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A critical eye cast over Beirut

[Jim Quilty](#) | The Daily Star



BEIRUT: Bereft of the distraction of landscape or rival architecture, the azure sky offers an ideal frame for Randa Mirza's subject.

A futuristic-looking residential structure, its primary feature is its embrace of greenery, one not restricted to its lush roof garden. The two walls visible to the viewer enclose several palm trees, the way a bookshelf might be made to provide space for potted plants.

It's while debating the nature of this image – photograph? painting? collage? – that you may notice the stack of bricks in the foreground. Matching the sidewalk upon which they've been piled, the bricks have a shoddy photo-realism about them quite at odds with the idealized structure behind them.

It's here, at the interstice between the brick-laid sidewalk and the futuristic residential structure, that you find the ragged end of the advertising hoarding that is the subject of Mirza's work.

The structure doubly depicted in "The Selective Residence," 2013, isn't "real" in any corporal sense, but an elaborate imagining of a planned real estate development.

As serendipity would have it, a straggly weed has sprouted from the freshly laid bricks, blending almost imperceptibly with the cluster of trees the anonymous artist has depicted on the sidewalk alongside the yet-to-be-erected building.

One of three pieces from Mirza's "Beirutopia" series, "The Selective Residence" is flanked by "Where Life Thrives," 2013, and "Where Luxury Meets Comfort," 2013. These titles are evocative of the real estate-speak the ad illustrations embody, a discourse as otherworldly as anything out of science fiction.

Mirza's works are effective because the delicious incongruities they capture are embedded in the present. These luxurious digs are being thrust into the near future at a time when Lebanon is mired in political dysfunction and environmental crisis, and the region's cartographic status quo faces its most profound threat since it was mapped out in World War I.

Fortunately Beirut's landscape is still adorned by the old Holiday Inn building and Burj al-Murr, object lessons in misplaced optimism.

Mirza's work presently adorns the walls of Twin Galleries 2, one of two ground floor halls presently exhibiting "The City in the City," a group exhibition of contemporary cultural production on greater Beirut.

The show is one of several Beirut-centered exhibitions that will remain up at the newly retooled Sursock Museum through January 2016.

The other shows can be read as efforts to look back through the lens of artistic production to discuss where Beirut comes from. "Picturing Identity" is comprised of historic photos from the Debbas Collection, while "Regards sur Beyrouth" gathers 19th- and 20th-century canvases that render the Lebanese landscape.

"The City in the City" wants to locate where Beirut is, and the selection – curated by Nora Razian, the museum's head of programs – is to be applauded for its breadth.

While other museum exhibitions of contemporary art might privilege saleable art market gems for display, this show allots substantial space to documenting serious studies of the urban landscape that defy commodification. Consequently the show evinces the strong element of critically informed engagement present in the city's contemporary art scene.

"Practicing the Public," one of the show's two research-based installations, is a collective study carried out by academics Mona Fawaz and Ahmad Gharbieh and activists Abir Saksouk-Sasso and Nadine Bekdache (aka Public Works). Mingling graphic, textual and anecdotal elements, these studies use such criteria as recreational activities, policing, partisan stake-holding and militarization to map greater Beirut's historical and contemporary land use.

A second discursive installation, "Beirut Every Other Day," documents four artist-led workshops conducted by the multidisciplinary collective 98weeks. With its collaborators 98weeks looked into such subjects as urban ruins, walking as research (with peripatetic Belgian artist Francis Alys) and public spaces.

These valuable and stimulating pieces are unlikely to be found in most gallery spaces around Beirut.

"The City in the City" also samples work by a younger generation of Beirut contemporary artists, whose work is ordinarily hard to find displayed in town.

Accompanying the work of Mirza and 98weeks is Roy Dib's mischievous video "Objects in the Mirror are Closer than They Appear." This documentary-like 13-minute two-channel work mingles the artist's reflections with those of other informants to contemplate the disparity between past representations of Beirut (as reflected in the media) and contemporary realities, while suggesting such disparities aren't unique to this patch of the eastern Mediterranean.

Across the hall in Twin Galleries 1, the work of Vartan Avakian offers a nice complement to Mirza's photographs. Here the artist suggests an alternative urban topography based upon three action films

shot in Lebanon at the height of the Civil War period – two by Samir Ghosseini, a third by Youssef Charafeddine.

The work itself takes the form of three print etchings of landscapes (by Hatem Imam) – “Futures: Circa 1980,” “Futures: Circa 1987” and “Futures: 2037 after Youssef Charafeddine.”

Set among the etchings is a plastic relief map of a territory rendered anonymous by the want of any labeling, save that of the title of the piece itself – “The Revenge of Geography: Beirut.”

Avakian’s description of the story behind these works – departing from trash cinema produced in the midst of conflict – is reminiscent of Kamal Aljafari’s work on Jaffa, where U.S. schlock cinema played a hand in the city’s architectural degradation. Though this country too has seen its share of foreign armies, it is exceptional since much of its architectural degradation has been carried out by Lebanese.

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