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Beirut Art Fair supports emerging artists struggling through 2020

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| The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Despite Beirut Art Fair having to cancel its 2020 edition, it's been working quietly in the background, looking for ways to keep engaging and supporting local artists.

At the end of November, BAF launched an open call on social media, seeking emerging Lebanese artists who need need a hand, to offset Lebanon's multiple crises. The idea was to select artworks and offer them for sale, one per day, over the week of Dec. 3-9. After receiving about 200 applications in four days, BAF founder Laure d'Hauteville whittled down the artists to seven.

"The aim of this 'Open Call #1 for Lebanese Artists' is to reveal and promote the new talents of the Lebanese contemporary scene, to the numerous visitors who have participated in the fair since 2010," d'Hauteville said. "It is also to give back confidence to the artists, to accompany them in their creation, to help them live from their art, and to develop with them international initiatives."

"This open call gives the artists the opportunity to make their voice heard in COVID-19 time," co-curator Marie-Mathilde Gannat-Jabre added. "The opportunities to exhibit have disappeared and independent artists need more than ever to be supported and promoted in an innovative way, especially in Lebanon, which is experiencing a serious economic crisis. The positioning of BAF is daring and I hope it will resonate with foreign collectors."

Among the featured artists is Salah Missi, whose charcoal drawing "Endless loop" denounces the corruption of leaders in the Arab world. Michelle Maluf, inspired by her Lebanese-Colombian heritage, presented a tapestry called "Bright Side," combining ancestral techniques and contemporary elements to create a single piece with contracting materials, intended to be an allegory of Lebanese diversity.

Photographer Tony Mhanna's "Assemblee," from his "Wraith (Reviving Lebanon Heritage)" series, was also up for sale. The series looks at abandoned heritage spaces left after the Civil War, brought to life with fluttering fabric.

"I had the chance to take part in BAF 2019 at Le Grey Hotel, and the exhibition went viral on social media and it was beyond my expectations," Mhanna told The Daily Star. "I had many plans after my first exhibition. I wanted to do another at Beit Beirut and one at Rmeil Gallery in Gemmayzeh."

Less than a month later, the economic crisis and uprising had started.

"I always have people interested in my artwork, but due to the situation, many of them don't have the cash to purchase my work, and this was and still is a major problem for my career," Mhanna added. "I'm trying to reach art collectors and lovers through word of mouth. BAF did a great initiative for Lebanese artists and I think this is the best thing now to show the world our creativity and how much potential we have in art, and the patriotism that Lebanese people have to this country."

Zeinab Khalife's 2017 photo "One Moment on 40 Years" – part of a series that won first prize in the 2019 National Geographic Award – is still up for sale. The work captures Ammo Hassan, a dressmaker for 40 years in Sidon's old souk, who can only remember and recognize family members when at his sewing machine.

"This year has been one of the toughest in my life. Things started with the economic crisis that we are facing as Lebanese and personally as an artist and continued with COVID-19," Khalife said. "Several exhibitions and projects were canceled and many opportunities were missed. The economic crisis hindered our chances to improve our skills since attending international workshops became really hard, and purchasing equipment that would improve our final product is impossible now.

"The initiative of BAF to support Lebanese artists through these tough days gave me a push to continue my work and never give up in the current situation," she added. "The recognition and scope that BAF provided me through this initiative is priceless."

Camilia Salame's sculpture installation is a memorial to the bald ibis, a species of bird that disappeared after being last seen in 2015 during the destruction of Palmyra. Said to be the sacred bird that brought an olive branch to Noah after the Biblical story of the Great Flood, it is a figure of the rebirth but also of the loss of cultural and natural heritage.

Lea Skayem's photo – a black-and-white semi-nude self-portrait – investigates the relationship between the body and space, highlighting the challenges of women in conservative society.

Another eye-catching piece is Basile Ghosn's "The Left Hand of the Darkness," an architectural tracing print made using steel, found glass and other construction materials, inspired by science fiction author Ursula Le Guin's novel of the same name.

"The open call did help with some visibility. I have not sold the work yet, but I am confident that the network of BAF will attract new collectors," Ghosn told The Daily Star. "I have chosen a piece that is very representative of my composition and print. I fragmented reality by taking daily photographs of pieces of landscape and then, using a photocopier –tools inherited from fanzine culture – to reframe and superimpose photographs with images from the architecture magazines I collect, [followed by] the use of tinted windows or Plexiglas recovered from construction sites." Though none of the works have yet been purchased, d'Hauteville said many of the artists have been approached by potential buyers and are now in talks. Offers from galleries in Paris and the Biennale of Issy, in France, are also looking to have the collection exhibited in France, bringing more exposure for the artists.

The interest worldwide has prompted BAF to organize a second round once the first has been completed.

For more info, see: beirut-art-fair.com/program/open-call1-for-lebanese-artists/