

The Here of the Elsewhere

By Arie Amaya-Akkermans

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[The Arts](#)

"Our inheritance was left to us by no testament." – René Char

In his 1881 painting, "[Bar at the Folies-Bergère](#)", and the last of his great paintings, [Edouard Manet](#), credited with the invention of the painting-object, performs a simple operation masterfully executed already by his classical predecessors; that of the woman behind a mirror so that the woman is painted in two planes with one single source of light, reflecting only a discreet obliqueness. What happens in Manet's painting yet is not simply the doubling of an image, but a tripling; he attempts to enclose the space to a mirror, which is simultaneously both mirror and wall, leading to optic distortion: *"It is the double negation of depth since not only does one not see what is behind the woman because she is immediately in front of the mirror, but one does not see behind the woman what there's in front of her."*¹

There's a clear distortion between what is represented in the mirror and what must be reflected in it.² Painting-object refers here not to the formal relationship between planes but the autonomy of perception in different viewer positions, so that the viewer is invited by the painter to occupy two places simultaneously when facing the work: *"One place here, and the other over there."*³ How to occupy two places at the same time? To occupy two places simultaneously means actually to occupy three places, the sites of experience and also the intersection: Someone here and no one there; descending and ascending.⁴ When the Lebanese painters began to paint the images (and an image is already an opinion) of the razed **Beirut** in the post-war period, they did not know in which tense they were painting.

Being 'here' and 'there', even anatomically disperse, meant to paint without

speaking; when the resources of the symbolic order had been exhausted. How to paint war? That is what the viewer would ask. *"And the lesson is: one does not paint ideas. One does not paint a subject... There's no subject. There are only mysteries. There are only questions."*⁵ In a disfigured city, consistently digging out a pastless essence in order to combat the present, war is such an overwhelming condition that it becomes no longer objective; it is the inescapable condition that allocates the possibilities of language. One no longer speaks about it. There are always the small details; the fragile edits of time, at the edges of which the miraculous is bereft of gunpowder, calmly lying in wait, at the expectation of an image so loud that it will drown the noise of the battlefield.

"Thin Skin" is the title of an exhibition, bringing together the **Baalbaki** painters ([Ayman](#), [Mohammad-Said](#) and [Oussama](#)), [Omar Fakhoury](#), [Tagreed Darghouth](#) and [Nadia Safieddine](#), all Lebanese artists born in the generation of the first years after the commencement of the war, and who throughout the years, developed a practice which did not maintain a relationship of casual observation or documentation of the **Lebanese Civil War**, but rather, established a symbiosis in which the painter adopts a margin of reference which is, as its name suggests is, very marginal. In this private space, somewhat liminal, the artist is free to experiment; he is already both document and documented, so that he is then liberated from the visual relationship with conflict and is able to develop an additional territory of signs and symbols.

Departing from his earlier studies on architectural ruins and the condition of reconstruction (the skies are dead, everything is enveloped in a dust of terracotta and grey, there are no inhabitants), Ayman Baalbaki's painting, that at the time were pregnant with premonition as they were shown on the weeks immediately prior to the July War (2006), has traveled a long conceptual road, investigating if anything 'motion', or the impossibility of settlement. His installations, such as "B110037" (2004) and "Home" (2003) that surveyed the plight of refugees, alongside with the studies on

the keffiyeh and the hood (identified now with the tortured prisoners in Abu Ghraib), provided an insight into the refugee condition, which shed light on the powerlessness of the Arab public domain, constantly beset by the idea of a (Palestinian) total revolution[6].

