

Reaching across generations

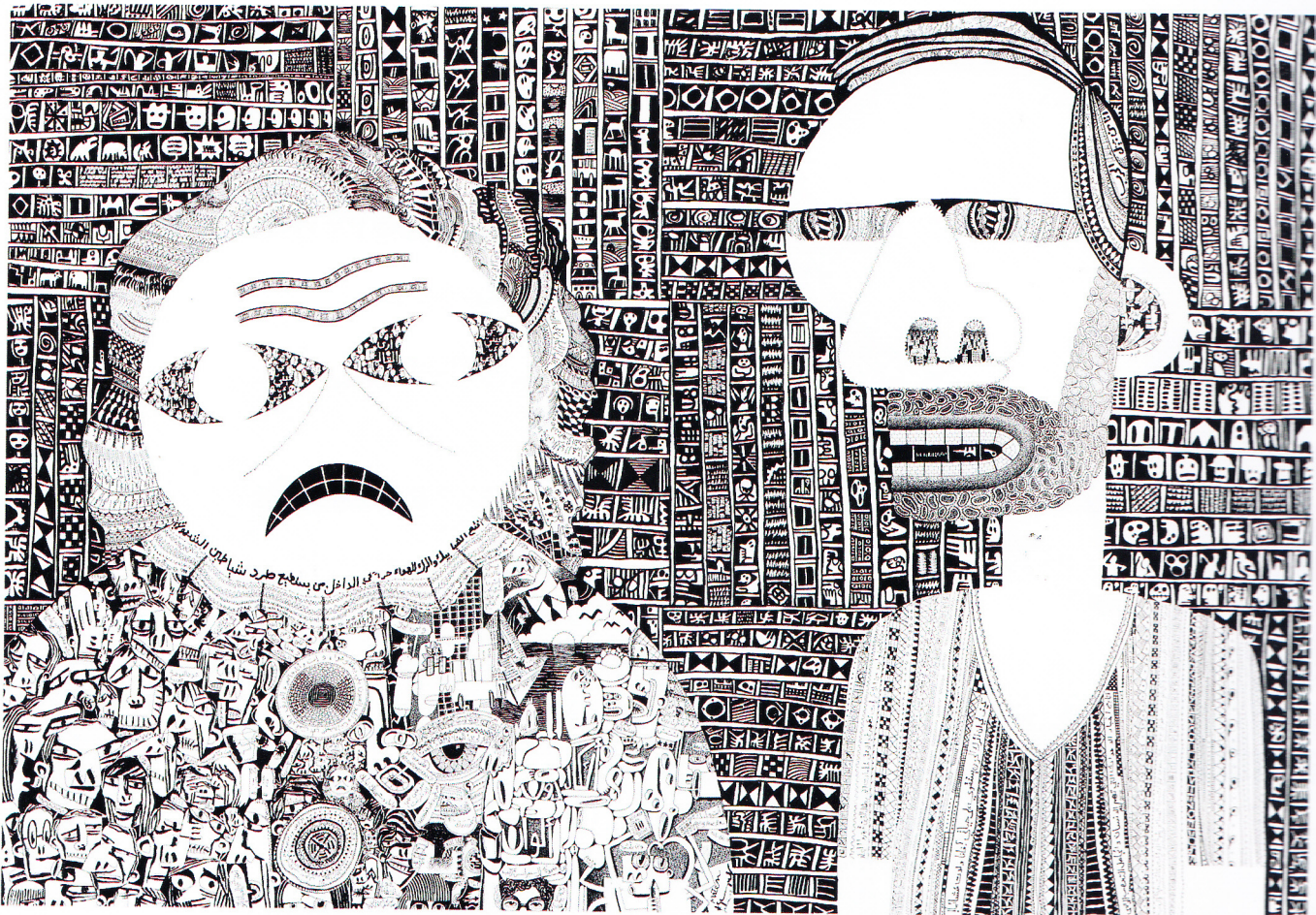
Katharine Gordon

Laure Ghorayeb and Mazen Kerbaj | **Laure et Mazen: Correspondance(s)**
Nicholas Ibrahim Sursock Museum

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“Sometimes I do half a face, it depends. I do what I want to do, he does what he wants to do and we finish by collecting and reconstructing what we’ve done... We only stop if we both sign off on the drawing. If we don’t both sign off, we

destroy it. [translated from French]” For Beirut’s most endearing artist duo, this is a day’s work. Laure, 88 years old, and Mazen, 44 years old, constantly challenge and inspire each other. Their overlapping, but distinct, artistic practices and need to express through ink and written word,





Installation view of the exhibition Laure et Mazen: Correspondance(s) at the Sursock Museum
Photo: Christopher Baaklini

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have allowed them to create in tandem for more than a decade. To read and see their drawings displayed in Sursock Museum has the same mix emotions as looking through someone's diary, or finding an old box of love letters. Its public display feels intimate and invasive at the same time. Yet, it pulls the viewer in, begging to be read frame by frame like an unfolding story. It is here that their relationship is illuminated and the unique dynamic that is part familial and part creative comes to light.

