

Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon (MAC Lyon). *Beirut and the Golden Sixties*. Lyon, France: Silvana Editoriale, September 14 to December 31, 2022.

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Whither the Arsonist's City?

Entering *Beirut and the Golden Sixties* at MAC Lyon, my visual field is dominated by an enormous photograph of bikini-clad girls.[1] Printed on thin fabric and stretched across plywood scaffolding, the black and white image shows two young women playing in the surf off a Beirut beach in the late 1960s; laughing and waving, they encapsulate the carefree joie de vivre so frequently evoked in discussions of the city's "golden age." To the left of the image of the girls, a painting—comparatively diminutive at 60x100cm—hangs against the scaffolding's particleboard backing. From a distance, it seems an unremarkable beach scene, but within a few steps I notice the boats in the harbor, the flurry of activity on the shore. In this untitled work from 1958, self-taught artist Khalil Zgaib portrays American forces arriving on Beirut's shores during Operation Blue Bat, a US military intervention staged the same year in the name of the Eisenhower Doctrine. This juxtaposition—a cosmopolitan capital on the right, an embattled city on the left—establishes the exhibition's central tension. Furthermore, the subject of Beirut's port situates the show in relation to the present, calling forth recent memories of its catastrophic explosion in August 2020. *Beirut and the Golden Sixties* presents a crucial moment in modern history from the vantage point of an ongoing

crisis," claims the introductory wall text, "highlighting the entanglement of past and contemporary struggles." [FIGURE 1: <https://tinyurl.com/27mhbz4r>]

This first section, "Le Port de Beyrouth: The Place," immediately invokes a recent catastrophe. Works like Zgaib's, a label notes, "assume a retroactive eeriness in the aftermath of the 4 August 2020 explosion that devastated Beirut's port—the world's largest non-nuclear explosion in recorded history." In framing the exhibition as a reflection on the present as well as the past, curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath render an inevitable bias refreshingly transparent, choosing to engage directly with a set of circumstances that would have shaped the exhibition and its reception whether acknowledged or not. They also draw visitors' attention to a crisis that has largely faded from view outside of Lebanon; while the August 4th explosion made international headlines, the record-setting economic downturn that worsened in its wake is rarely discussed in mainstream international media. Nevertheless, this framing also perpetuates—and, perhaps, aestheticizes—a deterministic vision of Lebanon as defined by perennial disaster.

Beirut and the Golden Sixties was conceived as one of three central parts of the 16th Lyon Biennale, *manifesto of fragility*, and its engagement with the biennial's larger theme is made explicit right out of the gate.[2] "Beirut," argues the introductory wall text, is "in and of itself *a manifesto of fragility*. It continues to evoke both vulnerability and determination—or at least traces of it—and conjure forms of resistance, called forth by the urgency of the moment and the desire not to be forgotten." While the exhibition is clearly trying to complicate the cliché of Beirut's golden age, this description evokes the city as a ghost town whose time has come and gone, and situates its "vulnerability and determination" partially in response to "the desire not to be forgotten." I catch a glimpse of several Beiruts as I walk through the exhibition, but by far its dominant iteration is as a spectacle, a city that not only ruminates obsessively on its past but that demands a witness to both its former glory and its history of cyclical suffering.

The exhibition presents 230 paintings, drawings, sculptures, tapestries, and mixed media pieces by 34 artists, organized roughly chronologically across five thematic sections. Following "Le Port de Beyrouth" are "Lovers: The Body," "Takween (composition): The Form," "Monster and Child: The Politics," and "Blood of the Phoenix: The War." Throughout, more enlarged images of Beirut in the 1960s and '70s are stretched across scaffolds, hung from ceilings, and plastered on walls as vivid reminders of the city's most mythologized aspects. Displayed both behind and adjacent to artwork, these photographs, at first, show girls in miniskirts, bustling nightclubs, crowds in art galleries, and other testimonies to an era of fun-loving, Westward-facing decadence. As the exhibition progresses, the subjects portrayed become darker in keeping with each section's theme; the good times stop rolling, so to speak, replaced by political protests, refugee camps, and militia activity. In conversation with these images, screens and projectors intermittently play newsreel clips showing parties and art openings, and vitrines display a

treasure trove of exhibition posters, invitation cards, event programs, and other ephemera from the vast, diverse network of organizations that sustained Beirut's art cultures during this formative period. [FIGURE 2: <https://tinyurl.com/4xw6hyd7>]

