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I returned from a visit to Lebanon in March 2014 with my head, eyes and emotions all over board, triggered in all directions, confused but at the same time fulfilled and satisfied. Lebanon was a chaotic whirlwind of energy, creativity, contrasts, contradictions, peaceful and agitated moments, fears of violence, restful encounters. It was the occasion of an affectionate, tender and pleasant time with family, friends, artists, new acquaintances, but also the dramatic experiences of chaos, noise, congested traffic, unpredictable and uncontrollable events, violent news from neighboring suburbs, towns and countries, potential threats... In Lebanon, one lives in the moment and tries to enjoy it to the maximum. The quality and richness of relations and human exchanges prevail and fill one's days, leaving fears and worries in shadows.

Those who reside in Lebanon, native or foreigners, resort daily to their creativity, to their intellectual and spiritual attributes and quests, to their artistic expressions, to remain afloat, survive and communicate. Art under all its forms abounds, and its forum is everywhere, spread throughout the city both in sophisticated galleries and homes as well as in hidden difficult to find venues. Confrontations of ideas, reflections on the times, political, social or just poetic statements, constantly interpellate the viewer who cannot escape their questioning and thus becomes part of their equation.

While in Lebanon I met many artists, went to many art shows, galleries and museums, plays and movies, music concerts. I was constantly challenged and reminded to go beyond the surface, to connect with the essence of the created work, with its message, and to delve into the psyche and questioning of its creator. In this respect I can say that the majority of the expressive works I saw or listened to were political in their stand, connecting to the reality of the artist, also to the existential, social and political reality of the moment, of the place, of the time.

[\(http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8701\)](http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8701)

Alfraji, Sadik, Once I Could Fly, india ink, charcoal, acrylic, rice paper on canvas



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8691

Alfraji, Sadik, In Baghdad, under the Freedom Monument – 1, india ink, charcoal, acrylic, rice paper on canvas



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8692

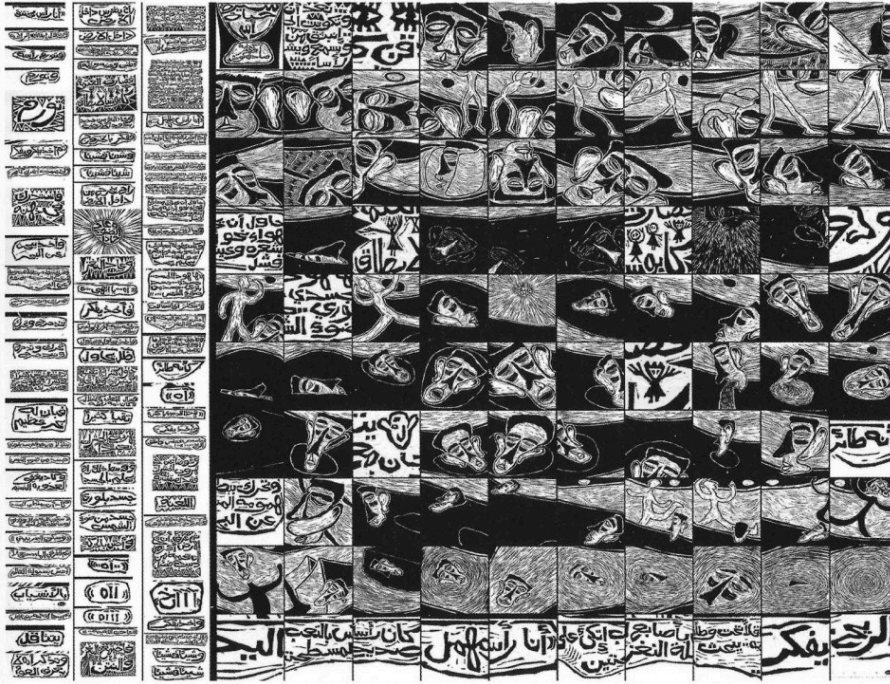
Alfraji, Sadik, In Baghdad, under the Freedom Monument – 2, india ink, charcoal, acrylic, rice paper on canvas

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Alfraji, Sadik, Biography of a Head, animation video of linocut prints

At the **Beirut Exhibition Center**, a large, tall and impressive exhibition hall located not far from the Beirut harbor, I saw "Biography of a Head," a collection of drawings, paintings and videos by Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, who lives currently in the Netherlands.

