sighs. "If they work for one side, they write my family's name. If they write for the

[More Information](#)

"In Transit" is on show at [Agial](#)

other, they write the name of my husband's family." [Art Gallery](#) through Sept. 20.

Observers of work like that on show in "In Transit" For more information on Tanbak sometimes remark that the stories inspiring visual art or to see more of her work, visit can be more compelling than the work itself. Such observations betray more about people's fondness for narrative than the relative virtues of formalism. tania-tanbak.com

The principal critical strength of these works may be the precision with which they express how the many and voices of diverse human tragedies tend to be leveled with distance, and whitewashed..

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