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Seriality: Artistic Production during the Lebanese Civil War

| by *Sarah Rogers*

Introduction

This essay explores seriality, the practice of painting or drawing in a series, as a mode of artistic production during the early years of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). In art history seriality is most often associated with postwar American art: a moment distinguished by a radical shift in the concept of art as a unique expression issuing forth from an individual creator (represented most prominently in the career of Jackson Pollock) towards an artistic practice that embraced the repetitive, mechanical forms of industrial capitalism (made famous by artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein). Yet, as this essay considers, the work of prominent Lebanese artists working in a series format during the mid-to late 1970s challenges conventional Euro-American art historical narratives. In the context of a violent civil war, the repetitive nature of a series that takes as its subject the surrounding hostilities suggests an aesthetic of witnessing: working through repetition to create a visual testimony that both documents events and conveys a sense of their unreality. The Saradar Collection offers a point of entry into the possibility that seriality is a mode of production particularly relevant during the early years of the Lebanese Civil War. The collection is an assemblage of works dedicated to modern and contemporary art production in Lebanon. This essay focuses on a select number of works by three prominent Lebanese artists: Seta Manoukian, Jamil Molaeb, and Aref Rayess.

I.

In the foreground, a young man lounges on a twin bed, propped up by pillows, gazing vacantly at something outside the picture frame, a television set perhaps (Fig. 1). His idle posture and blank stare is mirrored by a second man in the background. Their twin beds are separated by a small table that hosts a radio and small bowl. The indolence of the scene bears the weight of the passage of time: the stillness of the men's bodies and gazes suggests a hospital room, that liminal space in which body and mind are trapped between the forced respite of healing and the anticipated progression to health.

A second sketch echoes the composition described above, reflecting the monotony of the hospital setting (Fig. 2). Captured from the same perspective—peering into the room from a corner—the scene depicts two resting men in profile, their twin beds separated by a small table that holds a bottle and two small glasses. Whereas the man in the foreground, distinguished by his unshaven face, stares up at the ceiling with his hands crossed and resting on his chest, the figure in the background stares unaffectedly ahead, suggesting as in the previous sketch the presence of a television set.

These works are preliminary drawings for Seta Manoukian's 1976 *Hospital Series*. Begun just a year into the war, the series presents a portrait of a generation of young men: Ex-fighters now bedridden, vulnerable and listless, with the space of the hospital in stark contrast to the violent madness of the fighting outside in the streets of Beirut. The immobility of the wounded body is underscored in a third sketch in which Manoukian depicts only the figures' legs, lain in profile with crutches in the background (Fig. 3). In another drawing, the figure sits up in bed, directly confronting the viewer with the recurring vacant expression shared by the other men (Fig. 4). A fifth work again assumes the perspective of looking into the hospital room in profile, however, in this one, two figures lean over the bed, their heads bent with the urgency of care, whether in the possibility of death's presence or a sign of awakening is unknown (Fig. 5).

In each of these sketches, Manoukian poignantly conveys a sense of the passage of time within the space of the hospital. In some of the sketches, time is expressed through the inertia of the injured immobile body; in others, it is the humbling instance in which life and death hover together. Manoukian's use of line, with its cursory outline and dynamic flow, further accentuates the passage of time, as if the artist drew the scene before her with the urgency of a fleeting instance. And although these are preliminary sketches, a finished oil painting from the series, *Wounded Militiamen in Hospital*, preserves the hurried line of the sketches. It is precisely the line's transitory nature that suggests an act of witnessing in the work, and it is the presence of time that characterizes the mode of working through in a series format.