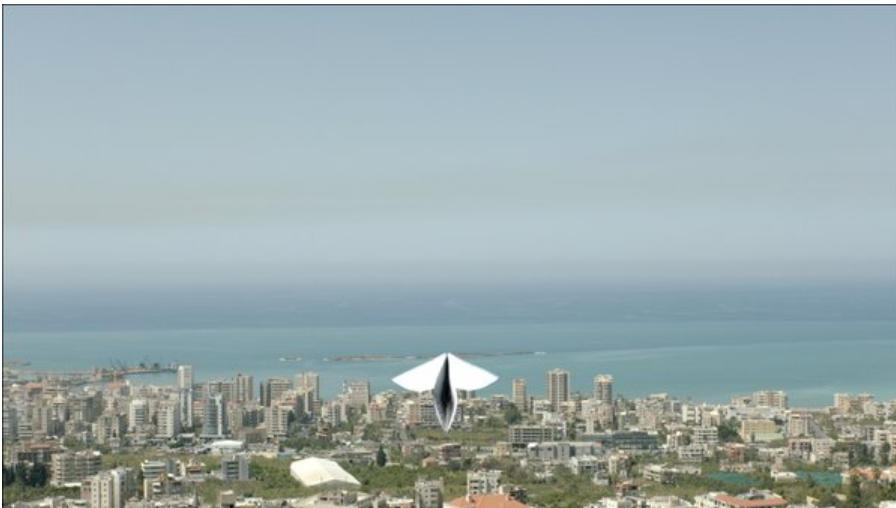
Alfraji's poetic narrative sprouts from his condition as a wandering Arab, unable to speak or to "fly" ("Once I could fly") in his conflictual and repressive country of origin, and now in a Middle East torn by violence and unrest. Colossal figures, representing him or the anonymous universal citizen he now incarnates, often with no arms, seem to float from painting to painting, wandering the large walls and space of the exhibition hall, creating a strong feeling of loneliness, solitude and sadness.



"In Baghdad, Under the Freedom Monument – 1" represents him standing armless and motionless in the Freedom Square of his birth city Baghdad, surrounded by flying birds displaying, in contrast, their well expanded wings.

"Sisyphus Goes on Demonstration" is an animation video of Alfraji's self drawings as Sisyphus, his head progressively detaching and becoming the heavy rock that he has to constantly, aimlessly and absurdly move forward. Commenting, Alfraji says: "Sisyphus, Godot, you, me, the man on the street,

all in one united cry: Where is my Liberty?" Another video, "Biography of a Head," that Alfraji did especially for the show, hence its title, is an animation of a series of linocut prints depicting floating dismembered heads and bodies, interspersed with Arabic texts. Alfraji had created the linocuts in 1985 at the time of the Iraq-Iran war; they were, however, rejected then for exhibition in Baghdad, for political reasons.



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Zaatari, Akram, Letter to a Refusing Pilot (detail 1), video

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Zaatari, Akram, Letter to a Refusing Pilot (detail 2), video



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8697

Zaatari, Akram, In This House (detail 1), video



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8693

Zaatari, Akram, In This House (detail 2), video

In another part of town, the Quarantina, previously a large area of slums now transformed into a somewhat rough industrial zone, **Sfeir-Semler**, a difficult to find gallery occupying what used to be an apartment, was hosting a video installation show by Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari. Zaatari, who lives and works in Beirut, is a filmmaker, photographer, archival artist, curator and co-founder of the Arab

Image Foundation. The Foundation's goal is to preserve and document, through archival photography, life and conditions in the Middle East.

Zaatari is very interested in exploring and documenting issues pertaining to post war Lebanon. His video "Letter to a Refusing Pilot" recounts poetically his early days and time growing up in his hometown Saida, frequenting its school which his father had founded, and the rumor he had heard of an Israeli fighter pilot refusing to bomb the school, in 1982, during the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon. The school, nevertheless, ended up being bombed and destroyed by another pilot. Filming in the neighborhood of the school, Zaatari incorporates aerial photographs, drawings, computer images and some of his personal documents to tell the story from his perspective as a teenage boy when the bombing occurred. The refusing pilot, it was discovered 20 years later, did in fact exist, identified as Hagai Tamir; Zaatari dedicated his evocative film to his act of conscientious objection, wanting at the same time to emphasize the importance of Tamir's refusal as a transformative act changing the paradigm of war history. "The ... story... gives the pilot a human face," he says. "It gives what he is about to bomb, ...considered terrorist ground,... also... a human face. I think it is important to remember in times of war that everyone is a human being."

