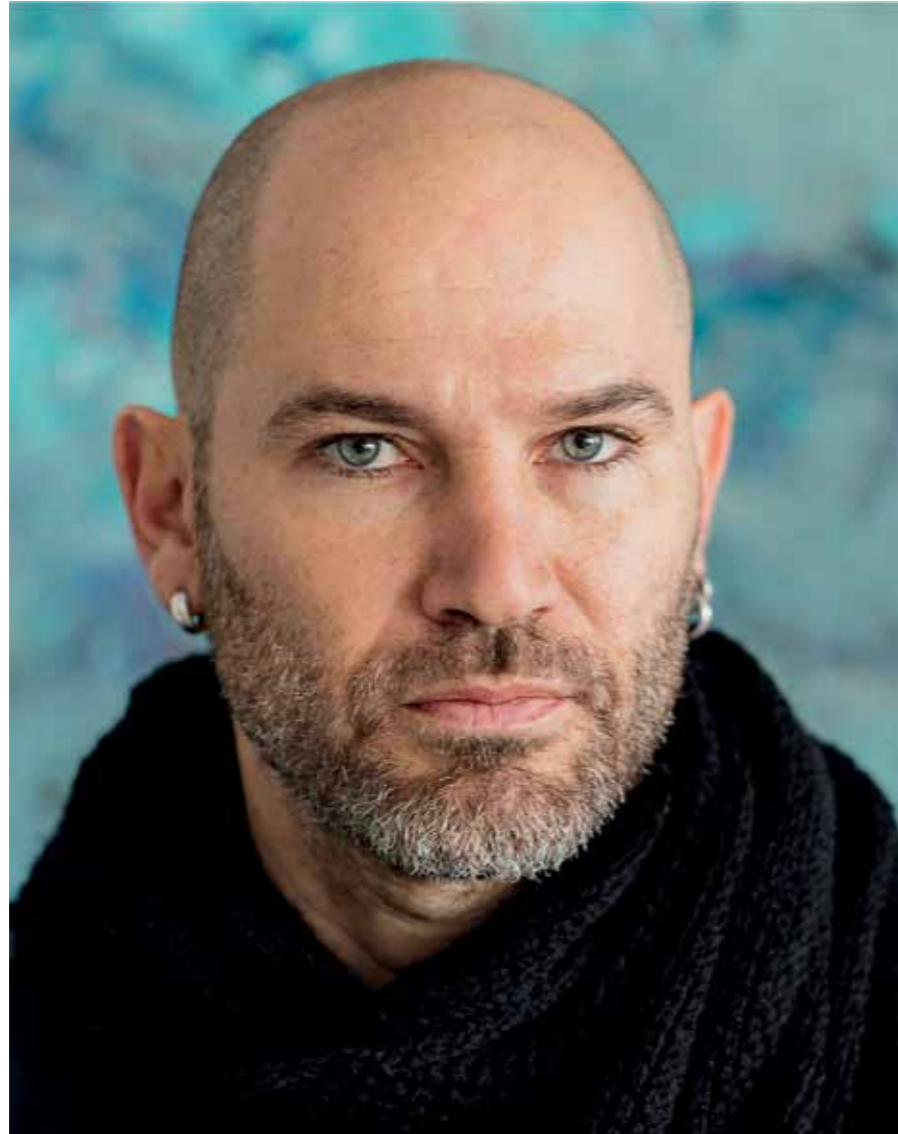


AYMAN BAALBAKI
/'blōbak/



© Thierry Van Biesen

Return to BEIRUT XXI c.

Coming back to Beirut in the early years of the new century, with its mid XXth century art and cultural scene values in mind, and with memories of when it was rightly considered the regional window to the world of ideals and concepts of the post World War era. Beirut in that postcolonial era had grown to become the intellectual hub and beacon of the Arab world, a little jewel of a city on the oriental shores of the Mediterranean. There, where the rainbow range of social, political, economical, and cultural battles of the emerging Arab world were contested and fought in its universities and cafés, on its polemic and lively trilingual press pages, and in its thriving publishing houses, while at the core of the region's coming of age, the city banks and its trade organizations were stewarding the new regional wealth, in an enviable yet thriving business-as-usual mode.

Today, one is confronted in Beirut with a cataclysmic transformation of scenery: Sociopolitical thought and expression... mute, cultural values and identity... lacking in national consensus, even the quality of language... gradually meeting Esperanto in some ways, development terms of reference... without an outlook, the media... near bankruptcy, the general scale of values... mostly material, and finally, the inevitable fall out of globalization on a comparatively small national economy; and all on a backdrop of a still present history of conflicts and wars.

