

Title: The Artist At War: Mazen Kerbaj's Incredible Beirut Blog

Writer: Christian Bruno

Published @ www.heliomag.com

At first glance, Kerblog appears nothing more than angular drawings. Some in simple thick black lines, others richly colored, all suggesting fast strokes and immediacy. But take a closer look: landscapes of buildings take on almost human form and cower beneath a sky crowded with airplanes; or figures struggle with emotions that literally threaten their physical stability.

Since 2000, the 31 year-old Mazen Kerbaj has created diary entries in drawn form, an interior world made legible. Words often share the pages, a fragment of thought or the snippet of a conversation. In the past he has published these journals in book form. But as of July of this year, he has brought these rough-hewn pages to the web to detail the horror of life in the midst of war, as bombs fell on Beirut.

It is hard sometimes to use the word blog seriously. It feels like an icky nickname that follows one around, resurfacing at inopportune moments. It undercuts the significance this tool of self-publishing on the worldwide web has demonstrated in just a few years. The Wall Street Journal will consistently remind us that bloggers (blech!) have become THE weathervane in political reportage. Perhaps less reported, independent journalists like Dahr Jarmail provide alternative coverage to the mainstream media of the present US incursion into Iraq in his dahrjmailiraq.com weblog. And let's not forget the myriad number folks weighing in on sports, music, movies, and Harry Potter plot points. But there are artists who have turned to the simple tools of blog software like Typepad and Wordpress to create a different kind of reportage online. Mazen Kerbaj, a Beirut native, has created such a site with Kerblog.

This siege of Lebanon by Israel this summer was meant as method of eradicating Hezbollah, the unaffiliated military group harmful to peace in Israel, from that country. But whether the Israeli Defense Force or Hezbollah suffered casualties is irrelevant - the real victims, as always, are the people. And not merely those who are killed, but those who must live on with loss, those who live on maimed, those who live on a landscape carpeted with unexploded cluster bombs.

Mazen Kerbaj gives voice to that anxiety and loss. It is a human voice, in his diaristic comics. Never in the sterile sound bites of network news or government statistics, Mazen eschews political commentary to respond with immediacy and heart-breaking imagination. Its where buildings and night-skies cry out alongside humans, sometimes in Arabic, sometimes in French, but always translated into English. In one, a strange dog with a nearly human head howls, the caption reads, "The bombs drop and we bark".

This seemingly simple representation of futility opens up a huge space for us to consider life during wartime and its accompanying powerlessness. From July 18, the shards of a bombed out building forms a battered face that attempts to give news from Beirut before crumbling; meanwhile a family huddles below ground unable to help their trapped neighbors. For those who have never lived under such constant threats, the work can be a profound message to us.

The rough edges of Mazen,s work belie the imperfections of verbal description, singing out against the cold horror of war. They are immediate and raw reactions, seductive because of it. In his only audio posting, "Starry Night", Mazen Kerbaj, who is also a member of Beirut's thriving improv music scene, has recorded the sound of bombs falling on Beirut, with himself providing counterpoint on the trumpet. It is a scary piece, because of the troubled, irregular silence between many of bombs, and the trumpet speaks almost hopelessly against it.

In a talk given at Massachusetts College of Art entitled "Artists in Times of War", historian Howard Zinn calls on artists who have, not just the ability, but the responsibility to break free from their supposed role of entertainer. "It is the job of the artist to transcend, to think outside the boundaries of permissible thought and dare say things that no one else will say". He invokes the spirit of Joseph Heller, Langston Hughes, Bob Dylan, writers, singers, performers, who used their medium to speak against injustice.

What is ultimately powerful in Mazen's blog is the Internet's promise fulfilled. Unmediated and direct contact, not dictated by broadcasters, filtered by advertisers, fit to fill a 30 minute time slot plus 3 commercial breaks. Clearly, he has found the means to saving himself and he shares it with us, one on one as people. It is an extension of his own heart, an invitation to empathize with the larger world. If we are willing to listen.