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Canticle of Death: Tagreed Darghouth's skulls at Agial

By marietomb

Darghouth has come a long way since her slightly awkward, albeit conceptually powerful, period where she exposed the Lebanese's obsession with plastic surgery. (Later, she denounced another Lebanese obsession: mistreating foreign domestic workers.) This time, her topic of choice, the eeriest one to date, is weapons of mass destruction.



(<https://artsbeirut.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/beirut-27-oct-19-nov-agial-art-gallery.gif>)

Born in 1979, Tagreed Darghouth did not grow up with the Cold War. Like most people from her generation, she learned about it through books and films: she actually had the idea for the series while reading about the Western nuclear programs established during World War II, especially the U.S. and British ones. (The latter, where the bombs were disguised under the codename 'Rainbow', ended in 1958). By pointing to British and American nuclear agendas, Darghouth might actually be making a veiled reference to threats much closer to us: the nuclear plotting of big powers in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Darghouth candidly divulges the crux of her project: to draw attention to the apparent disconnection between the endearing nicknames given by Brits to their weapons of mass destruction, and their lethal purposes. Why name bombs after beautiful, innocuous things (glamorous actors, Romantic music, cute animals)? "Green Parrot", "Blue Bunny", "Red Rose", "Yellow Sun" a Rainbow of death indeed, used by Brits to bury their heads in the sand.

In the catalogue to the exhibition *Rebirth: Lebanon XXIst Century Contemporary Art* (2011), Darghouth declared: "Was the use of the word 'Rainbow' accidental? The rainbow, according to the biblical story, appears after the end of the flood. This Godly flood drowned the 'bad', but the 'good' saw the rainbow as a sign of the rebirth of life. With the presence of this English 'nuclear' rainbow on Earth, do weapons of mass destruction lead the way to a new rebirth?"

The answer given by the exhibition is a resounding no. The rainbow's only a symbol of hope for the (Western) countries who'll use these nuclear weapons to obliterate others and, maybe, hopefully, bring about peace. For the victims, it's another story. And it is maybe too obvious that Darghouth sides with these victims in her denouncing nuclear proliferation. She paints bombs, men, but mostly skulls. Dead people. You draw the link.

Darghouth's previous series were subtler. Documentary in nature, they cast a (seemingly) objective eye on their subjects and made one think twice about their underlying meaning. But there is nothing documentary about *Canticle of Death* – apart from its premise. Here, she strays away from reality. Her bombs are not presented in any context, nor are her skulls and explosions; they are symbols of death floating in fantasy spaces.



(https://artsbeirut.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/artwork_images_425143720_668573_tagreed-darghouth.jpg).

The skulls emerge from solid backgrounds (can one call them solid with all that brushstroke working?) or patterns of stars, stilettos or bunnies. They are most striking when Darghouth violently pairs colours together, when she juxtaposes a bright background with kitsch patterns to these heads reminiscent of Northern Renaissance and baroque art. (The skulls are less effective tone on tone, almost swallowed by Darghouth's brushstroke.)

Visually, the theoretical extreme violence of the skull motif is abolished by Darghouth's heads physical and emotional innocuousness. Their expressions are farcical, they cannot be menacing; rather, they seem supplicating, praying to be harmed no further. (Skulls were inflicted death, the ultimate harm, but some here bear traces of physical fractures). They are singing to the gods of death in a macabre choir, but also defying them.

The exhibition takes up the two floors of the gallery, and the real jewels are downstairs (albeit not as well lighted as they deserve on my last visit): a skull set against the score of Strauss's Blue Danube, an assemblage of small skulls framed to mimic seventeenth-century paintings, and a work recently exhibited in APEAL's Lebanese art exhibition in London, a rainbow of nuclear explosions, or, a row of blossoming flowers. (There are also portraits of two actors whose names were considered to christen nuclear bombs – works whose self-reference unfortunately goes beyond the scope of the rest of the exhibition.)



(https://artsbeirut.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/td_i2.jpg).

Where Monet sought to record how the changing light and atmosphere modified the visual appearance of his haystacks, Darghouth's skulls, under their multiple guises, emphasize one single message: the threat of nuclear proliferation. Yet, beyond its topical aspect, the exhibition harkens back to a perennial artistic theme: the Vanitas, or the reminder of the transience of human life. Two layers out of the many interpretations possible; however, the sheer beauty of the canvases do not require explanation, and perhaps the contextual information diminishes their impact, making them mere commentaries on historical and political events.

Maybe the exhibition spoke to my mad obsession with skulls in art*, hence my enthusiasm. Whatever the case, Darghouth can paint, and is not afraid to show it.

You can visit the skulls at Agial in Hamra up until Christmas Eve.

* Just ask my students. Now they think that all that was painted between 1300 and 1700 is skulls. Also: skulls are still in and everywhere, from Alexander McQueen's scarves to the Musée Maillol big 2010 Vanitas retrospective.

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