His other video, "In This House," tells the story of the Dagher family house in the Ain el Mir village of South Lebanon. In 1985, and following the Israeli withdrawal from the area, the village became a frontline and, the then abandoned house, became occupied by a radical resistance group. In 1991, when the war ended, Ali Hashisho, one of the resistance members stationed in the house, wrote a letter to the Dagher family justifying its occupation and welcoming them back to their house. He buried the letter in the garden, inside a B-10 82 mm mortar case, keeping instructions on where to find it. The movie, filmed in 2002, shows, in parallel, images of Hashisho recounting the occupation of the house and narrating the various events of the time, side by side with images witnessing the excavation of the garden in search for the letter. The story brings humanity to a time of violence in history, a bomb being replaced with an unexpected note of kindness.



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Cherri, Ali, The Disquiet (detail), video

At another venue, the **Beirut Arts Center**, also located in an industrial warehouse part of central Beirut, I saw, in presence of its author, "The Disquiet." This short film is by Ali Cherri, a visual, performing and graphic design artist born in Beirut in 1976. Cherri works with video, installation, printmaking and multimedia performance. His movie, metaphorical and symbolic, investigates the seismic history of Lebanon pointing to the many past devastating earthquakes of the area and to their persistent and ongoing potential threats. Its opening image is of the Beirut River, tinted red as if spoiled with blood and, at its center, isolated remnants of surviving vegetation. This ominous beginning continues with darkly lit images scanning forests and landscapes, visually progressing as if toward imminent catastrophe. Even though, in its essence, the film recounts the violent physical earthquakes that have already affected Lebanon, it cannot but be perceived as a reference to the current explosive political situation facing the country and region, a situation which possesses – we're indirectly reminded – all the internal elements to prove disastrous at any time, unexpectedly and with no alert or control.



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8709

Badran, Zeina, Ominous II, monotype and etching

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Badran, Zeina, Between the Lines XI, mixed media on canvas



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8704

Badran, Zeina, *Between the Lines XI* (detail), mixed media on canvas

The opening of "Minor Elements," an exhibition of prints and mixed media works by Zeina Kamareddine Badran at **Art on 56th**, was the occasion of a festive gathering of individuals from various sectors of the Lebanese society. Young and old, students and professionals, artists and art appreciators, hippie and well trimmed-looking, all were there enjoying a beautiful evening. The setting was a typical old Lebanese house with its high ceilings and open and welcoming architecture. Those gathered looked at art, socializing, enjoying champagne and gourmet hors d'oeuvres.

Badran, born in the city of Tripoli in North Lebanon, is primarily a printmaker who delves into various printmaking techniques including lithography, etching, silkscreen. Her exhibit included separate series of works – "Ominous," consisting of etchings and monotypes, and "Between the Lines," mixed media paintings on canvas. Badran's elegant and esthetically pleasing work, often multilayered, requires excavating and patient discovery in order to bring out its hidden meaning. In "Between the Lines XI," a large mixed media painting on canvas, Badran plays with the liminal space between chaos and organization, layering and manipulating innumerable thickness of material, making the background as essential as the image, creating struggle between surface and deep plane. Through the layers are collaged old Lebanese stamps from the years of her childhood, strips from old phonebooks with names and phone numbers of residents of her hometown Tripoli, scripts from old documents of land trade contracts she discovered in an antique shop also in her hometown. Badran uses strips of paper to cover her piece; their mostly orderly display creates a sense of organization that she willingly disrupts in places in order to cause tension and provoke the unexpected. The strips also become reminiscent of doorways, passageways, windows to see through and behind, revealing pieces of hidden history – her own, that of her town, also of her country – speaking of a nostalgic time gone by, of a peaceful time now replaced by upheaval and uncertainty.

Under the superficial appearance of well controlled beauty and serenity, Badran's work, when carefully contemplated, effuses with tension and unease, reflecting the unsure and precarious situation of the country and the times.

