

## ART

# Residual debris of war trauma evident in imagery and texture

If the function of art is indeed 'to express feeling and transmit understanding' these two Lebanese artists are fulfilling their functions admirably, writes *Helen Khal*

Last autumn, when I looked at the work of Lebanon's artists on exhibition in the Surssock Museum's annual salon, I was struck by what I saw. I had been away for a number of years and, considering the passage of time plus the unquestionable imprint of war experience, I realised there would be a change but had little idea of what to expect.

I noticed that only a few paintings reflected the distinctive luminosity of colour, the sense of joy, that once pervaded much of Lebanon's contemporary art. Largely gone was the impulse to express in either figurative or abstract mode a visual and emotive response to the land and people, to the pro-life energy inherent in the forms, colours and textures of life in Lebanon. Instead, many of the young artists had turned their vision inward and seemed to be caught in the dark, sunless alcoves of disturbed sentiment. I felt them locked in a world of unyielding austerity, a world of interior walls and solitary motionless people, of subdued colour and ambiguous imagery.

Two exhibitions that opened this week serve to reaffirm my response to the Surssock show. Although not readily apparent, the work of both, to my mind, springs from the residual debris of past trauma.

Both are abstract, yet each draws on metaphors of figuration based on the indelible reality of experience. If the function of art is, as Herbert Read wrote, "to express feeling and transmit understanding", both artists acquit themselves admirably, with strong talent, masterly skill and singular commitment to their creative purpose.

**Afaf Zurayk**, showing at the Janine Rubeiz Gallery until April 9, left Lebanon in 1983 and lives in Washington DC. A woman of tall stature, quiet movement and soft speech, she is a Harvard MA graduate in fine arts and has been exhibiting since 1978 in the US and

Lebanon.

Through the past two decades, Zurayk's work passed through a sequence of expression that moved from nostalgia to pain of loss to incipient rebirth. "I strongly felt the need to accommodate the demands of two worlds: the



**Bright spark:** In *Face* Zurayk's images slowly emerge from the debris of detail

world of my childhood and the one I live in now," she writes. "My painting has been, ultimately, an attempt to conquer dispersion, loss of home and self, abandonment and isolation."

The 36 paintings on exhibition, all small in size and executed in mixed media, are abstract expressionist in style. The works are divided into three parts which, like movements in a symphony, voice the swelling chords of a single theme.

In *Face* and *Mask* Zurayk's hand, laden with emotive power, lays in swift, diagonal passages of pigment that spark the predominantly black surface with sudden notes of ruby red, emerald green, pearl white and amethyst. From the centre of each piece emerges the faint traces of a human face, barely visible in definition yet noticeably pensive and searching in expression.

The *Face* images are vague, without defined physical features, as though seen from a distance. They are, as the artist writes, "images that slowly emerge from the debris of detail". In the *Mask* series, the faces assume more recognisable presence. Their eyes, large, melancholic and quietly staring, are described by Zurayk as "a child peering over an object".

In *Dream Persona*, colour totally disappears, and when the suggestion of a face emerges, it is reduced to the nagging notation of an unremembered dream. These pieces, in which I read the use of black as strength and white as clarity, project a crescendo pitch of fortitude and hope. About these, Zurayk says, "Slowly, painfully, complete distillation occurs".

**Amal Dagher**, at Galerie Epreuve d'Arise until March 29, is a younger artist who was six years old when Lebanon's war erupted.

Small and sprightly in body, with pony-tailed hair, rosy cheeks and vibrant expression, she still looks like a child.

A graduate of the Lebanese Academy of Fine arts, she also studied in Paris and began exhibiting in 1993. In her life, Dagher pursues all the adventurous experimentation and healthy curiosity of a young, untroubled person. She para-glides off mountain tops, snowboards down steep hills, listens to Japanese music and is a vegetarian.

Nothing of what she looks like and how she lives resembles her work.

The ten over-size canvases and 14 inks on



**Emotive graffiti:** Dagher's mixed media is imposing, and totally engulfs the vision

paper that constitute Dagher's show are, in magnitude and expression, more like what one would expect from a muscle-bound body and stoic temperament.

The material in itself, as well as the process of production, demands physical strength and endurance. Dagher's medium is polymer plaster and paint. She stretches the huge canvases and prepares the heavy plaster grounds herself. She grinds her own pigments out of natural-coloured earth powders and paints, bent over the canvas on the floor. Her tools

are brushes, spatulas, knives, sticks, rags and her bare hands.

Out of these materials, Dagher produces dense, textured walls of black, white and ochre tonalities upon which she inscribes the graffiti of her emotive impulses.

These are minimal works of imposing presence that totally engulf and arrest the vision. We wonder about the recurring symbols – the receptacles that resemble a giant child's soup bowl, the criss-cross lines that could be the sidewalk chalk markings of a hopscotch

game, the suspended masses of white that look like blocks of cement. What does it all mean?

I asked Dagher. She replied: "You have to find your own meaning. All I care about is that the painting stops the eye, makes you look. It doesn't matter whether you like it or not, I only want you to really look, to say 'yes' or 'no'. In my work, I don't like to talk too much; I just want to put down the essentials. The bowl to me is simply a beautiful form; the lozenge shapes I scratch in are divisions of space meant to create depth."

All very well, I thought to myself. But there's more to it than that, I thought, as I began to look for meaning. Let's assume I didn't know that as a child during the war Dagher was displaced five times. Even then, I believe I would still see thick walls, their surfaces peppered with holes and scarred by the ravages of violence. I would still see black skies and eroded earth. I would still see flying fragments and toppled stones.

But most of all, behind all this presumably symbolic content, I would find deeper meaning, the presence of a threatened psyche impelled to construct protective walls for itself.

At first glance, Dagher's walls appear cold and unresponsive, but slowly as they begin to emit soft whispers of isolation and solitude, of insistent survival and defensive need, we begin to understand.

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