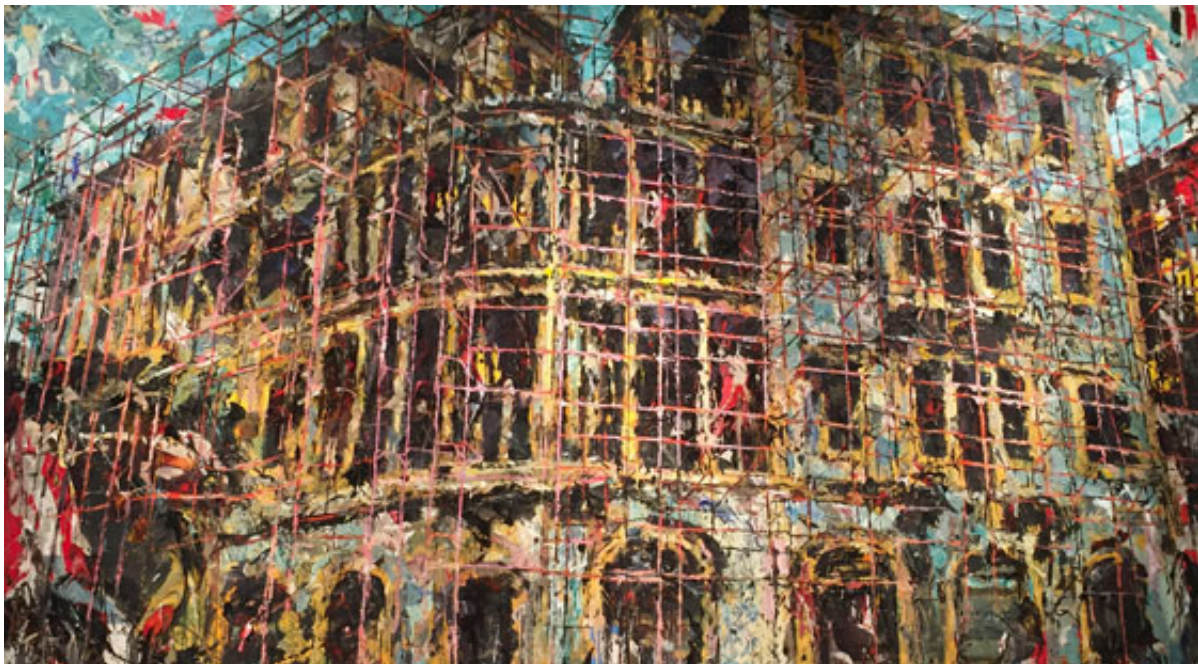




The Eye of Lebanon @ Beirut Art Fair

Lizzy Vartanian Collier *Art, Reviews, Uncategorized* *amer shomali, arab art, arabic art, arabicity, armenian, ayman baalbaki, beirut, beirut art fair, claude moufarege, contemporary art, elias maamari, hedy sy, iraqi, lebanese art, lebanon, levant, mahmoud shubbar, middle east, middle eastern art, mona hatoun, nabil nahas, nada sehnaoui, ourouba, palestinian, rose issa, syrian, the eye of lebanon, ziad antar* *Leave a comment*

At the heart of this year's Beirut Art Fair lay an eye. Curated by Rose Issa, *Ourouba: The Eye of Lebanon* comprised 70 artworks by 40 artists that looked at the current state of the Arab region as a whole through a Lebanese lens positioned towards the private and public collections of 20 Lebanese collectors.



Ayman Baalbaki, Barakat Building, Mixed media/ canvas 2015-2016

The word *Ourouba* means 'Arabicity.' Despite political turmoil throughout the region, Arab artistic production is thriving. A multicultural display that included artists that are not only Lebanese in origin – but also Palestinian, Armenian, Syrian and Iraqi, in addition to Lebanese artists that live outside Lebanon – the exhibition looked outwards beyond the borders of the Levant, to the parameters of the greater Middle East as a whole. In the foreword to the exhibition's catalogue, Issa begins with a reference to 2001, the year which sparked an urgency amongst creative minds to

reflect on resilience and beauty in reaction to the violence witnessed by Arab societies following 9/11. While the curator insists that the exhibition had no particular theory or philosophy in mind, the works on display explored memory, deconstruction and reconstruction, as well as conflict and peace. Issa neglected a narrow, focused approach in favour of a broad presentation of the individual experiences of artists affected by living in war-torn zones, thus allowing themes to form naturally for themselves. It is therefore worth noting that the show had been titled *eye* and not *mouth*, allowing the audience to witness, without being told: letting the viewer draw their own conclusions.

