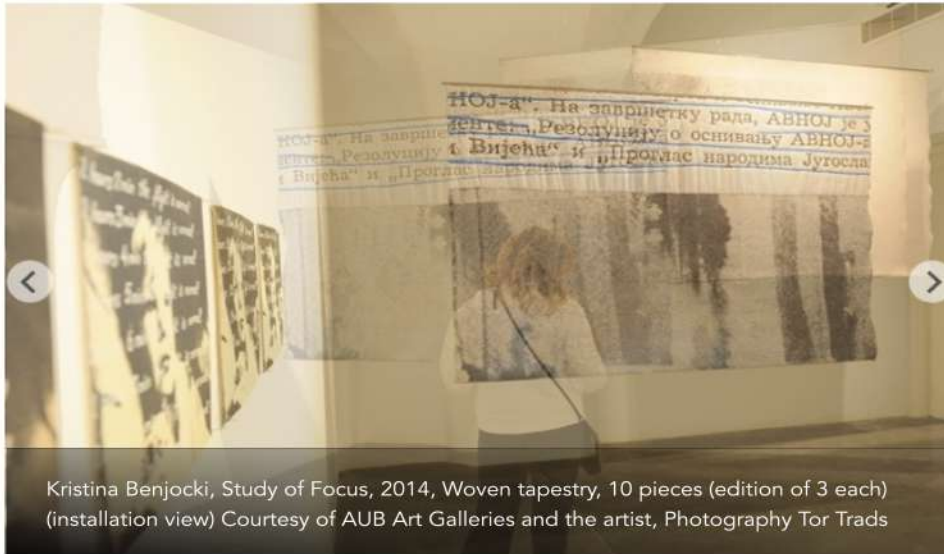


The art of a plane about to crash



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BEIRUT: Among the array of soft-spoken multimedia works on display at the American University of Beirut Bank Byblos Art Gallery (AUBBBAG) nowadays, the first you may notice is a 2014 canvas by Daniele Genadry – hanging on the wall facing the gallery entrance.

The mid-sized (205x315 cm) acrylic and oil painting “The Glow (proposals)” renders a rural landscape from the perspective of a roadway approaching it. Genadry’s palette is monochrome, as though the artist weren’t depicting landscape as such but an early photo of that landscape.

At least this is what’s to be gathered from assessing the edges of the canvas. The realistic depiction of a scene is not the artist’s primary concern.

The middle bits of “The Glow” are empty. The canvas isn’t blank, but occupied by a wash of sepia – the work’s principal hue – that seems to grow brighter at its “center” (which is mischievously off-center within the frame) to suggest the “glow” of the work’s title.

The juxtaposition of photo-realistic figuration with shimmering absence may back foot the onlooker. Glancing back to the edges of the frame, it’s evident that Genadry has segmented the visible landscape into bands.

These are reminiscent of the bands of the color spectrum, though the work’s palette is fixed and unvaried. Instead, the figuration in each discrete portion of the work grows more distinct as the eye approaches the canvas’ edges.

“The Glow” is a counterintuitive sort of work. It recreates the experience of moving toward an object through time and space but reverses the reception of the image so that the tableau’s peripheries are sharper than the center. It also betrays the intelligence of the artist, whose art critical gesture is expressed in a salable object, rendered in an otherwise decorative aesthetic.

Complementing Genadry’s piece is another work that – in its physically diminutive way – makes a winking, critical gesture to salable art objects.

Walid Sadek’s “What Job’s Wife Said,” 2014, is a diptych comprised of two pieces of cardboard (9x11 cm each), one oriented as portrait, the other as landscape. Each is

about the size of the card affixed to the back of library books, upon which were stamped the borrowed book's "due date" – Sadek being of a vintage to recall such archaic practices.

Upon the portrait-shaped card is a (black-and-white) Xerox print of a 9x9 cm X-ray of one of his paintings. The landscape-shaped card bears the title of the piece.

For those innocent of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Job was the Old Testament prophet renowned for the faithful patience with which he bore the torments that the one true deity inflicted upon him. A skeptic (and an early empiricist), Job's wife counseled him to denounce the feckless god that tortured him so.

It may be useful to recall that in the 20th century art historians and restorers began to employ X-rays as a way to determine if a wall or canvas was actually a palimpsest within which hidden, possibly interesting or valuable, older works might be found.

Based on the black-and-white X-ray image, Sadek's painting was a simple landscape, denoted by a horizon line, above which the hue is darker than below. The features the X-ray foregrounds isn't that of the painting but of the nails used to affix the canvas to the frame, and the mangled length of wire used to suspend the work from a wall.

This thoughtful, dense little work seems to address a broad range of issues, not least the romantic tendency to attribute aspects of the "divine" to art, and the more parochial obsession with hidden meaning – a shard of optimism attributed to religion and fine art alike.

