Type in “Subtitled: With Narratives from Lebanon” into a search engine and at most you will find two reviews (here and here) and one summary about the show. Finding images from the show is a rarity. In London, and in Kensington itself (where it was based), there wasn’t any physical signage to publicize the show. If I hadn’t been lucky enough to have seen The Feel Collective’s status on Facebook alerting their fans to the show, I may have not even heard about it.

From what I’ve said here, it must seem that the exhibition was very small and basic. Certainly, it only lasted three days, from the 3rd to the 6th of November. But this impression of simplicity is nowhere near what any visitor must have truly experienced upon seeing the show.

It was a very large exhibition organized by APEAL, and very comprehensive of the different artistic and conceptual explorations taking place in Lebanon in it’s recent history. For this reason, I am dividing this exhibition review into five parts in order to do it justice while keeping these posts digestible.

a subversive reinterpretation,

or an observant lens.
And why shouldn’t Lebanese artists carve out that niche? The issue of “war amnesia” is something still very much at the heart of Lebanese collective memory. Although Lebanon is known as the “Paris of the Middle East” for its relatively liberal nightlife and entertainment TV, it seems not much has been learnt from the politics of the past. Sectarian divides and tension still exist. There isn’t a clear dialogue about the recent past turmoil. Many politicians and militiamen from the civil war hold governmental positions today. There is ad hoc censorship, minimal political freedom of speech except for common cries of “weynieh’l dawleh?”, i.e. ”where is the government?”.

So artists like Alfred Tarazi act on a historical basis, drawing attention to those involved in the war, those responsible for the weak Lebanese currency; in *Subtitled* he does this through his digital collage where militiamen live in an awkward alternate dimension seemingly unaware of the financial havoc they wrecked.

The other artists in the *War-Torn Narratives* section do not point as directly towards notable figures through recognizable means, rather they appeal more to the senses.
Nadim Karam, for example. His submitted piece was a triptych whose limited colour palette, poignantly scratchy lines of screaming figures, and large scale bring to mind Picasso’s *Guernica*.

Fouad El Khoury’s *The Flag* works loosely in a similar way, but the documentary nature of the photograph adds rawness of truth over possible subjectivity. In a sense, the once pretty flag with bullet-holes says “This is what happened. Look at what’s been done to me. Sad, but true.” It doesn’t point fingers, it just quietly complains.

In the second room (a large open space which held the rest of the pieces from the different sections of the exhibition) were the last three pieces from *War-Torn Narratives*. Benoit Debbane and Samar Mogarbel use the notion of transport as a wartime theme.

Benoit Debbane. "AK 47", 2006. Airbrush and Mixed media on canvas. 120 x 200cm.

Benoit Debbane's piece has "direction of traffic" written on it in Arabic; so the gun serves as an arrow pointing towards a hell of a journey. Mogarbel’s piece, in casting them in bronze, solidifies the memories of car bombs which were so frequent an occurrence, not just in the civil war, but presently. Both Debbane’s and Morgarbel’s pieces were placed right next to each other, and they worked very well together; both subtly hint to the horrors of being on one’s way somewhere in a tumultuous region.
I got JEALOUS of those Artists who were able to do an artwork related to identity matters and I was particularly pissed off by the ones who came from a war background and knew how to talk about it.


Mounira El Solh’s contribution was an interesting video documenting her fictitious efforts to avoid talking about war in the video. While walking about in various places, she ends up failing as she seems to physically be running away or towards something.

When relatively stable (such as now), Lebanon is a beautiful place to visit. It is a country that doesn’t want to be seen to outsiders as suffering from political tension, always trying to pick itself up. The Lebanese are also known for their food, music, nightlife, and fashion. These are the positives that are highlighted variously. But what these artists are trying to do is not dispel these qualities; rather, they want to keep in mind what is the source of problems time and time again, what may be buried at the back of the minds of the Lebanese but not outwardly acknowledged.

These include people’s relative experiences, because the plethora of backgrounds, religions, and histories of Lebanon is not just a fact without it’s ramifications. It also includes collective memory; those missing persons from the civil war who are not publicly addressed, and a lack of a war memorial. These are real issues that cause these
artists to simultaneously act as historians, doing so observationally, satirically, or theatrically.

Part 2 of the review next Friday will consider *Reconstructing Narratives*, a section
The fleeting exhibition at the Royal College of Art was so impressive, I’m blogging about almost all the artworks that were on show.