I also had the welcome opportunity to meet Lebanese husband and wife **artists Ayman Baalbaki and Tagreed Darghouth** in their beautiful **rooftop apartment** overlooking Beirut. Their living space is filled with art, some of their own, other done by family and relatives, friends and teachers.

http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8708

Baalbaki, Ayman, *Al Mulatham* – Fedae, ink and acrylic on paper



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8702

Baalbaki, Ayman, Al Mulatham – Ya'illahi (God), acrylic and mixed media



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Baalbaki, Ayman, Tammouz, acrylic on canvas



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8710

Baalbaki, Ayman, Destination X 1 – Good Morning Wadi Abu Jamil,
mixed media installation



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Baalbaki, Ayman, Destination X 2, mixed media installation

Ayman Baalbaki was born into a family of artists in 1975, the year the civil war started in Lebanon. He grew up experiencing first hand violence, physical destruction, displacement and errance, loss and death, searching for identity. These themes have permeated his work ever since, reinforced all along by the effects of the persistent Israeli-Arab conflict and the social and political upheaval and turmoil in the region.

Baalbaki's extensive series of large paintings, "Al Mulatham" (The Freedom Fighter), represents heads covered with the typical headscarf, the keffiyeh, initially associated with the warring Palestinian Fidae,



but now, for him, an iconographic image of the universal Lebanese and Arab citizen. The scarf covers entirely the face, hiding it and replacing it, thus becoming the identity of its bearer, the anonymous individual, male or female, who is daily affected by and involved in the prevalent violence. For Baalbaki, the symbolic covered face "is as much about defeat and disillusion as about heroism." In some of the paintings, he presents it like in a religious frame, alluding ambiguously to both its sanctity and its martyrdom.

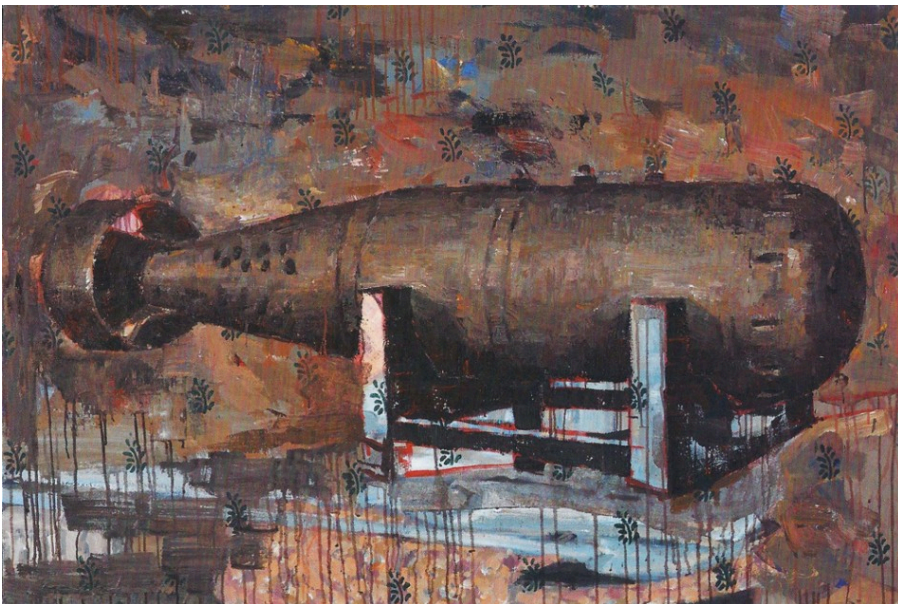
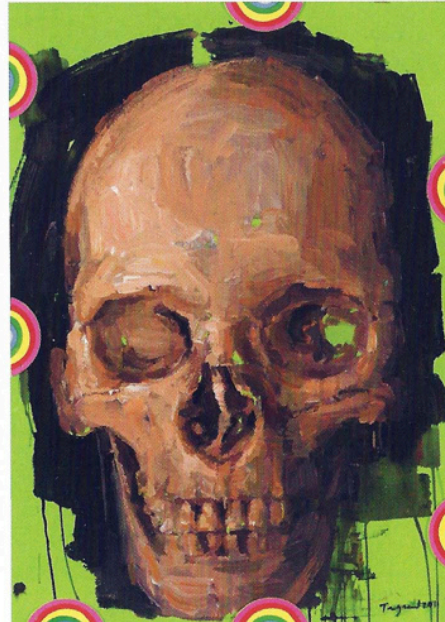
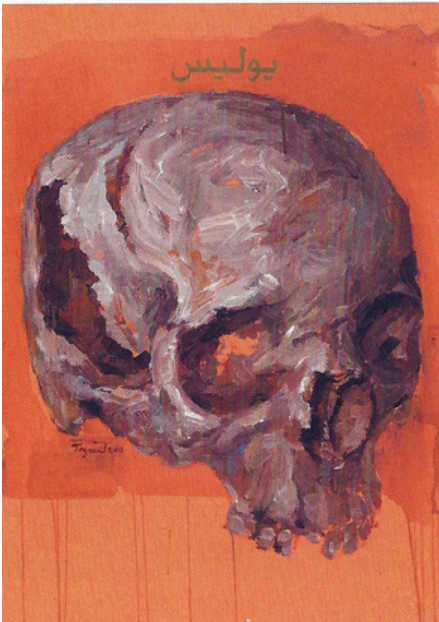
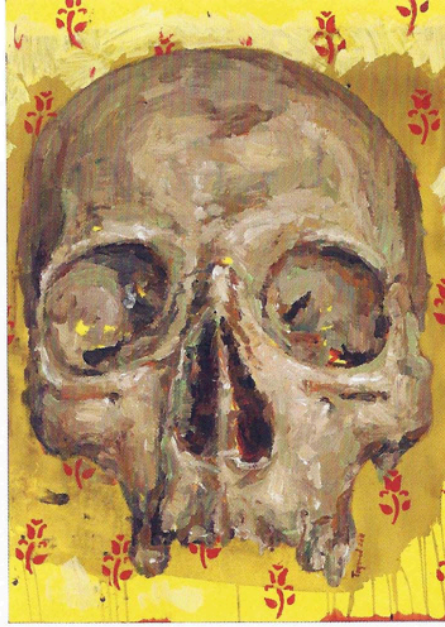
In his series "Tammouz" (Arabic for 'July,' in reference to July 2006, the month Israel bombarded Lebanon), Baalbaki paints, using thick brush strokes and heavy texture, repeated images of destroyed and desolate buildings, structures impressive by their presence and stature, standing alone as witnesses to the

