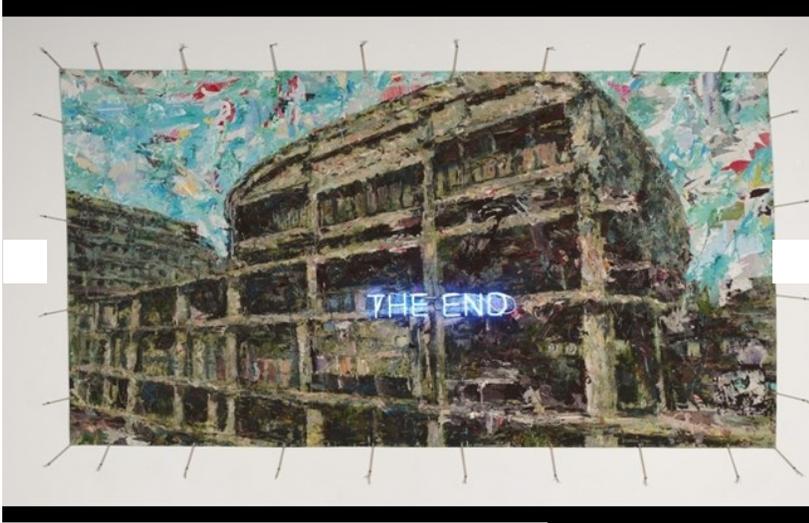


THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Print

Baalbaki's Blowback asks hard questions



Nov. 24, 2016 | 12:03 AM

Sana Shaban | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: In its most recent usage, the term "Blowback" denotes how every decision or military action provokes unintended, unwanted consequences. Wikipedia suggests the term was coined by the CIA. It's also the name of Ayman Baalbaki's exhibition at Saleh Barakat Gallery, whose 18 paintings and five sculptures are heavily influenced by the artist's memories and experiences of the accumulated wreckage of Beirut.

The show's first floor displays three paintings and three sculptures.

The series depicts one of Beirut's more ubiquitous features – a red-and-white metal object made from three metal rods welded together and molded concrete forms, both used to block the city's streets.

Titled "Blood Borders," the series borrows its name from a paper retired Lt. Col. Ralph Peters published in U.S. Armed Forces Journal in 2006. The various pieces depict the flags of Iraq, Kurdistan, Syria and Palestine, as well as the logo of Hezbollah's Waad, a company created to rebuild the southern suburbs after the 2006 Israeli war.

A circular painting, "Parliament," echoes the exhibition's title – insofar as every political decision provokes blowback. Up close, the painting looks like an abstract. Taking a few steps back, the image clarifies as the Lebanese Parliament main assembly hall.

Beside the stairs to the gallery's lower level, an untitled painting illustrates the destruction visited upon Lebanon over the years.

"It shows that it's obvious, and raises questions," gallerist Saleh Barakat told The Daily Star in an interview. "It tries to put people in this place where they should be, asking questions, and not accepting, rebelling toward a situation that is not anymore acceptable."

"Right now with so much emerging in Beirut with the art," added curator Natasha Gasparian, "it's also important to go back, at least discursively, to these questions

that were raised, and thinking about the war, and not having that historical distance to revisit that."

The gallery's lower level shows 15 paintings, all highlighting significant historical events in the Middle East. Notable works include "The Embassy," which portrays the 1983 suicide bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut.

"He's very committed to representing the war, and this representation is [as] complicated [as it is] fragmented," Gasparian remarked.

"It's this constant dialectical process. It's not just a matter of abstracting it. He's really committed to representing it."

Another round piece is the mixed-media work "1559." The canvas is a table that depicts a metal device for blocking roads, painted with laminate, and bearing a red neon light with the work's title – which refers to the 2004 U.N. Security Council resolution calling for all "foreign presences" remaining in Lebanon to withdraw.

"All That Remains" is an enormous (2.5 meters by 6 meters) painting illustrating the intense destruction of the Syrian city of Homs. The work, which took the artist three years to complete, is marked by aggressive and vigorous brushstrokes, emitting a relentless quality.

"It has something ... that makes it very apocalyptic," Barakat said, "and [it's] very well-painted and so representative of the situation of how I see the Middle East today."

"If I were to talk about an individual piece, I'd share the same sentiment as Saleh," Gasparian added. "I think for me, that one would encapsulate everything that you have. You know different instances over all the different works but you can see it all in that one piece."

Part of Baalbaki's "No Flag Zone" series, "Tehran, 2011" shows a British flag being burned. It references protests in Tehran provoked by a British government decision to impose sanctions on Iran and banning U.K. financial institutions from conducting business with Iran.

Many observers have noted stylistic echoes of deceased Syrian artist Marwan Kassab Bachi (1934-2016) in Baalbaki's work, particularly Marwan's mature work – though the subject matter of the two artists' oeuvres are entirely dissimilar.

"Marwan has been his teacher and there is no doubt not only he influenced him," Barakat said. "He was also a major mentor for him. Having said that, I don't know if I can speak of influence in painting, but definitely he was a major influence on the discipline."

"He imposed on his students a rigorousness. Painting is a very serious thing for Marwan and his disciples ... Another thing I can say, on behalf of Ayman, is they stick to their beliefs. Marwan and Ayman were always true to their beliefs, even if that will sometimes hurt them on the international scope."

Baalbaki's work, the gallerist notes, has evolved.

"There is no doubt that [Baalbaki has] evolved a lot stylistically," Barakat said. "He developed this place where his painting is very abstract when you're close and it brings back a certain figuration when you step back."

"It has always been about his life and his country and the political issues that are related to the life he lives through," he continued. "I think if there is one common theme in the whole exhibition, it's about wrecks and destruction and where somehow we can see the whole Middle East becoming a big rubble."

"There is something about the forms," Gasparian added, "and the use of neon for me that make it also about maybe some kind of spectacularization about this wreckage."

"MEA," names two paintings of airplanes in an airport – one a large-scale work, the

second zooming in on the MEA logo from the 1970s.

Both recall "Operation Gift," in which Israel bombed Lebanon for the first time in 1968, destroying 12 airliners belonging to MEA and Lebanese International Airways, and two Trans Mediterranean Airways cargo planes.

The exhibition offers a captivating perception of the history and ongoing issues of the Middle East, allowing the viewer to actively engage and identify with the experiences faced in the region.

"Blowback" is up through Nov. 30 at Saleh Barakat Gallery, Justinian Street, Clemenceau.

Copyrights 2016, The Daily Star - All Rights Reserved
24/11/2016