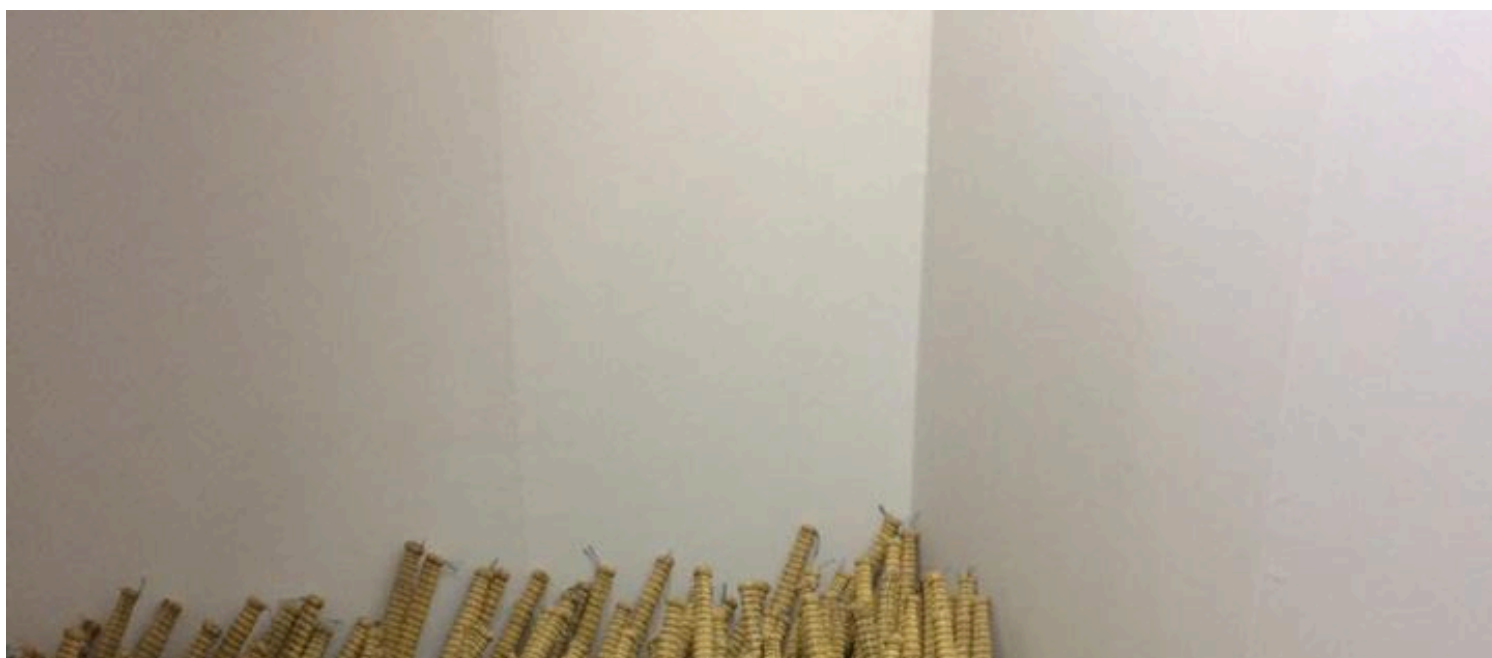
Perhaps the most important work to begin this review with is Elias Maamari's *You Are Here For Now*, 2009. The piece asks the viewer to live for the moment. Just as the neon light installation instructs its audience to live in the present, *Ourouba* concerned itself with the contemporary Arab situation, removing the preconceptions with the past that are often plastered on top of anything connected with the Middle East, whether it be artistic or not, hindering understanding and causing the region to be compartmentalized.





