

Installations refreshed by dereliction

Group exhibition encourages fresh readings of work by local artists

By India Stoughton
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BEIRUT: In a dimly lit, near-derelict room, a tangle of pipes bristles with numerous bizarrely assembled taps. As you cross the decorative tiles adorning the bare, dusty floor, your footsteps echo back at you from the peeling walls and soaring ceilings. Beneath the footfalls, a soft susurration fills the room, its origins unclear. As you approach the taps, you realize that the whispering voices you hear are emanating from the polished metal fittings.

Approaching "Whispering Taps," an immersive sound installation by Charbel Samuel Aoun, is an eerie and engaging experience. The work is one of two by the artist currently on show at the atmospheric Villa Paradiso in Gemmayzeh, where the shell of a once-stunning mansion is now elegantly decaying.

This location was carefully selected by curators Fadia Antar, Clémence Cottard Hachem, Marc Mouarkech and Chadia Samaha for their exhibition "Unsaid, Unheard, Untitled," which runs until Sept. 18.

Coordinated by Léa Sednaoui, the exhibition is the final project undertaken by the curators, marking the close of their yearlong masters program in art criticism and curatorial studies at the Université Saint-Joseph. The four curators chose to work with a series of interlinked themes such as interior and exterior worlds, taboos and marginalization, engagement and voyeurism and inclusion and exclusion.

Together, they selected the work of seven Lebanese artists who habitually touch on these themes, most of whom will be familiar to habitués of Beirut's galleries. The two installations by Aoun are accompanied by



Lara Tabet, "Pénélopes," 2013, variable dimensions, installation in situ.

work by Nadim Asmar, George Awdé, Rana Eid, Dima Hajjar, Randa Mirza and Lara Tabet.

Visitors are greeted by Aoun's installations. In "Whispering Taps," the artist tackles the issue of Lebanon's migrant domestic workers, who, trapped all day and night in the homes of their employers, often have no one with whom to discuss their problems.

Ghostly voices issue from the steam punk jumble of piping, enticing viewers ever closer in the hope of deciphering individual phrases and prompting them to engage with a discourse that often goes unheard.

Aoun's second installation likewise engages closely with the exhibition's themes, tackling the unspoken stories of Lebanon's marginalized communities. Entitled "Voice of the Invisible," the work consists of a bank of 12 old-fashioned landline telephones, connected to a central laptop.

Every few seconds one of the phones begins to ring. Ignore it, and

its demanding summons will fill the mansion for 30 seconds or so, before it's replaced by another model. Answer it, however, and you're greeted with a distant voice, reciting a crackling monologue.

From a homeless man to a young Syrian boy, these voices belong to Lebanon's disenfranchised minorities, and are the result of a series of interviews carried out by the artist in an unspecified public garden in Beirut in May 2013.

In a near-dark room nearby, a neatly made single bed sits beside a small table bearing a video projector. Perhaps afraid of rumpling the bedclothes, visitors perch gingerly on the edge of this minimal furnishing to watch a 15-minute video by Asfar, a slideshow of photos taken in 2005, accompanied by captions that tell an unusually intimate story.

The photos, which capture a series of mundane moments in the photographer's daily life – the view from his window, two daddy long legs mating on a wall, a plate of half-eaten food,

friends doing shots at a club – were exhibited a couple of years back at Galerie Tanit-Beyrouth, then known as Espace Kettaneh Kunigk. Accompanied by Asfar's commentary, however, they plunge viewers into the artist's interior world, providing an intimate window into his feeling of having lost his sense of self in the wake of a failed love affair.

In the next room hang a series of shots of the photographer's unmade bed. In these simple photographs, Asfar emphasizes the different patterns inscribed in the tangled sheets, which become landscapes of rolling hills and shadowed valleys.

Clues by which to assess the photographer's quality of sleep, these abstract patterns allow viewers to decipher his interior world through exterior traces, like a fortune teller reading someone's future in their tea leaves.

Upstairs, photographs by George Awdé, previously exhibited last summer at Sednaoui's now defunct gallery The Running Horse,

approach interior and exterior in a more literal vein. The images, from the artist's "Windows" series, capture Lebanese and Syrian laborers, some framed against windows in the early morning light, others captured unawares, photographed from outside the building while asleep behind uncurtained windows.

At once intimate and voyeuristic, the photographs bring the viewer into close contact with the subjects while raising questions about public and private space and the transparent barriers formed by a pane of glass.

The curators have chosen to use the layout of the villa to create a similar tension in their deployment of photographs by Randa Mirza. Entitled "On Sex and Gender," the series explores anatomy and gender perceptions through portraits edited to create composites, in which a body might feature both male and female genitalia, or alternatively neither.

The curators chose to hang the works in an upstairs room blocked off from the mansion's main dining hall by a glass wall, leaving viewers to peer in at the photos through an invisible barrier intended to echo the wall of silence surrounding taboo topics such as gender and sexuality in Beirut society.

Two sound installations by Rana Eid, exploring personal desires and public events, a series of photographs taken in the homes of strange women by Lara Tabet and a multilayered, abstract installation in three parts by Dima Hakkar, exploring religion and social control, complete a fascinating exhibition that hinges on its unorthodox location.

Much of the work on display in "Unsaid, Unheard, Untitled" may not be new, but its imaginative deployment and the care that the team of curators have taken to forge connections with the old building that houses it encourages fresh readings. Well worth a visit.

"Unsaid, Unheard, Untitled," is up at Villa Paradiso in Gemmayzeh through Sept. 18 and is open from 5 to 8 p.m. daily. For more information, please visit www.facebook.com/events/590753724369055

Photo courtesy of Marc Mouarkech