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A picture of environmental violence



An installation view of Samad's "Memorial to Wildlife," at Saleh Barakat Gallery. Photo courtesy of the artist

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👤 Ava Anderson | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: With a wall of painted birds, Hassaan el Samad's "Memorial to Wildlife," hung in Saleh Barakat Gallery's upstairs rooms, makes a plea to the people of Lebanon to respect their environment and the creatures that inhabit it. An installation of oils dominated by depictions of lifeless birds, the show is a powerful tribute to the wide variety of avian species that inhabit or pass through Lebanon and have been decimated in what Samad sees as increasingly crude hunting practices.

These birds are rendered belly-up, legs outstretched, or faces in the ground, wings folded down. A sense of grief and peace hangs over the series, as Samad has intentionally omitted blood or any sign of violence that may have been inflicted on the bodies. The figures convey death, though to the optimistic viewer they may only be sleeping.

"Maybe I'm trying to make them [sleep]," Samad said of his subjects. "I don't want them to be dead."

Beautifully detailed in their unique intricacies, the birds are rendered against a wash of thick brushstrokes. Nothing else competes for viewers' attention on the canvases, all of which are hung flush to one another, like pieces of a puzzle.

Born during Lebanon's 1975-90 Civil War, Samad grew up hunting with his father and developed a passion for birds early on. He said the works in this series were created out of pure fascination and appreciation for the animals, mixed with anger at the damage some humans have wrought.

Samad isn't new to art about environmental decline in Lebanon. His first solo show, in 2017, looked at Lebanon's worsening trash crisis.

"[The environment] concerns me a lot," he said. "My work, my country, my region, my people, the space I live in. It's traumatic for me.

"I noticed and I watched my world being destroyed and saw dramatic change, environmental most of all. Now I see this catastrophic situation, so I decided to make a statement to stop hunting and make paintings," he continued.

"I've always been amazed by the beauty of the birds, and the variety of birds in Lebanon."

He attributed the level of devastation to a certain lawlessness and sense of entitlement that has grown in segments of the hunting community. "[Hunting] is increasing and becoming something crazy, and everyone here wants to hunt - [with] no rules, no laws, no control, nothing," he said.

"We have some violent culture, or a violence in culture," he added. "I don't know why. I cannot analyze the people's psychology, but it's sick. They don't have any kind of respect for nature or the environment."

Strewn throughout the dozens of birds are representations of what Samad sees as a toxic and harmful culture, such as a defaced sign reading "hunting prohibited" in Arabic, a Pepsi can or a tin of fowl (prepared broad beans) pockmarked with bullet holes.

"It's a part of the package, the violence package," he explained.

"[When they] don't find anything to hunt for example, they shoot the signs, and they make kind of a challenge against the authorities maybe. It's something sadistic."

Samad said hundreds of species of birds migrated through Lebanon or resided here full time. For him, this show is not only about exhibiting the harm done to a large number of birds, but also elevating them so that people here appreciate the beauty that continues to exist.

"I'm trying to highlight ... how rich our environment still is," he explained, "even though we are destroying it."

The exhibition conveys a dark but hopeful vision.

"I don't mind being dark," Samad said. "There's some message, some contribution in making people aware of what's going on."

"Memorial to Wildlife" is up at Saleh Barakat Gallery through July 25.

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