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Sign of the Times: Collage in the work of six Lebanese artists

| by *Rachel Dedman*

Introduction

Most famously employed in the context of early Modernism, collage was developed in the 1910s by Cubist artists playing with illusion, and by Dadaists invested in reorienting visual language. For artists such as Braque and Picasso, the introduction of 'real' material, such as rope, oilcloth, and wallpaper, into the painted space of the picture, enabled them to challenge fundamentals of perception in painting. By calling attention to the surface (being incontrovertibly attached to the canvas), these collaged elements forced 'backwards' the flat, painted areas that simulated perspectival space. The 'abiding effect' of Cubist collage was, therefore, 'a constant shuttling between surface and depth'.[1] The simultaneous *depiction* and *incorporation* of text and material into the space of the picture disturbed painting's traditional relationship to mimesis.

Many decades later, an untitled collage by Halim Jurdak, 2000, responds to these paradigms. Its surface appears a swimming, pulsating map of matter, its layers shifting beneath the eye. The background is charcoal grey, like smoke coalesced into stippled clouds. Yellowed newspaper cuts through the fur. In places its text has been peeled from the surface, exposing the fibrous inner seam of paper. Scribbled ink forms jagged patterns of crowns and open mouths in the newsprint's negative space. Scraps of pale draughtman's paper overlap and underlay, looped with scrawls of charcoal, graphite and felt-tip. On every spare surface fine line drawings scatter doodles, in an architect's hand, small-nibbed. At the centre, the only colour: half-hearted smudges of pink and yellow; testing the pen in the unnatural green of institutional biro. Childish thick-tip stars and kiss-crosses dance whimsically across paper crevices.

Jurdak's confusion of signifiers seethe across the paper, taking Greenberg's 'shuttling' to an extreme. As first explored by Braque and Picasso, areas address the flatness of the surface: the text of the newspaper, the reverse-emboss of the paper's brand. Other elements recede into depth: the recessive spirals drawn in pen, a panicked face half-lost

1 Clement Greenberg, 'Collage', 1939.

to overlapping scraps. The implications of the work feel less important than its formal effects—the rise and recession of details beneath the eye, the materialisation of of illusory shapes, their coalescence into shared form.

The works of Mohammed Rawas appear to investigate the same processes. In *Escapism*, 1980, a bird in profile, its beak gasped in misery or joy, lies flat upon a table. Two monochrome photographs lie beneath it, saturated with ink. Empty frames, the kind that hold photographer's slides, pin down the bird. Their upper edges are lapped by rough-cut swatches of coarse linen—the fabric's open weave and frayed edges blur into opacity when folded upon themselves. In *Beirut Revisited*, 1989, a cityscape strip like a richly-coloured summer postcard, intersects a spotted image of a child's face; dark eyes looking out at the viewer. An Egyptian deity is embossed in profile, stacked in neat rows. A woman dances to either side, lifting her long skirts to reveal bare ankles. Along the lower edge, hands clap again and again, like a row of postage stamps, or the reel of a film. Rawas composes dream-like, emotive images, as though summoning half-conjured recollections to the conscious surface. His works deal with history and the city through the lens of personal totems, icons of the slippery, partial nature of memory. Although their texture frequently feels watery and loose, Rawas almost always uses geometry to pin down his material: *Berytus* is dominated by enlarged compass bearings, and *Beirut Revisited* is flecked with the thin red markings of a surveyor's map. This apparatus lends an urgency to the images' recollection, a need for their forensic examination, their fixity. However, despite the dense layering of maps, stamps, frames, charts, textiles, texts and photographs in these works, they are, crucially, not collage.

Though Rawas worked frequently in collage, these works are screen-prints, a process which involves the exposure of an image onto screens, in layers separated by colour, which then have paint pushed through them one by one. In this sense, printmaking is the opposite of collage. The former flattens the paper, producing an image under high pressure, by tautly pulling ink across the surface. The latter takes paper as a ground for the upward construction and accumulation of substance. Where the Cubists sought to disrupt the artifice of academic painting, by swapping the represented for the actual, prints return the 'real' to the plane of representation, and enable its mass production. Collage as a medium resists the reproducibility of printmaking; the incorporation of objects external to the picture means a collage can never exist twice. A second work by Halim Jurdak, also from 2000, is less kinetic than its sister, but identical in structure: the collage is built upon an earlier work by the artist—an engraving or a print. In both pieces Jurdak enjoys collage's ability to render his original piece obscure and unfinished, to disrupt its integrity, to deny a viewer access to its whole. The space it constructs is slippery, ambivalent, irreverent; implicitly—for Jurdak—a site to disturb what he has already made. Print-making, by contrast, requires rigorous planning and composition, it needs the image to be fixed before it is produced. Although Rawas attempts to mimic the artlessness of collage, and imply the immediate presence of the artist's hand (ringed 'stains' suggest wet cups forgotten on the surface of *The April the Lilies Died*), his prints lack all spontaneity. Unlike Jurdak's dashed scribbles and quick-fire stars, Rawas's indexical gestures serve to reinforce the work's artifice, its pre-supposed impulsiveness.

Indeed, it is a lack of pre-supposition that distinguishes collage from other media. In collage, things need cutting, pasting, gluing, shifting. Elements are constantly swimming in relation to one another. Unlike painting, where a certain consistency of material allows for prediction of the behaviour of the paint, collage is always about the interaction of di-

verse materials: their visual, physical and chemical relationships. For this reason, collage rarely allows for pre-ordained certainty to its making. No matter how precisely imagined a composition might be before the artist begins, the interaction of surface, glue and material is unstable. While printing requires a design's completion before production, there is no *single* gesture—no swift pull of the squeegee, nor exposure of paper to the light—that will fix a collage in place. Although the ultimate effects of Rawas and Jurdak's work appear similar, the way Jurdak's forms shift kinetically under the eye is a reflection of their construction, and the ongoing nature of our reading the world; Rawas' pieces feel static by contrast, like history held in amber.

