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SERWAN BARAN IN BEING AYMAN BAALBAKI ISSUE

by ANASTASIA NYSTEN ([HTTPS://SELECTIONSARTS.COM/AUTHOR/ANASTASIA-NYSTEN/](https://selectionsarts.com/author/anastasia-nysten/))

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My first meeting with Ayman was in summer 2001 in the Atelier in Amman with the creative Marwan Kassab-Bachi/ Darat al Funun-Jordan. I met Ayman, the young man from Beirut, a head full of hair, civil war tragedy and religious conflicts. He was a quiet, well-educated person with a mature vision, carrying a great turbulence deep inside, revealed only when necessary. He was also a great listener, talking only when necessary. What connected us was the memory of the war and the “remnants” of people after it. He paints with high emotion and speed aiming for the spontaneity he discovers while catching the aesthetic moments of the act; he paints pieces of dead cows in the colours of fresh meat, the detached horse’s head in the colours of dark blood with highly expressive approaches.



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-theme-Ayman-Baalbaki-and-Serwan-Baran.jpg>).

Ayman Baalbaki and Serwan Baran. Photo by Hady Sy.

We were in an ongoing discussion with Professor Marwan and the other students, Said Baalbaki, Tagreed Darghouth, Samer Al-Kurdi, and a group of ambitious Palestinian youth, about freedom of thought and performance, focusing on staying away from embellishment and beautification of artistic work. I remember at the time asking him for my portrait before he leaves to Paris for his art studies. I also remember that Professor Marwan was very impressed with the portrait. He insisted on me keeping it, not giving it to anyone. I didn't know why... As the days passed in the workshop, I enquired about it and he said: “Your important works should be kept for your history”.



<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-theme-Portrait-of-Serwan-Baran-by-Abdul-Rahman-Katanani.jpg>

Portrait of Serwan Baran by Abdul Rahman Katanani

I remember Ayman, at the time, using to cut off from the surrounding world whenever he painted, devouring the painting like a savage child, emptying all his creative energy until the work is finished. He enjoys speed and spontaneity in doing things, charged with high emotion, away from excessive decorations. His performance was fascinating, a bit fierce. We spent a good time painting and wandering the popular markets looking for colourful Iraqi traditional rugs, the rustic antique pieces he and Professor Marwan loved. He is extremely emotional, always seeking the history of the things he buys for very small amounts. We were living in a subsisting way, remembering the works of the great German Expressionists and post-war artists who left their mark on art history. Today, and for 21 years, we still criticize each other's work, trusting each other's vision through our daily pursuit of beauty and techniques. As the workshop was over, each of us traveled to a destination.



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-theme-Portrait-of-Ayman-Baalbaki-by-Serwan-Baran.jpg>).

Portrait of Ayman Baalbaki by Serwan Baran.

The meeting was in Beirut in 2008. Ayman has attended maturity, experience, and professionalism. It was my first visit to Beirut... After 4 years, Ayman was one of the first friends who encouraged me to stay and settle in Beirut. He and Tagreed Darghouth were the first to receive me. Ayman still has the same concern for 21 years. This anxiety and turmoil were reflected positively on his artistic work, leading him to be very careful with the decision to finish the work in order to be convincing to himself before the people around him. After 2012, we all worked as a group that ties us together in friendship and the memory of the workshop with Marwan; and most importantly, we all worked in the drawing field or present our works in a contemporary drawing style. The meetings were daily, starting with our morning breakfast and ending with a Beirut evening. I watched Ayman closely, his choice of topics, returning to their historical or political reference, and destroying forms to rebuild them in his own way.

The impact of the streets and the graffiti spreading in Beirut was his main obsession, always looking for protests painted on the walls, continually capturing the simplest traces of human action on the streets, collecting and reviving damaged posters and advertisements.



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-theme-Portrait-of-Abdul-Rahman-Katanani-by-Serwan-Baran.jpg>).

