Cutting-edge art that explores timeless societal ills

'Image: Fixe, Mobile, Animee' focuses on new ways of addressing old challenges

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Review

BEIRUT: "Image: Fixe, Mobile, Animee," the exhibition currently up at the gallery of the French Cultural Center (CCF), features the photographic and video works of Gilbert Hage, Ricardo Mbarkho and Ziad Abillama, three major players in Lebanon's contemporary art scene. Accompanying their work is that of 15 younger artists, all former students of ALBA - the University Of Balamand's Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts.

All the artists use new communication and information technologies - digital photography, experimental video, 2 and 3-D animation and video games - to create a provocative visual language. The object is to interrogate Lebanon's memory and trigger strong emotional reactions. Shocking images are not censored.

The exhibition's works question identity in the Lebanese and wider Middle Eastern socio-political contexts. What is particularly powerful here is the constant link between technique and expression: the freedom of one frees the other.

Many of the younger artists are inspired by Ricardo Mbarkho's research on identity. Mbarkho, 35, graduated from ALBA (where he presently teaches) and Paris' National School of Fine Arts. He defends new media art as cheap, easily copied and reproduced, an art that should be deeply lived and not simply watched.

His 2007 piece "Arameans" questions the mobility of Aramaic-speakers in Lebanon, focusing on a woman who survived an explosion in Beirut. In this work, we recognize three of the artist's favorite themes - identity, intra-communal relations and social confrontation - enhanced by the use of split screens and distorted sound, one of his favored techniques.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, "Homeland 1," the latest work by photographer Gilbert Hage, questions Lebanese identity from another perspective. The photograph interrogates the aesthetic of frontiers and territories by representing buildings in Beirut's southern suburbs that were bombed during the summer 2006 war with Israel. He contrasts the stable lines of still-standing buildings in the background and pieces of destroyed ones in the foreground, using a filter to intensify the color of concrete.

Contrast and contradiction are also at the center of Frederic Lezmi's 2006 photo work "Arabian Prospects," which represents areas destroyed during the 1975-1990 Civil War in one part of the frame and new scaffoldings in another. Beirut's urban landscape reflects a society in perpetual reconstruction.

Politics are never entirely divorced from religion in Ziad Abillama's video "Why don't you stop dying?" His documentary-style camerawork interrogates the Lebanese on their own history. Does Lebanon create its own martyrs? Why do we sublimate death? Can history stop repeating itself? These are some of the questions raised by this work, the most thought-provoking of the exhibition.

In Hala Dabaji's work "Art Grandeur Nature," characters face blind walls and shapes of modern Beirut, seemingly confronting their own confusion.

Nayla Dabaji's photographs draw a parallel between Irish and Lebanese religious conflicts with representations of tagged streets and destroyed bridges. She conveys an idea of disconnection and gaps that need filling.

Video works explore the many possibilities of digital technique: Sound distortion, over-exposed images, gaps between speech and subtitles and the introduction of archive images. Liberated from cinematographic and televisual conventions - in terms of cost, length, aesthetic, linear narration, and formatted speech - such video art attempts to relate a complex reality.

Digital photography also allows for boldness. Joanne Issa's 2008 series "Accord Raccord," for example, displays six portraits of women whose legs are cut and replaced by others. The resulting twisted shapes convey instability and anxiety.

Innovative, mind blowing, serious and humorous, "Image: Fixe, Mobile, AnimŽe" is a must-see.

"Image: Fixe, Mobile, AnimŽe" runs until March 6. For more information call +961 1 420 272.

Tags: Beirut, Bill, Lebanese, Lebanon, War