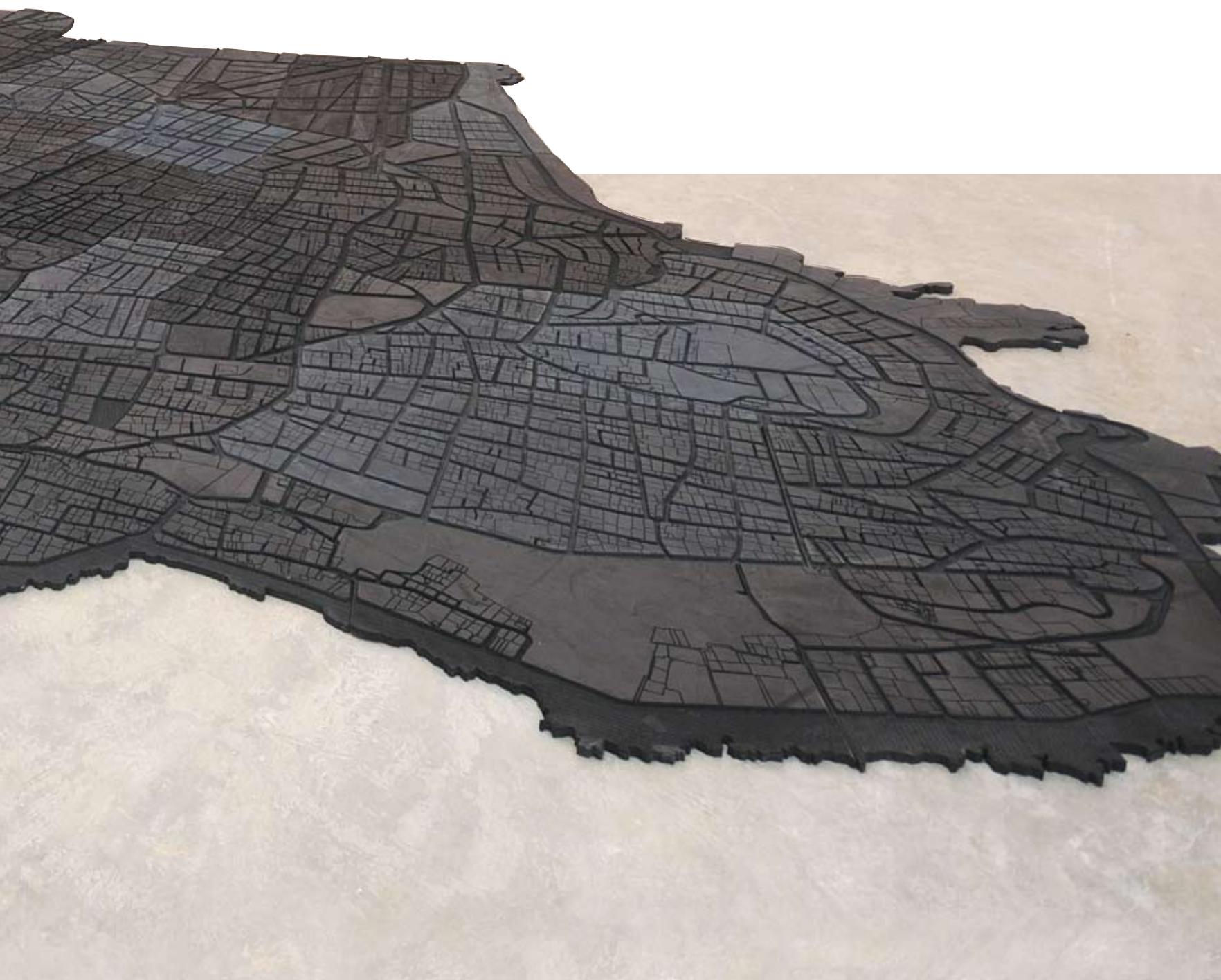


SEEING THE



UNSEEN

MARWAN RECHMAOUI



Architects design. Artists create. Governments collapse. Wars ravage. Construction companies build. **Myrna Ayad** meets Marwan Rechmaoui, who decodes Beirut.



nyone who has flown onto Beirut would have marvelled at the stunning vista through the oval airplane windows. Despite the wars that have ravaged this city over the years, that aerial view hasn't changed much, save for the odd silver cluster of fancy high-rises on reclaimed land. 'Reclaimed' is an interesting word to use in the context of Beirut – while it denotes the process of creating new land from the sea, it also alludes to the ownership of land and how it has 'changed' hands thanks to years of crippling sectarian battles.

