

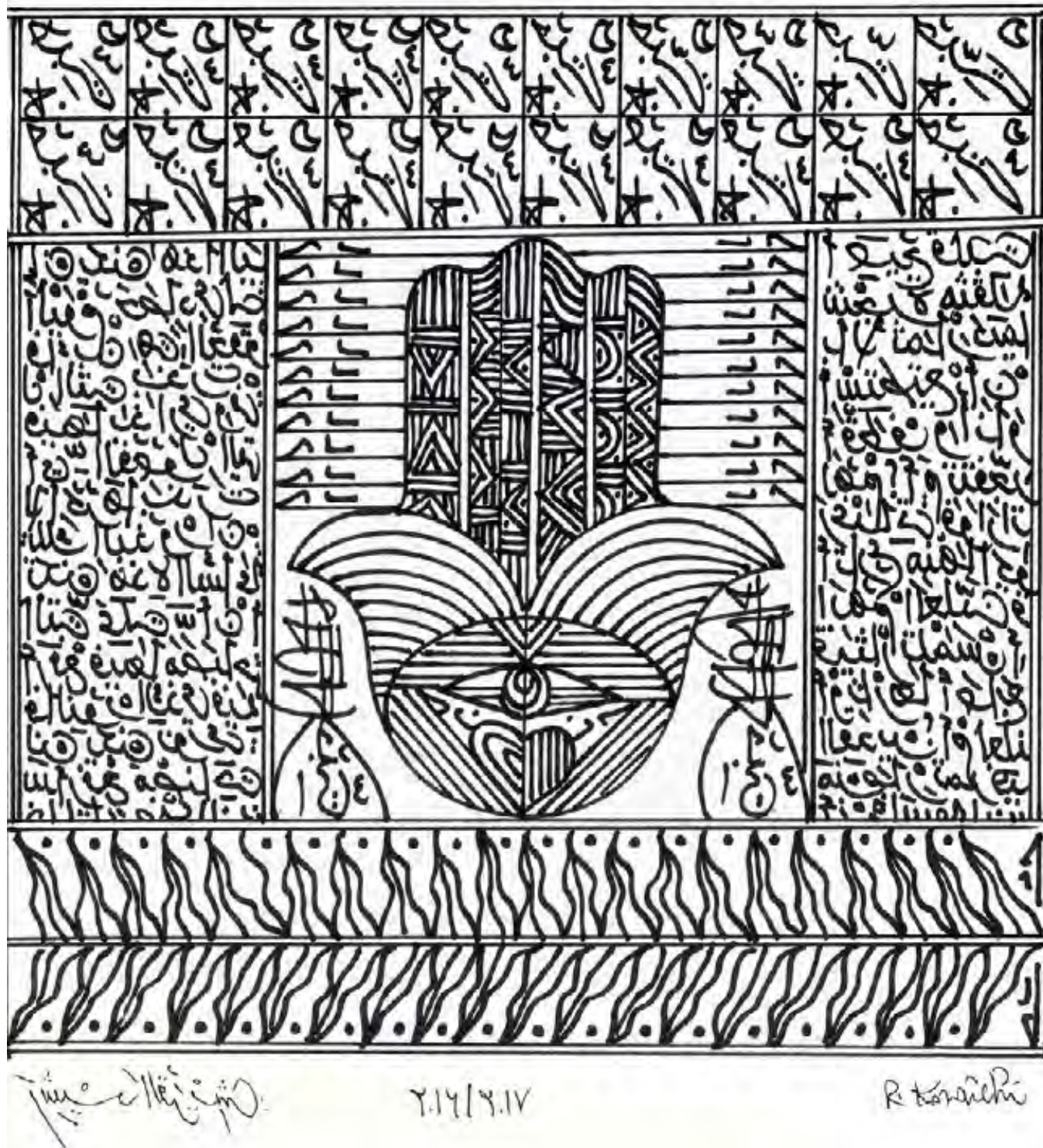
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Beirut Art Fair looks at region's history

With 1,400 pieces, show highlights work in Lebanon and the Arab world



Ayman Baalbaki's "Barakat Building," 2015.