Mahmoud Shubbar, Untitled, 2015

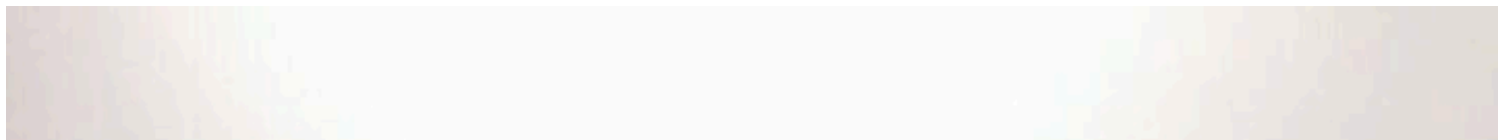
Unsurprisingly, a visual display of conflict was present throughout the exhibition. Mahmoud Shubbar's *Untitled series, 2015*, comprises, stainless steel road signs that appear to be damaged and cracked. An Iraqi artist now living in Beirut, Shubbar's signs read 'Welcome to Baghdad' and 'Saddam City.' It looks as though something has exploded against them – they could easily have been lifted straight out of the artist's homeland. The effects of destruction are mirrored in Mona Hatoum's *Witness, 2009*, in which a white porcelain statue of victory, whose arm has been amputated, is covered in black bullet holes. The works mirror the state of Lebanon, a nation that is repairing its exterior, is still wearing the scars of the civil war, with bullet holes and buildings in a state of disrepair can still be found amongst the newer, modern skyscrapers that have now sprung up across the country.





Nada Sehnaoui, To Sweep, 2001

One of the most powerful works in the show was an installation composed of brooms and scraps of paper. Nada Sehnaoui's *To Sweep*, 2001, consists of dozens of wooden brushes laying dormant beside a pile of many thin strips of paper that have words like terror, sadness, destruction and injustice printed on top of them. The piece references the tendency for Arab societies to sweep the negativity and ugliness of the current political situation under the carpet. But in Sehnaoui's work, someone has removed the rug from the floor, exposing the realities that lay beneath a false exterior, allowing the viewer to reflect on what has been overlooked.





Ziad Antar, Cote d'Azur, 2007

While destruction and conflict was referenced heavily, Lebanon's ongoing process of reconstruction itself was also documented within the display. Those who have visited Beirut will be familiar with just how much of the city has been rebuilt and is still being renovated by the sheer number of building sites that are present on every other street corner. Ziad Antar's photograph *Cote d'Azur, 2007*, from the *Beirut Bereft* series shows a hazy coastline with a single palm tree standing alone in front of a building site. In Antar's image, the scene is barren of any other structure, whereas Claude Moufarege's *Les Grues (Cranes)*, oil on canvas, 2016, is a vertical painting of a city that is densely populated by buildings. The city is framed by cranes in the background, which are putting together even more structures in the distance. A more real look at the process of reconstruction is illustrated in Ayman Baalbaki's *Barakat Building*, oil on canvas, 2015-16, which shows the huge building that is located in central Beirut, covered in scaffolding, ready and waiting to be renovated.



([https://gallerygirl.co/2017/09/27/the-eye-of-lebanon-](https://gallerygirl.co/2017/09/27/the-eye-of-lebanon-beirut-art-fair/amer-shomali-laila-khaled-icon-2011/)

