



Afaf Zurayk, Sarah Rogers, ed. *Afaf Zurayk: Return Journeys*. Beirut: Twig Collaborative/Saleh Barakat Gallery, 2019. 96 pp.

Reviewed by Kareem Estefan (Brown University)

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The Art of Receiving: Afaf Zurayk's Return Journeys

An expansive yet intimate view of a singular artist whose career has yet to be sufficiently celebrated, the monograph *Return Journeys* documents four decades of paintings and poems by Afaf Zurayk, many of which were recently on view for the first major retrospective of the artist's oeuvre in her hometown of Beirut (January 18-March 1, 2019). The exhibition at Saleh Barakat Gallery and its eponymous publication offer a welcome opportunity to appraise the work of an artist whose abstract paintings and multimedia works are remarkably subtle, as Zurayk frequently opts for a small scale, employs a minimal, earthy or black-and-white palette, and prioritizes explorations of light and line over recognizable subject matter. Zurayk's work is unmistakably personal, probing the vulnerable depths and complexities of emotion, but it is not confessional. Rather than divulge details or depict discrete situations, she continually pivots around potent symbols and forms—keyholes, eyes, faces—to reveal a subjectivity that is porous to the world, shaped in precarious relation to others and to nature.

Since the early 2000s contemporary Lebanese art has acquired international renown, via artists such as Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, for theoretically sophisticated works about Lebanon's 1975–90 civil war that use experimental documentary methods—mostly in lens-based media—to examine the politics of archives, memory, and representation.[1] Yet the important, now-canonized contributions of the “war generation” of Lebanese artists risk

overshadowing a more diverse spectrum of creative practices in Lebanon, one that reaches back before the war to painters such as Huguette Caland and Helen Khal, both major influences on Zurayk. It might be said that the rupture of the civil war created a polarity between those conceptually oriented artists who took the war as their subject, and those more painterly artists for whom questions of form and material remained central—while the subject of war often entered the work, it was transmuted without remark. In light of this history, the title *Return Journeys* carries a dual resonance. It may suggest Zurayk's own displacements from and returns to Lebanon (she first departed for Washington, DC in 1983); however, if it points to the political conditions of migration and diaspora that have marked the lives of millions of Lebanese, it more strongly evokes the psychological and spiritual travels undertaken by the artist, journeys which may arise from emigration or exile but are, ultimately, universal.

In the wall text that frames the exhibition, Zurayk presents her art as a journey inwards: “My life in art is a perpetual return to what resonates within me and what prompts me to open gates into unknown gardens: to plant and to weed, to prune and to cultivate, both senses and thoughts into a coherent, organic and complex whole.” The artist's horticultural metaphors signal a psychic pull toward nature as an organizing life force, but the attraction of the organic does not render the self a timeless entity detached from the world. In a short per-

sonal essay included in *Return Journeys*, Zurayk writes of herself as “a child of the Arab world during one of the most turbulent epochs of its history” (p. 25). Indeed, as art historian Sarah Rogers points out in her illuminating introduction to the monograph, the artist was born in 1948 to a father whose landmark historical study from that year, *Ma’na al-Nakba* (“The Meaning of the Catastrophe”), coined the term still used by Palestinians to describe their dispossession and displacement, conditions which eventually constituted one of the major sparks of Lebanon’s civil war. However, rather than dwell on or disclose the political histories that have impacted her life, Zurayk’s essay conjures her intense engagement with light and color, the influence of mystical thinkers from Ibn Arabi to Carl Jung, and the importance of listening closely. She writes of “living on the edge; painting on the edge” (p. 25), chronicling a life of creative exploration that arises from a commitment to facing and plumbing existential vulnerability.

