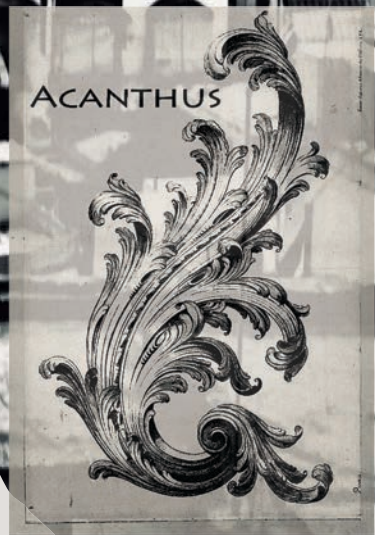
لبنان

Lebanon



In this special edition of *Acanthus,* we turn our attention to Lebanon, a nation rich in culture, resilience, and artistic spirit. As a gallery, our mission was always to bring Lebanese art to European audiences and to work with artists and organizations there to create a nurturing environment of collaboration. In these challenging times, we stand in solidarity with the artists who continue to create amidst the turmoil, their work a testament to the enduring power of expression. Through their art, they offer us glimpses of hope, beauty, and resistance, reminding us that even in the darkest moments, creativity will always light the way. This edition is dedicated to honoring their voices, their visions, and their unwavering commitment to bringing light to a world in need.

Soubhieh: The Lebanese art of taking your time

Someone once wrote on a review of the gallery, “They are more interested in talking and coffee than selling art”. That is the Lebanese way. Come talk to us, share a coffee, just be, and then you can buy some art.

So, sit down, pour yourself a cup, and come wander through the wonderful world that is Lebanon.

A brief story of a city by Bob Khoury

Writing a brief history of a city is never an easy task. How do you condense millennia into a few pages? The reader should keep in mind that a city is not just a place, or architecture; it is the sum of its history and its future, of all the people who have lived, live, and will live there.

Beirut, Beyrouth, بيروت, is a city of the sea. Built on two hills, Achrafieh and Mosaitbeh, it is a peninsula surrounded on three sides by the waters of the Mediterranean. The history of Beirut can be traced to prehistoric times - flint tools have been found near the cliffs overlooking “Raoucher” - yet most historians agree that the origins of Beirut date from around 5000 BCE. Beirut´s name is derived from beir, “well”, with Beirut being the plural in Semitic languages, thus a town with many wells became “Beʾerōt” or, Beirut.

The first mention of Beirut in historical texts comes from the 14th century BCE, in the “Amarna Letters” found in Egypt. These were a series of correspondence between the city-states of Phoenicia asking the Pharaoh for help against the “sea people”, but, for the most part, the city lay hidden in history, lying in the shadows of its two hills, facing the north, until 140 BCE., when Diodotus Tryphon seized and destroyed the city, causing it to be rebuilt in a Hellenistic manner, the resulting city being renamed Laodicea in honor of a Seleucid Laodice. Numismatic finds from that era shows the goddess of fortune on one side and a dolphinon the other side of the coins.

The Romans conquered Beirut in 64 BCE. Agrippa and his legions, in the same tradition as the Greeks, renamed the city, "Colonia Julia Augusta Felix" in honor of the emperor's daughter, Julia. The city became Romanized with large public buildings. In 14 BCE, the “Beirut school of law” came to fame. The School of Law became widely known thanks to the work of two of Rome's most famous jurists, Papinian and Ulpian, who taught there under the Severan emperors. The city was a quintessential roman city; it had its temples, thermae and aqueduct, and their ruins are still visible in archeological digs that can be seen in modern downtown Beirut, as well as a complex aqueduct known as “Qanater zubeidah” east of Beirut over the Beirut river.

In 551 CE, a triple catastrophe hit the city: earthquake, tidal wave and fire. About 30,000 people were killed in Berytus alone and, along the Phoenician coast the total casualties were close to 250,000. In ruins, the city slipped into obscurity again, becoming a quiet town by the sea. Long years of wars between the Byzantine empire and the Persian empire had left the region in ruins.

