SELECTIONS

ARTS-STYLE-CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

 # 58 BEING AYMAN BAALBAKI

SPRING 2022 - *USD 20/EUR 18/AED 74*

JANUS GATE AT THE 59TH VENICE BIENNALE - PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH KEY FIGURES IN AYMAN BAALBAKI'S LIFE: DR BASEL DALLOUL, ROSE ISSA, SALEH BARAKAT, NAYLA TAMRAZ, STEPHANE SISCO, SERWAN BARAN, SAID BAALBAKI, OUSSAMA GHANAM - THE ARTIST REFLECTS ON FRIENDS, FAMILY AND INFLUENCES

ROSE ISSA

Ayman Baalbaki with Rose Issa, ©Sueraya Shaheen.

The Power of **Talent**

BY ROSE ISSA

AS REGARDS THE ARTIST'S WORK, IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT [1]. BOLD STRIKING PIECES, BURSTING WITH ENERGY, BRUSHSTROKES REFLECTING STRENGTH, DRAMA, BEAUTY AND BEWILDERMENT. THEN I MET THE MAN, AND LIKE EVERYONE ELSE WAS OVERWHELMED BY ALL THE QUALITIES YOU COULD HOPE TO FIND IN A YOUNG ARTIST.

Rose Issa is a curator, writer and producer who has championed visual art and film from the Middle East and North Africa in the UK for more than 30 years. She has lived in London since the 1980s showcasing upcoming and established artists, producing exhibitions with public and private institutions worldwide, and running a publishing programme.

Through curating numerous exhibitions and film festivals, she introduced Western audiences to many artists who have since become stars of the international scene, including: Ayman Baalbaki, Shadi Ghadirian, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Bahman Ghobadi, Hassan Hajjaj, Fathi Hassan, Farhad Moshiri, Abbas Kiarostami, Rashid Koraichi and Nja Mahdaoui among many more.

As well as holding exhibitions at Rose Issa Projects in London, she frequently co-curates exhibitions with international private and public institutions.

Rose also lends work to and advises on collections for public and private institutions and organisations around the world.

Rose was also a Jury member for the National Pavillions at the 50th Venice Biennale (2003) and sat on the Jury for the Arab British Centre (2013).

Since 2015, after the closure of the Rose Issa Projects space in London, she has been focusing mainly on co-publishing.

Of course, he was then already 30, known by many: there was always a hint of jealousy or envy when people talked about him, but also love. Later, I too became jealous, in my case of his mother, for having given birth to such talented sons. I right away wanted to include his work in the different exhibitions I was preparing.

Ayman Baalbaki invariably wins over hearts and minds, even of those who have never seen his paintings. His genuine charm, his phenomenal artistic gifts, his generosity, his contained violence and calm – the latter occasionally tested – immediately impress. He is also one of the rare Arab artists who know their culture, language and history perfectly well.

Soon after we met and were making exhibition plans, I proposed he use my late parents' flat as a workshop; but he was making money from his works and preferred to buy it outright. He part-paid me with paintings. Both he and his wife-to-be, the wonderfully talented Tagreed Darghouth, liked the flat, though in his case with reservations, as Tayouneh is far from Hamra, and he does not drive. But I wanted him to be distanced from bars, for his generosity was attracting a few parasites.

To meet him you had to go to Hamra, which was and remains his territory. You could always find him, if not in his studio, in a café or a bar, lending his bicycle to street kids who sometimes returned it to him the next day. Most of the time he was surrounded by singers, filmmakers, artists from Lebanon, Palestine, Syria or Iraq. This was a brotherhood of destinies, a common ground for artists from countries on the edge of precipice, reflecting despair, hope, terror and courage in the face of witnessed tragedies. For Beirut – from 2010 until the rape and the theft of the banks in 2020 – was their refuge and gathering point.

Destination X installation shot at "Arabicity: Such a Near East" curated by Rose Issa at the Bluecoat Arts Centre, Liverpool, 2010.

As art fairs, auction houses and galleries became bigger and smarter, museum projects came to the fore. While friends were hoping to build a museum of memory, housing reminders of our tragic contemporary history, Ayman's paintings never ceased to record shared despair and destructions, images of fast-disappearing landmarks; so instead of a building we have the record of these artworks. The artist continued, in a distinctive and insistent way, to give collective trauma a space, and with it reclaim the values of historical truth.

At my project space in London we collaborated on three wonderful solo exhibitions and several group shows together. In 2009 came *Ceci n'est pas la Suisse* (before the 1975 war people used to call Lebanon 'the Switzerland of the East'), a moving homage to his beloved Beirut. Two years later he continued his ceaseless exploration of his hometown's history in *Beirut Again and Again*. [2]

Opposite page – **Ayman Baalbaki**, Al Mulatham, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 185 x 129.5 cm. Courtesy of Rose Issa Projects.

This page – **Ayman Baalbaki**, Wake Up, 2012. Mixed media installation, 170 x 110 x 80 cm. Photograph: copyright of Andrew Youngson, Courtesy of Rose Issa Projects

Destination X, installation shot at “Arabicity” curated by Rose Issa at Beirut Exhibition Centre, 2010.

Two versions of the exhibition *Arabicity* [3] were prepared in Beirut and at Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool, featuring his car installation *Destination X*. [4] When I went to visit him in Liverpool just before the opening, it seemed that all the artist communities, workers, artisans and barmen of Liverpool knew him, yet he has never managed to learn much English. His translator became a friend. The truth is that he did not need language to communicate.

In the past 16 years, I have never gone to Beirut without first calling him. He gives me the pulse of the country, delights me with his new works, updates me on other artists’ projects, and continues to be my source, my energy, through the beauty he incarnates. He makes his city and his friends real.