From a couple of thousand feet, Beirut still looks like Lebanese artist duo Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *Wonder Beirut* project of original postcards of the Lebanese capital from the 1960s – wistful, modern and topographically beautiful. From high up, the city is a sight for sore eyes – akin to a giant bronze-coloured carpet cascading from the mountains, woven with yellowed buildings glistening in the sun, others greyed by shadow, and all interlaced with palm, fig, banyan and pine trees. The white foam of the azure Mediterranean waves crashing against Beirut's shores recalls a carpet's tassels. These elements are connected by a perplexing grid of roads and alleyways. However, where carpets have patterns, Beirut's urban landscape is a muddle – a great disarray of disorganisation and clutter that can be seen more closely as the plane approaches the tarmac. The cracks begin to appear, the yellow turns to brown and neighbourhoods look like constellations. "It's all in the details," says Marwan Rechmaoui, who conceived the idea for *Beirut Caoutchouc*, a giant black rubber floor piece depicting municipal Beirut in 2002. Its material is derived from the *ficus elastica*, also known as the rubber tree, which is indigenous to Mediterranean and South East Asian countries and a deliberate 'home-grown' choice of medium on Rechmaoui's part. He also intended *Beirut Caoutchouc's* staggering size – 3 x 875 x 675 cm – "to signify that this is a city you can get lost in, it's a map to look at and people can actually walk on it".

Opening spread: (Detail)
Beirut Caoutchouc.
2004–06. Engraved rubber.
Variable dimensions.
Edition of five plus one
artist's proof.

Facing page, above and
below: (Detail) *Spectre (The
Yacoubian Building, Beirut)*.
2006–08. Non-shrinking
grout, aluminium, glass
and fabric. 225 x 420 x 80
cm. Edition of five plus one
artist's proof.



DIGGING DEEPER

It was 1994, four years after the Taif Agreement, which ended the 15 year-long devastating Lebanese Civil War, and a year after Rechmaoui had moved to Beirut from the USA where he had dabbled in various fields before settling on art. It was also the year that he, along with Christine Tohme and Rania Tabbara, co-founded Ashkal Alwan, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of art and culture in Beirut, and through it he exhibited at Witte de With in Rotterdam (2002), Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona (2002) and the Townhouse Gallery (2001) in Cairo. It was a

difficult adjustment, but Rechmaoui didn't regret his decision to move back after 10 years spent between New York and Boston. "I was still in the transition phase between student and graduate, but I started to change my lifestyle, meet new people and manage to bypass sectarian social circles," he grins. "I'm an artist; I can stay indoors for a year and still produce work." It was, perhaps, "staying indoors" which led Rechmaoui outdoors – the "pitch blackness" that fell on Beirut at night, courtesy of Lebanon's (ongoing) relentless power cuts, left him exasperated. Ironically, it was Electricité du Liban's neighbourhood signage which Rechmaoui trailed

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in order to define where the borders of Beirut begin and end for *Beirut Caoutchouc*. “For the sake of efficiency, they had to specify areas for billing, so they had to be organised,” he laughs.

He didn’t know it then, but in retrospect, Rechmaoui confirms that whatever artistic projects he had been pondering at the time have now lined up chronologically and led to where he is today – it is clear, he affirms, that an “evolution” was, and still is, developing. “Even as far back as what I was doing in college, there are links throughout,” he stresses. So when the war lords and guerrilla organisations put their arms and ambitions aside, and residue from the sectarian hostilities was being scraped away – or rather, swept under the proverbial carpet – Mr Lebanon, aka Rafic Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister, and his redevelopment company, Solidere, stepped into Beirut’s urban arena. Rechmaoui and others grew concerned about the city’s “damaged” urban fabric following the “controversial construction debates” put forth by Hariri and Solidere. “Things had to be clarified,” says the Lebanese-born artist. “I wanted to show how a division was forming, how neighbourhoods were clustering and how abstract culture was becoming. *Beirut Caoutchouc* is a layer about demographic distribution; it’s a negative connotation to what has happened.”

