

THE DAILY STAR

Where fashion, fabrics and geometry meet

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

BEIRUT: For that past year, it seems, Beirut's pre-eminent white cube for the exhibition of contemporary art has been exploring all the possible seams and fissures that can run through a postindustrial space hosting two very different artists at once.

Last spring, Galerie Sfeir-Semler paired the formidable Etel Adnan, an octogenarian Greco-Lebanese novelist, playwright and painter, with the rambunctious Yto Barrada, a 30-something Franco-Moroccan artist messing around with photography, video, posters, board games and sculptures.

The combination of the two parallel shows – one spilling along the gallery's back side, the other its front – highlighted the affection for color, nature, and slowly burning politics that both artists share, despite the fact that Barrada experiments with bold forms and wildly disparate ideas while Adnan paints diminutive mountain landscapes with an abstract touch, over and over again.

Then, in the fall, the gallery matched the Egyptian artist Wael Shawky with the Lebanese artist Mounira al-Solh. Though both artists can be said to belong to the same internationalist contemporary art milieu, their sensibilities are worlds apart.

While Shawky explores historical ruptures and cultural collisions dating back to the crusades in elaborate video productions and meticulous installations of such materials as oil, asphalt, chicken wire, and roofing shingles, Solh's work is far more playful, agile and of the moment, revolving around an extended performance of the artist as a gender-bending alter-ego named Bassam Ramlawi.

What linked the two artists, however, was the quiet, obsessive, daily practice of drawing, which cast both of their practices in tender new light.

Now, again, Sfeir-Semler is testing out two new shows – one by veteran German photographer F.C. Gundlach, the other by the textile-slashing French-Egyptian artist Hoda Tawakol – to see where the possible intersections lie.

For a gallery committed, on paper at least, to minimalism and conceptualism, fashion, fabrics and a curvaceous approach to geometric patterns would seem unlikely points of contact, but they work surprisingly well here. The double billing of Gundlach and Tawakol has generated Sfeir-Semler's most accessible exhibition to date.

With its rather bland and utilitarian title, "The Middle East in the 50's and 60's," F.C. Gundlach's show is a treasure trove of mid-20th-century glamor. If you enjoy the novels of Lawrence Durrell and Paul Bowles, early James Bond films, pictures of the Baalbek Festival in its heyday, or those billboards lining the new waterfront district in Downtown Beirut (advertising a real-estate development called Zaitunay Bay) – if you are, in other words, a sucker for the so-called Golden

Age of Beirut and Cairo – then you will probably love Gundlach's exhibition.

At least, you will find much to admire in this installation of 66 vintage black-and-white prints, depicting glamorous models draped before the pyramids, the temples of Baalbek, the ruins of Byblos, the Phoenicia's pool or the Beirut airport, well before it was named after anyone who'd been killed.

Born in 1926, Gundlach is one of the best known photographers of postwar Germany, having chronicled everything from haute couture to prêt-à-porter for magazines such as Stern, Revue, Elegant Welt and Film Und Frau. What is great about seeing such a copious number of his photographs now is to clock their glorious imperfections – freckles, wrinkles, a serious scar on a model's neck – as details from an age before all stray marks were wiped out and cleaned up on screen.

Some of the poses are awkward, as with a model faux-strumming an oud resting precariously by her ankles but, thankfully, Gundlach's images are not noxiously exotic. They simply seem like relics from a time when travel around the Mediterranean was fun, less blemished by politics, when not every imported or assimilated idea was a vile imperialist horror, every foreigner a dubious mercenary or spy.

It's all fiction, of course, but the dashes of style are nice antidotes to the usual strife.

The real revelation of this particular double-whammy, however, is Hoda Tawakol. Born in London in 1968, raised in Paris and a long-time resident of Hamburg, where Sfeir-Semler's original gallery is based, Tawakol is the antithesis of that other bi-national Egyptian in Germany, Susan Hefuna.

Both artists manipulate the peek-a-boo effects of the masharabiya, but Hefuna's works are easy on the eyes, and a little cold and stiff, while Tawakol's works are violent, fragile, queasy and seductive. Made of stretched, layered fabrics that are slashed and cut into delicate patterns, her "Fragments" series are nearly monochromatic, save the metallic materials that shimmer beneath her slits, and the highly judicious embellishments of reckless embroidery.

A few of Tawakol's portrait works look too much like grunge and goth hangovers from the 1990s – black-and-white photographs of vacant women with strings, threads and baubles tumbling from their eyelashes, for example. This is like playing with the pages of fashion magazines that are old but not old enough. The dialogue between the base imagery and Tawakol's intervention doesn't go very far.

However, her soft-sculptures of warriors made from synthetic hair, her affinity for the materials of skin-tight women's clothing (latex, nylon, spandex), as well as her mesmerizing notion of "ornamental injuries" and wounded surfaces – all of these things make her show, titled "Behind the Window," an intriguing introduction to an artist, virtually unknown in these parts, who is far off the beaten path of the usual suspects.

F.C. Gundlach's "The Middle East in the '50s and '60s" and Hoda Tawakol's "Behind the Window" remain on view at Galerie Sfeir-Semler in Karantina through July 16. For more information, please call 01-566-550 or see www.sfeir-semmler.com.

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