The artist herself acknowledges a shift in the perception of time during the start of the war, explaining that the constant unfolding of events made time seem to move faster.[1] Moreover, her work during this period also changed focus. During the early seventies, before the war, Manoukian produced untitled paintings known as collectively as the *White Period*, depicting a bed with an unidentifiable form hidden beneath a white bedsheet (Fig. 6-7). The artist had just returned to Beirut from her studies abroad, first on a scholarship to Perugia, Italy through the Italian Cultural Center, before enrolling at the Academia di Belle Arte in Rome where she spent four years. She returned to Beirut, holding her first exhibition at Galerie Alecco Saab before receiving another scholarship for a year at the Barking College of Technology in London. When she returned to the Lebanese capital, she took a teaching post at the Lebanese University and immersed herself in the city's vibrant artistic and cultural scene. Yet, according to the artist, in order to paint, she found it necessary to isolate herself in a closed off room, often painting herself and her own body, a witness to her own being. The works from the *White Period* emerged from Manoukian's contemplation of the white sheet as a sym-

1 Svetlana Darsalia, dir. Mother Sela-Artist and Buddist Nun. Youtube Documentary, September 27 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWwmTe2dq5I . Accessed May 10 2017.

bol of purification, removed from the political issues passionately discussed amongst her colleagues in the café: Palestinian refugees, Third World solidarity movements, or growing sectarian divisions within Lebanon.[2]

Manoukian had previously isolated herself in order to work. *The Hospital Series* thus marks a shift in artistic practice, a turn towards rather than removal from life in the city. In addition to *The Hospital Series*, during this period Manoukian also painted portraits of anonymous figures set in Beirut. The compositions are minimalist, composed of blocks of vibrant, bold color with only suggestions of Beirut's architecture. Elements in the environment are often depicted as floating in a fragmented spatial layout in which the relationship between the figures and the environment assumes a collage-like effect. As Manoukian's art engaged with the surroundings, so too did her daily activities: the artist devoted herself to bringing art supplies to children in divided neighborhoods and spent time with them drawing and coloring. Manoukian eventually published two books of the children's drawings from this time as a testimony to the atrocities of war. This active, committed encounter with Beirut and the hostilities might be termed engaged witnessing, and it is within this way of working that we might understand *The Hospital Series* as the intimate testimony of both a generation of young men and the artist's own response to the war.[3]

II.

An image of an ordinary city bus is rendered into a picture of horrific carnage as bodies spill out of doors and windows (Fig. 8). Limbs are deformed and dismembered, no longer anatomically attached to the body, but disjointed or morphing out of figural heads. In the front of the bus, lifeless bodies lie entangled on the ground. The bodies are no longer individual, but rather assume a collective mass. The repetition of the stark outline of the human figure—vulnerable in its primordial state of nudity—screams of a massacre.

The image references *April 13th 1975*, commonly referred to as "the bus incident," when Phalangist militiamen attacked a PLO bus carrying militants and sympathizers from a political rally to the Sabra refugee camp. Artist Jamil Molaeb's work serves as a testimony to this horrific event, which conventionally marks the start of the Lebanese Civil War. The drawing's documentary nature is suggested by the title's reference to an actual event as well as Molaeb's choice to work in black, white and grey, which lend the work the quality of documentary photography. However, the chaotic nature of violence is contrasted with the rhythmic gestures and poses of the bodies. A portrayal of tumultuous carnage paradoxically organized through a logical, repetitive patterning: the weaving motif in the foreground, for instance, or the four windows of the bus that evenly frame the mass of bodies. The compositional dynamic mimics the alleged logic of a retaliatory violence whose justification soon spirals out of control.[4]

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2 Ibid.

3 Sonja Mejcher-Atassi has examined the role of book art as a form of visual testimony of everyday life in contemporary Iraq. See her article, *Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: The Book as Document in Iraq,* Art History 35 4 (September 2012): 816-839.

4 In the 2016 documentary, A Life Worth Living, Molaeb discusses the rapid spiral during the Lebanese civil war from a revolutionary violence that promised social change to all-consuming hostilities seemingly without purpose. Mimosa Arawi, dir. A Life Worth Living. YouTube. October 16 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcOkTB6i_TQ. Accessed May 12 2017.