In addition to Rogers’s introduction and Zurayk’s essay, *Return Journeys* includes six brief texts by patrons and colleagues of the artist, including the exhibition curator, Sylvia Agémian, gallerist Saleh Barakat, and supporters ranging from an urban development expert to a Jungian psychologist. These largely personal appreciations of Zurayk’s practice are thoughtful, if not as substantial as desired; deeper critical inquiries into the artist’s cultural milieu, influences, and contemporaries might help to support or temper assessments such as Barakat’s pronouncement that “Zurayk is the leading painter of ‘intangibles’” (p. 7). The immense value of this monograph lies not in its prefatory essays, but in the compilation of a remarkable artistic oeuvre that can be appreciated in its breadth for the first time. Reproducing Zurayk’s drawings, paintings, and sculptures from 1978 to the present in three chronological sections (1978–2000, 2000–10, 2010–19), *Return Journeys* affords an immersive experience of slow attunement to the artist’s distinct visual language. The book is rendered more exquisite still by the poetic texts Zurayk wrote in tandem with each series of works, which are here printed on paper vellum so that the words form a palimpsest with the tangled lines and somber colors behind them, as they lyrically address the artist’s intimate, searching process.

Zurayk’s monograph organizes her work chronologically, but her practice has followed less of an arc than a spiral. Themes, symbols, styles, and colors recur cyclically, while her art gradually inclines toward more profound abstraction and spiritual intensity. In Saleh Barakat’s voluminous two-floor gallery, Zurayk’s works

found ample space for resonance and opportunities for intuitive juxtapositions that hewed less directly to the time line of the artist’s production—which has only accelerated in the last several years. The monograph cannot replace the multidirectional echoes of the exhibition, but its more linear view provides a chance to consider the artist’s trajectory.

Zurayk’s earliest drawings and paintings remain the most direct in their subject matter and more frequent tendency toward figuration. “My Lebanon” (1985), for example, is a series of fifteen small ink and watercolor drawings that render distinctive features of the artist’s home country—its palms and cedars, hills, and sunlit balconies—with a childlike simplicity and warmth reminiscent of certain watercolors by Zurayk’s compatriot Etel Adnan. If this series appears surprisingly buoyant for a work with its title, dated two years after the artist left war-torn Lebanon, a subsequent set of drawings, “dream doors” (1992), adapts many of its features for a more characteristically pensive mood. Here, thin ink lines mark out and interweave buildings, lamps, streets, trees, and the contours of human figures with eyes displaced from their faces, while intense yellows and reds surface amid the swells of mostly black watercolor. Zurayk’s accompanying text beautifully captures the tone of the drawings and gives them a setting: “as a child I lived in a house with no doors. / thoughts, drenched in sunlight, wandered / through its spaces. / they lived in the round. / they dreamt. // in time the sunset erected doors. / vision recoiled from touch as angles replaced / circles. / the house, organizing itself into neat thoughts, / closed in on itself. [...] like a bowl, the house embraced its thoughts” (p. 44). The oneiric qualities of this series, and many of its forms and figures, will return in later work, just as a set of minimalist paintings from 1983, “human form,” appears to prefigure an enchanting 2013 series entitled “... and morning drew softly.” *Return Journeys* is perceptibly a visual diary of continual and perhaps unconscious returns that underscore the artist’s process as a subjective voyage with an indeterminate and circuitous path.

The interplay of light and darkness is a constant feature of Zurayk’s painting, and it is no wonder that she prefaces the 2000–10 section of *Return Journeys* with a text that explains, “Even as a child I was fascinated with chiaroscuro” (p. 64). In the first few series (and Zurayk almost always works in series) of this decade’s output, her palette is more energetic and varied, as she paints abstracted human figures in acrylics and watercolors. “everyman,” a 2002 set of seven watercolors, refines the hu-

man forms—with displaced eyes, and keyholes floating nearby—first seen in “dream doors,” and now awash in brighter colors without the dense urban background. By 2007–08, however, the artist turns to stark black-and-white works. An untitled series of charcoal drawings from 2007 features a black void or navel surrounded by a richly textured torso or plane that shines at moments through the effects of Zurayk’s chiaroscuro. In a subsequent pair of untitled drawings from 2008, the use of chiaroscuro and charcoal remains, but even the suggestion of a body is gone, as the paper registers blurry concentrations of light and darkness that evoke the patterning of clouds, magnetic powder, or dispersed ashes.