The 'here' and 'there' in Ayman Baalbaki (1975) is not an aesthetic contingency, but the development from his post-war-cum-pre-war exhibition "[Ici et Ailleurs](#)" (Here and Elsewhere), held at [Agial Art Gallery](#), Beirut, in the summer in 2006. Titled after the film of [Godard](#), Gorin and Miéville (1976) which has had major influence among an entire generation of Arab artists (the film provides inspiration for a major group exhibition at the [New Museum](#), the largest of its kind to date in the United States) as it delivers a scathing criticism on the modern idea of revolution and aptly conflates political work with the grammar of media: *"En repensant a cela!"* (Think about that again!) In the language of Godard: *"Actors are dead / Actors filmed in danger of death / Death is represented as a flow of images / The images only hide the silence / The silence becomes deadly."* On one end: Revolution. On the other end: Simple images. *"Comme ça."*

Architectural renderings are always a form of historical painting, as they are charged with mythologies and archaeologies of Modernity, and so is the case with Baalbaki, whose hesitant paintings (one is never sure whether it is a ruin or an unfinished structure, or both) have developed a theory of the object as disappearance which he is now set to invert, presenting history not as the teleology of an imminent or past catastrophe but as a freeze or suspended past shedding irredentist light on the present: Painting the now famous Cedar rocket of the Lebanese Rocket Society, the iconic Burj El Murr (a commonplace trope in Lebanese art) and the infamous bombing of the MEA fleet at the airport in Beirut by the Israelis during the 1950s, Baalbaki allegorizes (and satirizes) the historical object by presenting it as both beautiful and terrible: The monuments of a collapsed imaginary are suspended in a bed of flowers or a pristine cerulean sky.

The kind of items that define Ayman Baalbaki's anatomy of (involuntary) wandering such as suitcases, shoes, ropes, piles of clothes, from the above-mentioned installations, one can see reconstructed on the canvas (by means again, of dispersion, almost the singularity of a color field) in the paintings of Mohammad-Said Baalbaki (1974), a gramophone of debris. His series of works, all titled "Heap", making reference to a tree-shaped data structure; the figure of speech tends towards abstraction but yet casually intersects the everyday: The case-scenarios of life in temporary structures and the illogical syntax of possibility, presented by deserted landscapes of heaps and piles, are only surreal by the contrast they produce between their formal properties and the images of refugees begging in the streets, living in tents, out of heaps and piles, throughout the Arab world; almost its distinguishing feature.

Mohammad-Said Baalbaki however, like Ayman, is not a documentary artist, and overlaps his practice as a painter with projects of historical reconstruction (Al-Buraq the mythological winged horse found under Al-Aqsa, the missing arm of the bullet-ridden Martyrs' Square statue in Beirut) that are simultaneously archaeological and hypothetical. In his practice, Mohammad-Said Baalbaki has constantly questioned the authority of the museum, or the display, at the heart of the Orientalist discourse that redeemed and closed off the past indefinitely by merely showcasing it under scientific pretensions. The transition between conceptual investigation and the political condition of refugee is never seamless or free of doubt. Questioning historicism, and hence conflict, is for the artist, a means to articulate his hesitation over conflict as something constructed and therefore abstracted; it can easily be shunned and misshapen.

At this interstice, between construction and reality, in itself the sum total of relationships and phenomena, Mohammad-Said and Ayman Baalbaki are concerned with Beirut as an open-ended text, or as a palimpsest which is constantly washed and re-inscribed, unconsciously re-writing the present in a futureless circular motion under the weight of an unreadable past. A

palimpsest nonetheless, is not a mnemography, and the risk of intelligibility is exponentially augmented each new layer. Beirut appears as porous material: *"If one term could be offered to characterize the city of Beirut, it would certainly be the word 'permeable'. Permeability denotes the state in which the categorical distinction between the city, body politics, and the text written on that body, dissolve... Porosity is the image of this (un)written text which defines the physical and political pre(modernity) of Beirut; it constitutes a continuum in the shifting identity of the city and its social body."*⁷

In this city of event horizons, a subterfuge for imaginary victories hanging from the skull of the most indescribable ignominies, and a museum of internal displacement and emigration on its own, a micro-architecture of impermanent monuments grows behind the apparent mobility and seamlessness of everything. It is a chemical process: Liquids damp the solids that then melt and amalgamate into a viscous substance which then enters the bones and unstitches the organic structure of the world into cycles of pure nature; formless but inescapable. These are the temporary but yet so solid and omnipresent shelters that Omar Fakhoury (1979) has brought to life (or, to still-life) in his large canvases: Construction sites, army outposts, guard houses, parking lots. His emphasis is not on the singular beauty of the crass object but on the permanence of temporary blocks and blockades; more permanent than residential homes in a city imaginarily divided by placards, posters and simple graffiti.