The contrast between repetition and compositional balance and the subject of war that characterizes *April 13th* runs throughout Molaeb's 1976 series, *Diary of a War*. The series documents Molaeb's responses to the hostilities, which earned the title *Diary of a Civil War* from fellow artist Rafic Charaf who saw the series at a downtown Beirut café.[5] Some pieces, such as *April 13th*, reference specific events during the early years of the Lebanese Civil War, whereas other works in the series reveal the more mundane images of war. *Let's Fight* (Fig. 9), for instance, depicts a jeep unceremoniously carrying militiamen off to battle, or *Roadblock* (Fig.10), which portrays a common image from the war of one of the city's checkpoints. Other drawings assume a more fantasy-like and formal allegorical language. In *International Community* (Fig.11), an enormous fish with spiky fins consumes smaller fish with heads resembling human faces. Surrounding the central fish are multiple smaller spiky hybrid human-fish, each one being swallowed by or swallowing another fish, an insidious metaphor for the international community's participation in a reportedly civil war. Uniting the works in Molaeb's series is not only the subject matter, but also the striking formal language: at the start of the civil war, the artist made a conscious decision to work in black and white.

Renowned for his bold use of color, Molaeb is an artist whose diverse body of work shares an interest in the natural world, whether scenes of peasants or the recurring motifs found in nature that Molaeb transforms into dynamic and rhythmic abstract compositions. Born in Baysour in the Chouf region of Lebanon, Molaeb trained under modernists Chafic Abboud and Paul Guiragossian at the Fine Arts Institute at the Lebanese University. Unlike most artists of his generation who furthered their studies in Europe or the U.S., Molaeb spent a year at the School of Fine Arts in Algeria, receiving a one year scholarship. In 1984, Molaeb traveled again, this time to New York to receive a Masters of Fine Arts from the Pratt Institute; subsequently earning a doctorate in Art Education from Ohio State University. He returned to Lebanon in 1989, a year before the war ended, and taught at the Lebanese American University and the Lebanese University. Throughout his prolific career, the artist has worked in a number of techniques and styles from total abstraction to folkloric genre scenes. Thus, within this diverse body of work, the black and white ink drawings of the *War Diary* series represent a dramatic shift in practice and aesthetic.

When hostilities began, Molaeb acknowledged the violence with a conscious shift in his artistic practice: the artist considered the stark contrast of black and white in china ink and charcoal to be a more direct aesthetic for visually registering the war.[6] The artist also worked in woodcuts during the 1980s and 90s, a technique that exhibits a similar visual contrast. Similar to *War Diary*, the woodcuts convey the terror of war through an overwhelming rhythmic patterning of line, often in which bodily limbs multiply. In this way, the documentary elements of the series are infused with a surreal quality, which I suggest speaks to the troubling nature of violence and the act of witnessing. It is thus the fundamental elements of line and color that are mobilized to become visually expressive of violence. Furthermore, the choice to work in a series serves to reinforce this aesthetic through the very act of repetition. In other words, when viewed collectively, these works speak to the Lebanese Civil War through a particular formal language.

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

III

A strange red amalgam of horse and machine gun juts out violently from the corner of the composition (Fig. 12). The hybrid's sharp, gleaming teeth threaten to attack a group of men and women whose faces are distorted in fear. Behind the figures, facing off the red machine-like horse, is a menacing, black and grey human-like mask with piercing blue eyes. Below, a turquoise conglomeration of sharp mechanical-like barnacles shoot up towards the figural grouping, one of whom sits with his head in his hands, encapsulated in a glass jar. Above it all flies a feathery turquoise bird who appears to deliver an orange slice to the red horse.

In a jarring color combination of red and turquoise, artist Aref Rayess creates an enigmatic and treacherous dream-like scene in this 1977 untitled work. Rather than premised on individual portraits or actual events as in the works of Molaeb and Manoukian from this period, Rayess' painting is more allegorical. Yet similar to Molaeb and Manoukian, Rayess encounters the war through the creation of a distinctive formal language: an electric color palette dominated by bold red; sharp, jarring angles; and a strange conglomeration of figural and abstracted imagery. Together, these formal elements denote violence and acknowledge Rayess' engagement with the current political situation and events.[7]

