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The need to express my memories of childhood haunted me



A bus and its replicas

How did the simple school bus become a vehicle for Lebanon's collective memory? **Houssam Bokeili** explains to **Natasha Dirany**.

In your new exhibition, 'A bus and its replicas', you have returned to your childhood memories. Why was this important to you?

My memories of childhood that date from before the beginning of the civil war are happy ones. I remember a free and open city, aspiring to modernity, through which I strolled as a schoolboy. In 1976 I left Beirut with my family to go and live abroad, at first in Switzerland and then in France. On my return in 1994, I realised the magnitude of the destruction of the city and was confronted by the impossibility of reconstructing, even mentally, the universe and the environment in which I grew up. There is no memory that

is constructed without a spatial framework. It is in this framework, like a stable landmark, that our thoughts and our imagination can be reconstructed. In a city of ghosts, I had to force my memories to reappear – I used photo albums from my childhood, objects from my daily life, and the stories of those close to me. In this, my work translates my need to express these happy memories, this life which was not shared by my compatriots born after the start of the civil war... Is there a sense of guilt I feel vis-à-vis my compatriots? Or one of witnessing, that I don't manage to express except through my work? I think these two problematics confront each other.

What interests me is to transmit my vision of an era...

How did the idea for the series develop?

In 1994 when I arrived in Beirut, I looked for my old school bus, and I managed to find it. I'd never thought of working on this bus. That year, I exhibited oil paintings at the CCF that represented in a straightforward manner the scenes of violence as they were animated by the media. 'Le Boucher' (The Butcher) is one of my works, it represents killing as if it's a homely craft. In 2009, I started working with silkscreen printing... the need to express my memories of childhood haunted me. Putting

together the two buses – the one of my childhood and the one of Ain el Remmaneh – was inevitable in this wish to translate what the war had performed in my memory. Because of this, I decided to document the bus of Ain el Remmaneh, the history of which I only knew vaguely.

What techniques did you use to convey your subject?

The first and foremost technique is the technique of remembering – mnemonics! For my school bus and its environment, I returned to my own personal archives; the objects, books and photos. For the Ain el Remmaneh bus, I researched: I met people connected to the history of the bus, conducted a series of interviews, and searched in UMAM's archives to address the subject with the historical accuracy that this memorial-in-progress demands.

What reaction do you hope to get from the exhibition?

The Ain el Remmaneh bus is a memorial and a symbol in which Lebanese of all confessions share. My works use humour, nostalgia, like sadness and violence. My pieces make reference to multiple elements of the collective memory of the Lebanese – objects, the city, the bus – which pertain to the collective memory of the war. This collective memory, if not stressed and highlighted, will be appropriated by the wave of amnesia which risks drowning us all once again. The 'duty of remembrance' suggested in the exhibition is instead associated with the notion of 'never again'...



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