Fakhoury, unlike the Baalbaki painters, developed his instinct for concrete and concreteness, coming from a place a lot more liquid than that of installation and conceptual painting: The video-artist and photographer worked on more liminal spaces that presented the circus of Beirut in its most erotic and punctuated abstractness, through titillating texts and loops. His works on video from the past decade, such as "War Pattern", a collage of three thousand headlines on TV from the 2006 war, or "July Dream", an animation reconstructing a dream from the war time, staged at the iconic

Holiday Inn, site of the Battle of the Hotels, which defined the extent of the Lebanese Civil War, are based on the text as both allegory and hyper-reality; one can say even exaggeration, the poetics of surplus. Constructed realities (again) concentrated in order to reflect a reality with precision, that is, with message and intent, without the pluriverse of modalities that co-exist in the everyday: There's no such a thing as total war.

His paintings, on the other hand, liquidify the speed of the loop, which later emerge as concrete blocks. An idea, made wildly popular by French theorists, postulates that wars are fought and won in the media, while behind the interminable loop (both televisual and virtual), there still lurk real sites of catastrophe and victims, and just as interminable physical and psychological destruction. While the analytics of war, an academic field on its own right, has kept up with military strategy, postwar is still a question mark, an exclamation sign. Fakhoury's paintings, "Self-Defense", speak of the protective walls which by force of necessity, glue together a rotten structure once the social tissue has been effectively eroded, blurring the line between inside and outside. Precarity is here not an accident, but as in the case of the refugees, their world painted in the Baalbaki's, also a condition of life today.

The extreme violence, at the heart of contemporary culture (no less than the death-drive with which we experience the endless possibilities of mortality), comes to us no longer in the existential dramas of Christianity and the Enlightenment, but in significantly enlarged icons, blending the dramatic and the cinematic, drawing on pop culture and science fiction. This is what Tagreed Darghouth brings to the canvas, not only in her almost comical - but utterly realistic - figuratives of surveillance cameras (be a metaphor for what you wish; the state, corporatism, the blurred lines between private and public) but also in her rendition of nuclear explosions in almost Impressionistic palettes, reminding us of how the atmospheric aspect of war has been normalized into everyday language; naming bombs after animals, plants, sonates. Darghouth's archaeology of modern images can be at times

sinister, but often also comic and liberating.

In the same pictorial tradition (but conceptually not altogether similar) Nadia Safieddine's impasto paintings, veer towards abstraction, not as the mathematical color fields of the second half of the past century, but more as a question about the essence of ruins and their allegories: How would the remnants of a catastrophe look like if we could photograph them, or merely look at them, at the very moment of the implosion? A house in rubble, is still a site, delimited by the coordinates of the Cartesian plane and definite volumes which do not fade easily. These shredded temporalities, structures and anatomies are all deployed in Safieddine's painting, which inherits its syntax from piano composition. In music, it is possible to exist in multiple coordinates, to saturate the space completely and alter its shape; against the architectural fragility of our daily lives, Safieddine sees the ruin as more permanent and stable; an endless present.

A more realistic observation, and therefore far more traumatic, takes place in Oussama Baalbaki's work, which, practicing an absolute neutrality and externality from his life and specific narrative content, attempts an impossible task: To place himself simultaneously as author, subject and spectator, again in the tradition of Godard's films. The almost pointillistic technique (a branch of the Impressionist movement, embodied by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac) sabotages his architectural understanding of pictorial space, endowing the paintings with a dizzying photographic aura, somewhat aware of its titillating disfigurements. The punctuation of the brush, however, is post-expressionist, bordering on the magic realism of some American painters. His persistence in maintaining clear lines in an altogether perishable visual field, attests to his hesitation, sometimes historical, between abstraction and expression.