Encounter



Fawzi Baalbaki, sketch for "Goodmorning Jabal Amel", 1981



"Goodmorning Wadi Abu Jamil", mixed media/installation, 2005

In Beirut, as in the majority of other art capitals in the region, including those pretending and aspiring to be such, one becomes painfully aware of the inadequacy of the terms of reference of that heroic modern era. One needed to be re educated with updated and compatible terms of reference to enable one to grasp, and be familiar with the new socioeconomic, political, and cultural scenes. Art appreciation and its acquisition had moved at amazing lightning speed from the domain of an educated, culturally aware and engaged middle class, where modern art, as with poetry and other cultural practices had enjoyed wide berths of freedom, in covering a universal spectrum of subjects, styles, and mediums of expression, with a vigorous patronizing public that enjoyed profound individual and personal encounters with art work, now being gradually replaced by a consensual media driven culture with new terms of reference, generally based on novelty, technology, trending, and the economic values that dominate the world today... and the art scene is no exception.

Dipping into the art scene of Beirut after more than two decades of absence, I was keenly aware of an under-the-surface, vitality and energy that I had mistakenly attributed to be reminiscent of those pre civil war days, though in different scales and keys from that of the Beirut of the sixties and seventies. Now, I can confidently maintain that these notes of earlier discerned murmurings were nothing but distinctive and original voices of an under forty generation that was born after the Civil War blackout of some twenty years, and with hardly any experience of it, assiduously redefining their new age cultural and social points of reference with a fresh range of manifestations free from the shackles of a twice lapsed generational gap..

I first came into contact with Ayman Baalbaki's work some time 2006, with working knowledge of the new Beirut art scene that had dwindled into a blank by 1990, seeing "Bonjour Wadi Abu Jamil" perched in inner left corner of "Agial Gallery". It had an unexplained magical impact on my practiced and somewhat outdated art definitions. But it stayed with me for the next few days, and I re visited the gallery to see it again. I had an irresistible urge of wanting to see it in my own living space.

In the same period, I saw his Babel hanging in the gallery for the first time, its moving epic biblical reference could not escape demonstrating a highly cultured modern mind and talent.

Few days later, on a visit to Saleh Barakat's welcoming basement den, he showed me some recent arrivals for a forthcoming exhibition. These were small-scale variations on Ayman's "Mulatham" theme. That closed it, this artist was on my re discover agenda. I found out much about his work and history, and was keen to meet him.

That came about sometime later; in one of Agial's openings I sighted a turbaned and elegant young man that floated at ease in the crowd, I was told it was Ayman Baalbaki. We were introduced. I from the era of the 60's, and he, from Today, a calm and self-assured young man, courteous and deferent, low spoken and totally devoid of small talk and loudness. Courtesies exchanged, promises of a studio visits were undertaken, only to be broken by the devouring Beirut time and tempo.



Babel, acrylic on canvas, 260x200cm, 2005

Blowback

A decade had passed since my first encounter with Ayman Baalbaki's work, during that period, what was taking place in the Beirut art scene occupied much of my attention, awareness and curiosity, since it was an extremely turbulent decade that saw the precipitated end of a twenty year occupation; a sequence of assassinations that left the country in an unprecedented state of political polarization; that, in addition to another devastating war waged on the country, leaving parts of it, and its national infrastructure in an unprecedented state of destruction. Paradoxically, the art scene was still flourishing and carrying on at an amazing pace. Galleries were opening at unprecedented rates, reconstructed museums re opening to their public, new public collections inaugurating their space, new museums in their final planning and realization stages; and all that... in a state of deteriorating economy that some pessimist analysts may call collapse.

Ayman's steady inroads into the regional and international art scenes provoked much of my inquisitive curiosity. Invited to visit his Hamra studio, I thought was a rare opportunity to explore this phenomenal artist's creative process. Over three long visits to his space, while he was putting the last touches to his forthcoming solo exhibition "Blowback", our conversations covered a myriad of topics ranging from mundane daily life issues to those that trigger and provoke his creative work.

