Hanibal Srouji: capturing the phoenix rising from the ashes

'You can look at a crippled building, see a composition and make something positive'

Like the phoenix, which consumes itself in fire only to rise gloriously again from the ashes, Lebanon and her inhabitants go through periodical cycles of rebirth. With the advent of higher forms of conceptual art in the last century, those artists who lived through times of conflict and civil war have been driven to explore their personal experiences of pain, suffering and sense of relief during these processes of decay and regeneration. Hanibal Srouji is of these artists.

With a name that is evocative of the Carthaginian general who harassed the Romans with his famous elephants, one would expect to meet an interesting and remarkable man, and one is not left disappointed.

As an individual, Srouji is entertaining and thought provoking. He worked with the Red Cross as a teenager at the outset of the war, "helping to carry the dead and wounded," eventually leaving when his home was destroyed and moving to Canada. He was classically trained in fine art at Concordia before moving to France where he has become accomplished in his chosen profession.

As an artist, he is skilled, intuitive and adaptable, and the fruits of his labor exhibit a verisimilitude apparent even in the abstract. He has returned for his third exhibition in Beirut since 1997 with a display of his work that forms the latest installment of a series which encompasses the themes of "memory and transformation," both of human emotion and the city of Beirut.

An abstract expressionist, Srouji incorporates both color field methods and the manipulation of two dimensional forms in three dimensional spaces. Using brushes, hands and blow torches he creates his emotive work with bold acrylics on raw, sometimes free-hanging, unprepared canvases.

"I am trying to transcend," he says describing his work, "to take all the negative energy and regenerate it as something positive. You can look at a crippled building, see a composition and make something positive from it." And this he has done with success.

Compared to his earlier shows, the pieces are larger and less inconspicuous than before, Srouji explains, "there was the same point of departure, but this time its more daring, more colorful and more cheerful – the mood has changed."

And this is the key to his theme. His artwork is an attempt at a reflection of his country while it has struggled during its regeneration, and is intended to explore the emotional relationship between itself and the viewer.

"If there is to be a title to this exhibition, it could be Lightness and Liberation," he elucidates, "firstly the personal liberation, and liberating myself from conventional way of seeing painting. Secondly a general liberation and where liberation does not exist, to force it to become a reality!" he says with a laugh.

There are two distinct aspects to his art. Firstly, large paneled pieces which represent the oft-pockmarked buildings and surfaces of Beirut. And secondly, strips of canvass of equal dimensions, sometimes freely hanging, which represent "the emotional or mental essence" of individuals. With the two elements in juxtaposition, the atmosphere in the gallery is like that of wandering around Beirut, and provides are refreshing perspective of modern day city-life encapsulated in a collection of colorful oeuvre.

His bullet-marked walls are painted with emotion, and at times he has spread the acrylic onto the canvass with his hands and thumbs, with the effect of encapsulating a detail that confusingly borders on realism. It is here that Srouji has confronted the perennial dilemma between illusion and representation with his own brand of abstract literalness.

"Sometimes, I like to consider myself as a landscape artist," he says with a smile, "you can look at a field or ground with vegetation and try to produce a Monet, you can look at a crippled building and do the same thing, I think I'm a bit of a romantic."

The flat form that is intended to destroy illusion and reveal truth – to paraphrase Rothko – has been adhered to, but with some interesting modifications. In the paneled work, one can't help but observe the surfaces as being en relief, even if there had been no conscious attempt to create any such effect, and most importantly, the use of a small blow torch, to sear and singe small holes and lines respectively in each canvass. The holes, which represent collateral, structural and emotional damage, are un-invasive with respect to the painting and provide it with both color and extra dimension, sometimes even piercing through the strips of material.

