

REVIEW

Rebuilding spaces of wood and ink, in a world without land

Saba Innab's mixed-media works stem from the confluence of architectural design and landscape

Jim Quilty
Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: Take a landscape painting and compare it to an architectural plan. Before electronic media intervened, both forms required a hand to apply pressure upon media with a pencil, pen or brush. Yet painting and plan have embedded within them an intriguing disparity of ideals – the difference between the place as the artist found it and the space as the architect envisions it.

At the confluence of this disparity arises the work of Palestinian-Jordanian artist and architect Saba Innab.

Recently some of this work was hung at 3studios, a project space located in a lovely old flat in Ain al-Mreisse, where Innab held a summertime residency. 3studios is presided over by Ghassan Maasri, known for his work with the AIWA artist workshops, and Mansour Aziz, veteran multi-tasking cultural laborer and grassroots organizer.

Until recently a neighborhood of human-sized, early-20th century houses and apartment blocks joined by pockets of disused green space, Ain al-Mreisse is nowadays being devoured by the impatient maw of real-estate development.

This ambient apocalypse made 3studios the ideal location for an exhibition of Innab's compact oeuvre, which ruminates, as the artist has written, "upon urbanism, and the process of space production and reproduction."

The show was comprised of



Layers of applied color, abraded and torn like the walls of long lived-in, now-abandoned, house.

mixed-media work of many different forms – including paper sketches, photographs and work rendered directly upon the walls of the space's walls.

Most arresting are Innab's "canvasses," actually mixed media (she prefers acrylic paint and ink) applied to rectangular wooden panels.

The latter tend to be either 1.2m X 0.8m (most of which depict scenes around Beirut) or 1.2m X 0.6m (rendering landscapes outside Beirut).

International audiences will find a single eye and hand at work in all these pieces. All work with the interplay of more-or-less precisely rendered images ("landscape" or "architecture") with layers of earth-tone wash-

es. The wood-panel works have the aspect of found objects, with layers of applied color at times abraded, torn and cut-into, like the walls of long lived-in, now-abandoned, houses.

For anyone familiar with the Beirut cityscape, Innab's urban-centered works may be less compelling than her smaller rural landscapes.

The never-finished concrete skeleton of Burj al-Murr – an effigy of mid-70s modernism in the Zuqaq al-Blat quarter that sits at the center of one piece – is such an iconic structure that it has proven resistant to efforts to render it as anything other than what it appears.

The same might be said of the Charles Helou bus station –

a concrete shell near Beirut Port that resentfully hosts its daily population of transients – which dominates another work, even when, as here, it is pitched on its side.

More intriguing are the less-familiar (therefore less-parochial) rural landscapes, all emerging from the artist's time in the region around Tripoli. Six of these fall into a natural pair of triptychs. The more successful of them suggest a hybrid aesthetic that mingles Turner (the painter) and Beckett (the playwright).

At the center of each panel is a landscape that, at first glance, suggests something like photographic precision. Layers of earth-tone wash offset this illusion of clarity, creating the

impression of the photo-image being erased or devoured.

Exactly what is devouring these furtive strips of color and texture is suggested by the geometric lines that further intrude upon the central landscape.

At times these intrusions are simply criss-crossing lines in the upper quadrants of a work. Elsewhere the lines assume more concrete forms – three-dimensional images that could be a projection of intersecting lines of latitude and longitude.

Elsewhere, the lines become more concrete still – a monumental architectural notion imposed upon a receding landscape, or a steel grid work embedded in the soil.

In another work, the architect-

tural interpolation is not a projection of the science fiction imagination but something more organic – an indistinct sketch of a concrete house, partially collapsed as if from shell fire.

The intellectual and emotional crucible for Innab's Lebanon work has been her encounter with post-bombardment reconstruction in this country.

In 2006, the artist found herself in Lebanon working on the reconstruction of the southern village of Aita al-Shaab, which was blown to smithereens (but not actually held) by the Israeli Army in the month-long summer aggression.

Innab's architectural work in the south later led to an opportunity to lend her skills to the rebuilding of the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared, which was blown to smithereens by the Lebanese Army between May and September 2007. After about a year working on the Nahr al-Bared reconstruction, Innab says, the most pressing question changed from "How do you rebuild the camp?" to "How do you build without land?"

Not all the work that distilled from Innab's inquiries is equally well realized, of course. The 3studios show rested heavily upon the artist's professional competence with structural sketching and evident interest in landscape impressionism. When she steps from these forms the effect is less impressive.

Yet there is something refreshingly uninhibited in Innab's work, something that makes you curious about the artist's next set of questions, and the forms that grow out of them.