

Immortalizing a few moments

By Mirella Hodeib

BEIRUT: Nijad Abdul Massih ceased to believe in fairy tales in 1975, around the time when Lebanon's various factions were gearing up for an armed conflict that went on for 15 years. The bloody 1975-90 Civil War failed to prevent the artist from creating his own fairy tales, however, and the war's cruelty sharpened his sense for detail.

Surrealist as they may appear, each of Abdul Massih's composite photographs relates a story, defends a cause or conveys a particular emotion. People, places and colors are at the center of the artist's work, particularly "Loss of Innocence," selections from a body of work of the same name currently on display at the Q Contemporary art space in Zeitouneh.

"Loss of Innocence" is comprised of photomontages mounted in lightboxes and projected in a slide show, called "Mary goes to ..."

Abdul Massih, who describes Lebanon's Civil War as a "motive and a hindrance," isn't bothered by the idea that an artist may wear many hats. He believes photography echoes art, history, activism and more.

"Having hit 40, I'm past the phase of deception and I'm more into retrospection," he says. "Yet I feel the younger generation should be exposed to the truth and miseries of this world from early on so as to avoid them any major shock."

Abdul Massih counts the Civil War among several major delusions that he had to see though. Another was his realization that the mannequin with the glistening eyes at his mother's store in the Burj – as pre-Civil War downtown Beirut was known – would never come to life. "Another shattered fairy tale," he says.

The mannequin, Abdul Massih's alter ego, will never cease to be one of the artist's many muses. Dubbed "Mary," she is a recurrent character in "Loss of Innocence."

"She is so beautiful," Abdul Massih mutters, gazing at an image of the mannequin that is part of "Mary goes to ..."

One of the central elements of the exhibition, the projection consists of photomontages that juxtapose the image of Mary with that of various places the artist visited – including Baalbek, California and Rome – all depicted from the mannequin's perspective.

Mary has even visited the photographer's hometown, the Akkar village of Beino in north Lebanon. In one of the collection's most poignant images a close-up of the mannequin's face renders her skin translucent, exposing an underlying structure of brickwork with two makeshift

ladders resting against it.

The earth tones deployed in the montage – grey, brown and nuances of blue – evoke the Lebanese countryside and nostalgia for the country's traditional architecture.

The contrast between the artist's application of new-ish media to historical artifacts (heritage architecture and so forth) creates a sort of incongruous complementarity between "old" and "new," which makes the work more powerful.

Abdul Massih is critical of rehabilitation works in his village, which saw one of its oldest souks razed. "Mary in Beino," he says, was a cry against over-modernization and complete failure to preserve notable artifacts from the past.

"Who says that modernity stems from erasing the past?" he wonders.

Architecture is a source of inspiration for Abdul Massih, who worked in Italy for 17 years and holds dual Lebanese-Italian citizenship.

Rome's Coliseum, downtown Beirut's ravaged opera house and the city's French Mandate-era apartment blocks and other monuments figure in "Loss of Innocence."

One of these structures – an imposing cameo rose ("pink" to the uninitiated) structure in the district of Gemmayzeh – is at the center of "Fragile," montage-in-lightbox works. Superimposed over the right-hand side of the building is the translucent profile of a man's head, the textures of his hair mingling with that of the clouds to form the impression of a single entity. Superimposed over the structure at the upper left is a yellow tag that reads "Handle with Care" – the image associated with postal packages with fragile content.

Abdul Massih's background in advertising and his penchant for new media collage is clearly apparent in "Fragile." The layers of detail in Abdul Massih's works are not added haphazardly. Ostensibly abstract, these photomontages attempt to address contemporary political and social issues.

"Human nature and cultural interaction motivate my work," he says. "'Fragile' sends out a very clear message: Preserve Lebanon's architectural heritage."

Abdul Massih has also shouldered the burden of documenting daily life in Beirut. "Beirut is in constant evolution," he says. "I want my works to record this astounding process."

The color choices too are made to serve the work's themes. The bronze hues that dominate "Fragile" are meant to create a sepia effect so popular in Mandate-era photography and trigger nostalgia for a bygone era.

"I never manipulate my pictures but I can merge up to 25 pictures together to get a color I am looking for," Abdul Massih confides.

Colors, places and the social and political issues are not the artist's only sources of inspiration. For Abdul Massih, who worked in television for several years, women and femininity is a dominant theme.

Several women, including Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki, have served as principal characters in his photo collages. "All my women," he says, "have contributed in making a

difference in their immediate environment at least.”

The figure at the center of “Distracted for a second,” Abdul Massih’s second montage, is gracious dancer wearing a heart-shaped hat, apparently fiddling with her minimal costume, while gazing at a man, who is reflected in her makeup mirror.

It is the more flamboyant of the two photomontages, and leaves room for wide interpretation. A tiny sticker pasted on the mirror facing the dancer reads “Kitch,” suggesting something of the setting in which the original picture was taken – and perhaps the sensibility to which Abdul Massih wants to appeal. Its hues, ranging from blue to purple, as well as the depth of the image are highly evocative of the color-saturated photography of the 1970s and add to the mystery of this work.

“Still images do not attract me,” says Abdul Massih, “I’d rather focus on the beautiful little details that immortalize the moment.”

Nijad Abdul Massih’s “Loss of Innocence” runs until Feb.25 at Q Contemporary. For more information call 961-3-300520.

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