Genadry and Sadek are among the nine Lebanon- and Netherlands-based artists whose work has been commissioned for "This is the Time. This is the Record of the Time." Co-curated by Angela Harutyunyan and Nat Muller, the exhibition is the fruit of AUB Art Galleries' collaboration with Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, where the first version of the show opened in September 2014.

The show takes its title from the not-pop tune "From the Air," by U.S. performance artist Laurie Anderson. Conflating in-flight emergency protocol with the child's game "Simon Says," Anderson's piece, which was released in 1982, seems to equate contemporary existence with the experience of sitting on an airliner whose captain has just informed his passengers that he's about to make a crash landing.

Anderson's metaphor continues to resonate today, an era that – as the curators suggest in their catalog notes – is "characterized by the perpetual reproduction of crisis." While "news feeds, social media and other recording devices" constantly expose us "to various histories in the making," information overload makes it harder to understand our time.

The artists in this exhibition "investigate the extent to which the recording mechanisms and material recordings of our lived times shape our notions of temporality."

The AUBBBAG show doesn't quite duplicate the one held in the Stedelijk. A piece by Diana Hakobyan, for instance, has replaced the Priscila Fernandes work hung in the Amsterdam iteration.

Each version of the show also had to reconcile itself to the eccentricities of the host spaces – differences the artists and curators are better placed to notice than AUBBBAG's casual passers-by.

Still, it's useful to note that the Beirut space's location in the midst of a university campus inspired certain adjustments to how individual works have been staged. The shape of AUBBBAG itself – whose arcade-like exterior betrays a series of arches within, which give way to a vaulted ceiling – offered certain challenges to the curators.

Rayyane Tabet's "waiting for a manifestation, beirut, March 17-25," for instance, is comprised of a series of five-segment clusters – its original media was described as "graphite on wall" – evocative of how a prisoner might keep track of the passing of the days in his dungeon cell.

The work's 2015 version makes elegant use of the space's eccentricities. The work has been transferred to a membrane and hung in one of the arcade's exterior arches, which usually houses one of the gallery's glass doors. Here the door has been locked, transforming it into a vitrine allowing the work to be seen from outside.

Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the installation of Cynthia Zaven's 12-channel sound piece, "Perpetuum Mobile," suspended from the ceiling near Genadry's work.

The product of the Beirut composer and artist's residency at STEIM (Amsterdam's Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music), this sound installation has an uncharacteristically sculptural quality: Each of its 12 speakers being arranged within a metal ring, to resemble the digits on the face of a clock.

Zaven's sound work is an accomplished piece of contemporary minimalism. Single notes stuck on a piano keyboard resonate tentatively before the tune swells into a more complex composition – its piano notes providing counterpoint to the squeaking, crashing reports of violence done to the body of a piano.

The best way to understand the work – to follow the movement of sound around the metal ring's "clockface" – is to stand immediately beneath the work, at the confluence of the 12 speakers. This multiple-channeled delivery greatly thickens the density and complexity of the thing, making it an altogether different experience to listening to a tune on an iPod, or being performed on piano.

Unlike many sound installations, "Perpetuum Mobile" is not enclosed within its own space, but hangs in the midst of the gallery. The further you move from the ring, the more easily the work can be mistaken for what it is not: music composed to accompany an exhibition.

This problem is most complicated by the ambient campus noise that surrounds AUBBBAG. To a lesser extent "Perpetuum Mobile" suffers from proximity to the rest of the exhibition, specifically the audio traces emerging from two fine video works by Sebastian D'az Morales.

The portrait-shaped "Pasajes II," 2013 and the landscape-shaped "Pasajes IV," 2014 (which was commissioned for this show) depict a pair of impossible journeys.

The 2013 piece follows a man as he climbs a seemingly infinite flight of stairs. As he does he walks through the frames of the fixed cameras that appear to monitor the goings-on in the staircase of a building whose individual floors are utterly disparate from one another. At one point he's moving through a richly appointed mezzanine, the next passing through the crumbling interior of a working class building.

The 2014 work explores the richly varied landscapes of the artist's native Patagonia.

Arresting as the newer-media works are, some of the stronger pieces in "This is the Time" include those that reconceptualize older media.

Kristina Benjocki's "Study of Focus," for instance, is a body of 10 woven tapestries that, in the manner of traditional rugs from this region, are figurative.

The images reproduced here aren't landscapes, however, but images and blocks of text (pen scribbles and all), enormously pixilated, from schoolbooks produced in Serbia for students in the former Yugoslavia.

As in Genadry and Sadek's work, it's refreshing to see critically minded art expressed in disarmingly comfortable-seeming media.

"This is the Time. This is the Record of the Time" is up at AUBBBAG through 25 July. For more information, see www.aub.edu.lb/ART_GALLERIES/CURRENT/Pages/time-record.aspx.