Bullet-hole art and flowering eroticism

He holds a degree in social sciences and at one point seriously considered becoming a psychologist or a chemist or a mathematician. Instead Hanibal Srouji became an artist because, as he explains it, "The practice of art combines elements of all three: the unconscious, the physical and the intellect."

Srouji is one of the Lebanese displaced by a war he didn't experience except through television images, news reports and second-hand accounts of its violence. Yet the kind of paintings he has been producing for the past several years, which he first exhibited at Galerie Janine Rubeiz three years ago and is also showing this month at the same gallery, have their source in that war. He says that he was continually haunted by the images of war for years, but it was not until he returned to Lebanon after a 15-year absence that he was moved to express it in his art.

Confronted by the visual remnants of a city in ruins, the selective eye of his unconscious skimmed across the wholesale drama of destruction and became most sharply caught by the still-standing bullet-peppered walls of Beirut. On this level, Srouji's paintings are easy to read, made up as they are of actual burnt or rust-eroded holes peppering his canvas "walls."

On a conceptual level, however, they surpass that graphic reality and are intentionally related to the artist's thoughts on life and on art. It could be said of Srouji that he belongs to the latest school of avant-garde art in which the temporal process of expression takes precedence over the permanence of the product. Attracted by the potential of change that lies in the vulnerability of materials, he collages bits of iron on the raw canvas and lets them rust their way through the linen.

The longer they rust, the larger the holes and the weaker the fabric become. He sometimes uses a blow torch to pierce the canvas, burn its edges and char its surface. And he pins up colored fragments of canvas into compositions that can be changed and rechanged at will, but that can easily fall off and be swept away by the wind.

Srouji revels in the fact that a painting of his can at any moment disintegrate, soul along with body. What is the redeeming philosophy behind this, my conventional mind asks. Isn't the enervating sense of change and impermanence in our lives these days enough? Can't we at least count on art to be permanent?

"I don't paint for eternity; I paint for people in the here and now," he answers. "My art is ephemeral, always changing, because life is that way." The saving grace in Srouji's paintings rests in the lovely splashes of lyrical color that overlay the scarred walls.

He admits to being a landscapist at heart and says that for years before the bullet series, he painted color-field soft-edged abstractions gleaned from nostalgia for the Lebanon he remembered. In this respect, he retains faith in Lebanon; he contradicts his denial of permanence and admits to the hope offered by change. One of the paintings prompted a visitor who knows what art is all about to exclaim: "Monet's water lilies revisited 100 years later!"

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