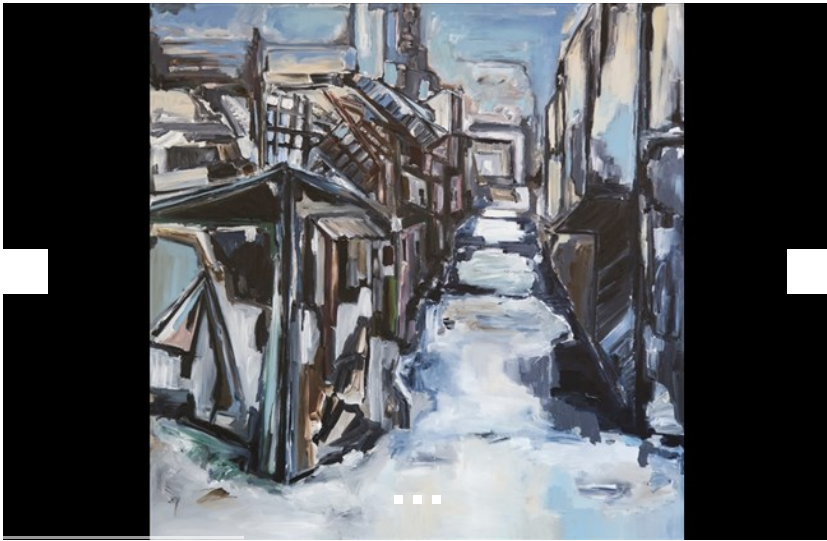


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## The architectural legacies of war in art



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👤 India Stoughton | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Four decades have passed since construction started on the Burj El Murr. The 40-story tower remains unfinished, its completion interrupted by the Civil War.

Looming over west Beirut from the edge of a ruined downtown core, the concrete skeleton has hosted unspeakable acts of violence and witnessed many more.

Designed as an office block, by the time its construction was halted in 1978 the structure's empty floors had become a warren of snipers' nests, with a panoptic view of more than 2 kilometers in every direction.

Militiamen are said to have tortured prisoners in the bowels of the building and flung some, still living, from the roof.

Too tall – and too enmeshed in local politics – to be toppled, the Burj El Murr remains a hollow relic of “progress” and atrocity in the center of the city. A de facto monument to destruction in a country whose leaders strive to forget the Civil War, it's not surprising that the tower has inspired a number of Lebanese artists whose work deals with themes of violence, legacy and memory.

Marwan Rechmaoui's 2001-08 installation “A Monument for the Living,” a hollow scale replica of the tower in wood and cement, explored the enduring specter of the Burj in the center of Beirut's post-war reconstruction zone and its role in the collective memories of those left alive. Painter and sculptor Ayman Baalbaki juxtaposed the somber grey expanse of the tower with a backdrop of gaudy flowers in a 2011 painting.

Animator Lina Ghaibeh took the building as the subject of her 2013 short film “Burj El Murr: Tower of Bitterness,” which envisaged the structure as the setting for a sequence of surreal events based on long-forgotten memories.

“My blood was boiling,” an unnamed character said near the end of “How Nancy Wished that Everything was an April Fool's Joke,” the 2007 play co-written by Rabih Mroué and Fadi Toufic. “I ... immediately went to the Murr Tower, since, due to my experience in the previous wars, I knew that a battle for Beirut is already half-won by those who control the tower.”

Musician and artist Mazen Kerbaj last year released a limited edition silkscreen capturing the shell of the structure against an idyllic blue sky, accompanied by the

caption: "Abandoned at birth/ I never ceased looking for you," an extract from his comic book "Lettre à la Mère."

Forty years after its inception, the unfinished tower once again finds itself aestheticized in "Burj El Murr," a 12-part steel installation by veteran Lebanese artist Ginane Makki Bacho, currently on show at Ayyam Gallery as part of a two-person exhibition entitled "Material Remains."

The installation stands near the entrance of the L-shaped gallery, the sculptures placed close together to form a metal metropolis of eerie forms, each characterized by an unusually long, lean frame and regimented windows. Six columns of square holes pepper the front and back of the steel columns, while two bisect one of the narrow sides and a single line traverses the length of the other. The irregularity evokes a four-sided cheese grater.

Closer inspection reveals that although they seem identical, each shredded hole in the building's steel façade is unique. Makki Bacho didn't employ a fabricator, but welded each tower manually on her balcony, producing irregular sculptures that convey a false impression of uniformity.

Enough space is left between the structures that viewers can walk among them, in the strange position of dwarfing the building whose metaphorical and literal shadow has loomed so long.

Makki Bacho is best-known for her sculptures of cedar trees made from chunks of shrapnel collected from the ruins of her home and studio, which were destroyed during the Civil War. She says that the installation came about almost by accident. She decided to make one sculpture, she explains, but found herself becoming obsessed with the building, which has been the focus of her work for the last two years.

She likens the sculptures in the installation to matryoshka dolls, a family of towers unfolding from each other's bellies as one memory unfolds from another.

"I had the idea to make them like Russian dolls because I wanted to get it out of my system," she says. "It was like therapy for me to go over the trauma of it, but at the same time I can't see Beirut without the Burj El Murr. It's something we have to take stock of, but we don't have to destroy it. It's really unique, this tower, standing tall [after] years of war, overwhelming Beirut and public memory."

In the gallery's main space hang six paintings by Fathallah Zamroud, an architect and jewelry designer who is exhibiting for the first time.

The Lebanese-Syrian Zamroud was struck by dramatic media images of the Syrian conflict and its spillover in Lebanon and began to collect them, soon filling a scrapbook.

The photos later served as studies for his paintings.

Zamroud's pieces capture refugee gatherings in Lebanon. Devoid of human presence, from close-up his large, square canvases are a jumble of abstract shapes, but from a distance they convey the chaotic landscapes of tents and makeshift housing units, separated by narrow, rubbish strewn alleyways.

Two works capture thin alleyways stretching away from the viewer. Bathed in cold, white light and picked out in shades of blue, brown and black, these paintings convey a sense of depth and distance, beckoning the viewer into the scene. The other four, which capture expanses of tents or poorly constructed dwellings against alien, mountainous landscapes, are less effective, their busy composition overwhelming the eye and lacking a clear focal point.

Zamroud's impressionist approach to the architectural traces of war provides a strong contrast to Makki Bacho's rigid steel forms. His paintings explore the tension evoked by hasty constructions imposed on a virgin landscape, exploring place and context, while Makki Bacho's work replicates the Burj El Murr, totem-like, in a vacuum.

The installation and paintings married in "Material Remains" are not necessarily an obvious pairing and their deployment in separate halves of the gallery encourages viewers to assess them independently of one another. Together, however, these

explorations of the physical embodiments of two wars, separated by decades but involving similar parties and tensions, provoke reflection on the relationship between construction and destruction, violence past and present.

"Material Remains" is up at Ayyam Gallery until May 31. For more information, please call 01-374-450.

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