

The question of Lebanese identity



An installation view of "And Lebanese - In Praise of Lebanese Fusion," up at The Hangar, Haret Hreik. Photos courtesy of UMAM

 Maghie Ghali | The Daily Star

HARET HREIK, Lebanon: UMAM Documentation and Research's latest expo is asking some provoking questions about Lebanese identity. Up at The Hangar, "And Lebanese - In Praise of Lebanese Fusion," is a developing essay-exhibition that's part of a larger project.

"Lebanon Through its Refugees: Most Welcome?" seeks to place a magnifying glass over how Lebanon is dealing with refugees culturally.

"It's a response to the Lebanese's xenophobic shortsightedness," UMAM co-founder Lokman Slim told The Daily Star.

"They became refugees themselves and are now trying to cling onto something to form an identity.

"To quote something by [Lebanese poet] Ounsi El-Hajj, describing [Palestinian banker] Yousef Beidas, 'A good Lebanese is a Lebanese who leaves Lebanon,' but Lebanon has a big problem accepting someone who leaves their country and succeeds in Lebanon," he continued. "The question we need to ask ourselves is, why the hypocrisy? Why can't we apply the same criteria of success inside and outside Lebanon?"

Founded in 2004, UMAM began after Slim and co-founder Monika Borgmann came to Beirut in 2001 for their film project "Massacre." Finding a lack of a national archive to draw information from, the duo set up UMAM to build a public archive and research topics of memory and civil violence through the arts.

Slim says the two previous projects in the series "Fewer Refugees, More Refugeeism," a book of essays released in May, and the archival essay exhibition "Lebanon 1920 2020: How Might We Commemorate This Centennial?" released in September - have partly resulted in the current overlapping project.

"This work is in the middle as it raises the simple but very complex question of, 'Who are the Lebanese?' and tries to highlight the input of various individuals, who are not necessarily Lebanese by birth or origin, to the histories of this country," Slim said.

"More specifically, our starting point is to take [a] position we're not shying away from

taking [a] position regarding an ongoing debate which is mostly based on prejudices against non-Lebanese.”

To fuel the debate, 40 people widely considered Lebanese and prominent figures in the country’s history were chosen to be traced back to their origins. The Hangar walls are lined with posters designed by Abraham Zeitoun, showing archival photos of the people with details about their lives and heritage that question their Lebanese label.

“We tried to sample various kinds of integration/non-integrations, so we started with the confusion around [Fakhreddine II], who is usually taught in school books as the founder of Lebanon ... but he’s not Lebanese,” Slim said. “Each community in Lebanon tries to pull him towards them but really we don’t know if he was Kurdish, Arab, Druze, Maronite or Sunni.

“We have a stop dedicated to Fairouz. In the Lebanese consciences, she has been assimilated to not only a Lebanese, but has been raised to an icon of ‘Lebanity,’ and if you dig a little deeper you will find that though she was born in Lebanon, we are unsure about the identity of her father,” he added. “Sure, he was a former Ottoman, but was he from [Turkey, Syria] or Palestine?”

Other stops include clerics like St. Maron, a Syriac who preached from Turkey, and the (in)famous Afaf, (Budour Assad Dahouk) - a Palestinian brothel madam from the ‘50s and ‘60s that managed to sway Lebanese politics. As a pointed joke, Iraqi politician Ayad Allawi, who obtained Lebanese citizenship because of a recent naturalization decree, is also shown.

Unlike the previous projects, the archival material is not on display, which Lokman says is to avoid “documentation muscle flexing.”

“A characteristic of archives is that sometimes our discoveries are open secrets, there is nothing really unavailable - and finally [it] is about how to put things together to make sense,” he said. “The idea of archive and resorting to open sources is another invitation to see things from outside of any conspiracy theory or attempt to argue that ignorance is a justification.”

The duo says responses have been mixed, as with any material looking at a sensitive topic.

Some were surprised to discover these open secrets and praised the project, whereas others saw the work as an effort to attack an already fragile Lebanese identity.

“Interestingly, those who complained were those who just read the newsletter [for the exhibition,]” Borgmann said. “The people coming to the show were the people praising [it] but when we sent the newsletter out, we got comments from friends that were like, ‘Oh now you are normalizing and want to integrate the refugees,’ which I found interesting.”

The next step is to expand the project into a book looking at more than just the 40 people in the show. It is slated to be published in early 2019.

“And Lebanese - In Praise of Lebanese Fusion” is up at The Hangar, Haret Hreik, until Feb. 3, 4-8 p.m.