

Beirut Octet

a generation's journey of resilience & faith

afaf zurayk

Introduction

In this most recent body of work, Afaf Zurayk invites us to join her in a cathartic journey of painting, poetic prose, and poetry. The journey mirrors the history of a city and of a generation that have borne the brunt of tragic events for decades, most poignantly epitomized in the horrific Beirut port blast of August 4, 2020. Through a narration of being and of witnessing, her art describes the conquest of trust, faith, and resilience over disappointment, alienation, and misfortune.

By far Zurayk's most ambitious project to date, her poetic narrative brilliantly flows from the personal into the generational and geographic as well as the timeless and the global.

She paints a sensitive transformation from the earthly to the ethereal: "You are artists. You change pasts and form futures. You can move forward. It is all in the tilling, not in the trees."

The exhibit is designed in the shape of an octagon, historically a symbol for renewal, rebirth, regeneration, and

transition. It is laid out across eight distinct rooms, each featuring a chapter from "Beirut Octet: A Generation's Journey of Resilience & Faith" as well as its relevant art work.

The eight chapters, aptly named "dawn\ beginnings", "morning\ blossoming", "midday\ resilience", "afternoon\ introspection", "evening\ light", "sunset\ trust", "twilight\ quietude", and "dusk\ transcendence", effectively position a personal biography in its timeless human dimension.

In realizing the exhibit, Afaf Zurayk collaborated with Saleh Barakat and Rami Saab as curators, with Twig Collaborative for the architecture, with Noel Nasr for the photography, and with Clare Leader for the copy editing. She remains thankful to Namir Cortas for his insights and help throughout.

*I look up at the world
Through moving shadows
Held still, as white
Stirs
And turns into oblivion.*

Dawn | Beginnings

We lived gently then. Our house, next to water, was as deeply rooted in the earth as a tree and equally as old. We learned music listening to land and water commune in waves of sound. Watering our lives, we grew, emulating the grey green pine trees while hues of wildflowers lured us. Oftentimes we left each other bouquets of love.

Over time the land receded. We found our house resting on water, our tree rootless. Ruptured, we drifted to all corners of the earth seeking balance. We painted ourselves in the colors of sea and mountain and adorned our new homes with remembered faith. We swam on land and walked on water, looking for uprooted trees, finding solace in brick, wood, and endless landscapes. We were young. Our houses, physical and real, were our steady force, our assurance, our reassurance.

It took time to learn to be soft and true from the inside out, to find home in our inner being, to root our tree in our very soul.