Roaming around that large open plan space, surrounded by these recent works that leave no wall space uncovered by layers of neatly stacked large canvases, one is in the center of an unmistakable energy source. In answer to my question about the speed and tempo of brushwork needed for the coverage of works as large as

that of the carcass of the Israeli bombed MEA carrier, he candidly replied that in his current work mood he is testing the limits of relying on his intuitive rapid pace of work, that besides brushwork, embraced all instantaneous impulses to shear or over paint whenever intuition guides him... *"I need to transmit the immediate impulse..."*

Memory was an unavoidable central theme in Baalbaki's work, especially that most of his iconic subjects are of moments that took place in time, in his earlier childhood like the Embassy subjects – bombed 1983 when he was an 8-year child; even some that took place before he was born, like the airport bombing of December 1968 ... *For me memory is a cumulative heritage, as I was raised into a culturally and politically engaged family... The image that now dominates our knowledge process is central to my work... even the physical image itself is central to my aesthetic awareness and my work... It can be an active stored memory element, or even a medium in my preparation for work, exactly like foundation brushwork...*

The magnificent *Barakat Building* work intrigued me... composed of a depiction of the scaffolded image of that emblematic building destroyed during the Civil War when it was well known as a notorious sniper's nest... the precision interpretation of the scaffold in contrast to his intuitive and evident fast brush work made me pose the question... His comment was revealing... *I finished the work without the scaffold, I was aware of a sense of incompleteness... I let it rest... I never release a work that does not pass my own critical evaluation... the solution was adding the scaffold work, and I proceeded in rendering what its finishing required to blend into its completion...* Strewn around were a collection of works on flags, some in a fairly large format and painted on "Shader" – water



My God!, acrylic on vegetable cart/electric lamps, 210x127x8cm, 2008



The Barakat Building



View from the studio, July 2016. © Yara Boustany



View from the studio, July 2016. © Yara Boustany



Checkpoint, murano glass, 2013



Checkpoint, murano glass, 2013

proofed tent canvas; others in uniform smaller formats depicting different international identities, all were with fire burning through them, in a reflection on the raging modern conflict of identities, some to illustrate his current exhibition title: Blowback.

I did not need to elaborate any further on their evident lesson that dates back to creation as a central moral theme that **Newton*** had elegantly summed up in our modern era in his Third Law of Physics:

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Waddah Faris
August 2016

* *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, 1687



1559
Mixed media on laminate and neon
D= 116 cm, 2014

The Embassy
Mixed media on canvas
250x200 cm
2014-2016



The Embassy

Mixed media on canvas

D= 120 cm

2016



(The following pages 14&15)

Blood borders series (work in progress)

Acrylic on paper laid on canvas

50x70 cm- each

2013-2016



Beirut concrete
Acrylic on canvas
100x150 cm
2014





All That Remains
Acrylic on canvas
250x600 cm
2014-2016

July 2012, Quetta
Acrylic on canvas
D= 120 cm
2016



No Flag Zone

Neon
94x10 cm
2016

July 2012, Quetta

Mixed media on canvas
200x300 cm
2015



(Following pages 26 and 27)

November 2011, Tehran

Mixed media on canvas
200x300 cm
2015



No Flag Zone (work in progress)
Acrylic on paper laid on canvas
50x70 cm- each
2013-2016



The Parliament
Acrylic on canvas
D= 120 cm
2015



Untitled

Acrylic on canvas
200x250 cm
2014



(The following pages 34 and 35)

Barakat Building

Mixed media on canvas
250x400 cm
2015-2016



MEA

Mixed media on canvas
D= 120 cm
2016



(The following pages 38 and 39)

MEA

Mixed media on canvas
150x380cm
2015-2016

(The following pages 40 and 41)

MEA

Mixed media on canvas
200x400cm
2014-2015

(The following pages 42 and 43)

Draw The Curtain!

Mixed media on canvas and neon
220x400cm
2016





A painting of a dilapidated, multi-story building with a dark, textured facade. The building is set against a sky filled with vibrant, abstract brushstrokes in shades of blue, green, red, and yellow. The overall style is expressive and somewhat abstract. The text "THE END" is overlaid in the center of the building in a glowing blue, neon-like font.

THE END

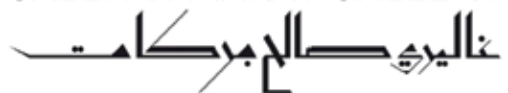
Ayman Baalbaki

Ayman Baalbaki was born in 1975 in Beirut, Lebanon. He received his diploma in Painting and Sculpting at the Institute of Fine Arts from the Lebanese University, 1994-1998. He continued his artistic education in Paris France, where he received another diploma in Art- Space in 2001-2003 from ENSAD and later a D.E.A in 'Art of Images and Contemporary art' in 2002-2003 from Paris VIII.

He currently lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon.



SALEH BARAKAT GALLERY



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