

OMAR FAKHOURY

REHEARSALS OF A SETTING

أجياي
للفنون التشكيلية



AGIAL
art gallery

Rehearsals for a Setting

A 3D word replaced a sculpture commemorating a former prime minister, after it had been bombed... Over a decade later, some of its letters were damaged in a storm. Some suggested replacing the monument with a clock tower... The dilemma was resolved when the re-designed 3D word was returned to its square.

Militiamen brought chains and a pickup truck to dislodge a memorial tank placed on a pedestal.

The statue of a saint miraculously rotated to enable one political party to defeat another in the battlefield.

*A vertical column flying an oversized flag hid the portrait of an assassinated president displayed on a billboard building. That same portrait had once replaced the image of a saint.
Etc.*

What Omar Fakhoury describes above are ordinary scenes from the spectacle of a country's uncertain present times – scenes in which the visible and invisible dynamics of erecting, modifying or recycling memorials and monuments translate the power dynamics of communities over territory.

The monument as a mnemonic device, according to French anthropologist of memory Joël Candau, was the earliest form of memory transmission before the invention of writing. Materializing absence to make it conspicuous and meaningful, a monument is both a storage medium and a means of sharing – the perfect tool to produce a sense of community.

Inherently shaping and marking space, public statuary plays a pivotal role in nation and community building – a role that is still largely utilized by group divisions across the country. It manifests itself in informal and unofficial transactions, characteristic of contemporary Lebanon's public space dynamics, and symptomatic of the loose rules and regulations governing monuments.

This territorial undertaking – not unlike the practice of advertising territorial claims with visible signs in animal behavior – has been documented in the artist's work, building alternative narratives for these historical signposts, and thus altering their original function.

Rehearsals for a Setting is a series of paintings depicting public monuments in Lebanon, cleansed of their memorial narrative and revealed as matter and form. This act of demystifying the weight of memory had begun in the artist's previous painting series, Holiday Inn, in which the unofficial but commonly claimed monument is reduced to a pattern and treated like wallpaper.

By annihilating the symbolic violence exercised by these imposing yet familiar landmarks on the space in which they are erected, a different type of reading is suggested. "These monuments become concrete blocks, arrangements of tiles and bricks, metal surfaces and boards," says Fakhoury. Pedestals, the artist adds, are very often designed by ordinary workmen and made with cheap material – in stark contrast to the elaborately designed sculptures, usually commissioned to artists or handicraftsmen.

Shown empty, the plinth becomes inclined to individual appropriation, as opposed to a monument's usual function of encapsulating the memory of political, historical or religious events and figures.

Void, as a substitute to the heaviness of a monument’s aura, can be a metaphor for the vanishing state in Lebanon’s contemporary history. It also symbolizes the failure of a nation constantly attempting to become one, a nation in a perpetual phase of rehearsal.

The titles of the series *Rehearsals for a Setting* and of its individual paintings (Man Crushing a Helmet While Holding a Flag; Woman Spreading her Arms; Man Raising his Finger; Four Men; etc.) are strongly suggestive of a theater set.

Denaturalized from the images or the memory they embody, these monuments are described as the “tableaux vivants” (living pictures) of a playscript. Historical, political and religious figures become men and women holding props and poised to perform on the stage of the plinth. It can be interesting here to highlight a certain reference to the ‘Theater of the Absurd’, as these prominent personalities are manipulated by the invisible, yet strongly present, power dynamics over territory in Lebanon.

Visually significant in the painting technique, the process of washing off images is literally achieved by rinsing the paint off the canvas, to attain bleached colors and a dripping effect. While marking the passing of time and history, this technique primarily highlights the process of making/erasing, painting/rinsing, in reference to the country’s continuous failed attempts at acquiring a fixed image – a nation perpetually in the making.

Based on photographs taken by the artist, these images of monuments shot from different angles seem like evanescent heroes, struggling to appear on the canvas. “I am painting like a printer that has run out of ink,” says Fakhoury, discussing the relationship between reality, the photographic image and the painter’s endeavor to represent a fragment of reality. It is as if the very structure of the monument were striving to represent any other image – anything but its own materiality.

Self-Defense and *Vivarium*, the artist’s previous painting series, were studies on military architecture, in the first instance, and on vernacular habitat, in the second. Beyond being formal and structural surveys, these series are territorial testimonies of polar opposites: the manifestations of authority and impotence in a fragmented state. In his recent, and sometimes anonymous, site-specific sculptures and interventions in public spaces, the artist uses an activist approach to directly challenge these power dynamics over territory.¹

Rehearsals for a Setting, together with the painter’s latest sculptural work *Le Socle du Monde* – which shares its title with Piero Manzoni’s 1961 piece Base of the World – are paragons of the artist’s continued interest in public space, and primarily in the everyday place-making dynamics that counter state-sponsored narratives in contemporary Lebanon.