Portrait of Abdul Rahman Katanani by Serwan Baran

For 12 years in a row, we met daily with our creative friend, Abdul Rahman Katanani, reflecting on creating an artistic movement with no specific intention, only because we shared similar ideas about revolutionary serious art away from the decorative painting. We shared several projects, the most important were the Cairo Biennale and the Beirut projects in Venice Biennale 2019. We work together, we share opinions. Sometimes we disagree, other times we agree. We lived our ups and downs. I still remember Ayman's face on the day of the Beirut explosion and the great pain it brought upon his city. We went out to Gemmayzeh that day to help and participate in cleaning up the city. We had memories in every part of the stricken city, but we were really positive about the power Beirut had to restore itself, with the help of its lovers.



Ayman Baalbaki, Serwan Baran and Abdelrahman Katanani walking down Hamra street.

I still remember one of our silliest situations, during the summer of 2019, when Ayman, Abdul Rahman Katanani and I were in a private atelier in Patras, the coastal city of Greece, escaping the momentum of life and the chaos of the city to devote ourselves solely to artwork. Daytime was for hard work in the large studio, evenings were for reward and city discoveries, wandering the neighbourhoods and restaurants, tasting fine wines and delicious seafood. All I can remember was us wandering one evening, after a hard painting day where Ayman, as usual, painted the walls with his brush stroke, and painted us and himself, too. This is Ayman. The child who plays with colours. That evening, we wandered, as usual, the alleys of the city at 3am. I watched Katanani dancing with himself in the street like an eager lover. I was running back and forth, without knowing why, expressing a strange feeling of freedom. The strangest one was Ayman, racing to hug a small palm tree full of thorns and hard fronds, as if he was passionately hugging his beloved. It left him with deep wounds to his head and face. We couldn't stop laughing that day. And to this day, I still don't know why he hugged the palm tree. But this is Ayman. A smart and naughty child who knows what he is doing, quenching his thirst with the spontaneity of a child.



(<https://selectionsarts.com/wp-content/uploads/selections-arts-being-ayman-baalbaki-theme-Portrait-of-Ayman-Baalbaki-by-Serwan-Baran-1.jpg>).

Portrait of Ayman Baalbaki by Serwan Baran

It was a special day filled with the freedom we were looking for as the catalyst and motivation for serious production.

Bio: Serwan Baran (b. Baghdad, 1968) is a Beirut-based Iraqi painter and sculptor. He received a bachelor's degree of Fine Arts from the University of Babylon in Hillah, Iraq. In the 1990s, his work was shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Iraq. He was awarded a youth prize in Baghdad in 1990, and the first and second prizes of the Baghdad International Festival of Plastic Arts in 1994 and 1995, respectively. In 2001, he participated in the Ayloul Summer Academy, a residency program led by artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi at Darat al-Funun in Amman, Jordan. In 2003, he moved to Amman during the American invasion of Iraq. In 2013, he moved to Beirut, where he has since been living and working. He represented Iraq at the 58th International Venice Biennale in 2019 with the solo exhibition, Fatherland, curated by Tamara Chalabi and Paolo Colombo. Other solo shows include A Harsh Beauty at Saleh Barakat Gallery (2020); Indelible Memory at Gallery Misr, Egypt (2020); Canines at Agial Art Gallery, Beirut (2018); Living on the Edge at Nabad Art Gallery, Amman (2013); Elected at Matisse Art Gallery, Marrakech (2013); and Whispers at Orfali Art Gallery, Amman (2012), among others in Amman, Damascus, Tokyo, and the Dominican Republic. He has participated in group exhibitions at Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut (2018); The Mojo Gallery, Dubai (2015); AL-Markhiyya Gallery, Doha (2013). His work was featured in the Cairo Biennale, Cairo (1999, 2019); Al-Kharafi Biennial, Kuwait (2011); and the fourth Marrakech Biennale, Marakech (2012). Baran is a member of several artist associations in Iraq.

A VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN PRINT IN SELECTIONS #58 BEING AYMAN BAALBAKI

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