



OPINION

‘Beyrouth Ya Beyrouth’: Mapping Beirut through comics



1 Comment

April 3, 2025 at 2:54 pm



A Lebanese flag hung on a car is seen among the destroyed roads and collapsed buildings in Tyre, Lebanon on November 29, 2024. [Murat Şengül – Anadolu Agency]



by **Naima Morelli**  **naimamorelli**



There are some cities that are impossible to grasp fully. No matter how much you try to explore them, to understand them, it's impossible to make sense of it all. Beirut is one of these cities, continually morphing, changing and rising from the ashes despite the hardships, **wars** and seemingly endless other **crises**.

We find all of these aspects and more in "Beyrouth Ya Beyrouth", a comic book collection in the form of a newspaper created last year by the comic book festival "Rencontres du 9e Art, Festival BD d'Aix" at Aix-en-Provence in the South of France. The collection sees a group of Lebanese artists sharing different sides of Beirut that are less known to the media. Rather than focusing on the crises and turmoil, they aim to capture the city's everyday life, emotions and experiences through the medium of comics.

Michelle Standjovski, a comic book author, illustrator and professor at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), played a central role in the creation of the collaborative

Latest news [See all](#)

'Beyrouth
Ya
Beyrouth'...

Hundreds
of
thousand...

Chancellor
Scholz says
he 'canno...

Russia says
US threats
of militar...

Israel:
Netanyahu
vows to...

Subscribe to our newsletter

Er

Sign up

project based on capturing Beirut's different districts and their residents. The idea for this came after Standjovski was contacted by Serge Darpex, director of the Festival BD d'Aix, in which she had participated before. "Serge contacted me and suggested the idea of creating a newspaper to be distributed," she told me.

The festival, managed by the tourism office of Aix-en-Provence, has a unique structure that offers distinct advantages. Maxime Arnaud, the spokesperson for the festival, explained that having access to the city's communication resources is what helped boost the festival's reach and open it up to a wider audience, rather than comic book lovers only. The idea for the journal format was also intended to let the French public get to know Beirut through the popular medium of comics.

Initially, the proposal was for a more general focus on Lebanon, but Standjovski immediately saw an opportunity to focus on Beirut. "I visualised something around the capital, rather than Lebanon in general," she said. "I thought that it could be a choral project with several voices, several participants, resembling the kind of mosaic that is Beirut."

Her vision was to capture Beirut as a living, breathing city through the eyes of the people who know it best and are sensitive to the changes and small details: resident artists. She reached out to a group of colleagues and students at ALBA, inviting them to participate in the project.

“

"We wanted to map out the city, visually and emotionally."

The contributors were tasked with depicting different neighbourhoods, each one presenting their own personal view of the area chosen. Standjovski emphasised that the goal was not to provide a comprehensive, factual account of Beirut, but to capture emotions and lived experiences. "We haven't tried to be exhaustive at all. We didn't really try to tell the whole story. It's more about emotions, sensations, personal experiences."

READ: Lebanese artist Nadia Saikali and Beirut as the centre of abstract art

The overarching goal of the newspaper project was to avoid the stereotypical representations of Beirut often seen in foreign media. When international journalists cover Lebanon, they usually focus on the same well-worn narratives and locations. Standjovski wanted this project to break away from this and present the city in its diversity. "Our main objective was to avoid clichés. Foreign journalists often highlight the same neighbourhoods and the same narratives. We wanted to showcase Beirut in ways that aren't typically seen."

Each contributor focused on a neighbourhood or aspect of Beirut that had personal significance to them. Standjovski herself depicted the path of protestors during the 2019-2020 revolution, capturing the routes they took through the city and the significance of mobile phones in documenting the events. "I wanted to show the diversity of people, their different lifestyles, different mentalities," she said.

“

The project allowed each artist to share a piece of Beirut that resonated with their own experiences.

The final form of "Beyrouth Ya Beyrouth" is a 24-page journal to be distributed for free during the Festival des Rencontres du 9e Art in April and May, and will continue to be available to be distributed upon request by the Festival.

A significant aspect of the project was the involvement of Standjovski's students from ALBA. As part of the Master's programme in Illustration and Comics, several second-year students were invited to contribute to the newspaper and attend the festival in France.

"More than others I felt that my students need to breathe, to get out of this war in which we were not yet directly involved, but we were still affected," said Standjovski. When the students asked if all five of them could attend, she reached out to Darpex for support. "The next day, I sent a message to Serge. He called me on the phone and said, 'Listen, Michelle, I don't have any money, but we're going to find some. The five of them are going to come.'"

The students' excitement was evident when their teacher shared the news. "They were so happy. Beside the

publication of the journal, we had an exhibition and a concert dessin , a live drawing performance set to music." This unique format allowed artists to bring their work to life in real time, creating a dynamic and engaging experience for the audience.

"The concert dessin  is a way to make the artwork come alive, to give it movement and voice," added Arnaud.

Lebanon's comic book scene has faced numerous challenges, particularly in terms of language and market limitations. While many Lebanese people speak Arabic, French and English, literary Arabic, the language typically used in literature, doesn't adapt well in a comic book format. "In Lebanon, there aren't really any comic book publishers for adults, the market is more focused on illustrated books for children," noted Standjovski.

“

Despite these difficulties, ALBA has been a significant force in supporting comic artists.

Until the financial crisis of 2019, the academy regularly published students' work as part of their academic projects. "The good thing about ALBA publications is that they are distributed in bookshops, but they are not for profit. They're academic. So, in a way, they are published to encourage publication, to encourage students, to serve as a springboard."

Several of her former students have used ALBA's publications to launch their careers abroad. "It's easier to get published in Europe or the United States," she said. "Most of our former students either work in illustration or not in comics." Standjovski herself has been published in France and for years she created a weekly comic strip for *L'Orient-Le Jour*.

Working as an artist in Lebanon is never easy, and that was especially so last year when the journal came out in the context of the country's political and economic instability. With frequent power outages, internet disruptions and unreliable infrastructure, the logistics of creating art can be challenging. Yet, as Michelle Standjovski pointed out, these technical difficulties pale in comparison to the psychological toll that the crises take on people. "People

are exhausted. Sometimes contributors would promise work and never deliver, not out of neglect, but sheer burnout," she explained. The country's ongoing crises make it difficult to maintain momentum in creative projects.

Despite these obstacles, Standjovski and her students found strength in their collaboration. "We weren't doing well. But working on this, collaborating, creating; it gave us a sense of purpose. It was our compass, our flotation device. We don't sink when we do things that interest us."

OPINION: Marseille' Revenir' exhibition sets out to reframe migrations, especially 'Return'

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Monitor.

1 COMMENT

Unless otherwise stated in the article above, this work by **Middle East Monitor** is licensed under a *Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License*. If the image(s) bear our credit, this license also applies to them. **What does that mean?** For other permissions, please **contact us**.

Spotted an error on this page? Let us know

Trending

Today
This week

What is the International Criminal Court?

NEWS

Hungary says it is withdrawing from ICC during Netanyahu's...

NEWS