However, a new era was coming to the Middle east; the Arabs. In 635CE the Arab conquest reached Beirut, which still lay in ruins. The Arabs reconstructed Beirut, making it a small, walled town that was part of the Damascus province. At the time it was overshadowed by other cities to the south and north, until the Fatimide state from Egypt came into existence in 977 CE. Then Beirut evolved a new role, and became the port to Damascus, and it regained some of its earlier status.

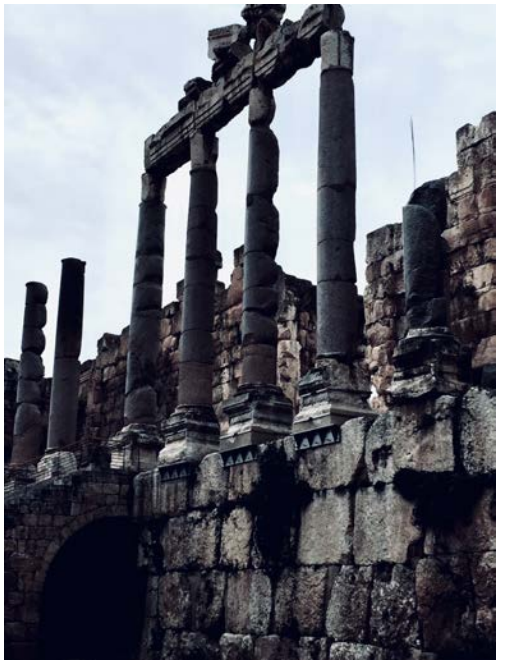
The middle ages unfolded, and the first Crusade reached Beirut in 1110CE, which, along with its coastal suburbs, was organized as a fief of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem. Beirut developed flourishing trade with Genoa and other Italian cities, which further consolidated its growing importance in the region. This was disrupted when Saladin reconquered Beirut from the Crusaders in 1187, but his successors lost the city to them again 10 years later. In 1291the Mamlūks finally drove the Crusaders. Under the Mamlūks rule, Beirut returned to its role as the port of Syria for the spice merchants from Venice.

1516 was the year when the Mamlūks lost their empire to the Ottomans, and Beirut again changed hands, but this time it was placed under the control of the local mountain emirs, the Fakr ed-Din of Maan family, as a semi-autonomous state. The emir's son and successor, Fakr ed-Din Maan II (1572-1635), made Beirut the state's winter capital, and encouraged silk trading with Europe through the port. With wealth, the trade ambitions of local emirs grew, thus triggering the Ottoman rulers to subdue secessionist movements which sought to break away from the empire. As the rulers of the adjacent Ottoman provinces fought for dominance, Beirut and Mount Lebanon fell victim to the power struggle, changing hands from Damascus province to Sidon province. After a tormented era, between local emirs fighting to take power and natural disaster, the Ottomans retook Beirut in 1763, and it regained a share of the maritime trade. For a few years it was the main trading center in the region. During the following epoch of rebellion against Ottoman rule in Akka and by the ruling pashas in Damascus, Beirut declined again into being a small town (population 10,000), constantly changing hands between the Druze, the Turks, and the pashas.

After Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt and the rise of Mohammad Ali, Ali's son Ibrahim Pasha marched to the Levant (1832-1840). This was a turning point for Beirut; commercial activity grew, foreign consuls and missionaries settled. After the civil unrest in the mountains, many families fled to Beirut, driving the population to 15000, and the city soon outgrew its walls. In 1866, American Protestant missionaries established the Syrian Protestant College, which later became the American University of Beirut, and French Jesuit missionaries established St. Joseph University in 1881. In 1888 Beirut became capital of coastal Syria and Palestine, and as peace reigned over the mountain after 1860 war, Beirut became a cosmopolitan center of the region. The modern harbor was built by the French in 1894, and a railway was established in 1907 linking Beirut to Damascus and Aleppo. Beirut's architecture started to adopt an extraverted structure in concordance with the transformation of wider cultural values. Along with old collective habitat "Beiruti" residences, there appeared high constructions with three-arch windows and red-tiled roofs. Beirut, the Arab city, became a "Mediterranean bourgeoise city". The project to modernize Beirut that started in 1880 ended in 1900, creating a separate space between the administrative public spaces and residential areas. The new bourgeoisie started to move outside the city walls, and in 1915 the wall was removed altogether.

