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Lebanon glimpsed in watercolor



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A vortex of color and light welcomes visitors entering "Watercolors," the exhibition now up at Agial Art Gallery off Hamra. With this collection of 30 watercolors, realized over the course of a year, Oussama Baalbaki presents inspiring glimpses of Lebanon



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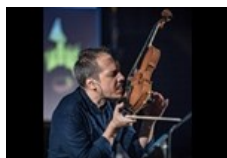
Violinist Luca Ciarla brings Mediterranean to Lebanon

Veronica Merlo | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A vortex of color and light welcomes visitors entering "Watercolors," the exhibition now up at Agial Art Gallery off Hamra. With this collection of 30 watercolors, realized over the course of a year, Oussama Baalbaki presents inspiring glimpses of Lebanon, encountered during his long habitual walks in and around Beirut.

Baalbaki graduated from the Lebanese University's School of Fine Arts in 2002 and has exhibited in a wide array of institutions in Lebanon and abroad, from Abu Dhabi and Dubai to Munich, London, New York, Washington and Miami.

These works on canvas mark a departure from the Lebanese artist's previous works, which have predominantly focused on such heavy subjects, as isolation and war.



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With "Watercolors," Baalbaki instead turns to represent the beauty around him.

"There is no specific theme in this collection of paintings," Baalbaki tells The Daily Star. "It is rather an artistic exercise, through which I could spontaneously reproduce what I see while walking."

Despite the absence of a precise subject driving the work, the "Watercolors" exhibition is not short on meaning.

The artist seeks to lure people's attention to ordinary elements from everyday life that are often neglected. "Especially in Beirut," he explains, "people do not look up to the sky." For this reason, sky and clouds, in a multiplicity of shapes, hues and shades, often take pride of place in these pieces.

Baalbaki's work largely derives from his personal connection with the street. He is eager to highlight that street life constitutes an essential part of his identity and is a great source of inspiration. Baalbaki defines it as "a place of movement," where the meeting of people and events produce a unique dynamism on multiple levels.

These pieces focus equally on some aspects of Lebanon that, in Baalbaki's view, distinguish it from other places.

"Lebanon is characterized by a special light," he explains. "It is extremely rich, including tones of both the Sahara and the Mediterranean." This, he says, is why shades of yellow, orange and blue dominate the gallery.

The works in this show evidently combine emotion with technical dexterity. Due to the difficulty in making corrections, watercolor technique requires a great mastery of the brush and close attention while painting.

Despite these challenges, Baalbaki's creativity flows freely onto the canvas, giving shape to a variety of representations that stimulate different reflections.

One of the pieces that stand out depicts a car parked beneath a tree, vividly expressing the tension between the old and the new.

"These two very different objects are pulled together in a kind of paradoxical way," Baalbaki suggests, "because I wanted to create a dialogue between contrasting elements, the old and the new, tradition and modernity.

"It is a series of paintings that come directly from the heart," Baalbaki concludes, "where feelings constitute the main target."

"Watercolors" is up at Agial Art Gallery through July 20.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on July 10, 2019, on page 12.

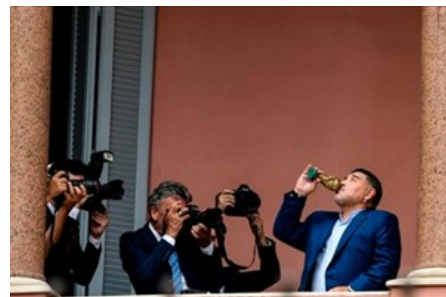
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