The *Reconstructing Narratives* section of the show focussed on various aspects of Lebanese society in a post-war context, from family to emigration, even infrastructure, as seen in “Ashes” (below).
Mary-Lynn Massoud and Rasha Nawam’s *Ashes* is made from ceramic raku, from the Japanese Raku technique. It is a sculpture made by hand, an exaggerated example of a haphazard Beirut building. It was placed on a plinth barely raised off the floor, so it was interesting to look down on it, because as spectators we tend to look up towards buildings. Its simplicity yet careful construction means although it appears “caricature-ish”, it is an effective interpretation of a patched-up building.

Awkward infrastructure is also portrayed in Zena Assi’s mixed media painting, *My City in Carrelage*. In the Lebanese post-war context, development was quick, yet not effectively planned and executed. Thus many places in contemporary Beirut appear overcrowded due to the rather careless city-planning. Many would argue: who has time to plan and consider, when Beirut is continually crippled by wars that could potentially tear down these buildings yet again?

Assi, “*My City in Carrelage*”, 2011. Mixed media and collage on canvas 220 x 180 cm Alwane Gallery.
What is additionally similar between the above sculpture and painting is that they use generally pale colours and diagonal lines. They do not deal with this theme as negatively as would be expected; rather, they appear to teeter towards neutral, observant, acceptant maybe, in that they do not openly challenge it, but document in a caricatured manner.

Huguette Caland *Apple Green and Green Tomatoes* also makes use of tight patterns. The brightly-coloured mixed media piece is reminiscent of patchworks, and the fine detail is striking.

![Image of Caland's work](image)


The little houses within are playfully and childishly portrayed in that they are flat and overly-simplified, and this and all the different elements come together to form a nostalgic, non-linear narrative that leaves me thinking of the quaint villages in the Lebanese mountains, the fresh air, the beautiful simplicity of it all. This, coupled with the complexities of space of the piece (i.e. the cramped patches of different scenes) makes it very powerful.
The catalogue states it is a narrative of her childhood memories, and mentions her as the daughter of the first Lebanese president, Bechara El Khoury. I’m not sure if this fact has influenced her work; in this particular piece, her father’s political position doesn’t have any apparent bearing.

Still with regard to nostalgia, Camille Zakhiria’s “Elusive Homelands” series evoke less pleasant memories in the way he physically pieced together his photographs. In these, he reconstructs his experiences with meeting Lebanese immigrant families in Canada.

Through his technique, he represents the fragmented personal histories of these families (a binding feature among diasporas). These photographs are cold and stark in their black-and-whiteness, and raw in the direct gazes of their subjects.

Samir Khaddaje's *Septembre 2008* is a muddled daily journal pondering a chain of seemingly unrelated existential questions and social memories. For this piece, he used images of archival photographs and his own paintings. It was an interesting stream-of-consciousness style piece, however it did not connect with me, from a spectator's perspective. I would not say it didn't make sense, rather it was elusive to the extent that I could not take away a tangible experience. Perhaps it could have something to do with the disjointedness of post-war experiences and consciousness.

The exhibition inched toward more of a lament via Jean-Marc Nahas's *Dara’a*, which depicts wailing women in a series of paintings arranged in an installation on a wall behind a clothes-line. I feel it was this clothes-line that gave these women away as mothers.
The catalogue points out that the title is after a town of the same name in Syria. I do not know much about the town, but the fact that the piece highlighted the agonized mother as the central figure, along with our knowledge of the importance of war on Lebanon, signals the mother as an important victim. I find the name interesting though, given the political tension between Syria and Lebanon.

A commemorative text was place on a wall for the last artist of the *Reconstructing Narratives* section: Mario Saba, who unfortunately passed away just before the exhibition. The curator informed me he was the only one who knew how to install his work, so the best the organizers could do was screen his video piece and display a photograph of his work.
From the photograph, his complex piece altogether appears as a sort of technological dystopia. It is a mixed media installation employing collage and eerie sounds. From the image of the would-be piece alone, there is a powerful contrast between the rationality of technology used, and the irrationality of the way they are mounted, forming a looming structure. It is unfortunate it was not shown as the catalogue describes Saba as a determined artist hoping to make a difference through this piece, wanting to shed some sort of light on the chaos of Lebanese wartime.

From the personal to the social, and from observational to the visionary, it is good to know that such artists tackle pertinent issues which are not just applicable to Lebanon, but also to the wider sphere.