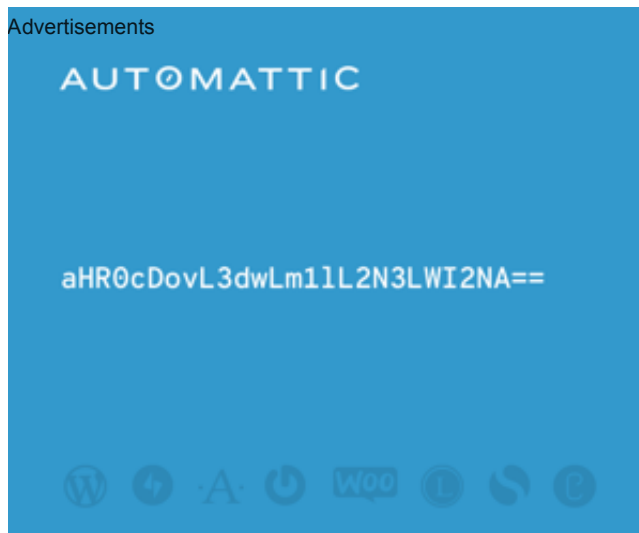
[beirut-art-fair/amer-shomali-laila-khaled-icon-2011/](https://gallerygirl.co/2017/09/27/the-eye-of-lebanon-beirut-art-fair/))



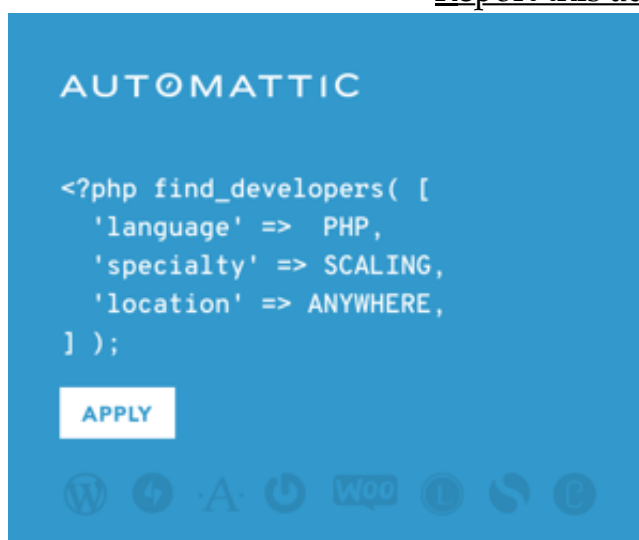
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Away from the effects of violence on the city, *Ourouba* also includes artworks, which on the surface, appear to comparably lighter, which focus not on the exterior appearance of buildings, but of people. Lebanon is a nation obsessed with beauty. In fact, it is the country with the highest percentage of plastic surgery per capita in the world. This fascination with glamour is reflected in Amer Shomali's *Laila Khaled Icon*, 2011. The work comprises an installation of 3,500 lipsticks. The juxtaposition of the female figure and the make-up is an interesting one. Khaled was once the poster girl of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and one of the most wanted women in the world. She is credited as the first woman to hijack an airplane but not usually for the use of heavy make-up, or beauty products at all. What is Shomali trying to say with the work? From make-up to fashion, Hedy Sy's *Bi Rakbo Trabish (They Wear Tarboushes)*, 2016, sees a floating red fez appear against a black backdrop, atop of a pair of white trousers, which references orientalist stereotypes of the Middle East. An illustration of the quintessential image of Lebanon is also displayed in Nabil Nahas's paintings of cedars from 2013.

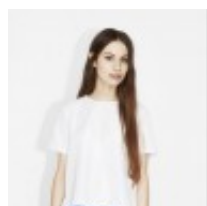
Issa is interested in art that reflects the aesthetic, conceptual and sociopolitical concerns of the Arab world. What links the works together is that it is all a product of recent Arab history and current affairs that have made their way into the collections of Lebanese collectors. As Beirut Art Fair, now in its seventh year, has become more international, *Ourouba* is not just one eye, but many eyes, looking out, as well as in, to illustrate a story that begins in, but moves beyond Lebanon.



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Lizzy Vartanian Collier is a London-based writer with a special interest in contemporary Middle Eastern Art. She has a BA in Art History and an MA in Contemporary Art and Art Theory of Asia and Africa from the School of Oriental and African Studies. She runs the Gallery Girl blog and has written for After Nyne, Artestive, Canvas Magazine, Harper's Bazaar Arabia, Ibraaz, Jdeed Magazine, ReOrient and Suitcase Magazine. Lizzy is also curator of Arab Women Artists Now - AWAN 2018 (London).