Rayess' artistic interest in war and violence began in 1945 with a charcoal and pastel drawing based on the bombing of Hiroshima entitled, *Horror*. Reportedly, a journalist for the francophone newspaper *L'Orient-Le Jour* saw the young self-taught artist's drawing while visiting the Rayess house and encouraged the architect Antoine Tabet, art critic Victor Hakim, and the Beirut-based French artist Georges Cyr to view Rayess' work.[8] Three years later, in 1948, Rayess held his first solo exhibition at the American University of Beirut. That same year, Rayess traveled to Paris, where the hitherto self-taught artist studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and joined the studios of Fernand Leger, Andre Lhote, and Ossip Zadkine. In 1954, Rayess left for West Africa, before returning to Paris in 1956. The artist moved to Lebanon in 1957, leaving again in 1960 for three years in Florence and Rome after receiving a scholarship from the Italian government. Rayess had a distinguished career, receiving commissions from the Lebanese government for the UNESCO center in Paris and the World's Fair in New York.

When the Lebanese Civil War began in 1975, Rayess was already deeply engaged with and troubled by the political climate. In 1972, he wrote an unpublished manifesto, *With Whom and Against Whom*, critiquing the corruption of the Lebanese political system, particularly in Rayess' hometown of Aley, and expressed hope for a better future for the Lebanese people.[9] Rayess' political engagement is registered visually as he produced numerous works related to the war, as well as publishing a book of illustrations titled The Road to Peace (figs. 13-15) in 1976.[10] Additionally, a 1975 painting compositionally references Jacques Louis David's famous 1793 painting of the murder

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7 I would like to thank Hala Rayess and Rawad Isaiah J. Bou Malhab of the Aref Rayess Foundation for sharing with me scans of Rayess' paintings related to the Lebanese Civil War held at the foundation.
8 http://theparkgallery.com/artist/aref-el-rayess/. Accessed May 17 2017.
9 Aref Rayess, "With Whom and Against Whom? A Manifesto by Aref Rayess," April 27 1972, Aref Rayess Foundation, Lebanon.
10 In 2009, the Beirut Art Center held an exhibition, *The Road to Peace: Paintings in Times of War* (1975-1991), curated by Saleh Barakat. The exhibition's title is a direct reference to Rayess' publication and served to underscore the exhibition's exploration of artistic engagement with the Lebanese Civil War throughout the years of fighting.

of French revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat, Death of Marat (fig.16). Similar to his other works from this period, the painting is characterized by the use of bold reds and sharply angled lines. In compositions that are both suggestive and enigmatic, terror is evoked through formal elements so that violence is not merely represented, but rather incorporated into the very language of representation.

Importantly, Rayess himself did not group these paintings together as part of a specifically identified war series, despite them being a body of work dedicated to the subject of the Lebanese Civil War. In this way, we might consider Rayess' paintings to belong to a temporally defined period, rather than to a particular series. However, the repetition of certain formal elements to express a specific subject enables these works to be grouped together. Certainly, within Rayess' body of work produced during the war years, there are numerous different series. *The Road to Peace* is a clearly delineated series, for instance. There is also a collection of paintings, such as the untitled piece discussed here, which share a distinctive formal language. It is thus not merely the act of portraying the subject of war during the time of the hostilities that raises the concept of seriality. Instead, as Rayess' untitled painting underscores, it is the ways in which the artist mobilizes form, line, color, and compositional dynamic to visualize violence often deemed inexpressible.

Importantly, it is not just Rayess who crafted distinctive, multiple aesthetic languages during the early years of the war. As previously noted, Molaeb explored both china ink and charcoal on paper as well as woodcuts (fig. 17). Manoukian also painted a series of works of anonymous figures throughout the city of Beirut in a very different technique to *the Hospital Series* (figs. 18-19). The presence of different series—each with its own formal language—throughout the period of the war among these three prolific artists highlights the process of working through the paradoxical relationship of artistic creation and violent destruction.