The present decade of Zurayk’s practice contains some of her darkest pieces, which bear titles such as “life is a continuous horror story,” “black hole,” and “crucifixion” (each of these series is dated 2014). Where human faces appear in these works, their oval forms barely take shape within an ambience of dense brushwork or a tangle of swift lines. But the faint emergence of these faces from the canvas, or their quiet persistence within and among the latter’s abstract elements, conveys a sense of the sublime, joining the horror of life to reverence for it. In one of the book’s final texts, Zurayk names this conjuncture “terror and grace,” writing that the two “are intertwined like vines within the tree (self)... To untangle them is fruitless” (p. 142). Grace and terror are poignantly coupled in much of this recent work, which at times approaches a condition akin to silence. Take the 2018 series “quietude,” comprised of ten 140cm x 100cm off-white canvases on which Zurayk has penciled light wispy forms, smearing them here and there as if they were twigs vanishing into a ground of snow. Or “... and the morning drew softly” (2013), a series of small oil paintings that employ minute variations of color to approximate the pale glow of dawn; in each, cloudy fissures of darker paint create powerful contrasts that evoke the grace of new beginnings. It is not darkness or light, but the fragility and force of their dialectic that Zurayk conveys in such series. [Figure 1, https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/t22_0.jpg]

Zurayk’s spiritual preoccupations are most evident in this final section of *Return Journeys*, as she writes of “the gift of receiving” energies and presences that can be felt through an inner commitment to awareness and acceptance (p. 82). Indeed, the rare, subtle beauty of Zurayk’s art lies in her ability to receive the amorphous, the lim-

inal, the emergent—not to give them shape, but to allow their tentative forms to imprint themselves, fleetingly, on a subjectivity and a world in motion.

It is both apt and regrettable that Zurayk, an artist who perpetually seems to be exploring for the first time, never had her work collected for a retrospective prior to “Return Journeys.” Further, no previous exhibition of hers resulted in a catalogue with substantial critical or scholarly essays addressing her art. To date, Zurayk’s publications have consisted of three short books of her creative work in writing, drawing, painting, and sculpture (*My Father: Reflections*, 2010; *Love Song*, 2011; *Drawn Poems*, 2012). Meanwhile, dating back to the 1980s, her exhibitions have primarily been documented through newspaper and magazine reviews; a search in academic databases comes up with no scholarly essays on her work. *Return Journeys* is thus quite significant as the first book to assemble a significant body of images of the artist’s work and the first to offer a critical framework, however minimal, to situate her practice. If scholarly attention has thus far largely eluded the artist, together with many of her like-minded contemporaries in Lebanon, perhaps the sensory pleasures and spiritual challenges offered by this monograph will be a first step in changing the art historical record.

Note

[1]. Postwar Lebanese art has circulated internationally and attracted widespread critical and scholarly attention in the years since exhibitions such as the Beirut-focused “Contemporary Arab Representations” (curated by Catherine David for Witte de With in 2002) and “Out of Beirut” (curated by Suzanne Cotter for Modern Art Oxford in 2006). In particular, Walid Raad has become something of a metonym for Lebanese contemporary art; his name dominates scholarly writing on the subject, and the archival interventions into civil war histories that characterize his practice have come to stand in for a broader generational and cultural response to the Lebanese wars. While scholarship on the “war generation” of Lebanese artists is proliferating—including the first book-length study of the subject, Chad Elias’s *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-War Lebanon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018)—there has been relatively scarce scholarship on a range of Lebanese modern and contemporary artistic practices distinct from those of the coterie who came of age during the civil war and subsequently took the war and its memories as their primary subject.

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