war and in defiance to its cruelty.

"Destination X," a series of large installations, addresses the repeated wandering of people and families from one area of Lebanon to the other, displaced by violence and the war. Each installation consists of piles of luggage and personal items, displayed in bundles or carried attached to the top of a car for a last minute destination. Living in Wadi Abu Jamil, a quarter of Beirut adjacent to the frontline during the Lebanese civil war, Baalbaki frequently witnessed these spontaneous displacements, affecting him, his friends and his neighbors.

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Darghouth, Tagreed, The Rainbow of Death, acrylic on paper



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Darghouth, Tagreed, Green Grass, acrylic on canvas



http://aeqai.com/main/?attachment_id=8705

Darghouth, Tagreed, Brighter than a Thousand Suns, acrylic on canvas

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Darghouth, Tagreed, Nuclear Craters, acrylic on canvas



Tagreed Darghouth, Baalbaki's wife, primarily a painter, also addresses in her work violence, war, death and destruction. Her series, "The Rainbow of Death," represents skulls, some intact and others broken, each filling the paper or the canvas, looking at the viewer with empty eyes, as if reflecting on the immoral atrocity responsible for their condition.

Darghouth's "Green Grass" painting is of a bomb, sitting on an inverted table, with repetitive

images, stamped in the background, of a small green multi petal branch, a possible allusion to life. The patterned background, however, is also reminiscent of gift wrapping paper, as if the bomb were a present brought to the table – here ironically inverted – as a familiar part of daily life.

Darghouth recently created works, in line with the time, dealing with nuclear threats, depicting them either as the mushrooms of atomic explosions ("Brighter than a Thousand Suns" series) or as the resulting devastated crateric lands ("Nuclear Craters" series).