If *Le Socle du Monde*, the naphthalene-coated “socle²” invading the exhibition space and standing defensively before the viewer, can be interpreted as a global critique of memorials, *Rehearsals for a Setting* strengthens this discourse, including local specificities in approaching monuments. Concerned with the social and political dynamics of contemporary Lebanon, the artist’s approach is rooted in the observations and methodology of urban anthropology.

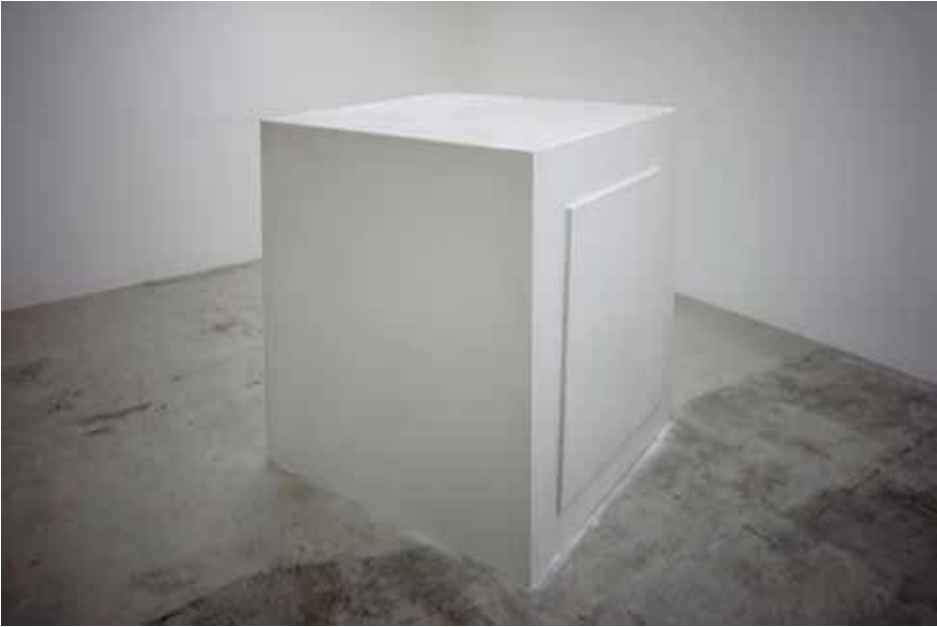
If public art becomes immune to public attention, as a result of “the erosion of sight” (l’usure du regard) as Daniel Buren³ once theorized, *Rehearsals for a Setting* overexposes Lebanese monuments. With an apparent memorial and political neutrality, it invites the public to rethink these Lieux de Mémoire⁴, sites of collective memory, with contemporary narratives.

Fakhoury’s act of reducing monuments to their formal appearance is not merely a discourse on the loss of their aura, but a strong critical allegory of Lebanon’s absurd social landscape. Compared to the plot of a play in constant rehearsal, it is represented with stiff, heavy and fixed structures, pointing to the fragile, precarious and fleeting image of a country in search of representation.

“There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument”⁵.

Robert Musil

Amanda Abi Khalil
Beirut, 2016



Le Socle du Monde, quartz and naphtalene, 150x140x120cm, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Ashkal Alwan.

¹ In the summer of 2014, Temporary Art Platform commissioned an intervention from the artist, within the framework of an artist-residency in the village of Meziara in North Lebanon. Fakhoury built The Station, a large-scale column made of cinder blocks and placed it at the center of the village’s main square, marking the happening with a strong signpost.

² Exhibited at the Beirut Art Center as part of “On Water, Rosemary and Mercury”, curated by Christine Tohmé, Home Works VII, Beirut, 2015.

