Installations refreshed by dereliction

Group exhibition encourages fresh readings of work by local artists

By India Stoughton
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B EIRUT: In a dimly lit, narrow rectangle room, a tangle of pipes bristles with numerous haphazardly 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 and Clemence Courtois, for their exhibition “Unsaid, Unheard, Untitled,” which runs until Sept. 18. Together, they selected the work of Lebanon’s disenfranchised female artists, who, trapped all day and night in the homes of their employers, often have no one with whom to discuss their problems.

“Body voices issue from the steam punk jumble of piping, enticing viewers ever closer in the hopes of deciphering individual phrases and prompting them to engage with a discourse that often goes unheard,” Aoun’s second installation like “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.

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. 

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Aoun’s second installation like “Whispering Taps” engages closely with the exhibition’s themes, tackling the unspoken stories of Lebanon’s marginalized communities. Entitled “Voices 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 cracking 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 nearly made single bed sits beside a small table bearing a video projector. Perhaps afraid of rumpling the bed sheets, visitors perch gingerly on the edge of this minimal furnishing to watch a 15-minute video by Astar, a slideshow of photos taken in 2003, 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 unawares, photographed from outside the mansion’s main dining room, a tangle of derelict cables bristles with numerous haphazardly 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.

Together, these works form a series of interconnected themes such as interior and exterior worlds, taboo and marginalization, engagement and voyeurism and inclusion and exclusion.

The curators chose to hang the exhibition in the final project under the guidance 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. Much of the work on display in “Unsaid, Unheard, Untitled” may not be new, but its imaginative deployment and the care that 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 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 locations.

Much of the work on display in “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.