



The Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmaoui with his work Beirut Caoutchouc, a map of Beirut consisting of 60 interlocking pieces of rubber. Shaun Curry / AFP

Beirut artist Marwan Rechmaoui says radical changes in his city are reflected in his work

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On a hectic January afternoon in Beirut, the conceptual artist Marwan Rechmaoui is sitting at a cafe in Mar Mikhael, watching the mad traffic and hustling passers-by outside the window. Rechmaoui has just returned from New York, where he completed a residency at Alwan for the Arts, an association that promotes Middle Eastern art. There, he found himself distressed by the city's radical changes. "You used to find pimps living on the same floor and entire Puerto Rican neighbourhoods," says the Beirut-born artist, who studied there during the 1980s. "Now it's all so corporate and homogenised. Cosmopolitanism is about providing space for exchanges and interaction, and that doesn't exist anymore."

The sudden gentrification of the Mar Mikhael section of Beirut also infuriates Rechmaoui. He seldom leaves his home in Hamra and his studio near Jisr el Wati; yet he spends most of his time observing Beirut's layered social and economic dynamics and what truths they reveal in a country where propaganda and censorship are habitual. Through meticulous research and rigorous observation, Rechmaoui uncovers the ways in which Beirut is shaped and manipulated by religious, economic, political and social forces,

offering an alternative reading of the contemporary history of the city. Along with the generation of conceptual artists that thrived in the city after the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990 (including Akram Zaatari, Lamia Joreige and Walid Raad), he has led the way in questioning the heritage of the colonial and postcolonial eras, crafting an artistic practice that is deeply rooted in local issues while informed by international contemporary art.

For his work *Spectre* (2006), Rechmaoui erected a replica of the modernist Yacoubian Building where he once lived, reflecting on the waves of changes that have occurred since the building was built, especially after the onset of the war in 1975. While the building was initially a western-style structure with small flats built for the educated middle class, it was increasingly taken over by rural migrants. These new tenants brought their traditions and living habits from their villages, modifying the building's facade and interiors – adding coloured curtains and gates, sometimes littering common spaces and violating the unwritten rules of so-called civic life in contemporary cities.

For Rechmaoui, the collapse of accepted social norms and the subsequent disorder symbolised the failure of modernism, which promoted rational, organised, sanitised living solutions for crowded cities. The concept had been imported from Europe without any consideration of local needs and customs.

"The urban environment is very hostile," Rechmaoui tells me. "City-comers cluster together because they are afraid they are facing a new system that they never knew before.

"During the war, some people were raising pigeons and chicken on their balconies, there were tissues and cigarettes flying out the windows. We were witnessing the clash between the provincial and the urban."

The artist saw the Yacoubian Building as a metaphor for discord and class struggle: "This gap is very important to understand," he continues, "so that we don't kill each other. We cannot throw out foreign characters and we cannot ignore them. They are part of the city. But these people are constant enemies and [currently] there's no space for dialogue.

"This problem is spreading to the whole Middle East: economic problems are creating chasms in society. We cannot deny the other anymore because the other is part of us now – and this is a universal problem."

Rechmaoui lived in the Yacoubian building before leaving Beirut to study. Upon returning to Lebanon he became active in the art scene, creating public art with the association Ashkal Alwan, a separate organisation from the similarly-named New York centre, and revisiting the art history of Lebanon.