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## ***Mandy Merzaban interviews Mohamad-Said Baalbaki***

***MM: Initially, your body of work focused on painting and the materiality of paint on canvas. How did your approach help you convey some of your personal experiences growing up in Beirut during the civil war in the 80s?***

**MSB:** My biography is very closely linked to painting. I come from a family of artists and painting was one of my very early discoveries as a child. Growing up in Beirut during the Civil War meant that we were often forced to remain within the four walls of our home, this was a protective space and at the same time a kind of prison. Painting became a place of refuge for me, it was the realm where I could dream and explore new things.

The things I had experienced were not always easy to convey, as a student in Beirut my paintings dealt with the themes of destruction and re-construction, later on, from the distance in Berlin my work took a different turn and I began to develop other themes. During the early years in Berlin my paintings were quite dark, I suffered from the lack of light, I often felt homesick and I was not sure of where my place of belonging was. The themes of exile, of travel, of identity became central to my work. I used suitcases and boxes as metaphors to express these sentiments. These motives possess a certain ambivalence. On one hand, every person who has experienced war links them to flight and exile, you get used to always having a packed suitcase at hand in case you need to flee. On the other hand they also represent new beginnings, hope, travel, even adventure. All these different meanings converge and overlap each other in my paintings of suitcases.

In 2006 I went back to Beirut for an artist's residence and it was during this extended stay that colour and light found its way back into my painting. I had taken the decision to stay in Berlin, to build a home there and this decision took much of the anxiety out of my life. I enjoyed a newly found freedom. So the suitcases took on another meaning, they began to symbolize hope, new beginnings and openings rather than flight and danger. This visual aspect was paralleled by a technical factor: In the hot and dry climate of Beirut, paint dries much faster than in Germany, so I was able to work with a complex technique using multiple layers of paint and thus create a sense of light in my paintings. This light together with the warm, soft colours shows a relation to French painting, something I feel closely connected to.

***MM: Can you elaborate on what motivated your transition from painting to a more conceptual approach? Have you abandoned painting entirely?***

**MSB:** I have been moving in these two parallel, but interlinked universes for the past three or four years. While they are complementary, I have also discovered that it is impossible for

me to work simultaneously in both since they represent very different approaches. Yet, they form two central pillars of my work. Painting is and will always remain my first artistic medium, the one I find most natural to express myself in. I consider myself first and foremost a painter. But my painting has changed during this process, it has become more conceptual, focusing on complex ideas that show a certain ambivalence or irony. This is also a reflection of my entire situation, of my life in Berlin with all its different aspects. The question of identity is not yet solved for me, rather it is like a tree whose roots stretches further and further in all directions. All these ideas take time to develop, they cannot be hurried and this is what I am working on currently. I am in a phase of intensive work, spending many hours a day painting and I have discovered that I missed this intensity.

On the other hand, my conceptual work allows me to develop other ideas that have been of lasting interest to me, such as archaeology, history, archives and collections. It also allows me to reflect on contemporary society in a different way, from a more analytical, "scientific" angle. I have always been fascinated by the world of science and research. If I had not studied painting, I could easily imagine myself working in this field.

***MM: In your ongoing work "Al Buraq", you fabricate a fictional story about how two German scientists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century discover the remains of Al Buraq, a winged horse with a human head used by Prophet Muhammad to travel from Jerusalem to Mecca in a single night. What is the motivation behind this body of work and why did you decide to use Al Buraq? In what ways is the fabrication a reflection of what goes on in the world around us?***

**MSB:** The central aspect of this work is not Al Buraq, actually I don't even mention Al Buraq in the first part of the project, but the question of how knowledge and truth is fabricated and transmitted. After completing my MFA, I did a Master in Museum Studies. But rather than focusing on pure science and theories on how to present knowledge in an objective way, I was interested in using the museum space as an artist, I wanted my intervention to be present. For this I developed a number of ideas on this basis during that time.

One project was a concept for a museum of history in Beirut. To define history in Lebanon is almost impossible, so many different views clash and so many people claim to possess "truth". The ideas as to what define the "nation" are so diverse that the idea of a sole historic truth that could be presented in accessible terms in an institution remains almost fictional. For another project I used parts of a personal archive of newspaper clippings on archaeology and history. Though the physical archive was lost during the July War of 2006, I remembered one clipping about an intriguing discovery of dinosaur bones in the Beqaa Valley during a search for oil. Since the quest of the scientists was for oil, the bones had no value to them and so the discovery remained largely unnoticed. Such stories were always highly interesting to me because they show how we attach value and importance to pieces of scientific information and how very shortsighted considerations often interfere with long-term understanding. A third aspect is how easily people allow themselves to be tricked by constructions based on images. One of the most glaring recent examples was the way, Colin Powell was able to make the whole world believe in Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in 2003, only through the use of a couple of manipulated photos.

The “Al Buraq” project can be seen as a study on the fabrication of truth and knowledge incorporating the different ideas just mentioned. It starts with the discovery of a casket of mysterious bones belonging to an unknown animal during an archaeological excavation. A discussion ensues between two scientists who try to analyze the finds, thereby navigating between the realms of fiction and reality, religion and science, knowledge and belief. The shoulder blade of the animal with its strange deformation, the possible wing, is the crucial part, a pars pro toto for all legendary winged creatures of history, Pegasus, winged lions, winged griffons, etc. It links the worlds of legend and myth on one hand and science on the other.

***MM: We are often quick to accept records provided by museums and institutions as factual and objective. In creating artefacts, data and research texts and arranging them in a way where they would mimic an authentic curatorial display in a museum, your work challenges a viewer’s gullibility in trusting facts based on appearances alone. How does your work call into question perceptions of recorded history and the credibility of the museum?***

**MSB:** I wanted particularly to challenge the viewers’ ideas of the museum as an institution that conveys facts and knowledge. Many objects in museums and collections are in fact contested and might or might not be “fakes”. Their presence in a museum, however, conveys credibility onto them, even if their provenance is not known. This immediately leads to the next question: “What is a “fake”?” And further than that: might not a “fake” have some value in itself? At what point does a “fake” become “authentic”? It was a common practice in Ancient Rome to commission copies of pieces of Greek art. A Roman copy of a Greek statue might once have been considered a “fake”, but now it is considered a piece of ancient fine art in itself and displayed as such. At some point in the future, maybe this will happen to other “fakes” as well.

These questions are an important part of my project. I was interested in exploring what mechanisms work to create truth and knowledge. For this, the objects were one part, the documentation (texts, letters, photographs, drawings) another and the presentation itself the third. I wanted to create a space reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century museum collections and so I produced cabinets and show cases to achieve this ceremonial atmosphere of another time. It was my intention to come as close to a genuine museum display as possible, apparently grown through many decades, while presenting a complete fictional fabrication, the discovery, the documents, the objects as well as the animal as if they were “facts” and thus question under what circumstances we accept things and ideas as “facts”.