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## Greater than the sum of its parts

*Laure Ghorayeb and her son, Mazen Kerbaj, explore artistic fusion*  
*Farrah Zughni*

Mathematically, one plus one is always two. Yet, as mother-son duo Laure Ghorayeb and Mazen Kerbaj acknowledge in their poem, “Ink. Paper. You and I.” this is not the case in the biological or artistic sense. “We succeeded to be one in the past”, they wrote. “Let us try to become one again on the paper.”

While most artists hesitate to share even a gallery floor, few dare to merge creatively with another. However, Laure Ghorayeb and her son Mazen Kerbaj, both independently-established Lebanese artists, undertook such a challenge for their project “You, Me and the Painted Paper”, a collection of quirky, intricate pieces on display at [Galerie Janine Rubeiz](#) until April 10.

Though mother and son have always been close, their three collaborative efforts have only occurred in recent years. The venture began in 2006 when Kerbaj and Ghorayeb displayed individual results of their blogs, [KERBLOG](#) and [Witnessing Again](#), respectively, side-by-side at an exhibit following the July War.

The next manifestation of the Ghorayeb-Kerbaj exchange came in the form of a diptych. For this project, the duo first created individual self-portraits. Then, they switched panels and elaborated upon the other’s work. Displayed at the [Sursock Museum’s](#) Salon d’ Automne, the illustration was awarded the prix du jury.

Encouraged by past success, mother and son took the next logical step for “You and I”, creating most of the 31 pieces in a manner similar to the diptych. In this fashion, a single piece endured the meticulous hand and discerning eye of not one, but two authors, traveling back and forth until both parties were satisfied.

During their artistic partnership, no planning and very little discussion transpired between Kerbaj and Ghorayeb - a model influenced by Kerbaj, who acknowledges his impulsive character and who enjoys performing musical improvisation. Though each artist was tepid at first, they both grew comfortable with the process.

“Sometimes she [Ghorayeb] would tell me ‘I’m thinking of doing this, but I’m not sure, maybe I will ruin the drawing.’ Then I would say, ‘It’s ok mom, if you ruin it, then we will throw it away,’” recounted Kerbaj. ““But,’ she would say ‘you worked on it for one week.’ And I’d say, ‘Yeah but, if it’s my drawing and I ruined it after one week, I would throw

it away myself.’”

The result of such collaboration is most visible in “Beyrouth mirage ou réalité”, one of the larger canvases currently on display. Kerbaj, a self-described pessimist, initiated the project with a sketch of what he views as “a city for sale”, to which Ghorayeb responded with a different idea of the city, thus adding depth and perspective to the original.

“There are a lot of contradictions in what is written,” said Kerbaj of the piece. “So it’s two views on Beirut.”

While “Beyrouth mirage ou réalité” flirts with political and social critiques, the rest of the exhibit has a decidedly personal and abstract approach.

For example, “Histoire de pommes”, explores the dynamics between men and women by playing on the Biblical tale of Adam and Eve. In each square, the slogan “They ate the apple” is found in Arabic while the nude couple is depicted talking, sleeping, tasting the forbidden fruit, or having sex. On either side, both figures are drawn without mouths, emphasizing their impotency.

Kerbaj admits that he found it “strange” to work on this piece with his mother, but emphasizes that the painting has a humorous side even while it probes the taboo.

On the other hand, the triptyque “Entre soleil et lune” gets more personal and, perhaps, a bit Freudian. On each of the three panels, a single person is featured: a blonde man, a starry-eyed woman and a brunet man.

Above the woman’s eyes, “I’m more beautiful than the moon and the moon is more beautiful than the sun” is written in Arabic. Meanwhile, the men on either side implore, “Am I the moon, or the sun?” to evaluate who she loves most. According to Kerbaj, the central character could be interpreted as his mother, the darker man could be himself and the third is a “contrary” figure.

While Adam and Eve had each other, this current set has one too many in the mix, and so, explains Kerbaj, a fight looms in the future - evidence, no doubt, that however one adds it up, three is always a crowd.



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