Art illuminates fragile Lebanese life

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By Alexandra Wells

Art, as defined in Webster's dictionary, is "the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way to affect the senses or emotions." Reflecting the dreams, history and depressing reality of Lebanese culture after its civil war (1975-1990), Convergence: New Art from Lebanon is a gem of an exhibit showing in Washington.

As the first exhibition in North America to introduce Lebanon's post-civil war art, it expresses both the vigor for and the precariousness of life in Lebanon today and will be at The American University, in the Katzen Arts Center through May 16. The show was co-selected by the Katzen Museum's director, Jack Rasmussen, and a highly respected Lebanese curator, Amal Traboulsi.

The various peoples of Lebanon have continuously overlapped in their cultures, sometimes violently, since before the birth of Christ. This juxtaposing of peoples has allowed for vibrant art to be created, partly from the violence that often engulfs the region. Modern-day artists have used the country's historical convergence of cultures to create the show's masterpieces.

Although many works of photography appear in the show, there are also more high-tech mediums, such as video art and digital animation. The show features 30 talented artists who created more than 50 paintings, sculptures and digital works of art. Of these unique artistic representations, more than a third of the creators are women who live in Lebanon's capital city of Beirut.

Depressing destruction infuses Nada Sehaoui's elegant photographic grid "Rubble," a 3-by-3 meter collage portraying multiple views of debris in Lebanon. Artist Nadim Karam created a 16-foot high metal piece of art made solely for this Washington show. The work brings about bitter feelings stirred up by lives influenced by war, but also by hope, represented by the installment of a cloud-like garden.

Another piece of art, an oil painting on canvas by Marwan Sahmarani, depicts soldiers at night. This dark work is meant to be a guiding light for future generations to view and then learn from so they can avoid the violence of their ancestors. Although the work is beautifully painted, Sahmarani writes that it should serve as a reminder of the cyclical patterns of Lebanon's violent history.
The American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center is free and open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., everyday except Monday. For more information, call 202-885-ARTS.