

Zeina Barakeh, son art tout en haut de l'affiche... [Her Art Making Headlines]

Written by Zéna ZALZAL, Posted on July 14, 2020

From Ras Beirut in 2006 to Times Square in 2020. In the space of 14 years, this Lebanese-Palestinian artist has managed to make a name, a career, and an enviable position for herself on the American art scene. The proof: one of her works presented on one of the giant billboards in Times Square, the heart of Manhattan, last June.

"Despite the physical distance, my life and my work remain closely linked to Lebanon," says Zeina Barakeh.



What artist wouldn't dream of having their art displayed on one of those giant billboards that make Times Square so famous? Zeina Barakeh experienced that dream from June 10th to June 15th. When, as part of the "Tunnels of The Mind" exhibition (see below), the giant LED screen belonging to the ZAZ Corner digital gallery, located at the corner of 41st Street and 7th Avenue, continuously presented an animated video bearing her signature and mixing two of her previous works: "Homeland Insecurity" and "Slam Bang Blue". A consecration for this Lebanese-Palestinian visual artist who, since her arrival in the United States fifteen years ago, has embarked on an artistic path marked by the sea of conflicts in her native region. "Admittedly, I am very pleased with the increased visibility that my work offers this exhibition which reaches the general public and not just a handful of visitors like in a gallery or a museum. But I am also very moved that its echo reached my country of origin, my family, and my Lebanese friends", Zeina Barakeh explains to the OLJ, during an interview via WhatsApp to learn more about her world. "Because, despite the physical distance, my work and my life remain intimately linked with Lebanon and Beirut, where I lived during my formative years," she said.

"It's funny, my destiny has often played out with extreme accuracy. Every instant, every day, always exactly at a nearby point for me", notes the (now American) artist. Barakeh obtained her nationality only a year ago, but continues to present herself as a Lebanese-Palestinian.

A Near-miss Visa...

"It was through failing my admissions test in architecture by one point while at the American University of Beirut (AUB) that I found myself in the early 1990s involved in interior architecture at the BUC (Beirut University College, today the Lebanese American University or LAU). My curriculum included drawing and visual art lessons, for which I was particularly gifted. Eventually, my work earned me the LAU Cheikh Zayed Prize. Obtaining this award pushed me to change lanes to orient myself. After getting my diploma, I decided to pursue painting and the teaching of fine arts in Beirut at the American Community School (ACS) and BUC. Later on, I had the chance to participate in an orientation supported by two artist residencies in 2001 and 2004 at the Vermont Studio Center, as well as a solo exhibition in 2005 at Espace SD organized by Sandra Dagher, who played a decisive role in my journey. Because of the good reception of this hanging of expressionist portraits, I made the decision to leave the following year and develop my skills in the fine arts at the San Francisco Art Institute".

A Fresh Start

"I got my student visa for the United States almost a few hours before the embassy in Aoukar closed its doors during the July war," Zeina said. After a dangerous crossing of the heavily bombed Lebanese-Syrian border, she left her home region and landed in San Francisco, California on August 6th, 2006.

Beirut War Memory:

"Once I integrated into the American West Coast, the memory of my experience of the war and its various episodes completely overwhelmed me to the point of permeating throughout all my artistic work. This resulted in me refocusing work on a clearly more politically charged type of art. Especially since, having just arrived, I was confronted with questions about my identity. Even if the San Francisco Bay Area where I lived was very progressive, I was still given stigmatizing looks by foreigners. This kind of uneasiness was experienced especially by people from our region of the world. I had to come back to all these questions about my identity to be able to situate myself. That caused a spark of new artistic discourse for me, I could no longer paint self-portraits and expressions of my inner world like I could before," she explains.

Zeina was born in Beirut in 1972 to a Lebanese mother and a Palestinian father and lived through the entire war in Ras Beirut. Her childhood was marked by the division of the capital into east and west sectors. As a child, Zeina had to cross the "red and green lines and the militia barrages" to go to the "Christian region" just to go and see her best friend (Joy Kanaan). The struggle of living in a country ravaged with such endless conflict will be the central axis, "the very essence", she underlines, of her new art.



On a giant billboard from ZAZ Corner in Times Square, images from two animated works by Zeina Barakeh. Photo DR

The Third Half

"My early years in Beirut were characterized by perpetual conflict - political alliances changed regularly, often leading to armed clashes. Those who shared geographic and socio-economic markers with political factions were seen as part of these alliances and, therefore, were seen as accomplices in the perpetuation of civil tensions. In response to these divisions, I conceptualized a space, The Third Half, in which

individuals exist outside of split communities - much like these gatherings of people that have formed during the revolution of October 17th, 2019. This concept functions as a process of producing works highlighting the divergent accounts of the Middle East around Western interventions and regional conflicts," she explains. Zeina, who also holds the position of Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs at the San Francisco Art Institute, explores in this ongoing project "how people and spaces or territories polarize during binary divisions,". She began the project in 2008, with serial paintings. It is through animation, digital media, and archive installations, that she feels are "more conducive to a narrative discourse", that she is presenting questions of an identity based, historical, memorial, and territorial construction. Using in particular the mythological figure of the centaur as an allegory for colonizing powers and the people they've oppressed.

Oppressors and the Oppressed

Zeina Barakeh, in addition to telling stories through her stationary work, sometimes slips into telling stories through a visual medium. Some examples of her visually oriented work are:

- The animated video series called "And Then", in which she scripted the visit of her avatar (the reproduction of her silhouette surmounted by a horse's head) in a Palestine under British mandate, in Jaffa, where her father was born, to fight the colonizers and reverse history.
- Two plays from which she made the stop-motion animation presented in Times Square were her first public work which, in addition to fame, above all gives her the opportunity to present "a war narrative contrary to what is generally described in the American media".
- A spirit of justice and of overthrowing hegemonic forces is found in her film "Homeland Insecurity", which won the 2016 Los Angeles Film Festival in the animation category.
- Two years later, her film "Slam Bang Blue" also won an award at the same festival in 2018 in the category of experimental animated short film on the web.

"All my work deals with this eternal conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed," Barakeh sums up as the one who made art her weapon against war and deconstruction.



An image from Homeland Insecurity.

“Tunnels of the Mind”: A Refuge in Times of Unrest

ZAZ Corner is a digital gallery that displays works of art on a giant LED screen in the heart of Times Square, New York. Celebrating the 150th year anniversary of the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), the ZAZ Corner exhibited, from June 10 to 15, 2020, "Tunnels of the Mind", a selection of 18 recent works by artists affiliated with SFAI. "The individual works reveal each student's internal world and showcase a subversive tangent of the extraterritorial and the supernatural", explains Orit Ben-Shitrit, president of the film department of SFAI and curator of this digital exhibition. "Art can encourage empathy and it is the highest form of hope. When our reality is devastating - with disturbing racist murders and social inequalities exacerbated by a pandemic - the imagination can provide refuge and lead us to discover new possibilities. "