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*

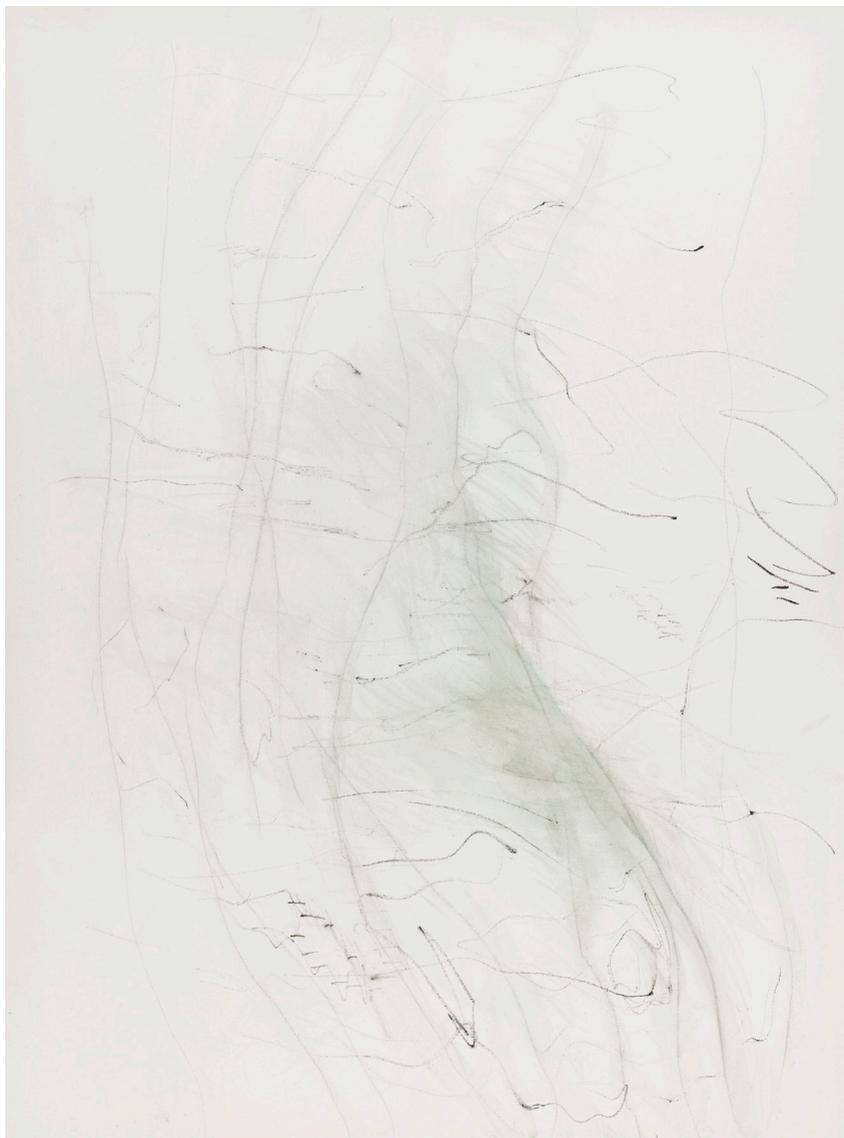
Morning | Blossoming

Yes, we were young.

Our sensuality, perceived in tangible form, was a passage through an eternal emptiness. We sought light in layers of comprehension, layers of being. Our immensity we compressed in a body not fully awakened. We moved in and out of awareness to find one another everywhere and in everything. Once found, we basked in our union and rooted ourselves in the earth, consumed with hunger. Doubt and uncertainty kept movement curtailed and desires contained. We longed to float in ephemeral space, longed for the presence we glimpsed between wakefulness and sleep.

In time life blossomed into a quest for trust, learned and acquired between tribulations and insights. Our emptiness became a space, our colors evoked light. Transparent, our souls recollected an awareness, an inner presence. A mist of recognition enveloped us as we joined with the ether, flowering in dreamtime and connecting from within. We sensed rather than touched each other and converged as one through eternity.

Transcending, open and receptive, we learned to feel, to experience the earthly as it became ethereal.



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*

Midday | Resilience

This is a story of minds born hopeful and thrust into life too young to despair and too fragile not to try one more time.

As children our grandmothers knitted our lives, while our parents fretted. We played with abandon, a game of hide-and-seek in the darkness of the night, not knowing it was a rehearsal— our childhood, for once, preparing us for what was to come. We communed with the earth, making music as we danced, and built imaginary dwellings. We curved our bodies to fit the uncomfortable demands of puberty, our eyes fixed on a mountain floating above the sea. We blossomed, touching a pinecone, and felt the earth open and close, cradling us.

Guided by shadows, sensing but not seeing, we spent our youth in the stupor of friendships and just causes. The country a battlefield, we straddled hope upon hope believing in the sanctity of pure breath, and the terror of its cessation. We scattered around the world in search of goodness and containment. Finding ourselves in uncertain seas, we learned to navigate, anxiously and with trepidation. Our expectations diminished and our terrors transformed, aloneness became our only reality, transparency our trusted veil. Devastating private wars aimed sniper bullets at our souls. Darkness

became darker than empty desolation. Fearful at every turn, we tried to steer, remembering and forgetting strategies. Abandoned, we learned the many faces of war, and we grew.

We grew when we planted oaks inside one another and learned the meaning of being true both in solitude and through communion. The space in-between became an expanse of white, contained and content in nature's embrace. We rooted seeds, emptiness devoid of debris. Our lives recalled the earth and steadied for a moment.

We returned home in a spiral of nothingness descending then ascending in a line we drew at dawn.

Our home, a prism refracting the hidden, transformed our beliefs, fitting us rigidly into corners. We remained—edifices crumbling, friendships solidifying, and memories extending into ripples. We found ourselves submerged in turbulent waters. Fluidity reigned. Blinded by a merciless sun, we watched as trees burned. We persisted, clinging to the fable of our history. The more imprisoned we felt, the more our minds imagined one more chance to be free. It came upon us as a devastating blow that drove us deeper into trusting in the untrustable current of fluidity that is our home. Alone, and in community, we were suspended, the muddy waters of chaos rampant, in a home with nothing left to steer.