After the Great War of 1914-1918, Beirut again changed rulers. The Ottoman empire had crumbled, and now the city belonged to the French mandate, which was to last from 1920 to 1943. During this period, Beirut expanded toward the west as new districts were built, like Hamra, the south with Mosaitbeh, and the east by Achrafieh. During the 1950s and the boycott to Haifa port, Beirut port became the main hub for regional maritime transport supplying Iraq, Syria and the Gulf. Old Beirut spilled into Hamra Street, turning it into a major commercial district. The economic boom of Beirut brought hospitals, universities, schools, printing services, newspapers and banks, making Beirut a center for services not only to Lebanon but to the whole Levant and the Gulf. The booming economy attracted an internal exodus from all the Lebanese regions which created in developing slums which surrounded the city at the expense of fertile fields and farmland. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the economic boom created an active middle class who inhabited Beirut and its suburbs, like Furn el Cheback, Chiyah. The burgeoning slums grew mainly to east like Quarantina, Karm el Zeitoun and Borj Hamoud, as well as Ouzaii to the south.

Beirut from the shore (2014) by Elizabeth Khoury



Baalbek (2019) by Elizabeth Khoury

We have worked with artist and gallerist Dzovig Arnelian since the beginning, with her kindly offering her artists' work for our first online exhibition and our opening. She personifies the bright, imaginative spirit for Lebanese art, breaking boundaries and ceaselessly working with emerging and established artists to bring their creations to the world.

Poetic Red (2019) by Dzovig Arnelian

A lyrical flesh (2019) by Dzovig Arnelian

Mutual Love (2023) by Dzovig Arnelian

Universe 7 (2020) by Dzovig Arnelian

Soul Layers: triptych (2019) by Maribelle Saad

Inspired by German artist kurtschwitters, Maribelle Saad puts together series of collages that combine abstractionism with expressionism. She chooses grayscale to emphasize the contrast between pain and hope. Darker painful patches are in direct collision with much brighter hopeful ones. The medium of gauze and paper sheds light on the medical backstory of the work.

