

Latest in long line of catastrophes yields artistic manifesto and visual expression of trauma

Jean-Marc Nahas' new exhibition takes up residence at Zico House after Israeli bombs destroyed former venue

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Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Sculpted birds fill a small exhibition room. Vaguely resembling varied species of seagull, they are made of hastily crumpled paper and held together by thick bindings of masking tape. Each odd creature hangs from the ceiling on a long string and is heavily splattered with black and white paint. At a glance, it looks as though these birds have been pulled half-dead from an oil spill.

Cartoon-like compositions cover every wall, but the contaminated birds hover so low in the center that one must carefully dodge them to get a closer look at the drawings.

Scrawled onto a series of fragmented comic-strip panels are graphic narratives devoid of words, they depict men and women drawn in black ink and occasionally stained with angry flushes of red.

The vast panoply of frantic

drawings consists most notably of nude figures engaged in compromising postures of sexual intimacy: Women sit with their legs splayed open, men wrestle, limbs flail, snarling dogs approach in gangs, and bedraggled birds hover in flocks. The humans and animals engage in some kind of perverse face-off, and all seem overcome with exhaustion.

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Entitled "Catastrophe," Jean-Marc Nahas' most recent exhibition opened last Wednesday at Zico House, on Spears Street in Sanayeh. Nahas originally trained as a painter in Paris at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts and is currently a professor at the Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA).

He has exhibited his uncon-

ventional work regularly since 1987, presenting myriad creations that range from graphically decorated glass bottles (for sale in the boutique of Beirut's National Museum) to last year's 10-meter fresco coyly titled "Beyrouth, Mon Amour."

In "Catastrophe," Nahas revisits the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War through an archetype of bestiality. Anthropomorphic birds perch on the limbs of savage humans and dogs glare with knowing intensity. An elemental quality of the grotesque perverts scenes of already unhinged human intimacy, and the characters in these scenes are both comically hapless and tragically wounded.

They reach for and reject the fellow bodies and creatures that surround them. As such, the ubiquitous presence of sinister animals is a nightmarish haunting. Although the disorienting drawings are executed with an exuberant energy of release, they evoke restrained physical pain, echoing solitude and violent despair.

Imposing intimate scenarios onto cold political circumstances, Nahas literally draws out the dark details of armed conflict, foregoing documentary depictions for the realm of unconscious suffering. Instead of portraying rape, massacre and destruction, Nahas explores the more all-pervasive terrain of psychological trauma, making manifest the ways in which a lifetime's experience of violence can infiltrate the most private reaches of human behavior.

Adding to the unsettling quality of the drawings is the disjointed disposition of objects in the exhibition. Rather than paint on a discrete canvas, Nahas breaks apart the unity of an enclosed visual frame, dispersing his representations into various modes of expression.

The drawings of birds stand alongside their ominous sculptural doppelgangers. Large storyboards are fragmented into countless frames, and characters cut out of storyboards are placed in jumbled wall collages. A fisherman's net has been draped over several hanging bird sculptures. A wire net hangs above the doorway, carrying large sheets of curtain-like paper colored in gradations of blood red. In one corner, two white doors are cracked open, revealing a side room where Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film "The Birds" is being projected against a wall.

Taken in tandem, the disparate elements of Nahas' installation create a realm of potent ambiguity. Which objects are the works of art and which are the atmospheric accessories? What can be touched and what must remain undisturbed? May the bird sculptures be casually pushed aside or must they be very carefully avoided? What surprises may be discovered behind which door or in which hidden corner?

Nahas provides exhibition visitors with an enigmatic manifesto, typed in large font on otherwise blank paper: "Catastrophe" does not date from today / It supports no party / It intends to be free, individual and against violence / For a better life / Without hate and without violence."

Having read the manifesto, one does not arrive at a revelation of Nahas' artistic intentions. He states that the exhibition "does not date from today" and therefore was not created in direct response to the July-August war. "It supports no party," and therefore is not arguing for one side or another in Lebanon's current political crisis. But it is for freedom and against violence.