Rechmaoui admits that he was “in love” with Beirut at the time. That emotion, has over the years, dissipated, though not to apathetic levels, or at least not yet. In the course of our discussion, he uses the word ‘we’ numerous times, in reference to a group of likeminded poets, artists, filmmakers and media representatives who gathered in Beirut’s Hamra district – an area, which was sheltered during and after the wars. “It was the only ‘cultural’ place in Beirut, a kind of protected environment. No other area was as functional and so we’d all gravitate there,” he says wistfully. “We created a network of contacts, we made links. It was easy to make statements, and very beneficial too.” Beirut boasted its very own St Germain district, and much in the same way as the latter attracted existentialist deliberation by the likes of Picasso, Sartre and Gainsbourg, so too Hamra gathered Lebanon’s cultural intelligentsia: figures who have since become notable names on the Middle Eastern art circuit – Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, Walid Sadek, Jalal Toufic, Ghassan Salhab and Tony Chakar, among others. “We were trying to understand the reasons for the war and move away from abstract notions of courage, pride and patriotism,” explains Rechmaoui. “Most of our work then was analytical, so the idea was to take apart symbols or icons. These discussions led to initiatives, not conclusions. In many ways, we’re still trying to understand what happened and is still happening.”

SET IN STONE

In tandem with the centrality of urbanism vis-à-vis civil life to Rechmaoui’s practice, and as his trajectory is steeped in sugges-

tions and indications, he created *A Monument for the Living* – a 230 x 60 x 40 cm concrete replica of the notorious Burj El-Murr in Beirut, an edition of which was acquired by the Tate. The tower, commissioned by the El-Murr construction group, owned by the El-Murr family, a powerful political clan, is located in downtown Beirut and was intended to be an office building. Construction was halted at the start of the Lebanese Civil War and the derelict 34-storey edifice fell into the hands of militias, guerrilla forces and various occupying armies – because of its strategic positioning, it is best known as a sniper outpost and was home to a labyrinthine underground torture chamber. For all Lebanese, it is a phantom of the war, a perpetual reminder of the atrocities committed throughout, as proposed by Rechmaoui's naming of the piece: it is a *monument* – a word suggestive of a past or a tomb – but it is a monument for the *living* nonetheless, an *aide memoire*. "Locally, it was a very present symbol so it was necessary for me

to interact with it," says Rechmaoui. For him, Burj El-Murr, "this icon, this ultimate symbol of war" revived its political allegory when in 2005, just hours after Hariri and 21 others were killed by 1000kg of explosives detonated among Hariri's motorcade, soldiers had taken up arms and surrounded Burj El-Murr (now owned by Solidere). "There was this 'vvvvv' sound," says Rechmaoui of the blast which took place within walking distance of his home; "and this incredible amount of dust literally burst through the sills of my windows."

Incidentally, my meeting with Rechmaoui took place in Dar Bistro & Café in Hamra – a charming two-storey building with high ceilings and Venetian windows constructed in the 1960s. It was his home between 2004-10 and later refurbished as a bistro. "Actually the spot we're sitting in is exactly where I assembled *Spectre (The Yacoubian Building, Beirut)*," he grins. Not to be confused with Cairo's Yacoubian Building, the Beirut version where Rechmaoui lived between 1995-2000 was built in Le