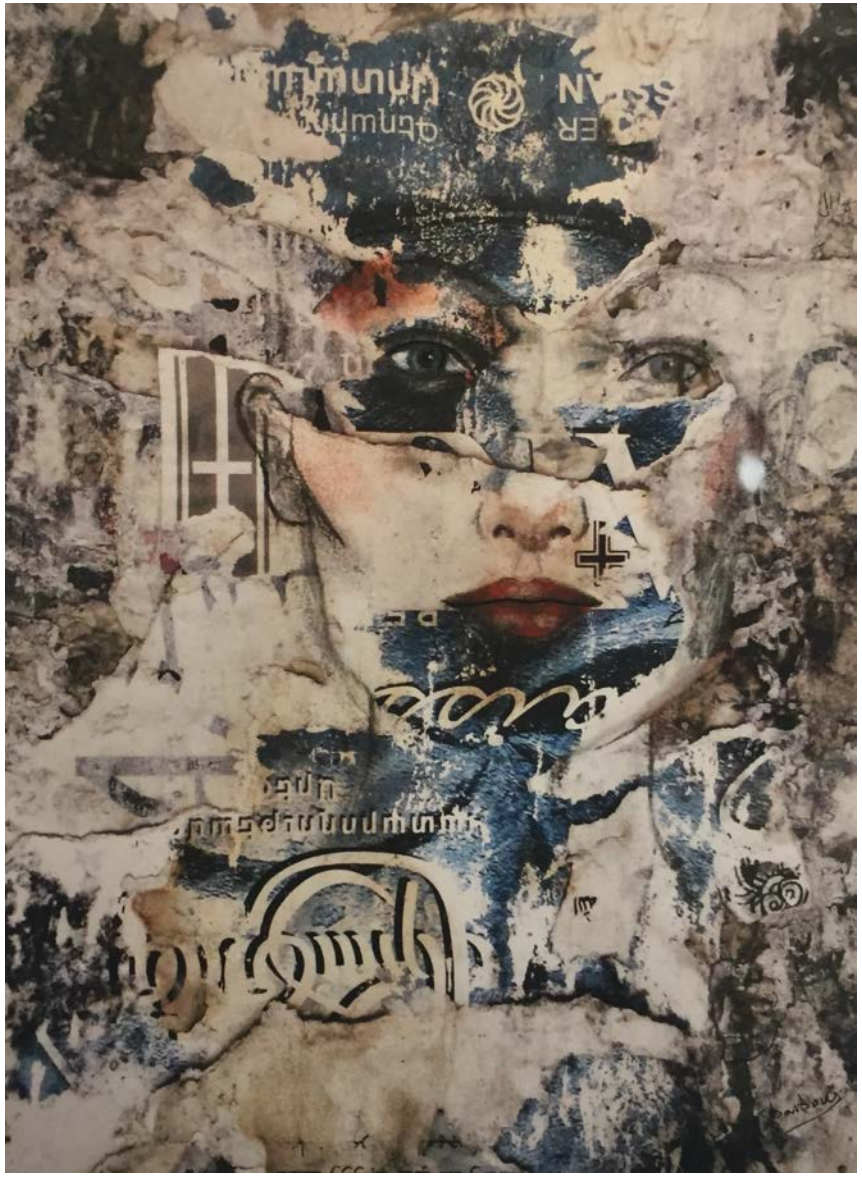
Lebanese artist and poet, Ziad Dib Jreige combines the worlds of literature and visual art in a mesmerizing way. In a fusion of realism, fantasy and poetry, he transforms original or classic sonnets into intellectual and poetic art. His paintings are brilliantly colored with vibrant and outstanding hues and his artworks often push the viewer towards deep contemplation and vivid imagination.

