

Creating a trans-Mediterranean culture through art

Home Beirut Sounding the Neighbors

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The concept of home as subject matter for artists is equivalent to the theme of love for songwriters; it is something that never wears out. We always have new things to say about it because, although it never changes, it changes all the time.

In this regard, when a show like “Home Beirut. Sounding the Neighbours” is hosted by a free-flow space like the Zaha Hadid-designed building of the MAXXI museum in Rome it takes on a special meaning. Walking in this boundary-less, fluid space, the feeling is one of stepping into a home in the process of being re-configured.

The show’s curators, Hou Hanru and Giulia Ferracci invite us to leave nationalism at the door. Here it is not about Lebanon as a nation, but rather about Beirut as a city, seen as a dynamic, more manageable hub for different identities coming together, re-aggregating into new shapes. Just like continental plates.

The exhibition is the third chapter of the “Mediterranean Trilogy” through which the MAXXI has been examining the interaction between

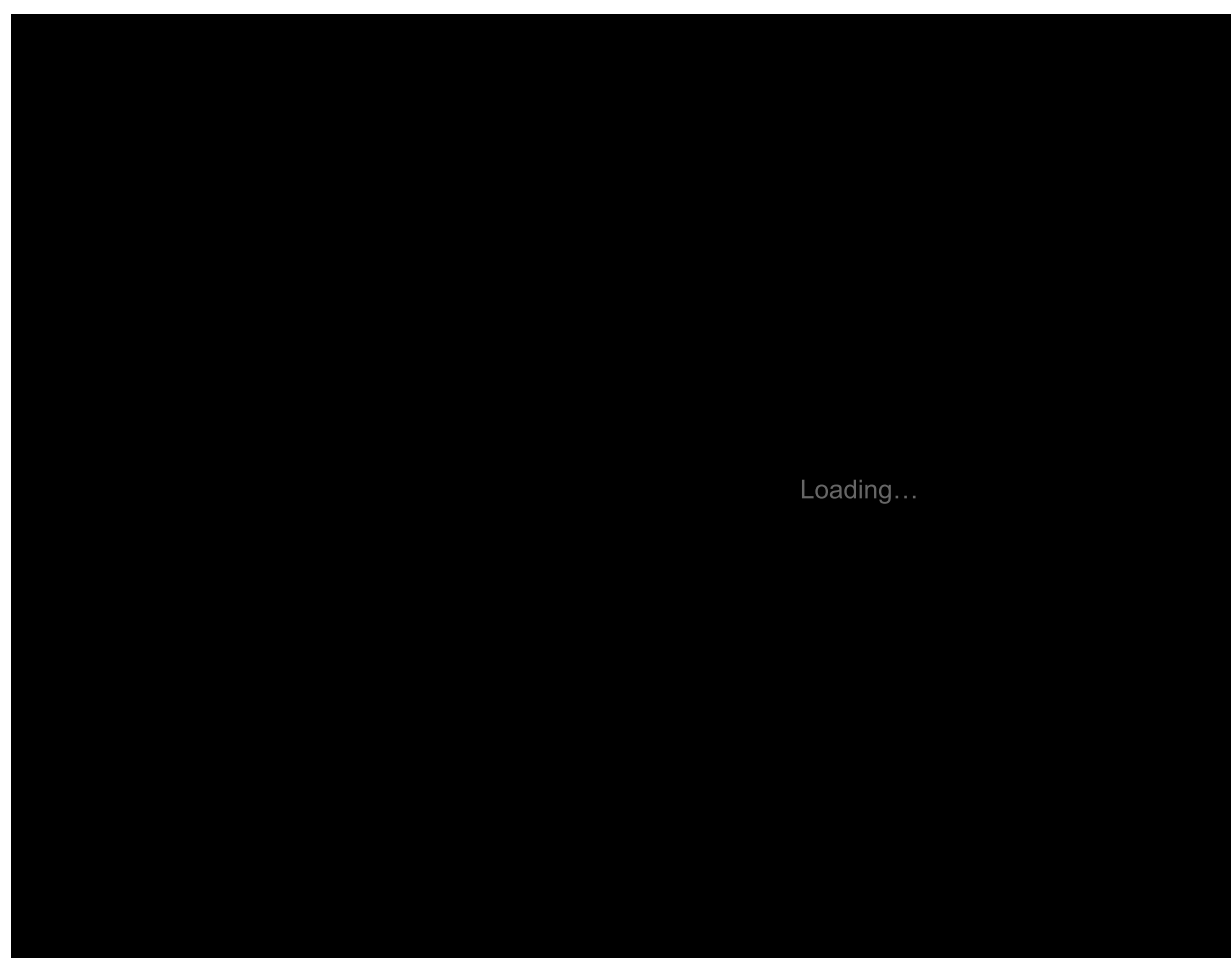
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the artistic communities of Europe and the Middle East. The aim is prompting the birth of a new trans-Mediterranean culture.



