
Modern art, from Abu Nuwas to iPad

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

BEIRUT: Q Contemporary opened a year-and-a-half ago on the ground floor of Beirut Tower.

The gallery is the partner and sister space of Ayyam, located in the same building, on the same floor. A luxurious plaza with a smattering of circular reflecting pools links Beirut Tower to Platinum Tower next door.

Yet another exhibition space occupies a corner of the ground floor there, where the organization LAB Art just opened their second exhibition, featuring the work of artist and novelist Harland Miller (LAB Art's first show, last September, presented sculptures and paintings by the British art star Marc Quinn).

Taken together, this threesome of venues constitutes one of the more unusual new pockets for the exhibition and consumption of contemporary art in Beirut. Like a tiny slice of Dubai style slotted into the Lebanese capital, the glitz&glam quotient of the area is surprisingly high – especially given that this is technically Zeitouneh, a neighborhood once known for its nightclubs, which became the sex trade's refuge of last resort when Beirut's old red-light district was destroyed.

Today, only a small army of security guards is on the prowl. Ask any of them for help finding Q, Ayyam or the exhibitions by LAB Art, and even if they are standing directly inside those spaces, they will swear to you that no such galleries exist.

It is something of a treat, then, to finally locate Q and find a rare and fabled installation by Mohamed Rawas inside. One of Lebanon's most prominent artists, Rawas is primarily known for his paintings and prints. Over the last 10 years, those works have become increasingly three-dimensional. His more recent pieces are filled with wire, thread, wood, diminutive figurines and meticulous architectural constructs, but they all remain bounded and contained by muscular frames.

Rawas' first and only installation consists of six mixed media assemblages (including calligraphy, doll-house sized chairs and silkscreens of manipulated digital photos) arranged around an LCD screen, a DVD player and a chair made of wood and straw.

Titled "Sit Down Please" and produced for the 2007 Alexandria Biennial, where it won the top prize, it is the artist's only work to date that is loosely arranged and spatially porous, breaking out of the conventional picture plane to occupy a room where people move around the different elements.

In fact, the installation is so variable that when Rawas exhibited it for an art fair in Abu Dhabi three years ago, someone in need of a seat ran off with the chair and never returned it. Rawas, who often works in close collaboration with a local carpenter, made a new chair, but he hasn't hazarded another installation since.

The form, and the physical movement it suggests, serves to amplify the work's content.

The title refers to a verse by the eighth-century poet Abu Nuwas. "Tell him," the poet wrote, "he who stands weeping over vanished traces, no harm done had he sat done."

Celebrated for his odes to wine and sex, his mastery of language, searing wit, devastating sarcasm and licentious lifestyle, Abu Nuwas was particularly critical of his contemporaries, who imitated their predecessors and, as Rawas explains, "lingered in a past they no longer lived in."

In bedouin times, he says, "when a poet returned to where he had left his beloved, he would find nothing there but the traces of her tribe's tent. He would stand there weeping over these ruins, and lament his departed love."

That moment would lead to the composition of a poem, which would begin with memories and move on to other subjects.

"The order of themes set the structure of classical pre-Islamic poetry," Rawas continues. The problem in Abu Nuwas' time was that his fellow poets were still weeping over traces they had never known. "Weeping over traces became symbolic of looking backward rather than forward in life."

For Rawas, at a time when fundamentalist groups clamor to be heard and push for an ultra-religious, pre-modern agenda, Abu Nuwas' lines have contemporary resonance.

The six panels in "Sit Down Please" feature the two lines from Abu Nawas, black and white photographs of a nude woman on crutches with her chest and pelvis blocked out, and silkscreens of color photographs of the same woman with an orgasmic expression on her face. The implication is that all the censorship and heavy-handed ideology in the world won't succeed in suppressing expressions of female sexuality, seduction and sensuousness.

In the video, different people, ordinary citizens, recite Abu Nawas' words in sign language.

"They are not necessarily deaf or dumb, much as the model is not crippled," says Rawas. These handicaps are a metaphor for the bigoted ideology of fundamentalist groups.

"Sit Down Please" anchors an exhibition titled "Calling the Shots Volume 3: The Digital Age," which is the final show in a trilogy at Q Contemporary. The first part considered architectural photography, the second narrative photography. With works by eight artists – including Ali Cherri, Jocelyne Saab and Ammar al-Beik – the third concerns the effects of digital technology on the aesthetics of contemporary art.

Almost all of the works that have been exhibited at the gallery since it opened are drawn from the personal collection of its owner, Motaz Kabbani. A few of them, however, are specially commissioned pieces, such as Sheila Ribeiro's triptych entitled "Ayoungkoun Helwe" (Your Beautiful Eyes), dated 2011.

The seemingly abstract, geometric images are actually QR codes, the next evolutionary step after bar codes, which are generated by a readily available software application. Ribeiro's

the Arab world.

Enter the gallery on any given day and Jessica Azeir, who handles media relations at Q, will hand you a new, second-generation Apple iPad and show you how to “read” the images, as well as the wall texts, which have also been turned into QR codes.

Ali Cherri’s video *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil* is likewise screening on an iPad screen mounted on a stand; an installation by Anahita Razmi is screening on three.

Gimmicky, to be sure, but the show offers a tiny glimpse into a vast world of possibilities at the intersection between art, technology and what many theorists increasingly refer to as a regime of biopolitics.

Rawas is skeptical that the Arab Spring has altered the thinking behind his installation. “I have my doubts as to whether we are developing a more liberal mindset or stepping into a Salafist way of thinking,” he says. “It’s too early to judge, but I’m not optimistic.”

“Calling the Shots Volume 3: The Digital Age” remains on view at Q Contemporary, on the ground floor of Beirut Tower, through May 28. For more information, call 03-300-052 or see www.qcontemporary.com.
