



BEIRUT: CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

By: Sarah Mousa

A four-story mural of a young boy with a flower bouquet, pieced together with the curvatures of Arabic calligraphy, towers over the streets of Dortmund in Germany. Yazan Helwani, a Beirut street artist, painted the image of the Syrian boy, Faris, in the midst of political debates about the Syrian refugee crisis. Faris sold flowers in the streets of Beirut, near Yazan's studio. He became popular among locals until he returned to his home in Hassakeh with his family, where he was killed shortly thereafter. The striking image is meant to remind debaters of the fate of those Syrians who remain in their country. The 'flower seller' is just one of many of Yazan's public murals. His works, mostly located in Beirut, are captivating not simply for the faces depicted and the stories behind them, but for their unique form. Yazan's signature use of Arabic calligraphy to weave portraits, of figures ranging from the iconic Lebanese singer Fairuz to a homeless man, Ali Abdulla, who died in the streets of Beirut from the cold, have become a part of Beirut's landscape.

Yazan's street murals are interjections meant to puncture an urban setting that he argues is devoid of cultural character. Yazan describes Beirut's post-civil war infrastructure as empty of any local significance, disjointed from the place within which it exists and the society it is meant to serve. This oppression of the urban landscape, as Yazan calls it, is a component of a status quo that undermines any collective formations of cultural identity. Yazan takes as the subject of his work the notion of Lebanese and Arab identity, and seeks to contribute to the myriad understandings of what it means to be Lebanese and Arab. A question, he thinks, that itself is suppressed by dominant political discourse. Yazan ties the question of cultural identity directly to politics. Allowing for the rise of alternative narratives on culture would threaten the monopoly over power held by existing political actors, many of who rely on sectarian identities to garner support. For artistic inspiration, Yazan looks to the past-to eras regarded as cultural golden ages in the Arab world.

Yazan's conceptualizations of art are in part inspired by traditional Arab artistic practices. Art in traditional Arab genres was not conceived of as a separate category or a simply aesthetic feature, but as a utilitarian and communal practice. While art in many parts of the Western world is exhibited in galleries under the name of a specific artist, this practice is not a part of Arab history. Art in the Arab tradition is often functional and circumstantial, embedded within its particular community, space and time. While the art itself may be long lasting, its meaning and significance varies depending on its shifting context and utility.

The conceptual approach to art in Arab culture, marked by utilitarianism and communalism, is embodied in the location, materials, techniques and content of art. Such forms are often assigned to low

grades in an art hierarchy, as opposed to non-utilitarian art that is cast as individual expression. Yazan resists pressure to create individualistic art and seeks to embed his work within its context. Yazan takes a communal approach: he does not sign his art, "it is not mine, it is something that the city generates," he explains.

In terms of technique, Yazan's use of calligraphy is also inspired by traditional Arab art. The Islamic ban on iconography made such forms prominent, as abstract spiritual expressions. Yazan takes the calligraphy, but uses it to form faces-in an attempt to "take abstraction to compose configuration." This combination mirrors a symbolic mix of past and present. While he maintains some continuity with tradition, he makes a departure that he finds more suitable for a contemporary society where images of people are commonplace.

Yazan's work also draws from a more recent era: the mid-twentieth century Arab world, a time of heightened cultural production. The art of this time period was created in the context of anti-colonial struggles and the immediate post-colonial era. As such, the arts of this era took the subject of Arab and national identities as its focal point. Yazan's work seeks to recall such eras and revive discussion of identity and the urban landscape.

One of Yazan's murals features Sabah, a Lebanese actress and singer who starred in dozens of Egyptian films throughout the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. The peak of Sabah's stardom coincided with Beirut's rise as the "Paris of the Middle East": a cultural hub. The epicenter of this was Hamra Street. Yazan chose to paint Sabah, out of Arabic calligraphy, on Hamra Street-on the facade of a building that once hosted a cafe frequented by Arab intellectuals. Today, Hamra is a commercial center, carrying international brands. Yazan hoped that painting Sabah on that street would reignite conversation on what Hamra, and Beirut, once were. And on what they have become. He seeks to draw attention to the buildings, their shifting usages, and the communities that interact with them. Beyond this, Yazan is pointing to political, economic and social transformations that have occurred in the post-colonial history of Beirut and the Arab world at large.

Yazan's street murals awaken a debate, on conceptualizations of art, identity and infrastructure and their relations to political and economic processes.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Sarah Mousa, is a writer and art critic based in Beirut. Sarah hold a degree in art history.



Weeping Metaphors, 2014, pigmented cast resin, monofilament and acrylic, Variable sizes, Courtesy of the artist.



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