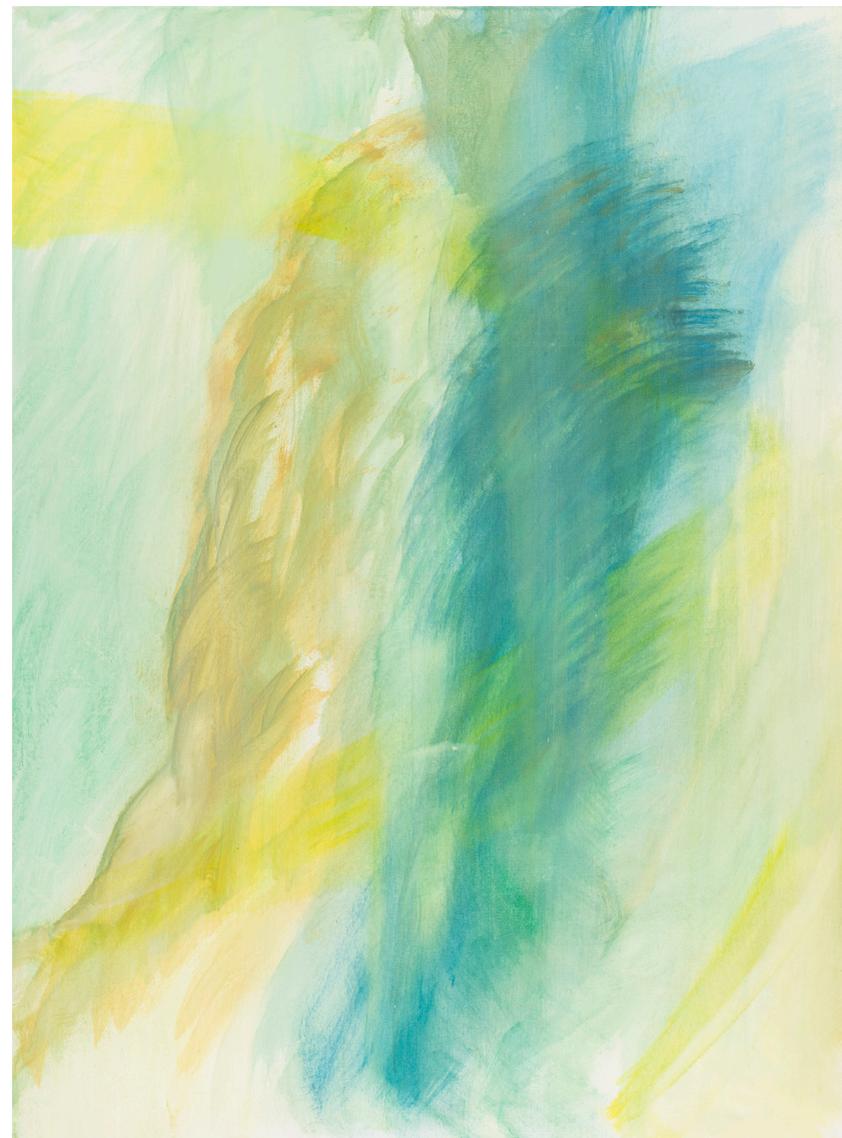
From deep within, we begin to whisper silently and to push ourselves once again towards the unknown, redrawing our line, at dusk, in white upon white.



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*



*120 x 90 cm
oil on canvas*



*120 x 90 cm
oil on canvas*

Afternoon | Introspection

Dry wells and suspended rocks color our days. Masses incapable of tears defy us. Open graves are our fate—unhealing wounds, a scorching sun, an open desert, millions dead, the silence of birds. Reflections, uncertainty, hunger within and without, lonely tables and violins, all pregnant with war.

The sun hovers over our disputes, resolved in seconds, on a round table with angles. Have you ever noticed the difference between angle and angel? It's merely a point of view, a change of direction, a haven for a new beginning. We could not spell either one. Blind with hope, our house a ruin, we turned to our faces, beseeching them for help. They smiled and responded: after seventy-three years you should know better than to ask.

Nevertheless they came to us last night, dressed in white and glowing. We shuddered with fear at their faith in us, transparent and free, despite our rage, clad also in white yet brittle at the edges. Our faces told us: You are artists. You change pasts and form futures. You can move forward. It is all in the tilling, not in the trees.