The archival vitrines are a delight to peruse, displaying hundreds of objects that testify to mid-century Beirut's unique and vibrant cultural infrastructure. These objects sketch the conditions of possibility for creating, exhibiting, and discussing art during the era, providing helpful context for appreciating the work at hand and giving visitors a taste of what established Beirut as one of the region's great cultural capitals. Weaving through the exhibition's maze of audiovisual elements, I do feel immersed in its vision of a lively city fraught with contradictions. Unfortunately, this sense of immersion quickly becomes overwhelming, and the design choices ultimately distract from the impressive collection of artworks on display. A subtle abstract landscape by Rafic Charaf (1932-2003) interrupts the massive image of a theater in downtown Beirut, the painting's subdued gray-green palette fighting to be seen against a poster of Egyptian actress Soad Hosny. A painting from the celebrated *Bribes du Corps* series by Huguette Caland (1931-2019) seems almost an afterthought next to an enlarged photograph of a woman, clad in metallic eyeshadow and a startlingly pink turtle-neck, chatting on the phone beneath an iconic image of Marilyn Monroe. Exacerbating the visual competition between the photographs and the artwork are the scaffolds on which much of the work is mounted, which have a makeshift, unfinished quality to them and add additional visual barriers to accessing the art. While this design choice extends to the entire biennial, presumably to underscore the theme of "fragility," the assertive presence of cheap, minimally processed construction materials inadvertently contributes to a vision of Beirut as an eternally thwarted work in progress.

[FIGURE 3: <https://tinyurl.com/3zmbwvj4>, FIGURE 4: <https://tinyurl.com/4sbcpbbs>]

If I am disappointed by these distractions, it is only because there is much from which to distract. To its great credit, *Beirut and the Golden Sixties* brings an unprecedented selection of artwork and archival material to an audience largely unfamiliar with modern Arab art, including works by lesser-known figures and pieces that have been hiding in private collections for most of their existence. A representative highlight is *The First Time I Ever Saw the Volcano* (1979) by the understudied Nicolas Mouffarege (1947-85), on loan from the artist's family in Shreveport, Louisiana. The work, roughly 115x145cm, uses Mouffarege's signature combination of pigment and embroidery to depict a nude male figure seemingly falling through space beside a volcanic landscape. This landscape appears to spill out of a window, contained within a square except for the ominous clouds that crown the volcano and a body of water that snakes toward the viewer. Surrounding these central images are geometric and foliate decorative motifs, as well as a mirrored pair of gryphons, a full moon, and the first letters of the Arabic, Roman, Greek, Hebrew, and Phoenician alphabets. If the volcano suggests cataclysmic eruption, the presence of these letters imbues this implication with creative potential. We see a similar tension in the body of the male figure: naked, falling, and possessed of a graceful, almost feminine softness, he nevertheless exudes a sense of strength and solidity through the exaggerated contours of his muscles.

In its refusal to distinguish between vulnerability and strength, *The First Time I Ever Saw The Volcano* comes close to enacting the kind of fragility articulated by Fellrath and Bardaouil in relation to the biennial's theme. In the exhibition catalog, the curators insist that this theme "positions fragility at the heart of a generative form of resistance that is emboldened by the past, responsive to the present and primed for the future," imagining

"a world where vulnerability is actively engaged as a foundation for empowerment rather than shunned as a sign of weakness" (p. 15). Mouffarege's work does, in some ways, appear to be a "manifesto of fragility," but in gesturing toward the generative potential of vulnerability it distinguishes itself from the exhibition as a whole. [FIGURE 5: <https://tinyurl.com/54s5r69t>]

Through the narrative arc of *Beirut and the Golden Sixties*, fragility emerges not as a source of power but as a threat to it. Framed through the lens of the 2020 port explosion and shot through with vague references to civil unrest, the first four sections of the exhibition serve as preface and crescendo to the last, which presents the war(s) as the ultimate shattering of Beirut's delicate facade and the foundation of its current struggles. This final section, "Blood of the Phoenix," occupies an entire floor at MAC Lyon, dedicating about 50 percent of the exhibition's total space to art in conversation with the Lebanese civil wars (1975-91).

The moment I enter "Blood of the Phoenix," I'm arrested by a floor-to-ceiling image of young fighters smiling for the camera. Some are in military uniform, others in civilian clothing. A few brandish rifles. They crowd around a shirtless, Thor-like figure: fair-haired, bearded, and impressively muscular, he holds a gun aloft above his flexed biceps. His eyes blink closed against the camera's flash, adding to the snapshot's amateurish, almost playful aura. I know before I read the wall text that these men are Kataeb, or Phalangist, militiamen. All seemingly under forty, they belong to a Christian nationalist political party explicitly modeled on Mussolini's Fascists, members of which carried out the massacre of countless Palestinian civilians in refugee camps between 1975 and 1982. In this exhibition, however, they are merely backdrop to Nicolas Mouffarege's *No. 7* (1975), a delicate greyscale embroidery piece measuring about 80x80cm. On a label, the curators tell us that this juxtaposition "subverts the conventional image of masculinity associated with

wartime." To my eyes, though, the nonsexual, gender-neutral canvas cannot formally undermine the machismo of the towering image behind it. In keeping with their counterparts elsewhere in the exhibition, images of Kataeb members and other militiamen are presented throughout "Blood of the Phoenix" as neutral pieces of contextual flavor, their human subjects left unnamed. The nonchalant, decorative depiction of armed factions strikes an especially dissonant chord given the exhibition's emphasis on the wars and their impact on subsequent decades.