Conclusion

In each of the three bodies of work explored in this essay, seriality serves as a mode of creation that enabled artists to register daily life under constantly shifting and hostile circumstances. The violent strife of the Lebanese Civil War thus ruptured the underlying rationality conventionally promised through the repetition of seriality. Serality is no longer a process by which mechanical arrangements guarantee an expected outcome. Instead, the repetition of seriality serves as a process through which to give form to unspeakable violence. Moreover, the personalization of witnessing conveyed in these three series lends seriality a degree of immediacy that registers the aesthetic ambitions and priorities of life and work under war. Manoukian, Molaeb, and Rayess were engaged artists during these years and they created formal languages to express their convictions.

Despite its noticeable presence during these early years, it is important to note that seriality is not a novel practice introduced during the Lebanese Civil War. Indeed, even within the Saradar Collection itself, there are artists working in a series format during the first half of the twentieth century. Pioneer of modern art Moustafa Farroukh's series *Scenes de la vie* (1940-52) and *Hommes du mandat* (1922-1934), ink on paper and drawings respectively, represent long term projects that work through a theme or characters, most probably as sketches for paintings. Farid Aouad is another mid-twen-

tieth century artist who worked in a series as a format for exploring different aspects of daily life under modernity, as in his *Fisherman* series, *Café* series, and *Metro* series. The striking number of series within the Saradar Collection itself reflects a private collection where circumstance and economics render the assemblage of artist sketches and preliminary works, many of which constitute what is labeled as a series in this instance, more accessible than finished works on canvas. In other words, art histories written from within collections contain a collection's own history of motivations and parameters.

However, what is striking is that during the 2006 war with Israel (also known as the July War), seriality—particularly the diary format—emerged once again. Take, for instance, Mazen Kerbaj's Beirut. July-August 2006, a series of ink on paper drawings. As a comic book author and visual artist, Kerbaj did not radically alter his aesthetic during the 2006 war. However, the series developed from a visual blog he published in 2006 on his daily life while living in Beirut.[11] For 34 consecutive days, Kerbaj documented his daily life amidst war, producing a kind of serial witnessing that is both intimate and documentary.

The use of the serial format during the early years of the Lebanese Civil War as well as the July 2006 War is all the more noticeable in the context of artistic production in Lebanon during the 1990s among a postwar generation of artists whose work centered on the histories, theories, and aesthetics of the archive. Artists of this generation include Paola Yacoub, Jayce Salloum, Akram Zaatari, Marwan Rechmaoui, Lamia Joreige, Walid Raad, Fouad Elkoury, and collaborators Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. A cursory glimpse at this body of work exhibits a critical interest in the production and circulation of images and the possibilities of narration through and by the archive, particularly as related to the histories of the Lebanese Civil War and postwar Lebanon. One is struck by the visual aesthetics of repetition and assemblage, both yoked to the concept and formation of the archive. By invoking the work of the postwar generation, I want to underscore the difference between seriality and archiving with respect to temporal discourses. The archive always comes after the event; it represents an assemblage that seeks to document from a technical and detached perspective. Very differently, the works of Manoukian, Molaeb, and Rayess, express an aesthetics of immediacy and sometimes surreal formal language, quite removed from the remote aesthetics of the archive. Furthermore, it is precisely this language of imminence, both temporally and experientially, that characterizes the series produced during the early war years and, as I would like to further suggest, reemerges during the 2006 war in Lebanon.