We wanted assurance that we will not undo death—that we will arrive. We started to look beyond without fear or doubt and with a palette of our own making. Our house, shifting position, began to move along a road as gentle as winding strokes protected by pines. With our house no longer on shifting sands, we will visit the cemetery on equal ground, dreaming of a tomorrow as gentle as brushes dipped in turpentine. We will make music and color the earth like a rainbow.



100 x 80 cm
mixed media on canvas



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*

Evening | In the presence of light

*The soft misty light
Of darkness
Illuminates
As the morning dew
Begins
And ends
The mystery of the shift
In gray circles
Ever turning
Ever mourning.*

Our country embodies light—the light of the soul, the light of the sun, the light of the setting moon. We live transparently with translucent light, shimmering light, evening light. We learned early to live with the glow of togetherness, not recognizing its rarity. Our childhood trained us to look from within as we were being sensitized to see the shadows, to model forms, to observe from without. We open crevices of darkness, merging intuition and foresight, as we search for luminosity to clear our inner labyrinths. Recollecting a loving hand and a promised smile, we feel a radiant shimmering and relive rays of insights, shadows of communication, and warm kindness. Nuanced shifts of perception beckon to us—our illumination a bridge, a compass, a safety net.

Light persists. The light which warms us with its mists and that which blinds us with its fiery force. We live in their shadow and continue to seek the spirit that shapes, while guiding, from deep within.

Darkness is not the absence of light. It is its closure.



*100 x 80 cm
oil on canvas*



*90 x 120 cm
oil on canvas*



*90 x 120 cm
mixed media on canvas*

Sunset | Learning trust

*A force
All seeing
Holds me dear
And close.
Enough to wander
Through the forest
And wade.*

Seeing light in another, our spirits awaken, our bodies nearing our souls. With light illuminating our perceptions, we begin to trust one another, tentatively, then more deeply—melting barriers, seeing through, feeling within, mirroring. At times we merge, our union an apparition encountered in dreams and visions. We nourish one another with the milk of togetherness. Yet remembering exile, we live in the shadow of fear, of separation, of solitude. By communing physically and emotionally we transcend both and acquire guiding insights.

We learn to walk with one another, lighting our days with each other's hopes. There is solace in community as we journey. Internal strife, as potent as ravaging wars, illumines conflicts as we proceed. Conflict, no stranger to dialogue, allows us to move both intimately and socially beyond our imagined borders, leaving us closer to inner truths and more accepting of change. Closely and forever within our being, our relationships emerge in unexpected moments to light our paths inward and outward. Relating to another is our aspiration to become one with the unknowable known. It is our spiritual longing, our quietude.



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*

Twilight | Quietude

The permanence of fragility—a flower, a seed, a look—catches me unawares, prolongs me, leaves me permeable like soft rain on softer sand on yet softer waters, no matter if salty. The ripples fill to the brim, living and dying like a blossom on a cloudy day.

*Always aware,
Feeling waves of violence and gentleness everywhere,
Rendering their shift to the rhythms of my body,
I softly move
To paint quietude.
Shedding tears
For the beauty of being alive,
For the terror,
For the love felt in moments of utter despair,
I put brush on canvas
Giving form to the formless,
Shaping time
Beyond endurance
Unhindered and untethered.*

Affirming my belief in the unbelievable gift of life, I watch the trees bend, never breaking, making room for force, sidestepping it, allowing it through—all the while preserving their essence, standing proud. I feel the trees within and listen to their quiet chant. We elevate and float, elliptical rings with roots, balancing the sky.