Collaborative Creation

The two began to collaborate in 2006, thanks to Mazen. Disappointed with his mother's lack of reaction to the ongoing conflict, he insisted she begin to draw and sketch, with the condition that he would display everything on his blog. Working with notebooks and loose leaf paper, they began to sketch their reactions and

impressions of the conflict. Although their styles differed, they began to each fill the pages of artist notebooks, adding notes and sketches, as well as impressions and ideas. The project started largely with letters, as Laure described to Gallery: "When Mazen left for Berlin, we wrote letters. In the letters we put our point of view, our reactions, the films we watched, the books we read, etc... It was like a diary, sometimes you would recount some nonsense, but you would recount it anyway."

Their styles differed, Mazen passing quickly through ideas, leaning towards all things cynical and dark, while Laure would focus for days on the same minutiae and intricacies of Arabic arabesques and designs. Working together was competitive at times, and certainly presented difficulties. However, there was mutual adoration as well, and plenty of artistic respect that came out of the project. This sense of a beneficially challenging partnership drove them to create more and begin to exhibit these joint works.

Toi et Moi

In 2009, they submitted a double self-portrait to the XXIXe Salon d'Automne at Sursock Museum. Toi et Moi, Double

Autoportrait was a resounding success, winning the Jury Prize of the Salon, and becoming an audience favorite. In this work their styles blend together more seamlessly than in any other, and yet, looking closely, the distinct hand of each is still clear. Laure's giant, wide eyes and upside down mouth look out at the audience, while Mazen's more comic-style representation eyes his mother out of his peripheral vision. Designs and patterns fill every space except their faces, creating a stunning contrast of textures.

One year later, Galerie Janine Rubeiz in Raouche held an exhibition of works by the pair. While Laure focused on her ornamental designs and poetic phrases, Mazen took on weighty subjects like Adam and Eve, with satire and sarcasm. Again, the road was bumpy with emotions high, and many a design was destroyed. Mazen working at night and Laure during the day meant that they were rarely in the studio at the same time. Despite all that, the work progressed on and the exhibition was a hit.

In 2015, after the success of previous collections, they presented another exhibition at Janine Rubeiz, L'Abécédaire.



Detail of *Entre Nous* (2017-2018) by Laure Ghorayeb and Mazen Kerbaj
Shown as part of the exhibition *Laure et Mazen: Correspondance(s)* at the Sursock Museum. Photo: Christopher Baaklini



Courtesy Sursock Museum

(2017-2018) by Laure Ghorayeb and Mazen Kerbaj. Shown as part of the exhibition 'Mazen: Correspondance(s)' at the Sursock Museum. Photo: Christopher Baaklini

This time the concept was set, and a plan was construed. Choosing from Scrabble tiles as their guide, they completed twenty six works each dedicated to a different letter. K became Kangaroo, with Mazen hiding like an adult joey tucked into the dress of Laure, and yet still haunted by anxieties of life. G stood for Guerre, 'war' in French, and became an allusion and homage to the horrific, and unfortunately little known, famine in Lebanon between 1914 and 1918, as well as highlighting symbols and images of the complex internal and external factors that play into conflict.

Together They Roll

Now they are together once more for this exhibition, one of the most comprehensive and touching ones of all. Certainly the main attraction of the exhibition is the roll, or rouleau, of paper. This roll, which is now over a hundred meters long, is comprised of notes, thoughts, poems, drawings, designs, and various other inscribed moments, constituting a journal-like piece that winds

its way around the entire gallery space. In the words of Yasmine Chemali, Head of Collections at Sursock: "With this project, the roll becomes the umbilical cord between mother and son...a notion that they both like to play with." In everything they do there is a sense of creation, of fusion that creates the conditions for them to evolve together.

For 'Amoureux', another rouleau work, they would leave each other notes on the roll, letting each other know what they had completed. This work, completed in just seven days at a residency in Rennes, France, features history's greatest couples from Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin, to Romeo and Juliet. While showing Gallery through the exhibition Laure showed us perhaps the most touching part of the work: a sketch of her self and Antoine Kerbaj, one of Lebanon's most iconic actors and her husband of more than 50 years. This particular addition was one of Mazen's late night contributions. Due to his nocturnal tendencies, there were times when neither would know what the other would add.

The roll of paper, which they diligently sent back and forth from Beirut to Berlin for months, is symbolic of their partnership: respecting, responding to and reacting against each other in equal measure. As Laure, expressed, it is like "two generations that are going head to head against each other." At the same time, it brings the idea of correspondence to its pinnacle. The roll became a kind of extended letter: "When he [Mazen] would respond, he would put the date, we would put the date, to know if the time he wrote was at the same time or before or after the time I wrote." While this system may seem complicated, the two found ways of balancing the work, and their relationship.

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