[1] His first solo show at Agial Gallery, 2006, all works frustratingly sold out.
[2] This was followed by the first monograph of his work, Ayman Baalbaki: Beirut Again and Again, Beyond Arts and Rose Issa Projects, London, 2011.
[3]Arabicity, Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 2010.
[4] Also shown at Ourouba, an exhibition I curated at Beirut Exhibition Centre, 2010, with catalogue. The venue was dismantled by Solidere.

Opposite page – **Ayman Baalbaki** Checkpoint, 2009 Acrylic on fabric mounted on canvas 200 x 150 cm Courtesy of Rose Issa Projects.

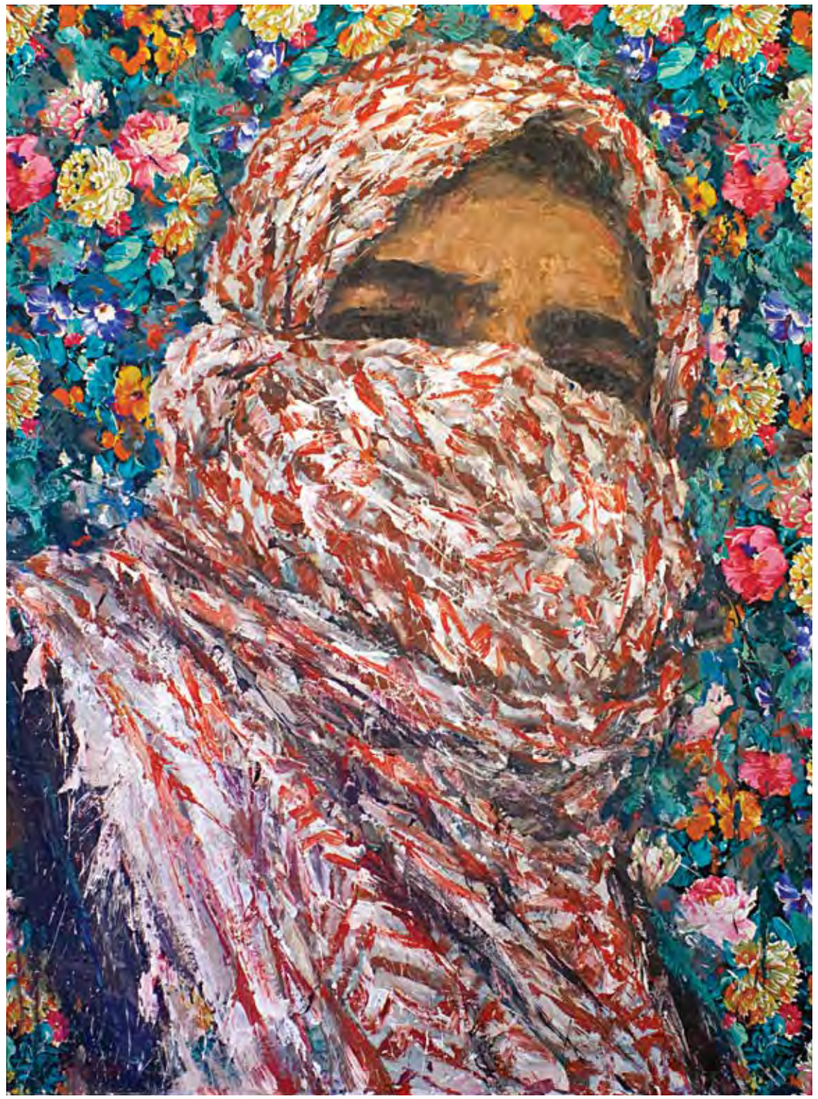
Portrait of **Ayman Baalbaki** by Sueraya Shaheen in front of Rose Issa Projects space showing Baalbaki's exhibition "Ceci n'est pas la Suisse " (Switzerland it Ain't) on Kensington High Street in London.

AYMAN BAALBAKI INVARIABLY WINS OVER HEARTS AND MINDS, EVEN OF THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER SEEN HIS PAINTINGS.

Ayman Baalbaki, Czech Hedgehog, 2013. Acrylic on cardboard, 70 x 100 cm. Courtesy of Rose Issa Projects.

Ayman Baalbaki,
L'Armonial, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 255 x 305 cm.Courtesy of Rose Issa Projects.

AT MY PROJECT SPACE IN LONDON WE COLLABORATED ON THREE WONDERFUL SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND SEVERAL GROUP SHOWS TOGETHER. IN 2009 CAME *CECI N'EST PAS LA SUISSE* (BEFORE THE 1975 WAR PEOPLE USED TO CALL LEBANON 'THE SWITZERLAND OF THE EAST'), A MOVING HOMAGE TO HIS BELOVED BEIRUT. TWO YEARS LATER HE CONTINUED HIS CEASELESS EXPLORATION OF HIS HOMETOWN'S HISTORY IN *BEIRUT AGAIN AND AGAIN*. TWO VERSIONS OF THE EXHIBITION *ARABICITY* WERE PREPARED IN BEIRUT AND AT BLUECOAT GALLERY IN LIVERPOOL, FEATURING HIS CAR INSTALLATION *DESTINATION X*.



Ayman Baalbaki,
Al-Mulatham, 2010. Acrylic on
fabric Laid on canvas,
200 x 150 cm. Courtesy of
Rose Issa Projects.

Ayman Baalbaki, The 'Sniper',
2009. Acrylic on fabric laid on
canvas, 210 x 125 cm. Courtesy
of Rose Issa Projects.