"Catastrophe" may simultaneously refer to a multitude of current political and social misfortunes befalling Lebanon: the catastrophe of war as a whole, the catastrophe of the coastal oil spill that resulted from the Israeli bombardment of the Jiyeh power plant, the catastrophe of the cancelled summertime cultural season, the catastrophe of artists and entrepreneurs failing to survive in a depressed economy, the catastrophe of perverted

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personal relations in a society traumatized by crisis and conflict, and the catastrophe of destroyed infrastructure in villages throughout South Lebanon and in the Dahiyeh.

Such catastrophic circumstances collectively inspire Nahas' work. Just as the catastrophes of war may shape the psychic consciousness of an artist, these very same catastrophes shape the concrete circumstances of artistic production. Once taken in by Nahas' depictions of abstract and intimate violence, it



Nahas insists his installation "does not date from today."

is easy to forget the very tangible havoc that war may wreak upon a local art scene.

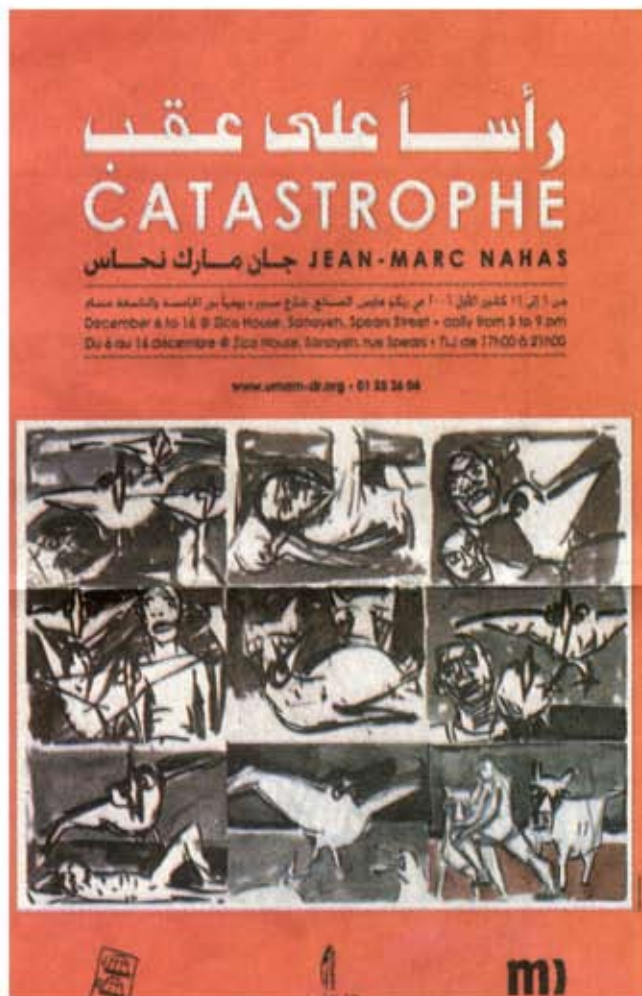
"Catastrophe" was originally meant to be shown at the Hanger – an exhibition space attached to the nonprofit group known as Umam Documentation and Research (Umam D&R). But this summer, Umam D&R, which is located in Haret Hreik, was nearly bombed to the ground. The Hanger's internal metal frame buckled under the force of a vacuum bomb that struck the building next door, collapsing half of it.

Founded in 2004, Umam D&R deals primarily with issues of civil violence and the memories of war, whether through academic seminars, activist forums, art exhibitions or film screenings. Longtime admirers of Nahas' work and his politically engaged aesthetic, the organizers had planned to exhibit his latest work in their space.

But when that space literally fell apart during the war, Nahas was left with finished work and no venue in which to exhibit it. Rather than wait for the reconstruction of the Hanger, scheduled to be complete next year, Umam D&R and Nahas decamped to Zico House.

With this space subplot in mind, "Catastrophe" becomes a show of not only aesthetic but also logistical resilience in the face of war. Art must continue despite war. Despite all kinds of catastrophes, traumatized artists such as Nahas keep on painting while destroyed venues continue to find ways of exhibiting their work.

Jean-Marc Nahas' "Catastrophe" is on view at Zico House through December 16. For more information, please call +961 1 553 604



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