Galaxy 2 (2023) by Ziad Dib Jreige

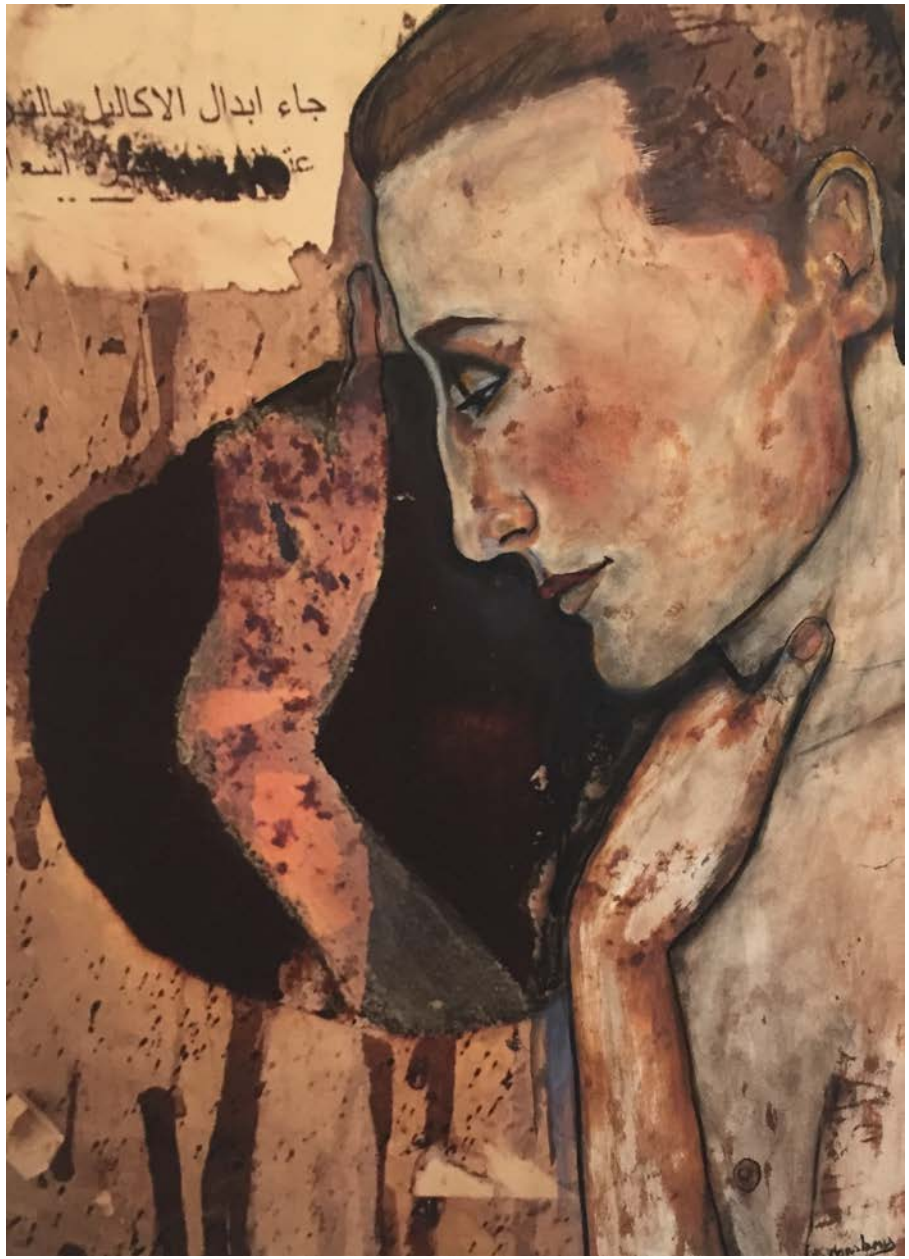
Catala (2023) by Sami Basbous

Sami Basbous is a multi-disciplinary artist who obeys Rilke's prescription that art arises from necessity. He has lived in Beirut, Paris, London, Montreal, New York, and Los Angeles, always travelling voraciously.

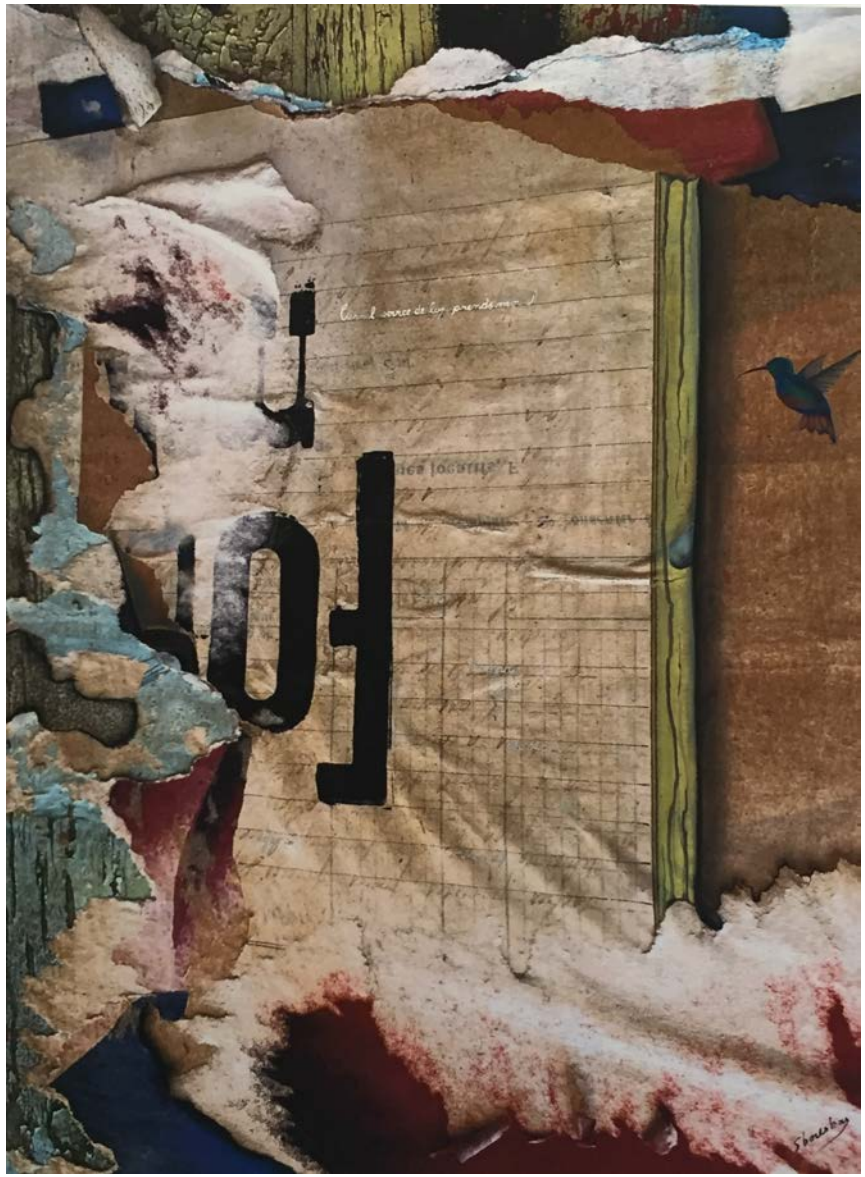
His recent work starts on the streets of Lebanon and other cities and places in the different countries he visits. He looks for the decaying beauty of posters and flyers on walls that withstood time and adversity, reflecting on his personal stories within the neighborhoods. Listening to his intuition, and wielding with immediacy, Basbous scratches, peels and carves out what exists, recreating chimeras of what will soon be covered. It's an amorous reverse/revenge collage process. The result is then photographed and printed on canvas or noble paper. In his atelier, he paints with oil, acrylic, ink, pastel, and charcoal on the photograph while listening to original music; channeling portraits of characters he has originated in his poetry and novels and visiting spirits, producing art that is rich in its dimension and layering. The photographs meld with imagined portraits, creating souls eager to tell forgotten and invented stories and fables. Basbous's artwork is completed when visual chaos abates, and meaning is found, yielding atonement and realizing healing.