Indeed, *Beirut and the Golden Sixties* dedicates an entire floor to work that deals directly with the civil wars—but in doing so, it turns "Blood of the Phoenix" into a largely two-man show. At the heart of this section are a series of paintings, *Technologies of War* (1978), and a series of drawings, *The Road to Peace* (1973-76) by Aref El Rayess (1928-2005), as well as drawings from the series *Civil War Notebook* (1975-76) by Jamil Molaeb (b. 1948). Rayess and Molaeb are among a small minority of Lebanese artists whose work engages with the violence of the era in a sustained fashion. Other works, such as Cici Sursock's surrealistic icon paintings, *La Cathédrale* and *Notre dame du matin* (both 1980), can be interpreted as reflections on sectarianism, and a subtle diptych by Simone Fattal, *The Last Moon the Fida'i Saw* (1978), engages obliquely with the Palestinian struggle.

These themes, however salient, point to notable absences from this section. Christians are overrepresented in Lebanon's art world for a variety of reasons, but the near-total absence of Muslim artists in a section about sectarian warfare seems a damning oversight. Additionally, while the fida'i is evoked in Fattal's painting and in corresponding wall text, Palestinian artists themselves are nowhere to be found. During the heyday of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1970s, Beirut's Palestinian refugee camps were abuzz with creative activity. Palestinian artists

mounted exhibitions in the camps as well as in popular spaces such as pubs and cultural centers, and much of their work dealt directly with their armed struggle—a struggle that was inextricable from the Lebanese civil wars. Also conspicuously missing from "Blood of the Phoenix" is any mention of the 1978 International Exhibition for Palestine, mounted by the PLO's Plastic Arts Division at Beirut's Arab University. As demonstrated by Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri's meticulous, highly public research on the topic, this exhibition was an important show of international solidarity around Palestinian liberation, comprising around two hundred works by artists from thirty countries.[3] Engaging with the cultural infrastructure of the PLO's Beirut-based pseudo-state would have introduced several Muslim artists and spared this section its overreliance on Rayess and Molaeb. Furthermore, it would have provided the visitor with a glimpse of a political movement that was not only a major factor in the wars' unfolding but also a cause around which the city's leftists congregated. [FIGURE 6: <https://tinyurl.com/2p99rtk8>]

In keeping with the curators' vision of fragility as a form of resistance that is "primed for the future," "Blood of the Phoenix" brings *Beirut and the Golden Sixties* to a close by looking forward. It does this by positioning the civil wars in conversation with recent events through two works of contemporary art by celebrated Lebanese duo Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas. In its incorporation of these works, the exhibition seems primed mostly for a future of infinite suffering, the current crisis rendered all the more crippling by the insatiable ghosts of the twentieth century.

The first of the Joreige and Hadjithomas installations, commissioned specifically for the biennial, occupies the exhibition's penultimate room in its entirety. *As night comes when day is gone* (2022) consists of a circle of twelve screens mounted at eye level, sandwiched between two larger projections. The projectors and the screens present synchronized security footage of the exact

moment the August 4th blast ripped through the Sursock Museum, which stands about eight hundred meters from the explosion's epicenter. Standing in the center of the circle, the viewer watches as banal scenes of empty galleries and bustling courtyards are engulfed in dust and chaos, leaving furniture and paintings scattered amidst the detritus of blown-out windows. These videos, claim the wall text, "show the extreme fragility of people, artworks and institutions and reveal ghostly apparitions."

On the one hand, I cannot say it is not moving. I watch as a person with emotional ties to both the Sursock and its city; I gasp audibly, tears welling, struck by the sensation of having been kicked in the stomach. Even for those without connections to Beirut, the Sursock Museum has become a felt presence through the exhibition's archival vitrines, and I appreciate this engagement with its recent fate. Literal fragility asserts itself, leapfrogging over a tedious theoretical framework to remind us that art objects are *objects*, subject to the material conditions of politically unstable environments. In a way, the installation might be seen to push back against the romanticized entanglement of art and tragedy in Lebanon by facing the viewer with a bluntly tangible example of pointless destruction.