The aim of the curator, [Saleh Barakat](#), was not only to simply bring together an assemblage of painting from Beirut, what would be a rather conservative museological approach. Barakat's concept of 'skin', in 'Thin

Skin', approaches painting in the sense proposed by Manet: *"He was therefore inventing, if you like, the 'picture-object', the 'painting-object', and this no doubt was the fundamental condition so that finally one day we can get rid of representation itself and allow space to play with its pure and simple properties, its material properties."*⁸ He is working with artists that having either begun or experimented with formats of art in which mediation rather than translation occurred (a question of medium), feel the necessity to return to painting. Returning to the brush on a naked canvas, after the intoxication of video-loops and the scientific veracity and validity of the research object, painting is both a schism and an incision, with a sharp knife, reminder of fragility, a transversal cut. What is thin skin? It is the realization that reproduction, representation and expression run in parallel.

The (religious and mystical) texts of some philosophers, make reference to the un-bearability of a direct presence: *"What is so terrifying about it is that it is so terribly clear and such gladness. If it went on for more than five seconds, the soul could not endure it and must perish. In those five seconds I live through a lifetime, and I am ready to give my life for them, for it's worth it. To be able to endure it for ten seconds, you would have to undergo a physical change."*⁹ Returning art to physical properties (skin, canvas, brushstrokes) is not a modernist flight, but a site of duplicity between primal and future; as in Godard's film, the world opens up as an additional continent/territory, which is both source and subject. The 'here' and 'there' is not an optic optative tense, but the realization that the production of political reality of the 'elsewhere' is a 'here and now' somewhere; closer than you imagine. Imagination is in fact not necessary, hence it strikes us as surreal: It is pure boundless terror.

Gilles Deleuze, in his book about cinema, contemporary with Godard, expresses the hope that perhaps we have finally given up the realism of places; living now in the 'espace quelconque' or whatever-space or any-space-whatever. All our spaces are now undone, hence any attempt at representation, which is what the painters of 'Thin Skin' are doing, winds up

being ultimately something else: A rhetoric of pure potential. Realism is the most consistent metaphysical fiction of the celluloid era and the one that demands the most theatrical capabilities, as attested by the girl in Godard's film, staging a victory in the ruins of the Karameh camp, singing a poem to freedom by Mahmoud Darwish. The dissonance between image and political reality couldn't have been more striking. Informed by the picture image, but ultimately faced with a multidirectional process, 'Thin Skin' presents an epic exercise in externality of perspective, a laboratory of images and a residual phenomenology of violence: *"It is a postwar feeling of lost coordinates, a certain anonymous emptiness... It is both ruined and fresh."*¹⁰

['Thin Skin: Six Artists from Beirut'](#), Ayman Baalbaki, Mohammad-Said Baalbaki, Oussama Baalbaki, Omar Fakhoury, Tagreed Darghouth, Nadia Safieddine, curated by Saleh Barakat, was on show at [Taymour Grahne Gallery](#), New York, from June 3rd through July 7th, 2014.

1. Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting*, Tate Publishing, 2009, pp. 73
2. Ibid, pp. 74
3. Ibid, pp. 74-5
4. Ibid, pp. 77
5. Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 124
6. Samir Kassir, *Being Arab*, Verso, 2013, pp. 11
7. Nadir Lahiji, *The Porous City, Worldview, Perspectives on Architecture and Urbanism around the Globe*.
<http://www.worldviewcities.org/beirut/porous.html>

8. Michel Foucault, *Ibid*, pp. 78

9. Julia Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection: Powers of Horror*, Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 12

10. John Kelsey, "theanyspacewhatever," *Art Forum*, March 2009
<http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=200903&id=22123>

[Beirut](#), [Lebanon](#), [Politics](#)