Walking through the works of the 30 artists on show really feels like taking the pulse of an incredibly vital city. The most interesting part of “Home Beirut” is that it is a highly political show in the most profound sense of the word. For these artists, being political means representing and reflecting on the recent history of conflicts. It means looking back and re-enacting memories and the micro-narratives which have been left out of the “big history”. It means laying out imaginative plans for the future, while keeping anchored to a present, the ceiling of which might sometimes feel pretty low.

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We can see politics slipping into the urban morphology of Beirut in the section “A Home for Remapping”. Like bad plastic surgery which modifies the features of a noble, old face, making it slightly grotesque, so too we can gauge the impact of neoliberalism on what was once a city known as the Paris of the Middle East, whatever such a colonial reminder might mean for the population; in many of the works on show we can see the colonial past represented as pride and disgrace in equal measure.

We can tell that Beirut artists are concerned deeply with issues of privatisation, expropriation and lack of public investment. The work by Walid Raad, “A proposal for a Beirut Art Museum”, is its usual mix of fictionality and reality; it calls for the presence of an institution in the local art world.

From photographs — the preferred medium of many artists in the show — we can observe the urban sprawl which doesn't take into account the need for the eye to rest on the beauty of architecture. And yet, in the installations of *Marwan Rechmaoui* — whose work often deals with themes of urban development and social history — we manage to find, if not beauty, at least interestingness. In the series of works called “Duchamp's bride”, pillars of reinforced concrete evoke both great artists from the past, as well as elements of pop culture. The artist also created a rubber carpet that visitors can walk on, representing the map of Beirut.

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In terms of curation, we must note that the whole show has a strong presence of textual explanations, necessary to clarify the context in which the art was created. The 1975-1990 Civil War, the 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon and today's crisis on the Syrian border are indeed the true canvases for many of these works. Beirut artists are historians in their own right, providing first-hand documentation and bringing their own personal experiences forward in order to counter the official accounts, which are often biased.

However, in the section where the political meets the private, called "A Home for Memory", we can leave the captions aside for a moment, in order to enter into a spontaneous dialogue with intimate works. Mona Hatoum, for example, is an international artist who moved to London to study; she uses video to document a chain of letters sent to her mother, where personal confessions are intertwined with current events.

On the other hand, Mounira Al Solh, chooses a medium which has been for centuries exquisitely feminine, that of embroidery. On big sheets, she mixes images with text, both in Arabic and English. The large collages of fabric are meant to be a reflection on history, and are a patchwork of sensations challenging the reporting of official news.

In "A Home for Everyone" we can see how Beirut is in constant communication with its neighbours and deeply concerned with their struggles. This is indeed a city shaped by refugees and constant migration.

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Perhaps the most striking work, not only in this section but in the entire show, is a three-channel video by Roy Dib called "A spectacle of privacy". The video presents the body of a man and the voice of a woman – which is already an interesting choice challenging common gender representations. Through the discussion we hear relationship issues unfold, and we witness the creation of emotional and physical boundaries. What appears initially to be a record of mundane problems facing a couple, becomes abruptly the starting point for a metaphorical discussion on the relationship between Palestine and Israel.

