The art of destruction

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Untitled (Bomb 2005 #3), depicts the blast that killed the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. Courtesy of the artist.

Watching the news coming out of Lebanon, one can easily conclude that the place is always smoldering, that its capital Beirut is a living, breathing ruin of buildings burned and besieged. This isn't the case, of course, but given the visuals that have accompanied the Hizbullah-led opposition's latest and most demonstrative putsch, Lebanon these days certainly looks like the charred carcass of a failed state.

There are at least three times more Lebanese living abroad than at home. Most of those who have left over the past half-century have done so in the midst of a war or in anticipation of the next one, and fury over the country's facility for self-destruction is scorched into the diaspora's collective memory. Many first generation emigrants don't look back. They dismiss Lebanon, deny its promise and embrace their adopted homeland instead. But a few second and third generation immigrants suffer an incorrigible curiosity that is passed down through family rather than experienced firsthand. It is their unique and perhaps unfortunate inheritance to long for Lebanon in the abstract even as they wonder, in concrete terms, if its conflagration will ever cease to burn.

The painter John Jurayj was born in Evanston, Illinois, just north of Chicago, in 1968. His parents met on a compound in Saudi Arabia when they were both working for the oil company Aramco – he was a surgeon, she was a nurse. They married in the United States after they were unable to wed either in Lebanon or in Italy – he is Greek Orthodox, she is Roman Catholic. "Remember this was 1961," Jurayj says. They never expected to stay in the US. Rather, they planned to return to Lebanon and school their children there. But by the time John was seven, the outbreak of civil war made an American education a much preferable option. By the time fifteen years of fighting had passed, the hope of returning home for anything more than a visit was gone.

Still, since the early 1990s, Jurayj has been returning to Lebanon regularly. He studied architecture at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and started painting in Rome during a junior year abroad. He has been exhibiting his work steadily since 1995, and earned a degree in fine art from Bard College in New York, three years ago. He lives and works in Brooklyn, but he finds much of his inspiration in Beirut. It would be trite to say that Jurayj discovered his roots through his paintings. He translates his

relationship with Lebanon into art, certainly, but it is a complicated process mediated by time, distance, family, culture, violence, sexual identity and political circumstance. His paintings explore "the complex space between exile and immigration", he says, and they delve into a notion of an identity that is constantly shifting between the Arab world and the West. But they are also a means of "asserting authority over my father, honestly", says Jurayj, who is gay and considers his sexuality an important factor in the cultural equation that defines his artwork.

Jurayj's paintings explore beauty and destruction in the same pictorial frame. They are as engaged with the history of Lebanon as they are with post-war American and European art. As such, they create an unusual but highly valuable link between a generation of artists in Beirut and their counterparts in the West. Jurayj's treatment of trauma and remembrance tethers him to the works of Lebanese artists such as Walid Raad, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (who despite the spelling difference bears the same name as Jurayj, though the two artists are not, to their knowledge, related).

It also places him, and by extension them, in a much longer, cross-disciplinary lineage that includes the painter Gerhard Richter, the writer W. G. Sebald and the master of memory himself, Marcel Proust.

As Jurayj prepares for a group exhibition this summer at New York's venerable Paula Cooper Gallery, along with two solo shows at the Walter Maciel Gallery in Los Angeles and the Alberto Peola Gallery in Turin (scheduled for September and November, respectively), his paintings are poised to earn greater international visibility. This could, in turn, provide some much-needed material for Lebanese at home and abroad who are casting about for some meaning in the latest of Lebanon's all-too-frequent bouts of madness.

Jurayj's oil paintings on linen and mirrored Plexiglas are all based on photographs, which create what the artist calls a mapping system for his aesthetic and conceptual concerns. Some of the photographs he retrieved from old family albums, including images of Lebanon's doomed natural beauty – the sea, the mountains, the cedar trees – that were taken by his parents on holidays or day trips around the country. Other photographs were clipped from the news or dug out of press archives: pictures of the American embassy and Marine barracks bombings in the 1980s and the explosion that killed Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafik Hariri, in 2005. Another category in Jurayj's image bank consists of photographs of Beirut's iconic modernist architecture.

When he is working on a linen support, Jurayj covers the fabric in a lurid-coloured gesso. He draws quickly and aggressively and then, like Jackson Pollock, paints with the work laid out flat on the floor, in drips and drizzles that record the physical movements of the artist's body. The results are paintings that represent Lebanon's history of violence but are at the same time almost entirely consumed by abstraction.

"The paint is the vehicle for the idea," says Jurayj. "The paint is the explosion or the collapsed building. I am trying to make the paint be the image, not just a description of it. The paint is the representation," he explained, not just the tool by which representation is achieved.

Jurayj's paintings depict "a history of conflict and trauma that has kept my family where it is," he explains. "Trauma is therapeutic in a way. You cling to it; you identify with it … [My work] is clearly engaged with beauty, but it's a beauty that becomes acidic and hallucinatory. It turns. The colors are a little sick."

Jurayj is keenly aware of the extent to which context informs a viewer's interpretation of his work. "An American audience is going to read this as German painting, 9/11 and a collapsed modernity," he says, clicking through images on a computer screen during a week-long stay in Beirut last month. "Here, it is going to be read as a precise political moment but [viewers are] probably going to be alienated from the form."

Jurayj also knows that there are key differences between his own work and that of his Lebanese peers. "A lot of the work here looks at war in a cool, clinical way," he said. While his contemporaries are concerned with "veracity, truth and the writing of history," he says he deals with "the immediacy of the body, identity politics and sexuality or desire." It is also worth noting that Beirut's contemporary art scene is fueled on videos, installations, immaterial interventions and documentary practices. Jurayj, on the other hand, is a painter, which makes him seem romantic and old-fashioned by comparison. He is furthermore a painter who is heavily invested in the gestural act, the physicality of applying pigment to canvas and his agency of a maker of marks.

"I am turning a personal and political subject into a complex space," he says. "So the viewer is left with a question that is not answered: Can you make a history painting through abstraction?" Viewing Jurayj's work through the prism of Lebanon's latest crisis, one might also ask: Can you turn a violent episode into art? There's little hope for an adequate answer, just as there is little chance of a workable solution to Lebanon's latest round of combustible problems. But Jurayj's efforts are an apt reminder that trauma can be turned around and made meaningful, however painful the process may be.

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reports from Beirut for The National