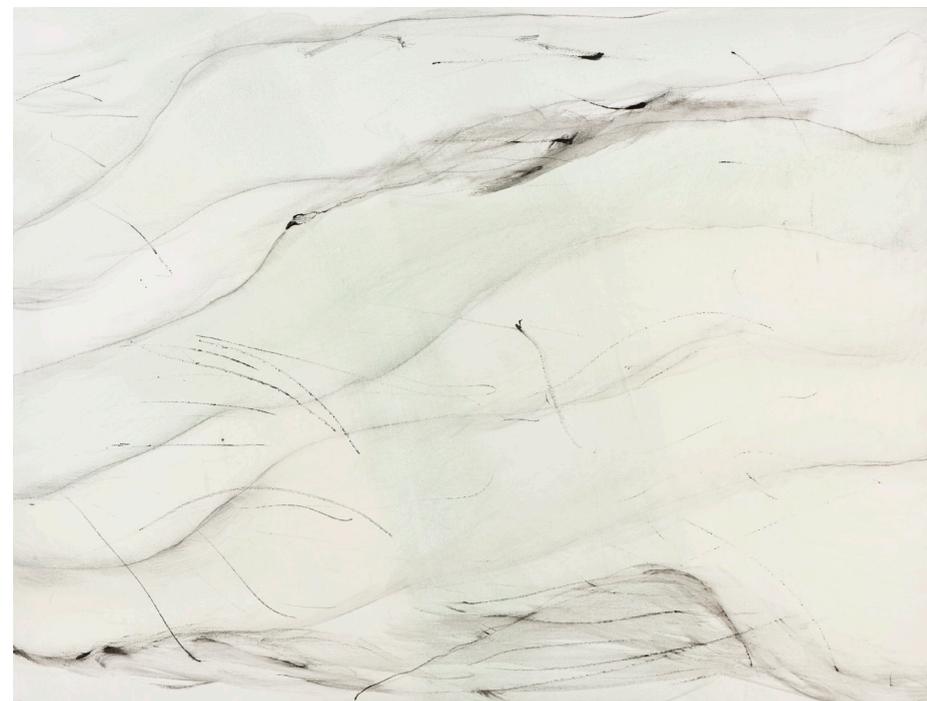
*140 x 100 cm
pencil on canvas*

Dusk | Transcendence

*Fleeting mists
Is all that we see
Composed and still
And ready for our thoughts.
Reaching for the unknown
We stretch
And bend
And flow
Becoming mists
Ourselves
In the process.*

Profound is the impact of seventy-three years of recurring devastation culminating in a blast that ruptured the weave of our very fabric. More profound is that we still are. Reaffirming my faith in life, wet brushstrokes on white canvas become the indelible marks of our aspirations. Through them I paint trust having known fear. I paint hope knowing that I am fragile. I paint spirit, loud in its whispered silence—resilient to change and accepting of it. I paint the earthly becoming the ethereal in paintings that recall nature sensed within a mist.

A haze of white—the ether of our soul—painted in a space transcending life itself, beyond limits, containing us all, allowing our souls to soar until we are at once alive and extinct, the Self transfigured.



*90 x 120 cm
mixed media on canvas*



*120 x 90 cm
mixed media on canvas*



*80 x 100 cm
mixed media on canvas*

Artworks and texts: Afaf Zurayk

Copy Editor: Clare Leader

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TWIG

With special thanks to Namir Cortas.

About the Artist

Afaf Zurayk is a painter, poet, and writer. With sensuality, transparency, and honesty, her work reflects her experience of the turbulent times of her generation. She is a seeker, not a finder, conveying in her painting and writing the questionings and upheavals of her time, constantly on a quest for an understanding of eternal human values and aspirations.

As a student of art and art history, Afaf was particularly influenced by the penetrating vision of Rembrandt, the inner necessity of Kandinsky, and the obsession of Morandi. She continues to be greatly affected by the light and the ephemeral qualities of Islamic architecture. Further, the art and lives of Dorothy Salhab Kazemi, Helen El Khal, and Huguette Caland remain legacies that are as formative as they are inspiring.

Afaf's painting employs minimal color palettes that stretch expression to its limits, often using white, grey, and black to inspire the presence of color through its absence. Ever seeking transparency in her art, she uncovers raw emotion and paints the color of light. In her most

recent paintings, fluctuations of white tones and brushstrokes invite the passage of time through lived realities and imagined dreams. A published author, her books, like her paintings, express, in sequence and rhythm, her faith in love as a bridge towards transcendence.

***Beirut Octet** is the coming together of painter and writer where individuality fuses with history in a contemplative inward journey of resilience and faith.*

Afaf received her BA in Fine Arts (with distinction) from the American University of Beirut in 1970 and her MA in Islamic Art from Harvard University in 1972. Afaf Zurayk lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon.

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Collections

Afaf's artwork is in the collections of the British Museum in London, the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, the Sursock Museum in Beirut, and in Darat al-Funun in Amman.

Gallery Representation

Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut