

War-themed art is popular in Lebanon, but many are tired of the fixation on their troubled history



"P.O.W." by Bernard Khoury

By Ben Gilbert

BEIRUT, Lebanon — To many Americans or Europeans, the words "Middle East" are synonymous with conflict and war.

So Bernard Khoury, a Lebanese man who is one of the Arab world's most famous architects, says he's had enough — at least with what he says are negative and simplistic views of the Middle East, and especially those perpetuated by the art world. He says American and European gallery owners, curators and collectors have fed Western perceptions that have pigeonholed Arab artists into creating "war art."

"I believe [Lebanese and Arab artists] are only celebrated through aestheticizing war, and fetishizing war ... what I call the neo-colonialist aesthetic of what Lebanon is and what the Beirut's port," Khoury said at his sprawling studio in a warehouse near Beirut's port.



Khoury's criticism is expressed in a collage and sculpture called "P.O.W.," or "Prisoner of War," now on display at a Beirut gallery. The point, he says, is to create awareness and spark a discussion among Lebanese and Arab artists about the "war slot" to which they've become "prisoners." "It's scary to see that all contemporary artists today are being put into that slot, even those who have a lot more to say in their work," he said.

Khoury says he's come to this realization in the 11 years since he first gained international fame for his own war-themed projects, which have been called "combat architecture."

In 1998, eight years after the end of Lebanon's 15-year civil war, he created BO-18, an underground nightclub on the site of a 1976 massacre in Beirut. A year later, on the old frontline that once divided Beirut's warring militias, he designed a sleek underground sushi restaurant which sat next to housing for war refugees. A few blocks away, Khoury gutted and wrapped an abandoned Lebanese house in steel mesh for a high-end restaurant called Centrale. The restaurant's bar is suspended above the dining room in a steel, gun-like tube; windows slide open for a view onto downtown Beirut.

All the projects were Khoury's reactions to war and urban space; among them, the way Lebanese society dealt with memories of the war and the way the war altered the fabric of the city. But now Khoury says the war theme has become commercialized and cliched.

"I think artists have a responsibility, and I'm slowly realizing that we're becoming really passive actors in a scenario we don't have much to do with," he said. "We're just riding the wave, as there is demand for [war-themed art]. I think there's another modernity, and other issues at work in this part of the world. This has been overused."

Art from the Middle East focusing on conflict has been wildly successful with collectors and curators in recent years, especially since the Sept. 11 attacks in the U.S. and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Lebanese curators and gallery managers say.

"They're all excited lately about Iranian art, Arab art and Middle Eastern art," said the manager of Beirut's Espace Kettaneh-Kunigk gallery, Joy Mardini, who previously worked at Christie's auction house. "I'm happy for us, for the Middle East. Finally someone is listening and looking at our work. But unfortunately the war scenes are selling very well abroad."

This summer has seen numerous Lebanese galleries and art institutions claim war-themed exhibitions. But many Lebanese artists reject Khoury's claim that they are "prisoners." "The works I do about photography, as a market, are much more successful than the works I do about war," said Akram Zaatari, a Lebanese artist whose pieces are displayed in London's Tate Modern gallery and Paris' Pompidou Center, a modern art museum. "Collectors have told me they are fed up with war, and say they'd like to collect images of flowers and not violence."

Zaatari is currently exhibiting in Beirut in conjunction with Khoury's P.O.W. exhibit. His exhibition includes an iconic piece called "June 6, 1982." His date refers to the day Zaatari took photos of an Israeli air raid from his balcony at the age of 16. He put the photos into a collage which has become an iconic work of art about the civil war. So, Khoury includes the collage in his P.O.W. piece.

"I gave him permission to use it in the piece, but it's shallow, it's a joke," Zaatari said of the P.O.W. collage. "It's a generalization, he picked up examples to illustrate an argument as opposed to exploring that argument well."

This summer, Lebanon's civil war was the focus of a month-long lecture series and exhibit called "The Road to Peace." In a first, it featured works of art created during the war in one exhibition at the Beirut Art Center — a new, white-walled, non-profit gallery opened earlier this year and which is also hosting Bernard Khoury's P.O.W. exhibit.

Beirut Art Center Director Sandra Dagher says war is such a common theme in Lebanese art because the country and its artists are still dealing with such issues.

"It's normal that artists work in the context of where they live," Dagher said. "And all of us are still living the traumas of the war. It ended 15 years ago officially, but we still live in the tension. And every time there's new political action, people go into this flashback of what happened. I think people don't talk enough about the war."

But Dagher says Western curators are guilty of picking from Lebanese and Arab artists' portfolios to choose work that has created a kind of neo-Orientalism that fitted with certain Western misperceptions, projections and preconceived notions of the Middle East. Joy Mardini of Beirut's Espace Kettaneh-Kunigk gallery says it is unfortunate that Western interest in Lebanese and Arab art revolves around the commercialization of violence and war. But, she says, "war is sexy," and it sells, if only for the moment.

"I think we're going to get to the point, five years from now, 10 years from now, when people are going to be fed up and artists are going to feel it, and they're going to change," she said. "It is a wave, like art deco or art nouveau."

But artist Akram Zaatari says he hopes war-themed art is not simply a phase, and fears criticism of such works could scare people away from exploring the subject.

"I'm afraid of people being marginalized, because the serious work has not even started on the civil war," he said. "I'm worried about the ones who tell me we had enough, because the terrain has not even opened up. What we have heard until today is really nothing. Personally, I have not opened the files for the Lebanese civil war because I do not know where to start."

Like what you just read? [Support high-quality journalism in Minnesota by becoming a member of MinnPost.](#)

1 Comment: [Hide/Show Comment](#)