11 www.mazenkerblog.blogspot.com

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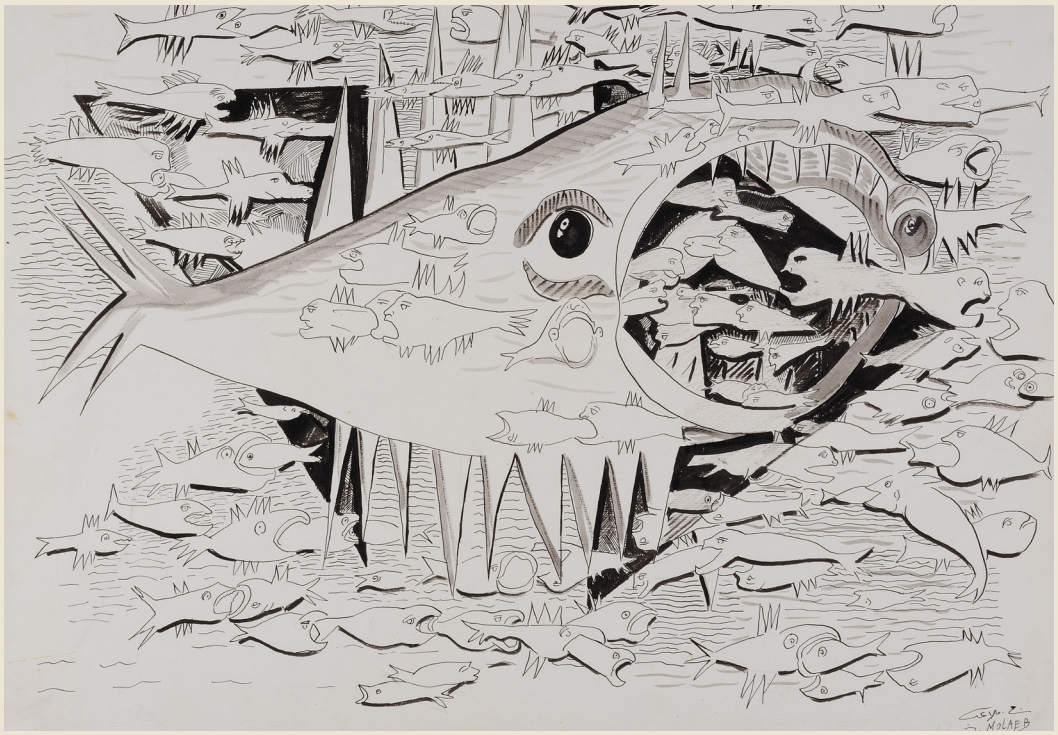
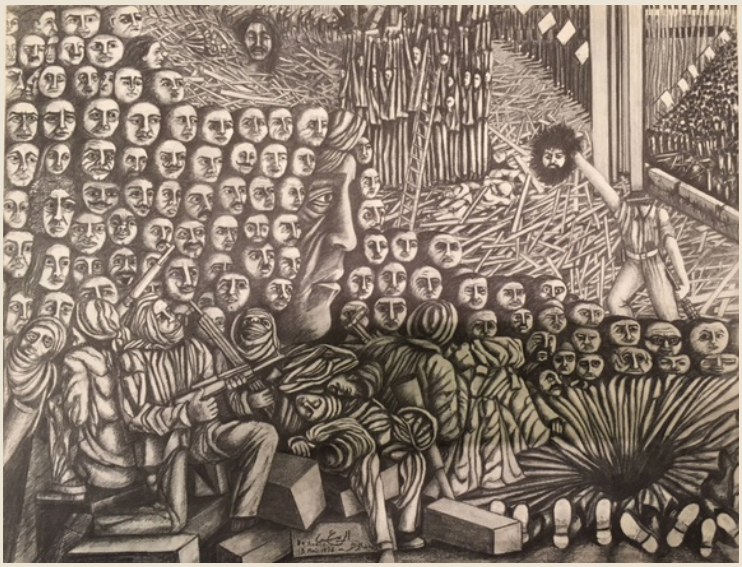
1-5 | Seta Manoukian
Hospital Series. 1975-1976
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

6-7 | Seta Manoukian
Untitled (white period). 1970
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

8-11 | Jamil Molaeb
Civil War Diary. 1975-1976
courtesy of the Saradar Collection



12 | Aref Rayess
Untitled, 1977
courtesy of the Saradar Collection



13-15 | Aref Rayess
The Road to peace. 1976
courtesy of the Aref El Rayess Foundation

16 | Aref Rayess
Homage to Martin Luther King, 1968
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

17 | Jamil Molaeb
Fate. 1984
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

18 | Seta Manoukian
Les Arcades. 1986
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

Seta Manoukian
Crossroads. 1986
courtesy of the Saradar Collection