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A gallerist's big step to Clemenceau



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BEIRUT: Saleh Barakat stepped onto the city's art exhibition stage in 1991, when he opened Ras Beirut's Agial Gallery. Since then the gallery owner, art aficionado and curator has become an important figure on the artistic landscape of Beirut and the region.

That landscape has changed in the past decade or so, with the rise of a robust Gulf-centered regional art market and, more recently, the announcement and launch of several Beirut-area museum projects, many of which focus on Lebanon's modern and contemporary art. Both these trends are notably at odds with this region's economic doldrums.

It's upon this shifting landscape that Barakat has founded a new, much larger, space, Saleh Barakat Gallery. It may seem a counterintuitive move, given the state of Lebanon's economy these days.

A savvy businessman who works according to five-year business plans, the gallerist says he's found success by always knowing what his next move is going to be.

He describes the new space as a "culmination of 25 years of hard work and perseverance – the natural next step. ... It's not like I woke up one day with a megalomaniac feeling of wanting to open another gallery."

Barakat would mount larger solo and group shows at Beirut Art Center and the (now shut) Beirut Exhibition Center.

A combination of reasons contributed to his decision to find a larger space. One was that, after 25 years, he felt he had sufficient experience and clientele to justify opening a new gallery. He represents a number of large estates, such artists as Nabil Nahas, Ayman Baalbaki, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Hamed Abdallah and Gebran Tarazi.

Saleh Barakat Gallery is located next door to Dar El-Nimr in Clemenceau, in an historic theater space that formerly housed Masrah al-Madina, and before that an art house cinema. It's walking distance from Agial Gallery.

Barakat stressed on the importance of keeping the gallery accessible to all kinds of people, from local intellectuals and residents to students attending one of the local universities.

The new gallery's location is of sentimental importance to Barakat – having been the first theater to introduce local audiences to noncommercial films, where he recalls

watching his first movie.

"I like to think," he said, "that saving [this structure] was important to both me and the community that had grown up around it."

The abandoned theater space was in bad shape and was destined to become a garage before he intervened.

At 11:30 in the morning, the gallery's transformed entrance hall is spacious and wonderfully lit with natural sunlight. A set of stairs leads visitors to a vast white and beige space, at once contemporary and luxurious and understated.

The high white walls currently feature the paintings of veteran Lebanese artist Nabil Nahas, who created a whole new set of paintings for the launch of Barakat's gallery.

The theme of Nahas' recent works is the cedar, the tree that's become Lebanon's national symbol. These large canvases are bold and somewhat abstract.

It isn't immediately clear that these shapes are cedars at all. Upon closer analysis, the shapes become familiar and the cedars make themselves known, set against a colorful background of geometric shapes.

The artist and gallerist worked together in the 2010 Nahas retrospective at the Beirut Exhibition Center. This present show is a product of two to three years and collaboration with Barakat.

One problem that Barakat has run into with the scale of his new space is that the high walls can "dwarf the work of artists."

Sometimes, an artist's body of work is more suited to a smaller space, which is when the more intimate Agial gallery will remain useful. Barakat is careful not to neglect his first creation, noting that he pays the same amount of attention to both and divides his time between them each day.

Seated on a comfortable couch in a minimalist office with Nahas' recently published catalogues littering the shelves, Barakat explains the motivation behind what he does for a living.

Art is way of expressing oneself, as many have said in the past, and Barakat aims to be the voice box of artists who have something to say.

He fervently believes that Lebanon is an incubator for art, with a constant influx of new and established artists, myriad galleries and artistic initiatives taking place.

This is why he chose to invest in his new space, though many would say that it not the right time to put so much faith in Lebanon – given the country's fluctuating political and economic stability.

"It's fantastic," Barakat said. "It's really fantastic, in a city that is struggling so much. We are still capable of doing so much."

For more on Saleh Barakat Gallery, see www.agialart.com/Exhibitions/barakat_exhibitions.