

The National



Brushing up

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The rising tide of the art market is buoying the careers of Beirut's young painters. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie looks at the perils of prominence.

Art critics all over the world love to declare the death of painting, in cycles that probably follow financial fluctuations more closely than anything else. When the art market is strong, paintings are popular because they are commercially viable as objects of trade. When the market is weak, potential buyers retreat from the galleries and auction houses that peddle pigments on canvas more readily than art in any other media, and paintings fall into decline. However paradoxical it seems, the diminishing of financial opportunities – combined with the tensions created by economies in free fall, attendant socio-political frictions and the rise of international grant-making foundations – may give artists more freedom to improvise and experiment with new and less explicitly tactile forms of art-making.

In Beirut, the videos, installations and relatively immaterial urban interventions that have earned the city an international reputation for critical and creative vitality were born of a wrecked economy and a derelict infrastructure for cultural expression. It is tempting, therefore, to regard the current contemporary art scene in Lebanon as an entity that emerged fully formed and from nothing.

When the conceptually-minded artists Ziad Abillama, Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari and Walid Sadek began working more than 15 years ago – assembling installations from rubbish, merging documentary practices with aesthetic forms, circulating poetic texts as artworks in and of themselves – there were virtually no collectors, galleries or institutions willing to support their efforts. They and their peers established their own channels for the production and presentation of their art. Many critics and scholars have since argued that it was both the indifference of the commercial gallery system and an overwhelming desire to break with past traditions of art-making in Lebanon that allowed these artists to develop bodies of work that were, and remain, worlds apart from the paintings, drawings and sculptures that traditionally predominated.

But this perspective on Lebanon's very recent art history is something of a fiction. Painting did not die in the badlands of post-war, reconstruction-era Beirut. Plenty of young artists in the last two decades followed in the footsteps of their teachers, mentors and predecessors and filled local galleries with paintings. Today there are a number of Lebanese artists in their twenties and thirties who are deeply devoted to the application of pigment on canvas. They are mining figurative and abstract terrain. They are intimately concerned with formalist techniques, but equally committed to social criticism and political relevance. They are painting their lives, their times and their experiences in styles that are stripped bare of nostalgia. For that, local critics often deride them for turning away from idyllic or prosaic landscapes toward depictions of Lebanon's dark, ugly realities.

Like their peers working in other media, they see themselves creating works in an atmosphere of isolation, in dialogue only among themselves. But unlike their contemporaries, these young painters, who have the backing of some of Beirut's best galleries, face local, regional and international market forces that are stronger now than they were in the 1990s, and potentially more damaging to their careers. Interest in Arab art has skyrocketed over the past few years, and if the results of auctions and art fairs are anything to go by, then painters are poised to benefit handsomely from this seemingly sudden turn of events. But there are risks involved: while a lively market may give young artists the possibility of supporting themselves solely through sales, it may also compromise their independence and integrity if they find themselves, consciously or unconsciously, making work to satisfy an economy rather than to express an image or an urgent idea.

Zena Assi, who is 34, held her first solo exhibition at Beirut's Galerie Alwane in July. *Cité et Citadins* (City and Citizens), as the show was called, featured 25 paintings in mixed media on canvas that sustained remarkable stylistic consistency. Assi's roughly chiselled portraits of rakish figures – lanky young men sucking down coffee and cigarettes, despondent young women sinking stubborn chins into thin, bony hands – jostled for attention alongside her paintings of dystonic cityscapes cluttered with electrical wires, television antennae and buildings stacked precariously on top of one another.

Assi earned a degree in advertising at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) in 1997 and spent two years working for the Beirut branch of the ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi. But she left her job in 1998, returned to ALBA as a teacher, and then stopped working altogether in 2004 to concentrate on painting. These days, she heads down to her studio just before 8am every morning. "It's a habit," she says. "I cannot start my day otherwise." She never makes preparatory sketches and begins instead by priming her canvases directly. She creates base layers with acrylic paints and then starts adding different textures, using tissue paper, cloth, broken brushes, whatever she finds in her studio to suit her mood. The final layer is painted with oils, which give Assi's canvasses their peculiar, compelling luminosity.

Assi joined Galerie Alwane in 2006. Odile Mazloum, who is an artist as well as Galerie Alwane's owner and director, has been selling art since 1964, when she founded her first gallery, L'Amateur, on Hamra Street. During Lebanon's civil war, L'Amateur closed down, and Mazloum established Galerie Alwane in the northern suburb of Kaslik in 1987. Four years ago, she opened a second branch of Alwane in Saifi Village, a newly revamped high-end mixed-use residential and retail district on the



"I used to hate it. Now I love it, this chaos we have here": Zena Assi, *El Karem* (2008). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Alwane



Tamara al Samarrail, *Water Guns* (2008). Courtesy of the artist