

# An art of murder, and education

Houssam Bokeili's 'The Bus and its Replicas' takes its departure from iconic Civil War-era bus

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**H**ARET HREIK: There are many buses in Beirut, but in the context of Lebanon's Civil War there is only one: the Ain al-Roummaneh bus. At the center of a tit-for-tat massacre on April 13, 1975, usually pinpointed as the beginning of the 25-year conflict, the vehicle has a ghastly significance.

The Ain al-Roummaneh bus is at the core, both literally and figuratively, of Houssam Bokeili's new exhibition at The Hangar, the gallery space of UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R). A collection of bus-obsessed canvases from Bokeili, the exhibition also displays, astonishingly, the Ain al-Roummaneh bus itself.

Nestled in a walled-off compound in the center of the gallery space, the pitted, crumpled husk of the vehicle provides an eerie object lesson in how a lump of metal can assume an enormous symbolic weight.

Bokeili and the UMAM D&R team carried out extensive detective work to locate the bus, examining police reports and vehicle registration records. Eventually it was located, moldering in a field near Nabatieh.

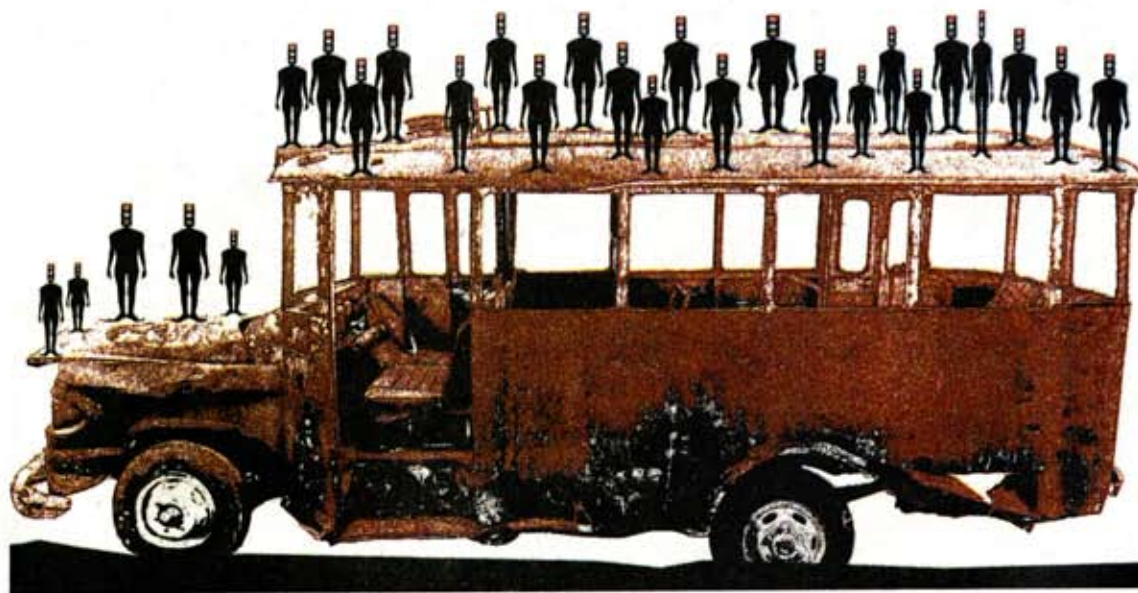
"This is the result of a huge research," says UMAM D&R co-founder Monika Borgmann. "We are absolutely 100 percent sure that this is the Ain al-Roummaneh bus. We know the entire history of this bus."

A video in the exhibition shows how the vehicle was transported from its field to the gallery.

"The bus," Borgmann continues, "is here really as a document."

In addition to the Ain al-Roummaneh bus, made by Fargo, Bokeili's paintings portray another bus – the Ford model that Bokeili rode to school at around the same era. Mingling memories of massacre with recollections of the journey to school, Bokeili creates a nightmarish vision of suppressed savagery, implicit in even the most mundane of daily routines.

There's a recurring motif of a boy with his hand cocked into the likeness



"Replica and the twenty seven" 137x87.

of a handgun. Enacting his murderous mime, the boy populates Bokeili's school bus images.

Sometimes the boys are numerous, brandishing their mock guns out of the windows, as in "Ecole buissonniere 1" (Truant 1). At other times they're alone, like the silhouetted child who aims his fingers at the bus driver's head in "Face to Face."



"Face to face" 115x97.

Eerily engrossed in their play-acting, these children serve as a metaphor for their adult counterparts, who have moved beyond games to the real thing.

Using the silkscreen technique that allowed Andy Warhol to produce hundreds of identical renderings of Campbell's soup cans,

Bokeili's buses are reproduced over and over in different settings and configurations. "Replica 3," for example, is fore-grounded by the pitted dashboard of the Ain al-Roummaneh bus. Through the windshield, a looming vista of iconic Beirut buildings throngs the skyline.

The Bourj al-Murr, contorted as though reflected in a wonky mirror, takes center-stage. Behind squats the corn kernel-shaped City Center Cinema ruin, while at the extreme left rears the old Manara lighthouse.

Rendered in pin-sharp black-and-white, the buildings form a silent, monumental parade of witnesses.

A more surreal posse of witnesses crop up in other canvases: silhouetted men with traffic lights for heads. In "Replica and the Twenty Seven," miniature traffic-light figures stand guard all over the hood and roof of the Ain al-Roummaneh bus.

Another canvas, "Ecole buissonniere 2" (Truant 2) shows a traffic-light figure leaping in front of Bokeili's school bus in a kind of mad dance. Two girls, eyes as round and blank as characters from "Little Lulu," the 1970s-era comic, stare anxiously from the back seat.

Deploying the flat, perfect sheen of the screen print, Bokeili's paintings reject any obvious reference to violence or bloodshed. His surreal, bubblegum-bright paintings could be illustrations from a children's book, were it not for their unsettling undertow.

One canvas, however, gives free reign to blood and gore. "Le Boucher" (The Butcher) is a stylistic anomaly, painted in a manner much closer to Francis Bacon than Andy Warhol.

A squat, smudged butcher maniacally wields his blood-drenched cleaver while a customer stands by. In the background, several human cadavers dangle, skewered through their feet by meat hooks. Outside the shop window, two boys can be glimpsed playing football on the street. "Le Boucher" is a revealingly explicit expression of the horror that lurks behind Bokeili's other, more suggestive canvases.

Accompanied by a plethora of information, both on UMAM's website and in an accompanying brochure, "The Bus and its Replicas" is riveting on numerous levels – the aesthetic, the historical and the symbolic.

"The Bus and its Replicas" shows at The Hangar, 4 p.m. – 9 p.m. For more details, visit [www.umam-dr.org](http://www.umam-dr.org) or call 01-273-881.

Photo courtesy of UMAM D&R