Celluloids (2023) by Sami Basbous



Divination (2023) by Sami Basbous



The Yearning (2023) by Sami Basbous

Heal the Boy (2023) by Sami Basbous

The birth of a nightingale by Ziad Dib Jreige

Lebanon
A sky of saints
A mount of poets
A meadow of musicians
A river of writers

North Lebanon
At the shades of rising hills
At the feet of cedar mountains
At the playgrounds of blowing winds
At the theaters of flowing waters

Al-Koura
Amidst the ancient wise olives
Amidst the dark blessed green
Amidst the clayish cliffs burnt by sun
Amidst the vast houses rhymed by rain

A celebration
A happy crowd gathering
With music filling the place
Night and rain were falling
Falling at a gentle pace

An encounter
A man stood before a woman
And stepped into an eccentric maze
An odd feeling never experienced before
A finger of fire touched his cold heart

A passion
An aroused passion made of breathing
An awakened passion built on impatience
Big enough to walk with life
Sturdy enough to chuckle at death

A talk
As a blossoming flower of a damask rose
Kissing the morning dew for the first time
As a young golden eagle with whitish wings
Riding the tides of wind for the first time

A treasure
As a poor fisherman
Shucking the right oyster
As a monk amidst sins
Touched by the Holy Spirit

A smile
An apricity
A wonder, a dawn
A look, a smile
And a nightingale was born!

Memories of Hope: thoughts on a city in crisis (written August 2020)