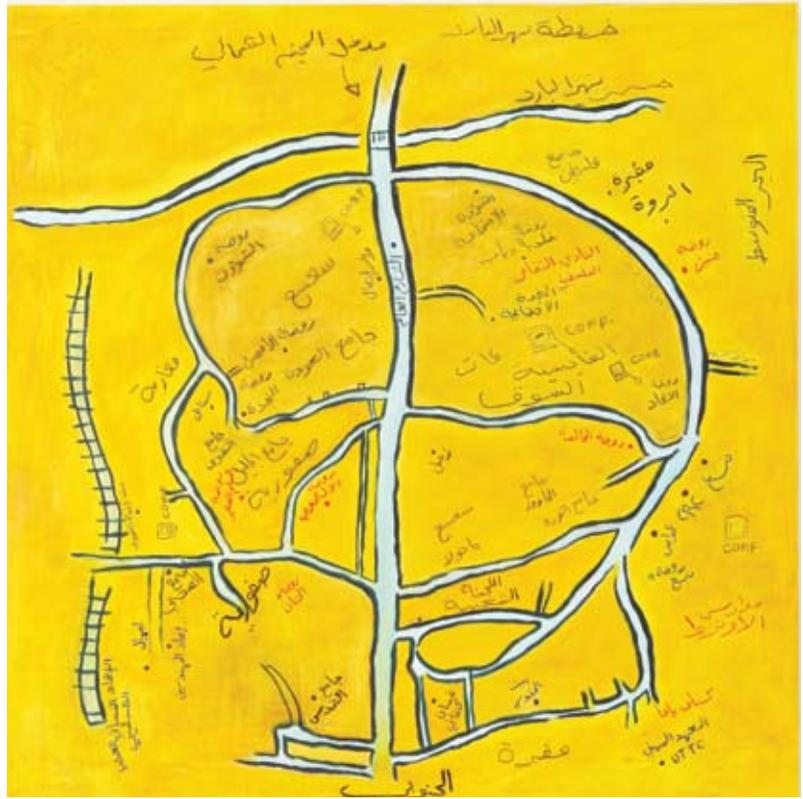
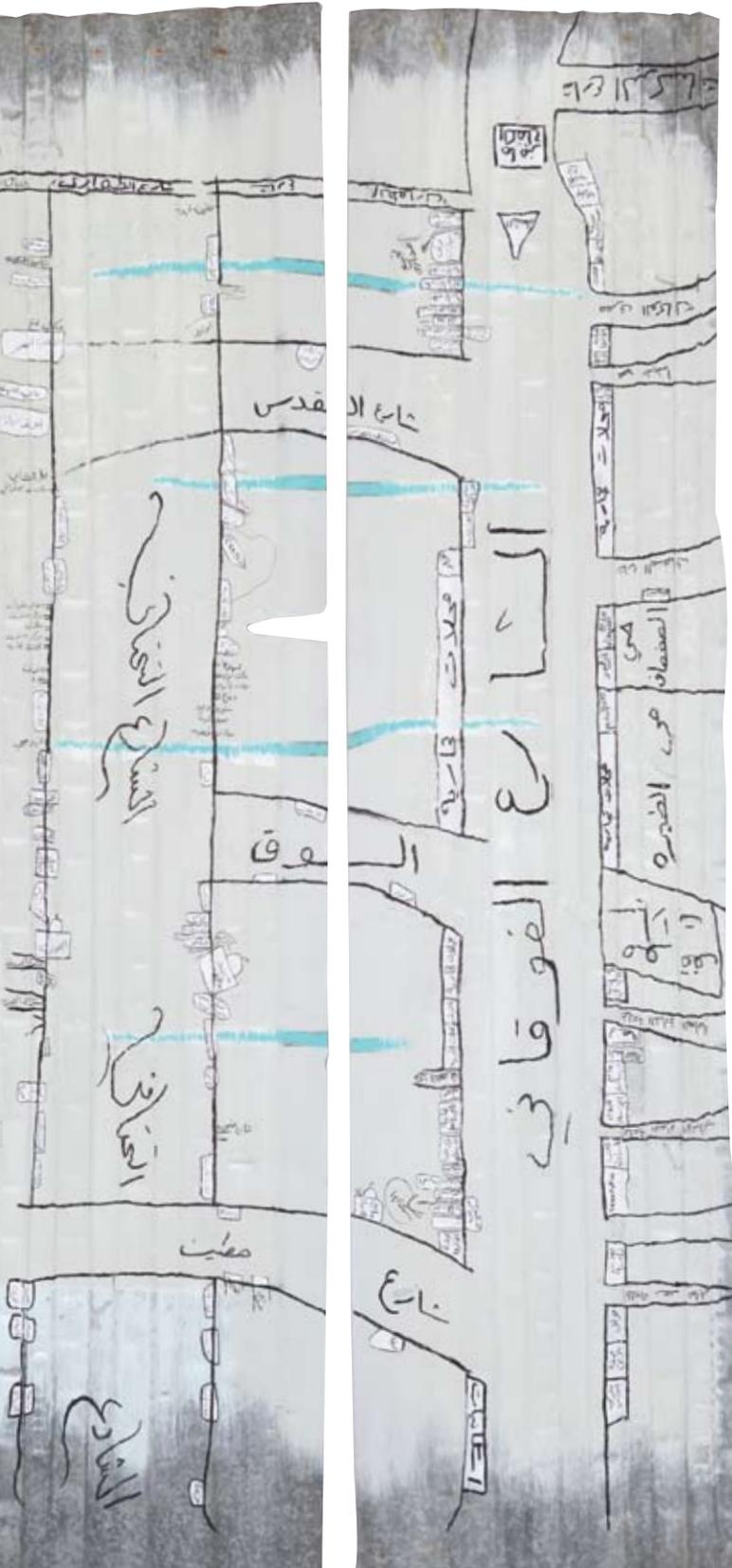
Facing page: *Monument for the Living*. 2002–08. Non-shrinking grout and cast. 230 x 60 x 40 cm. Edition of five plus one artist's proof.

This page: *Bomb Explosions*. 2011. Rubber cutouts. Variable dimensions.