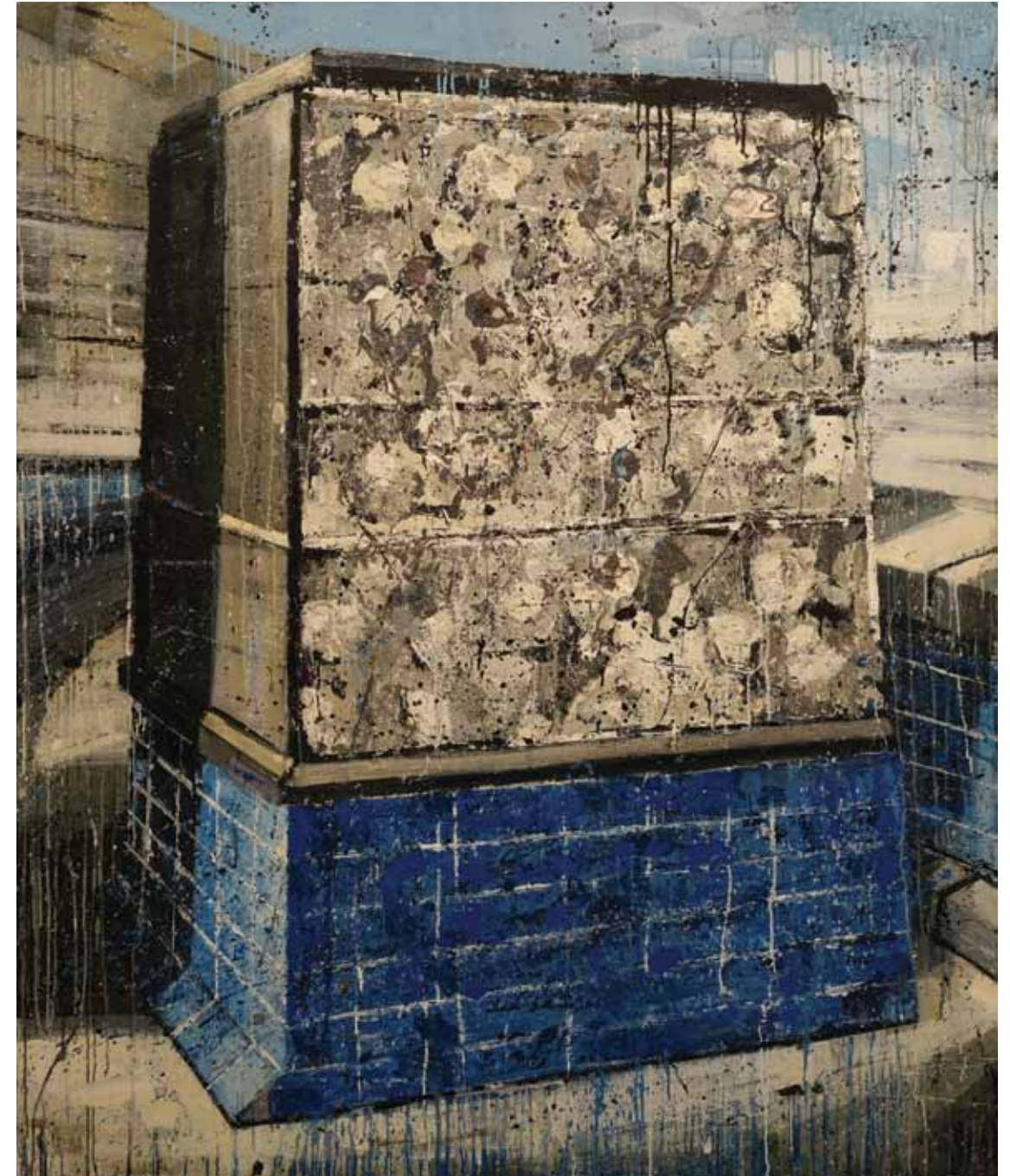
³ Daniel Buren, À force de descendre dans la rue l’art peut-il enfin y monter? (“After going down into the street so much, can art finally come up to it?”), Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2004.

⁴ Pierre Nora, “Entre mémoire et histoire” (“between memory and history”) in Les Lieux de Mémoire (“Realms of Memory”), Paris: Gallimard, 1984.

⁵ Robert Musil, “Monuments” in Posthumous Papers of a Living Author, trans. Peter Wortsman, Hygiene, Colorado: Eridanos Press, 1987, p.61.