In this work the micro-story and the macro-narrative come together strongly. That's where there is a sense that the shared struggles of the people of the Mediterranean become one: different experiences which have the seed in the bodies of the individuals and the way they relate to each other.

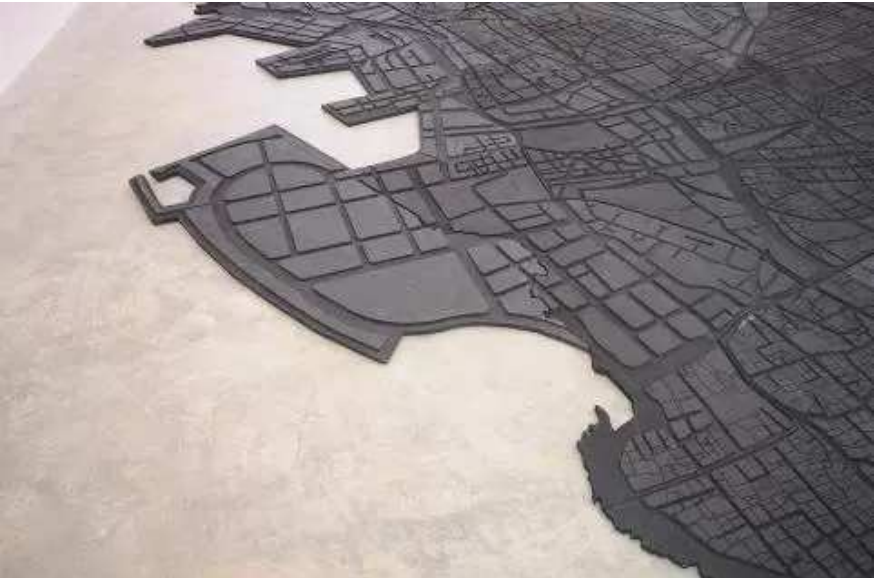
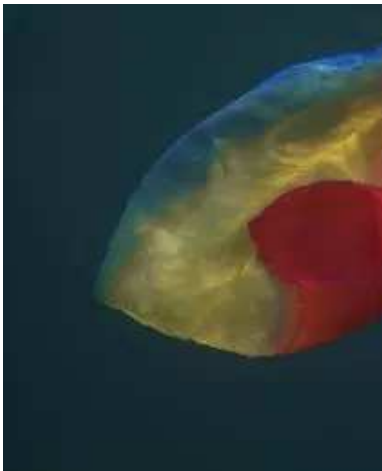
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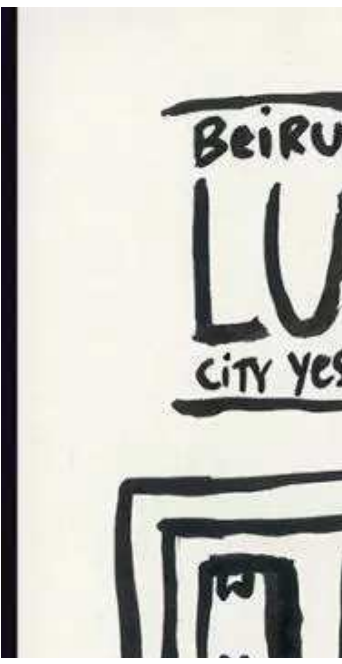
The last section of the show also embraces music, keeping the show true to its title "Sounding Neighbours". "A Home of Joy" sees culture and its production become a source of sincere happiness for the Beirut locals, and art positions itself as an act of resistance and life.

Whether through songs, installations, video or photography, "Home Beirut. Sounding the Neighbours" shows a European audience the complexity and vitality of the Beirut art scene, which is really contributing to the ideas of a new expanded Mediterranean culture. It

is a powerful reminder that, yes, life might feel unstable on those continental plates. However, resilience in the face of change – and the joy of creativity amidst change — is the way to go.







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