Despite their lugubrious topics, Darghouth's paintings always convey a soft, playful and poetic quality that is startling at first. However, the depth and severity of their messages quickly impose themselves alluding to the many contradictions of the world we live in, to the natural aspirations to life and peace in a context of war and death.

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Baalbaki, Oussama, A Tremendous Anticipation... Familiarity, acrylic on canvas



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Baalbaki, Oussama, The Diurnal Choir, acrylic on canvas

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Baalbaki, Oussama, Perished Car, acrylic on canvas



I also discovered the work of Oussama Baalbaki, Ayman's talented first cousin, at **Galerie Tanit**, a new and contemporary-looking gallery located in Mar Mikhael, an upcoming art district of Beirut.

"Shadows of Gloominess," the title of his show, tells of Baalbaki's existential and metaphysical reflections concerning his own life (as depicted in his self portraits), the aggressive handling of nature by our modern destructive culture (as represented by quarries, intrusive electrical poles, pollution), tragic events that he has experienced himself (as in his

charred destroyed cars).

Baalbaki's beautiful work breathes serenity and tension at the same time. His self portrait "A Tremendous Anticipation... Familiarity" shows him pensive, sitting at a table, his left hand inside a book as if questioning knowledge and the meaning of life. On the table, in a plate, is a half peeled lemon painted yellow and green, the only colors in an otherwise white, black and grey canvas. In his meditative introspective painting, Baalbaki seems to ask what is the real fruit of life to consume. "The Diurnal Choir," a very large colorful painting, depicts a peaceful landscape of rocky mountains, cliffs and vegetation, traversed by disruptive insolite electric cables and poles, a result of the destructive and aggressive intrusion of man and society in an idyllic nature.

"Perished Car," a black, white and gray painting is of a charred, bullet riddled, destroyed vehicle, abandoned in a desolate landscape. Reminiscent of real images of the violence during the Lebanese civil war, the damaged car serves also as a reference to the tragic car accident that killed Baalbaki's mother, and to any individual, including Baalbaki himself, who is scarred and lost as a result of violence.

During my short stay in Lebanon I came across many more artistic works as poignant as the ones I mention here. The majority also made a statement about the artists and the artists' reactions to the prevailing conflictual socio political situation they daily live and experience.

In Lebanon, even though in order to survive one lives in the moment, the past and the pain of the past, the anxiety and uncertainty of the present, and what might be in the shadows, are always there and show a relentless influence on all art. Artists, functioning as archaeologists and/or geologists, use their work to unveil and reflect the culture and history of the country, of the region and of the times. They implore the viewer to look under the surface of what they see and to dig with them. They call for reflection and questioning, trying to reveal truth and raise awareness. Expressing their concerns in their

art gives them the internal resources to continue in a troubling political climate. It also gives them the opportunity to sow, in the viewer, seeds of hope for a future peaceful country and region and for a better world.

By: Saad Ghosn

Responses

[Feed \(http://aeqai.com/main/2014/08/letter-from-lebanon/feed/\)](http://aeqai.com/main/2014/08/letter-from-lebanon/feed/)

1. *Veronica Tabet* says:

August 16th, 2014 at 12:32 am ([#comment-144780](#))

It's good to see the vibrant art scene in Lebanon, a country and its inhabitants ravaged by decades of war. Thank you to the artists who interpret these horrific experiences and help us, the viewers, to make sense of them. Most importantly, as the reviewer, Saad Ghosn, points out, ultimately the art is an act of hope. Very powerful.

2. *Holland Davidson* says:

August 26th, 2014 at 8:57 am ([#comment-168092](#))

I find myself returning over and over to read this article and study the images within.

So much hope, empathy, disgust, sorrow, love and longing are found here, it almost appears obvious that art must be some greater good that arises in humans in the face of what is too often incomprehensible cruelty and suffering.

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji reminds me that we are all Sisyphus, but can often only howl out through art at the absurdity in the disproportionate weights among the rocks we must keep pushing.

Zeina Kamareddine Badran showed me the importance of reading 'between the lines' to construct a personal narrative-structure of thoughts, memories and totems in order to make sense of all this mess. (Her work most shared my usual personal approach!)

I'm certain I will continue to gain insight reading of Saad's trip and relating to the artists' work he shared. Thanks to you all for continuing to make visual art that makes a difference. I look forward to seeing more of your work, and to a better world!

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