

Beirut Art Fair cancelled amid uncertainty



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BEIRUT: When Beirut Art Fair founder Laure d’Hauteville visited France in December, with only three pairs of trousers and five blouses, she expected to be back before too long. Six months now have passed.

The onset of the pandemic not only derailed her travel plans, but also forced her to move BAF’s 2020 edition to 2021. This year’s fair was already in a precarious position due to the mounting economic and financial crises and the popular protests they provoked. The pandemic pounded a final nail in the coffin.

“When the revolution started I was visiting FIAC, (Paris’ foire internationale d’art contemporain), which is part of my traveling for BAF to meet with galleries and artists, and I was talking about Beirut and our 10th-anniversary edition,” d’Hauteville told The Daily Star. “We were planning an amazing 11th edition because last year a lot of foreigners bought pieces, which was showing the start of a new economy of collectors for the country. Most of the hotels we work with were completely full.

“We had 36,000 entrants and everyone in Europe was talking about it and the Lebanese art scene and I received many emails about attending the 2020 edition,” she added. “Then, people were suddenly asking me if I was okay and if I had checked the newspapers. The revolution has started. At first I thought it was a good thing for the country because of the terrible corruption and Lebanon is a modern and sophisticated country despite this. I was proud to be part of the solidarity protests in Paris ... I’ve lived almost 30 years in Lebanon.”

The cancellation decision was made recently, after many Whatsapp calls with the Beirut-based team and attempts to look for solutions around the collapsing economy and ongoing protests.

“I wanted to come back to Beirut to see what we can do and then COVID-19 arrived and I got stuck but BAF was still on and we were suggesting that even if we can’t do BAF because of revolution, we could do something called Beirut Art Scene,” d’Hauteville said. “The curator was supposed to Marie Tomb at Beit Beirut and we would have a small exhibition made from Lebanese artists with the theme of ‘Resilience.’ It would have been completely nonprofit, thanks to friends and colleagues willing to help pay for the exhibition costs.

“But the revolution continued. The lira devalued more. The people are hungry. Supermarkets are struggling and I thought we can’t bring foreigners to have fun in a country where the people are struggling,” she added. “You can’t organize a fun event, drink champagne and party when in front of you the Lebanese people can’t afford food. It’s not possible.”

Despite the cancellation and Lebanon’s situation, d’Hauteville said many collectors and artists are still showing interest in coming to Lebanon, should something be planned. A possible alternative, depending on the pandemic measures and easing of travel restrictions, would be to bring small groups to explore the Lebanese art scene – similar to the VIP program for collectors that usually runs alongside BAF.

“Maybe in September we can bring small groups to take around the galleries, foundations and discover the culture and art of Lebanon,” she said. “This will bring in work for the hotels, restaurants and other aspects of the country, but only if the revolution abates and it’s safe for them to visit. I can’t bring guests to protests in the streets.

“Lebanese people are so creative and Lebanon is not dead. This is the worst time it has experienced, even more than the Civil War, but I’m sure something can be done,” she added. “We will recover and find a solution because we don’t have a choice, even if I don’t know what the solution is. It’s like being in a labyrinth with no exit, but maybe through art people will be willing to come back, enjoy the country and understand more about the Middle East.”

D’Hauteville said that next year’s edition will likely focus on the future and what tomorrow could bring, rather than rehash art inspired by the lockdown or the protests, which she considered an already tired topic.

“I think people are fed up with the revolution and foreigners don’t really understand it,” she said. “We want something new and fresh, with hope and trust, a look to the future.”

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