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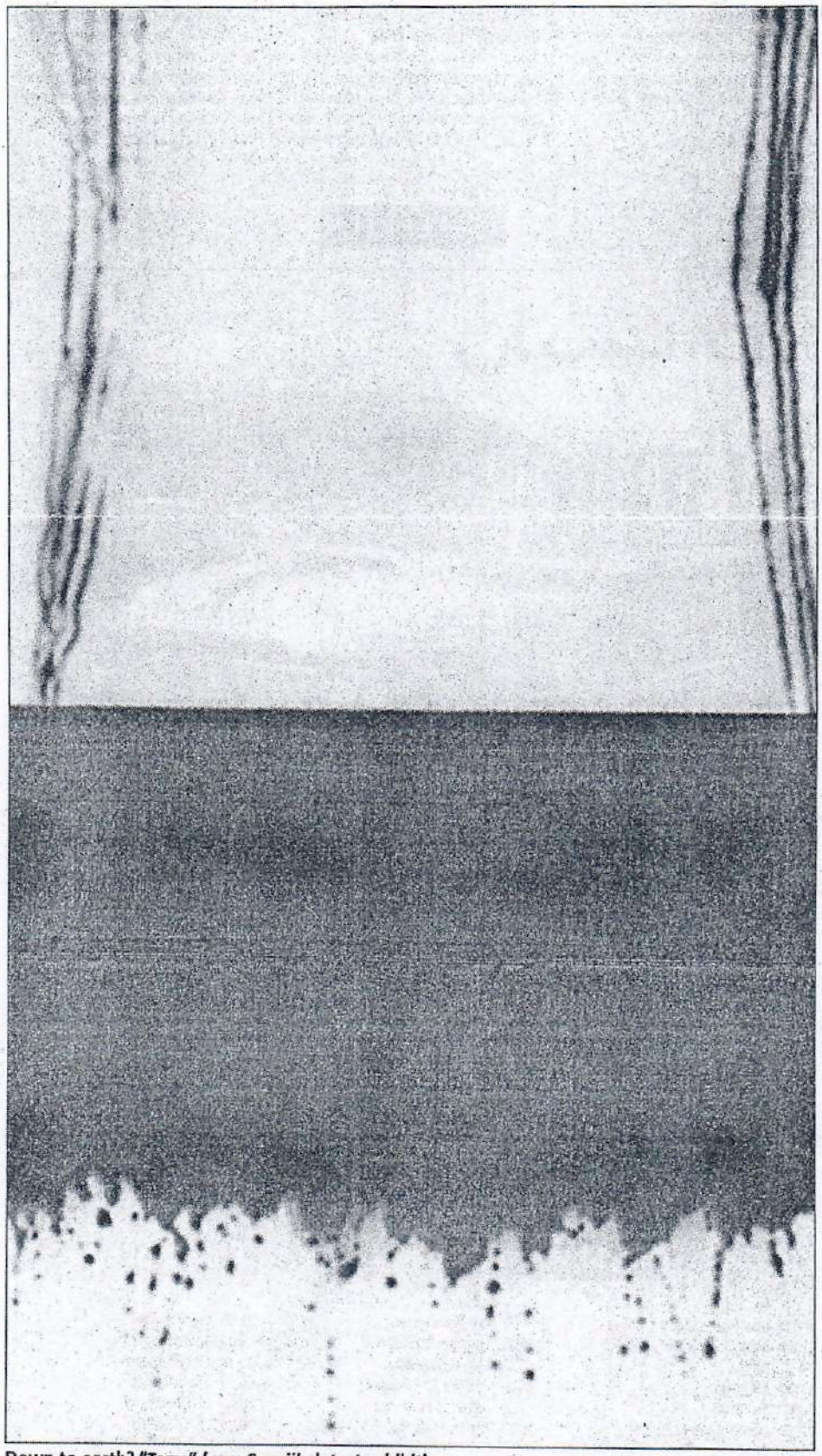
The panels that comprise some of his larger pieces come arranged in twos and threes of equal dimensions and horizontally aligned. Bold, central color-field blocks are winged on either side with soft textured mosaics of battle charred surface. "I like to think that the dense color gives these pieces a floating effect," says Srouji, "there is contrast within the pictures and the spaces provide us with a void."

The strips are either in free-hanging arrangements or placed side-by-side within wall-mounted frames, and never displayed alone. There is no method to their arrangement, and the ability to interchange the strips is an essential part of Srouji's plan, "they're not just something to look at, but to rearrange as well, it's all part of the game."

And it is with this that one really gets a taste of Srouji's almost impish sense of humor. He wants you to explore, feel, interact and challenge – but in the end he wants you to take home his message: that with destruction there is hope, and it is growing every year.



Down to earth? "Terre" from Srouji's latest exhibition