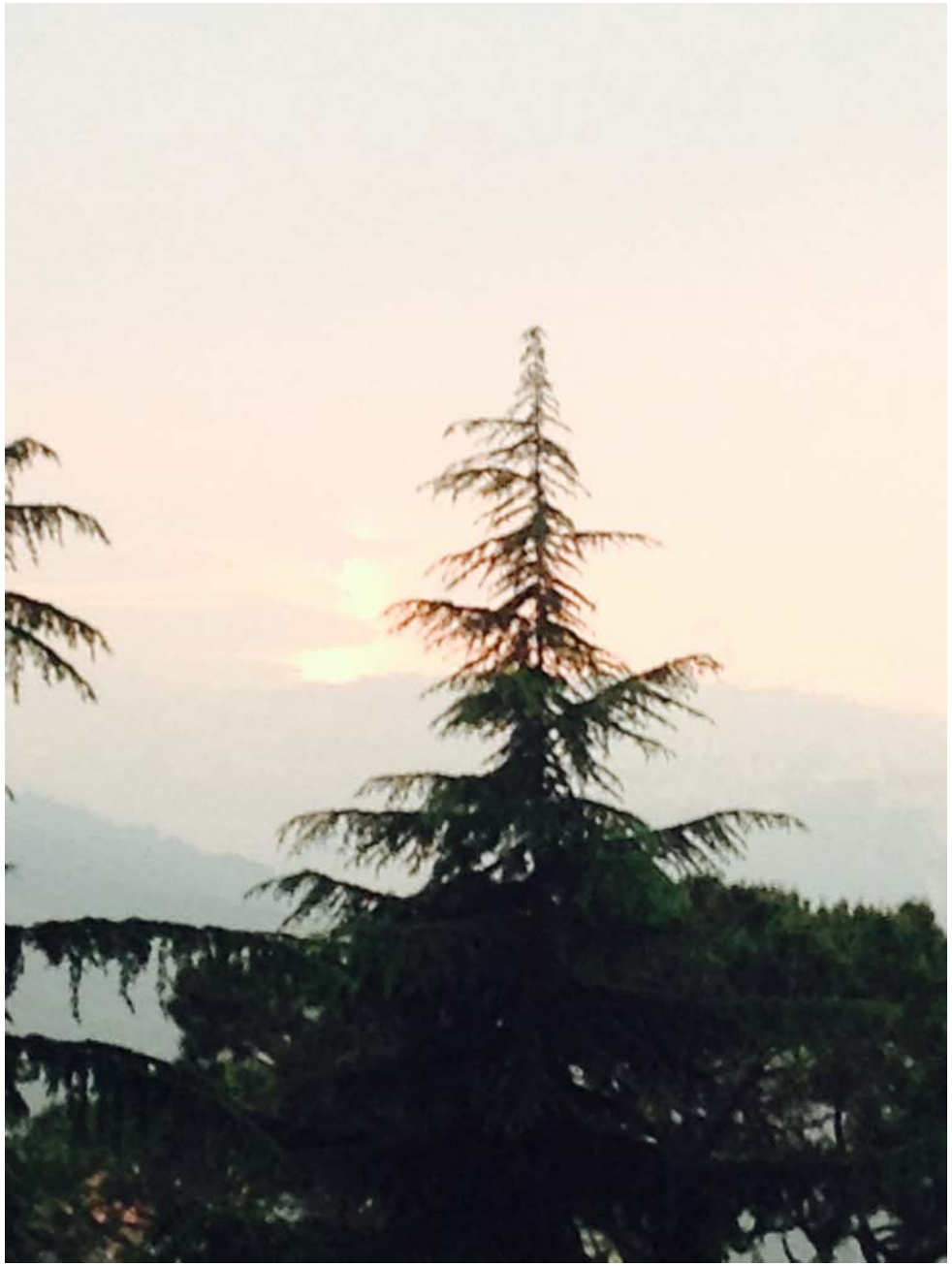
This was originally written after the port explosion, when the city was plunged into chaos. Again, the country is in crisis, with no resolution in sight.

February 2014. The first time I saw Beirut. I was there to research an ongoing art project about migration and was full of excitement. Months of research had preceded this; cramming my head full of history and the socio-economic situation in the country. The reality of it was far from what I was prepared for, nor did I know that it would be such a major part of my life from that day forward.

It was three weeks ago, a few moments now receded into the shadows. An explosion which lit the tinder of frustration, igniting the fireworks of the city again. But as quickly as it flared, it died down, its sparks extinguished by apathy, despair, and more enforced confinement in the face of a pandemic which defies politics and religion. The ghosts and the dust have settled. But the city will survive. It will rebuild itself as it always has and, as before, tragedy will be used as an excuse to turf out the undesirables as it erects more shining empty pantheons to greed. Another neighborhood’s soul will die. Such is life everywhere, but life is cheap.

