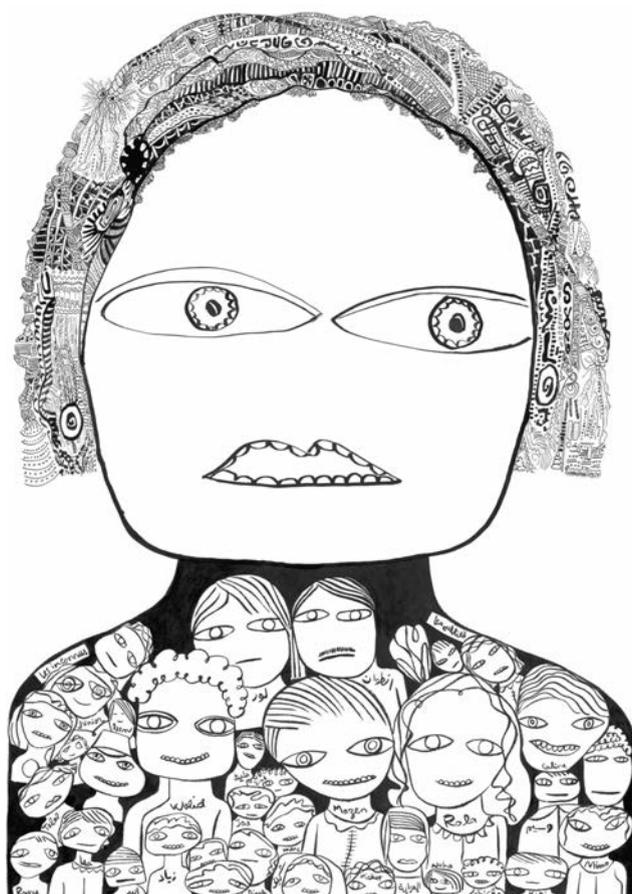


REVIEW

Mother and son on sex, drugs, Satan



"Guerre" (war).



"Jamile" (beauty).



"Satan."

Photos courtesy of Galerie Janine Rubeiz

'L'Abecedaire' marks Laure Ghorayeb and Mazen Kerbaj's third exhibition together

By India Stoughton
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: How do you create a two-man autobiography? Do you reveal only the moments shared in common? Do you bring together all the richness of two lifetimes, the incomparable perspectives of two people, and offer them up as one?

In "L'Abecedaire" (Primer), artists Laure Ghorayeb and Mazen Kerbaj are exhibiting an alphabetized series of 26 collaborative black-and-white drawings that aim to explore the possibilities of a dual autobiography. Each piece was worked on by both artists, their distinct but harmonious styles blending together to create a uniform aesthetic that runs throughout the series.

The exhibition is the third collaborative show staged by the mother and son at Galerie Janine Rubeiz.

In 2007, the pair exhibited a series of drawings completed independently over the course of Israel's 34-day war of 2006. Entitled "From One Window, the Other," the exhibition

contained two distinct but parallel visual diaries charting the violence. The work in the two artists' first exhibition together sprang from the independent blogs Ghorayeb and Kerbaj set up days into the conflict. The resulting works complemented and competed with one another, as the artists did during the period of frenzied creation.

Three years later came "You and I and the Painted Paper," a series of 31 ink-on-paper works that bore traces of both artists' pens. Each artist would begin a work, then hand it over to the other, who drew around and over the existing lines to create multilayered pieces that bore traces of both their styles.

"L'Abecedaire" sees the duo return to this practice, working in fine, spidery black lines to create intricately detailed panels and then drawing around or over the top with a thick black marker, creating bolder lines and giving the work a comic book feel reminiscent of Kerbaj's books. Those familiar with both artists' work might be able to disentangle their lines in places, but the overall impression is of a united front.

Writing in Arabic, French and occasionally English is squeezed between drawings or scrawled across doodles to create multiple layers, sometimes partially obscuring the work below. This gives the more chaotic compositions the qual-

ity of palimpsest, where the initial drawings are supplanted by those that come after.

The pieces display the characteristic blend of sardonic humor and darker, more-serious social commentary that marks both artists' solo work.

Part of the fun for viewers comes in trying to imagine how the mother-son duo came up with the word chosen for each letter of the alphabet, and whether it portrays a shared experience or something less tangible – a common interest, inside joke or missed opportunity.

This show is many things, but above all it's fun.

Kerbaj, who rocketed to fame after his 2006 war blog, Kerblog, attracted international attention, has said that he tries to resist producing work around the subject of war, resenting the thirst for conflict-related work by Lebanese artists from overseas audiences.

Nevertheless, for "G" the duo chose the word "Guerre" (war), creating a shambolic, scrawled mass of drawings, tangled words in Arabic and English, and dates. A terrified-looking woman clutching a mass of babies to her breast forms the pre-

dominant visual.

Around and above her, detailed scenes play out. Figures stand in huddled crowds, brawl with one another in a tangle of limbs or lie dead, bones visible under their flesh.

World War I is marked by large black dates, as is World War II, which formed the backdrop of Kerbaj's childhood, appears toward the top of the page, while a series of automatic weapons – bearing the legends "Made in Iraq," "Made in Yugoslavia," "Made in Russia," "Made in Czechoslovakia" – raise the specter of overseas conflicts.

In the following piece, the duo abandons the topic of war for a more humorous and perhaps unexpected topic: hashish. Loony-eyed men and women smoking hand-rolled spliffs cover the top of the page, while a step-by-step guide at the bottom teaches viewers how to roll a four-roach joint. The fifth and final step reads in French: "Light it (at your own risk and peril – the authors decline all responsibility)."

For "I," the artists have chosen to illustrate "Icons." Small oblong portraits capture 36 influential figures, from Amedeo Modigliani, John Cage and Antonin Artaud to Sheikh Imam, Ghassan Kanafani and Umm Kalthoum. Each is illustrated in a different style, the portrait cleverly

and comically relating to his or her own work.

It's easy to picture how Ghorayeb and Kerbaj might have worked together to come up with shared icons. When it comes to "O" for "Orgy," however, the mother-son links to the topic are harder to imagine. The humorous drawing captures a naked man and woman standing flaccid and forlorn in the foreground, facing the viewer. Behind them, naked figures cavort and copulate with abandon, genitalia, breasts and buttocks flying freely as far as the eye can see.

"R" is for "Roman" (novels), echoing the composition of "Icons" with a series of recreations of book covers. "S" is for "Satan" – or the evils of masturbation. A gaping maw surrounded by forlorn ghostly faces, screaming figures and grinning demons is topped by two angry-looking eyes below lowering eyebrows made of the Arabic phrase: "It's Satan who taught me to indulge my body when I miss unexpected intimate touches."

Combining a sardonic, twisted sense of humor with an experimental artistic approach, "L'Abecedaire" is many things, but above all it's a lot of fun.

"L'Abecedaire" is on show at Galerie Janine Rubeiz until April 3. For more information, please call 01-868-290.