On the other hand, as my hands shake and my heartbeat soars, I can't help but wonder how this serves anyone who lived through the blast. Surely this installation threatens to provoke a traumatic response in people who have experienced explosions—a group that includes virtually all adults who grew up in Beirut, even those who were elsewhere on August 4th, 2020—and I'm not convinced that the work's message justifies its cost. There is an undeniably voyeuristic quality to *As night comes*, a violence in stripping hours and hours of ordinary life from CCTV footage in order to broadcast the moment of death. The isolation of the explosion has a taxonomic feel to it, like a taxidermy animal prepared for classification in a nat-

ural history museum. Bolstered by the promise of "ghostly apparitions" and its situation within "Blood of the Phoenix," the work suggests a troubling eagerness to catalog this recent event alongside the civil wars in the annals of Lebanese misery.

The installation is further encumbered by the intrusion of sound from the exhibition's final room, where the duo's *But my head is still singing...* (2022) projects a chaotic and foreboding collection of phrases on a loop. *But my head is still singing...* likens Lebanon to Orpheus, who according to myth was ripped apart by female cultists and scattered into the River Hebrus. Orpheus's head, the wall text notes, continued to sing, "as our exhausted voices attempt to do." The work consists of two screens, suspended from the ceiling, and an audio component. The screens transcribe the audio component as it plays, the first as text and the second in a series of soundwaves. Words and soundwaves overlap and break down as a speaker emits fragments of poems about Orpheus in English and French, evoking a sense of overwhelm as written and spoken phrases flit in and out of comprehensibility.

With the exception of Etel Adnan, no Lebanese poets are invoked in *But my head is still singing...* Instead, the room fills with the words of Virgil, Ovid, Goethe, Rilke, and other such giants of the Western canon. The singing head of Lebanon speaks only English and French, expressing itself through centuries of European poetry about a classical Greek character. These references are by no means inappropriate, but the work's entrenchment in Western high culture as well as its conspicuous lack of Arabic signals a particular kind of Lebaneseness that has perhaps been subtly woven throughout the entire exhibition. It's the kind of Lebaneseness that doesn't flinch when confronted with images of Kataeb fighters, that doesn't notice the absence of Palestinians or Muslims in an exhibition about the civil wars. Fluent in cosmopolitanism, it sees itself reflected in newsreel clips of

gallery parties without reading the broadcaster's Arabic subtitles. Most of all, it is a Lebaneseness that can afford to see its country as a tragic, beautiful, broken object because its existence is not threatened by Lebanon's status quo.

The status quo presented in *But my head is still singing...* is that of a defeated resilience, animated only by the commingling of magic and grief. Lebanon is Orpheus, a man so distraught at the death of his lover that he barely resists his own murder; when the head of his dismembered body sings, its songs are not of triumph but of mourning. In the ceaseless looping of sonic and visual poetry fragments that are, themselves, pieces of the same story told over and over across thousands of years, this circumstance is simultaneously linked to the past and projected infinitely into the future. *Beirut and the Golden Sixties* ends with the tired trope of Lebanon as a nation born under a bad sign and raised in cyclical chaos, doomed by nebulous forces to keep eating its own. More troublingly, the exhibition's suggestion that the "entanglement of past and contemporary struggles" is based on some self-perpetuating curse elides the far less glamorous, far more concrete link between the two: the architects of the civil wars are, in quite literal terms, also responsible for both the port explosion and the financial crisis. The aesthetic draw of "ghostly apparitions" obscures the monsters that exist in the flesh, gesturing helplessly at the merciless hand of fate instead of creating space for intervention toward other, better futures. We are left with the well-worn image of Beirut as a phoenix when it is, as novelist Hala Alyan has put it, an arsonist's city, immolated by the same powerful handful of bad actors since its so-called golden age.

Notes

[1]. The pandemic-related postponement of the Lyon Biennale, which was initially set to open in 2021, prompted the organizers to bring *Beirut and the Golden Sixties* to Berlin's Gropius Bau as a standalone exhibition (March-June 2022) before it

opened in Lyon. I did not see the Berlin show, and this review reflects only upon its French iteration.

[2]. In addition to *Beirut and the Golden Sixties*, the biennial unfolded on the third floor of MAC Lyon in *The many lives and deaths of Louise Brunet* and across eleven different locations throughout the city through *A world of endless promise*. The former section positioned itself as a fictionalized, transtemporal retelling of the life of a young woman sent to prison for her role in the 1834 Lyon silk weavers' revolt. The latter explored the biennial's theme in relation to Lyon's layered histories, from the Roman era to the present. Bardaouil and Fellrath justified Beirut's inclusion in an exhibition otherwise rooted in Lyonnaise history through a nineteenth-century link between silk production in Lyon and Mount Lebanon, which is touched upon in *The many lives and deaths of Louise Brunet*.

[3]. Khouri and Salti's decade-long research on this topic resulted in an extraordinary exhibition, *Past Disquiet* (Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art, February 25-June 1, 2015; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, March 19-May 9; Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, Santiago, April 7-December 8, 2018; Sursock Museum, Beirut, July 27-October 1, 2018), as well as an accompanying volume of the same name (Warsaw: Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

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