

The Arab Weekly

Rechmaoui exposes Beirut's complexities

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Beirut - An intricate network of cultures, religions, sects and neighbourhoods intertwine and often clash in Beirut. A tumultuous history of instability and intermittent civil war have long marked the Lebanese capital as a city of complexity and delicately balanced relationships between its inhabitants, politics, geography and architecture.

Such notions resounded at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery, which has recently hosted Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmaoui's exhibition *Forress in a Corner, Bishop Takes Over*.

Conceived with the same rigour and structure that recalls a chess board and its pieces, Rechmaoui's work is an elaborate effort that maps Beirut's complicated neighbourhood divisions. Inspired by the blazonry practices of medieval Europe, a series of more than 400 coloured flags representing landmarks drape from the ceiling, and 59 brass and steel shields representing the city's districts line the gallery walls.

Having constructed a body of work which deals with themes of urban development and social history, Rechmaoui's latest show is a project that spans ten years, drawing conceptual inspiration from the perpetual state of alarm he has observed in Beirut's inhabitants since the 2006 war with Israel.

"I've noticed that everybody is on guard and ready for something (to happen)," Rechmaoui said. "I sensed that all Beirut residents are soldiers, so I felt the need to organise them in battalions."

A lack of urban planning and poorly signposted streets that are as confusing as they are charming to navigate prompted Rechmaoui to rely on the zoning of Lebanon's electricity company, *Electricité du Liban*, as a blueprint to distribute the 59 districts.

"In Lebanon [and] Beirut specifically, they don't use addresses much. The address is basically a description," he said.

References inherent in the names serve as markers to categorise each district. Some areas are named after sectarian figures and symbols; others draw on horticultural references, and architectural and geological references are used in some. The flags represent landmarks in each district and are coloured according to the political groups to which they belong. Neighbourhoods are ranked with shields that correspond to their size, so some shields are bigger than others.

"This method," Rechmaoui explained, "activates the potential for onlookers familiar with the city to grasp another point of view of the city."

"The regular use of names, words and locations becomes taken for granted. You say them automatically but you never think [of] what they mean. If you know what they mean, then you can understand how the city is structured, so you can predict how it's going to behave."

"I am aware of the demarcation lines but I see the city as a whole, as one entity, and I see the splits inside it as a whole... I'm suggesting that there are more demarcation lines than the original green line," he said of a prominent marker of sectarian strife during the civil war, which was used to separate Muslim areas from predominately Christian ones.

Manoeuvring beneath the hundreds of flags, familiar logos such as those of the ABC department store and Spinneys grocery stores become apparent. Yet, beneath the surface, more crucial motivations are at play. Rechmaoui affirms his decision to include them stems from the key role they played in tracing mile stones in Lebanon's history.

"These are commercial logos [but they] are not for advertising," he said. "ABC was the first department store in the Middle East that employed women, in the 1930s."

Recalling with a hint of humour, he said: "The original Spinneys that opened near the Unesco Palace had the first escalator in Beirut, so people used to visit the place just to go on the escalator, back in the early '70s. Later on, when the civil war started, Spinneys became a battle ground between the warring parties. And, in 1982, when the Israelis invaded, there was a major battle near Spinneys."

The placement of other flags acts as triggers that invite onlookers to draw on other associations.

Encountering a flag of the St George hotel, a symbol that harkens back to Beirut's golden age, along side a burgeoning construction project initiated by the private sector elicits thoughts of the struggle and debate on the distribution of public and private space in the city.

"My work usually opens the discussion. It's not about directing a discussion," Rechmaoui said. "My advantage is that I'm an artist. I'm neither a historian nor a sociologist, so I have the liberty to play."

Formidable in its scope, Rechmaoui's exhibition invites viewers to draw their own conclusions on the city.

"Writing history is an issue by itself," he said. "There isn't one history in Lebanon but each group writes its own history. What I'm trying to do is collect them all so that each different group would be faced with all the elements, even the ones they want to disregard."