

# NOW.

## A bus and its replicas

Naziha Baassiri

In a cold, cement room sits the embodiment of the Lebanese civil war: a rusting bus with flat tires and glassless windows. Were it seen on the street, the vehicle would be dismissed as another eye sore clogging up Beirut's streets. But its value is greater than it seems: it is the bus that was carrying a group of Palestinians when it was shot up by Christian militants in [Ain al-Remmaneh](#), sparking the beginning of the Lebanese civil war.

Come Wednesday, the Lebanese will mark the 36th anniversary of the beginning of the civil war that ravaged the country for 15 years. But the commemorations are lacking without a collective memory of what took place, which is what artist Houssam Bokeili attempts to create with his solo exhibition, "[A bus and its replicas](#)."

The exhibition, which is on display at the UMAM Documentation and Research art space in Ghobeiri until May 1, is made up of a number of canvases showing Bokeili's childhood memories of his school bus overlapping with his images of the Ain al-Remmaneh bus, also known as *the bus*. Miraculously, Bokeili was able to include the iconic bus in his show.

The artist was born in 1966 but left Beirut for Switzerland a year after the civil war broke out. He first returned to Lebanon in 1994 only to discover that "time hasn't stood still, which I can understand. [Rather,] it has regressed." But that didn't discourage Bokeili from showing his work in his homeland. In 2009, he exhibited his work at Zico House, displaying his growing interest in documenting the civil war.

“A bus and its replicas” is the embodiment of that urge. Bokeili’s canvases can be divided into three categories: the artist’s pieces reflecting his childhood, his work representing collective memory of Beirut and the bus, and the amalgamation of both.

For example, one canvas shows boys in a school bus pretending to be shooting guns, a thing Bokeili said is normal for children to do. “They make up games; they imagine them. [Most] boys have an innate desire to play the role of the hero, pretending to be Spiderman or Superman,” he told NOW Extra.

Another canvas titled “Fournitures de class,” or “Classroom Supplies” in French, shows objects that are representative of Bokeili’s childhood, such as a Chiclets gum box, a wooden clothes pin and a shuttlecock.

“Replica: Who’s leading?” merges the artist’s memories, showing a boy in a school bus on the left-hand side standing next to the driver of the Ain al-Remmaneh bus on the right-hand side. The two halves are combined to make one canvas, one bus, one memory. “I used to always sit next to the bus driver when the bus picked me up to go to school,” explained the artist.

But it is Bokeili’s “Replica 3” that best shows his efforts at forging a collective memory of Beirut and the war through the front windows of the bus. The monochrome canvas shows the Lebanese capital with icons representative of the city, such as al-Manara on the seaside, the vacant Bourj al-Murr, the bullet-riddled Holiday Inn and the new downtown area.

“I had to go take photos of all these places, stitch them together, then superimpose the photo of the bus so that the viewer can feel like he’s seeing all of Lebanon... [Somehow,] the bus knows us all... I didn’t want to paint [the canvases], because they wouldn’t feel real and I want the real thing,” said Bokeili.

So the artist turned to [serigraphy](#), a delicate art that was invented in the 1960s and was used by famous artists, most notably by American icon [Andy Warhol](#). But don't be fooled by the simplicity of the end product. The process is extremely intricate and requires the painstaking steps of taking a picture, photoshopping it, printing it on film, stretching silk or mesh on a wooden frame, adding a solution and then exposing it to light to burn the photo onto the fabric before choosing the paint to color the final product.

Bokeili voiced frustration at those who think serigraphy is an easy process. "A lot of people think it's easy and [believe] it's just a form of print, but it's much more than that."

The artist's work is only reinforced by the physical presence of the bus. Suddenly, the civil war – which today's youth didn't live through but only experienced through the memories of parents, aunts, uncles and cousins – is real, and somehow, all the talk about it gains importance and becomes real. This is where it all started, and now, when talking to foreigners about the war, one need not look to books to recount the past. We've been given our own personal piece of history to consolidate the fragmented collective memory we've been handed down.

*"A bus and its replicas" is on display at the UMAM D&R art space in Ghobeiri, next to the Imam al-Mehdi Mosque, until May 1. The exhibition is open daily from 4 – 9 p.m. For more information, please click [here](#).*