

Method behind Karam masterpieces

'Shorthand' delves into 40 years of archival material from Lebanese artist

By Maghie Ghali
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DAROUN-HARISSA, Lebanon: Lebanese artist Nadim Karam has been creating sculptural and architectural showstoppers around the world for decades, dotting the streets of Beirut, Prague, Melbourne, Tokyo and London.

Unveiled during the Beirut Art Fair last week, "Shorthand: Nadim Karam, Notes from the Archive," curated by Rachel Dedman, delves into about 40 years of archival material, showing the method behind the masterpieces.

"The sketches are always the origins of my big projects worldwide and it's so private for me that I never thought of showing them," Karam told The Daily Star. "When I started having curators in the office and we archived all of this, suddenly it becomes a wealth of material that's interesting to investigate."

"I discovered that I have initial sketches for ideas I would complete 20 years later," he added. "I started asking them to see what I have on a certain theme and they brought them out in order to reuse them to create new projects."

On show at his recently built atelier A.MUSE.UM – a spacious studio/exhibition space – the 120-piece showcase explores the symbolism and visual vocabulary developed by Karam's multidisciplinary practice over the years, comprising drawing, painting, performance recordings



An installation view of "The Archaic Procession," Beirut Central District, 1997-2000.

and the prep work for his monumental sculptures.

"You discover that he's this obsessive sketcher, this brilliant draftsman, someone for whom process is as important, if not more important, than the product," Dedman told The Daily Star. "He's sketched prodigiously, every day for the past 40-odd years."

"Delving into that archive became the project and I was excited to understand in Nadim's preparatory work, his 'shorthand,' the significance I couldn't so easily interpret in the big sculptural pieces

that I knew," she added. "I could see in the sketches gesture, spontaneity, emotion, thought, nuance and everything connected to process."

The exhibition begins with Karam's formative years in Japan, as a graduate student and subsequent architect. Sketches and elaborate stage sets designed for his own performances, which were inspired by Butai-zukuri – "stage-style" temples used for rituals – take up most of the first section.

"[Japan] influenced me greatly because the experience was unique, the philosophy is special and the

contrast is there between the Japanese and Lebanese culture," Karam said. "Ephemerality became so important to me and loss of boundaries became an issue to investigate, where we stand in life and these kinds of ideas."

"I hadn't thought of Nadim as a conceptual artist but within that archival practice I realized that was there and ... his time in Japan, which is the crux of it all," Dedman said. "It comes out in his performative works and the lexicon of characters he ends up developing – you can trace their development from these abstract

forms into something that becomes thousands of characters he can draw upon with different meaning."

Karam's "Urban Toys" became a common sight during the '90s in Beirut, and were often seen around the world. The 1,000 silhouetted characters, which represented the extremities of life and the specter of death that hangs over us all, appeared all over, from storefronts in Japan to spray-painted versions in the Paris metro. In Beirut, the strange figures would appear every year and shift toward the sea. They have appeared on the Sursock Museum's rooftop and bridges around the city.

Dedman said the figures were a product of the anxiety and fear that Karam felt during Lebanon's Civil War, which he watched from a distance via news from Japan.

"The combination of all of the characters creates a storytelling device," Karam said. "It's very important to be able to fragment the symbol, because symbols could be a cause of problems and issues, whatever it may be. When I fragment it into 1000 symbols, stories, when combined they can be interpreted differently by different people and will never symbolize one thing."

The later sections of the show focus on everyday life, often dealing with serious subjects, but always balanced with levity and moments of playfulness, tackling death, sacrifice and loss, but also sex and fatherhood.

"While his big projects take months to complete, these drawings are preparatory and brief," Dedman said. "The sketches of an instant feel to me much more connected to Nadim, and reveal how he personally locates himself in his work."

"Shorthand" is showing at A.MUSE.UM in Daroun-Harissa Fridays and Saturdays only, from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., until Oct. 27.