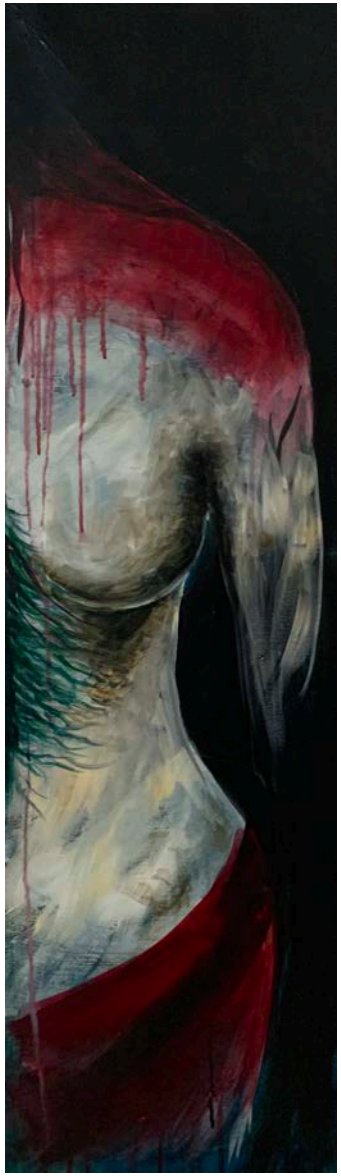
We encounter places along life's journey which we love despite ourselves. No words, no reason, can answer the "why", yet our hearts are forever doomed to dwell in their crumbling walls, belonging yet not belonging, occupying a strange limbo of being. For me, the city's flaws are its beauty, its weaknesses its strengths. When people talk of the glittering places of Beirut, bland and stinking of a sameness seen in a million others around the globe, I don't recognize the place I love. The place I love is dirty and rundown, wild and untamed. Derelict doorways open onto forgotten rooms. Elegant windows hide lives quietly lived. Ordinary yet extraordinary lives. For it is the people who make a place. Not the great and the famous, but the ones whose names are not heard, whose faces we do not recognize. People like the ones whose lives were ripped from their loved ones by a sudden blast on that August day.

The port always features in my memories, haunts my dreams. My first apartment; one side looking out over the water, the other to the busy streets of Gemmayze. Even at the height of summer a cool breeze blew through it, as if the sea was trying to escape into the city. My first kiss with the man I did not know would one day be my partner; the port looming outside, its sounds floating up like steel winged butterflies echoing at the window. Even when I ran to try and find peace after my own tragedy, high into the hills looking imperviously down at the city below, the port was there. Each night I watched it recede into darkness, every morning it reemerged in the dawning light of the new day. It was my muse. I gazed upon it as I tried to turn my jumbled thoughts into words. Now, as I look at the pictures of the destruction, it seems to have simply decayed, rapidly as if time sped up. It seems heartbreaking but inevitable. These ruins have become the symbol of a battered and lost Lebanon, exemplifying everything that is wrong with the country, but it could be the symbol of hope. It is in ashes and from those ashes the phoenix can rise.



لبيروت
من قلبي سلامٌ لبيروت
و قُبلٌ للبحر و البيوت
لصخرةٍ كأنها وجه بحارٍ قديمِ
هي من روحِ الشعب خمرٌ
هي من عرقِهِ خبزٌ و ياسمين
فكيف صار طعمها طعم نارٍ و دخانِ
لبيروت
مجدٌ من رمادٍ لبيروت
من دمِ لولدٍ حُملَ فوق يدها
أطفأت مدينتي قنديلها
أغلقت بابها
أصبحت في السماء وحدها...
وحدها و ليلُ
أنتِ لي أنتِ لي
أه عانقيني أنتِ لي
رايتي و حجرُ الغدِ و موج سفري
أزهرت جراح شعبي
أزهرت دمعة الأمهات..
أنتِ بيروت لي
أنتِ لي
آه عانقيني

Fairuz, Li Beirut



Lebanon (2024) by Elizabeth khoury