Rachid Koraichi's "Le Prophete – Du mariage," 2016.

BEIRUT: The eighth edition of Beirut Art Fair opened its doors yesterday, hosting 51 galleries from 23 countries at BIEL, with sections for promoting young talents and celebrating established artists.

With 1,400 works of art on show, the fair set out to highlight contemporary art in Lebanon and the Arab world, while engaging with artists and collec-

tors from America, Europe and Asia.

The centerpiece of this year's fair, "Ourouba, The Eye of Lebanon," is a 62-work exhibition curated by Lebanese-Iranian author and contemporary arts specialist Rose Issa. The collection looks back through 15 years of art in this region, exploring what it means to be an Arab in a region associated with conflict.

"We chose Rose because we wanted an exhibition that we could not have in another Arab country and wanted to show to the public that in Lebanon we don't have censorship in arts," fair founder and director Laure d'Hauteville told The Daily Star. "It was also important to show the history of the Arab world for the past 15 years and it shows that the collectors are supporting and interested in these topics too."

"Ourouba" is the product of Issa's six months of field research, visiting 20 public and private collections. According to Issa, each piece is linked to the history of the Middle East, such as the nostalgic picnic scene in Syrian painter Ziad Dalloul's "Celebration of the Absent," 2013, a scene now impossible due to the Syrian conflict.

"Ourouba means 'Arabicity' and to what extent it reflects the concerns and sociopolitical issues of our region. I think the selection here represents the works produced in the last years, which people called the Arab Spring," Issa told The Daily Star. "I called it the slightly orchestrated destruction of the entire region but I wanted to know how these rebellions and demonstrations that people went into whole-heartedly turned into total abdication of our culture.

"I called it 'The Eye of Lebanon' because it reflects what the collectors have been investing in and [I] was surprised to find that they are very flexible in what they collect," she said. "Moroccan collectors will only collect Moroccans' art. Here they collect everything and Beirut almost became a focal point for all artists in the region."

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Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki's work is more retrospective, looking back through his experience of Lebanon's Civil War and the marks it has left on the country.

"He was born with the war and lived in several houses, moving around all the time," Issa explained. "He has done dozens of pictures of buildings in Lebanon that were destroyed, preserving memories of what he's lived for 30 years."

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Baalbaki has three paintings in "Ourouba," taken from the private collection of Agial Gallery, including "Barakat Building," 2015, which depicts the bullet-riddled yellow villa recently rebranded as "Beit Beirut."

"This one is of the Middle East Airlines flights that were shot down in 1986 and 1988," Baalbaki said referring to "MEA," 2014. "My technique and the style ... are similar to Jackson Pollock but I also was influenced by the

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Other fair highlights include an exhibition comprising illustrations from Gibran Khalil Gibran’s “The Prophet” alongside new illustrations by Rachid Koraichi and “Food Art” sponsored by Bankmed. There will be roundtable discussions, book signings, Beirut Art Week’s installation tour and the By-blos Bank Photography Awards.

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“Each selected gallery will showcase one artist of promising talent,” d’Hauteville said, “offering access for collectors and promoting the creation of professional contacts among the various actors present at the fair.”

Mohamed Monaiseer from Cairo’s Mashrabia Gallery brought a selection from his ongoing series, “Dictionary,” which contains 280 works so far. “I started [in] 2013 and I was looking into parapsychology, the five senses, alchemy – when they tried to turn things into gold – and the line between life and death,” Monaiseer told The Daily Star. “The pieces are visual and are similar to an encyclopedia. I wanted them to look old and treated my canvas to look like parchment.”

Reminiscent of ancient manuscripts or scientific charts, these small A5-sized pieces work with scrawled writing and painted diagrams and illustrations.

The artist says the series explores whether “language and writing has meaning or not. All my pieces have writing but you can’t actually read it. I communicate through forms evocative of written language but [emptied] of literal meaning.”

BAF is running till Sept. 24 at BIEL Hall 2. For more, see www.beirut-art-fair.com.