“[Residents of The Yacoubian Building] were all able to function in one entity but on a nationwide scale, that couldn't happen.”



PROFILE



Corbusier style and is a 10-storey edifice that takes up about two blocks along the city's coast. It is symbolic of Beirut's architectural legacy, specifically at a time when, in the 1950s, Lebanese banks were depositories for Arab funds and the country was enjoying its positioning as 'the Paris of the Middle East.' 'The Yacoubian Building is definitely a layer of Beirut,' asserts Rechmaoui. In its heyday, the building's residents included singers, musicians, artists, comedians and other colourful figures who shared a single exit and entryway. 'They were all able to function in one entity but on a nationwide scale, that couldn't happen,' he says. In addition to replicating the building as a model of civic harmony, Rechmaoui also sought to criticise 'this modern architecture and how fascist it is.' An edition of *Spectre (The Yacoubian Building, Beirut)* was acquired by Charles Saatchi and exhibited as part of *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* in 2009. A day before the show's vernissage, Rechmaoui was assisting in the work's assembly at Saatchi Gallery and left to grab a sandwich. 'When I came back, I

“Who said the civil war ended?”

heard the handlers say ‘Yeah Steve lives there’ and ‘David moved upstairs’ while pointing to some of the building’s windows,” explains Rechmaoui; “they were localising it and that made me very happy. I felt I’d succeeded in making this building universal – The Yacoubian Building exists in London, Delhi, Paris and in many other cities too.”

DETAILS, DETAILS

By 2008 Rechmaoui had about five large-scale installations to his name and had also become part of Sfeir-Semler Gallery’s roster the year before. By then, the Middle Eastern art scene was booming and his was a known name on the rota, both locally and internationally. “I was already solid,” he says. “I didn’t have to deal with ‘can you add another 10 cm here?’ or ‘can you make that in glass?’” Last November, he held *Landscapes*, his first solo show at Sfeir-Semler’s Beirut space. One may wonder why, almost two decades after Rechmaoui began practicing art, his body of work is limited in number, albeit ‘concrete’, and why he only held his first solo show less than a year ago. “I research for years,” he says, verbally extending ‘years’. “And for most of my career, I’ve dealt with organisations and participated in group shows.” In addition, there’s the time required to execute the large-scale works, whose materials and scale demand numerous exchanges with the relevant specialists.

For *Landscapes*, “another layer of Beirut”, but this time, concerned with the city’s Palestinian refugee camps, Rechmaoui picked up what an NGO had halted due to the July War in 2006. The Arab Resource Collective had sought to virtually connect

the camps to the outside world via the Internet and asked residents of all ages to literally map out their surroundings. On a sociological scale, Rechmaoui found no difference between the priorities of those living inside and outside the camps. “In children’s drawings, there was their school, a flag and a friend’s house; mothers’ drawings featured the butcher shop, the clinic, the vegetable vendor and the pharmacy, and so on,” he explains. “The only difference between these people and those living outside is that the former don’t have official papers.” Rechmaoui took the existing drawings and reproduced them on materials indigenous to refugee camps – corrugated iron, flour, concrete and sugar sacks. “It’s not a fascination with materials,” he adds. “Why would I want to get the ‘effect’ of say, concrete, when I could just use concrete? Why would I want to offer a ‘metallic feel’ to say, a bomb, with an oil-on-wood piece when I could just use aluminium?” In eliminating possible areas where misinterpretation can arise, Rechmaoui strips concepts down to their basic elements and remains intrinsically suggestive. Take, for example his next project, which has been brewing since 2007 and has involved him reading a vast amount of books on Beirut, the science of chivalry, war strategies and tactics and urbanism. “I’m designing a coat of arms cast in aluminium for each of the 60 sectors of Beirut,” he announces. “We are in the 21st century, but Beirut is still tribal.” So the war lords and guerrilla organisations have regrouped and the dust under that proverbial carpet has never really settled then? Rechmaoui pauses. “Who said the civil war ended?” 

Facing page, clockwise:
(Detail) *Ain El-Hilwe 1*. 2011.
Oil, pastel and enamel on
corrugated tin. Diptych. 200 x
48 cm; *Nahr Al-Bared 1*. 2011.
Acrylic and oil pastel on wood.
122 x 122 cm; *Shrabinha 4*.
2011. Acrylic, china marker
and oil pastel on synthetic
burlap. 90 x 120 cm.

All images courtesy Sfeir-Semler
Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg.

For more information visit www.sfeir-semmler.com