Acrylic on canvas
2015-2016

Man Holding the Constitution
180x150 cm



Couple in Drapes Raising a Torch/Falling Men Wearing Suits
180x150 cm



Man II Holding the Constitution
180x150 cm



Man Holding the Constitution
150x180 cm



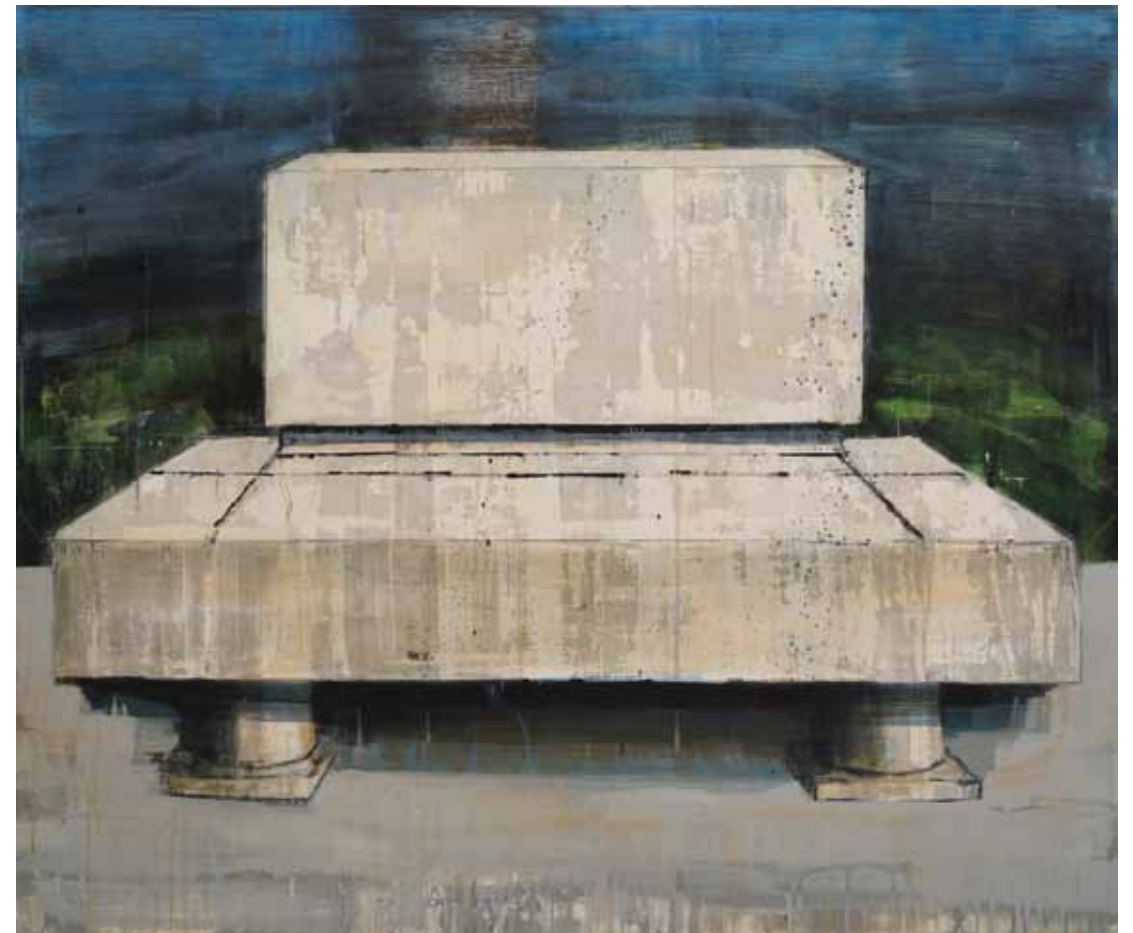
The Word Allah Inverted and a Flag
180x200 cm



Weeds
120x200 cm



Empty
130x110 cm



Man Raising His Finger
200x140 cm



Man Holding a Cigar
130x110 cm



Man Crushing a Helmet and Holding a Flag
130x110 cm



Three Persons and Two Hands
130x110 cm



Four Men and Roses
130x110 cm



Man Handing the Diploma

100x70 cm



Man Pointing to the Ground and Holding a letter

100x70 cm



Two Women and Two Men Figurines

100x70 cm



Man Resting His Arm

180x150 cm



Women Spreading Her Arms

100x70 cm



Kneeling Man Raising His Arm to a Cedar Tree

100x70 cm



Man with Half-Crossed Arms and Legs
130x110cm



About the Artist
Lebanon, b.1979

Omar Fakhoury (b. 1979 in Beit Chabab, Lebanon) primarily works with painting, although he also explores video installations and site-specific urban sculptures and interventions. His work concentrates on Lebanon's complex political and urban fabric. His interest in public space and the elements marking territories is manifested in his latest painting and sculptural works. He received a Bachelor in Painting and Drawing from the Lebanese University, followed by a Masters of Fine Arts from Paris I- Sorbonne in 2004. He is currently a lecturer at the Lebanese University (IBA II).

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Design by Carol Chehab
Printed by Salim Dabbous Printing Co. sarl
16 February, 2016
Beirut - Lebanon