Time and re-emergence from ruins

Historically, collage has been defined in terms of its introduction of the 'real' into representational space. As is evident in Jurdak's work, and mimicked in Rawas's, collage integrates realities both internal and external to the image: an engraving and newspaper, painting and fabric. By virtue of this, collage is characterised by a particular temporal state; one in which time is contained and prolonged. This is unrelated to the length of time taken to produce a collage; rather collage binds together the older time of the external object with the self-made internal time of the image. David Gall calls collage 'a practice of reemergence from ruins'.[2] Collage involves the introduction of fragments—or ruins—of the external world, and their time, into the closed timescape of the painting. *Re*-emergence becomes the key term here—collage is predicated upon the existence of other objects; its contents are always older than the picture itself. Thomas Crow writes, 'Cubism [ie. Cubist collage] is readable as a message from the margins not only in the graphic content of the intruder objects, but in their substance and organisation as well. […] As such surfaces soon degrade, peel, flake, and fade, as newsprint and handbills turn brown and brittle, so collage disrupts the false harmonies of oil painting by reproducing the disposability of the most ordinary consumer goods.'[3] The external (in Crow's term, 'intruder') objects extend the temporality of the image, by remaining subject to decay from exposure to the elements, in a way that painting—varnished, preserved—is not.

The work of Hanibal Srouji reflects this extended temporality, and the co-implication of inside and outside. *Rust Rush*, 1995, is a two-panel painting made of ash and terracotta-coloured traces. The left-hand plane is dense and distant, deep clouds of smudgy ash lay the foundation for swarms of umber freckles, specks of metal surging in red gusts. The right-hand panel is sparser, whiter, and closer to us; its corrosive stubs like the traces of bullet holes, or the marks of acid rain. Srouji's collage appears to subject the canvas to the durational, elemental effects of air, the drawn-out process embodied by rust. The work explores in abstract form the decay of Beirut in the years following the civil war, examining the traces left by conflict, through the intimacy of the city's surfaces. Resisting literal representation, Srouji uses rust as an index of time passed, as a state of transition, stretching open the expanded temporal field of the collage as medium.

Shafic Abboud's *The Sand Book*, 1973, further dissolves the distinction between the internal and the external of the collage. Coalesced in gloopy, sticky swathes, beige sweeps of sand mark the boundaries of each page. Individual particles shimmer and

2. David A. Gall, 'Fragments of what? Postmodernism, Hybridity and Collage', Journal of Art for Life, vol. 5, no. 1, 2014, p. 3.
3. Thomas Crow, Modernism and Mass Culture, p. 32.

swim in clusters, like swarms of miniature insects. Paint and mud mingle on the surface, crackling with the pressure of evaporation. Porous landscapes are dotted with dark granules, like coffee grounds suspended in a sink. Some pages reflect pure movement: the immediacy of gesture, the expansive spread of the brush. Others structure the image carefully, building up the surface in thick layers and opaque daubs of white pigment. A few are flat and simple, watery; the surface speckled and glittering. Only one hints at colour—glimpses of pink and green betray an underlying painting obscured by beige. Just as Jurdak obscures his underlying engraving, Abboud uses sand to hide his own painting. Clement Greenberg, whose text on collage from 1939 remains paradigmatic, testifies that at a certain moment, 'Braque and Picasso began to mix sand and other foreign substances with their paint; the granular texture thus created likewise called attention to the reality of the surface'. For Abboud and Srouji, however, many decades later, sand and rust are not mere signifiers of flatness. Indeed, in Abboud's book, sand is the only surface available. The collage here is all-encompassing; sand is not just a referent of the real, standing for itself in the space of the picture, but the primary tool of the artist's medium: its paint.

Abboud's 'book', in the end, is an impossible one—unbound, un-turnable, with nothing to read. It lacks all linearity, and features no content (or, rather, nothing but content). And while temperas are characterised by the mixing of pigment and water-based binding agents, sand is ultimately impervious to water. It cannot absorb it, is not chemically altered by it, and is shaped by it only over thousands of years. For this reason, sand has both an elusive and eternal quality. Beaches are spaces at the mercy of natural forces: subject to erosion, tectonic shift, and the tide. On two of the pages Abboud cuts through the sand's glutinous bulk, forcibly re-introducing the negative space of the page. One looks like the marks of a crazed man's grip, fingers ripping through the surface—as though in a moment of frustration with its strength. Abboud sets up a material impossibility: sand and water cannot bind permanently; their union is inherently fleeting. Yet his collages suspend the brevity of coalescence into solid planes. He fixes the sand in an in-between state—rendered both liquid and static, a shape-shifting material harnessed by the artist.

Collage as cartography

The fluidity of collage, enabled by its extended temporality, has been employed by artists since collage's inception—and not just by those testing the formal limits of the image. Artists like Hannah Hoch and Raoul Hausmann, working at a similar time to the Cubists, in a very different vein, used collage and photomontage in striking political critique. The medium became a key weapon in the armory of Dada, eventually refined into the absurdist work of Surrealism. Dada collage combined photographs, newspaper, drawing, and mass-produced material, enabling incisive parody and commentary on the state of the contemporary world. When pursued in less abstract directions, collage's extended temporality allows for similar scrutiny and disruption of established historiographies. Laure Ghorayeb's contemporary collages, *Beirut Calls the Future Generations*, 2010-2011, examines in three large, dense panels the history of Beirut through the personal and political rubble of the twentieth century in Lebanon.

Like Mohammed Rawas, Ghorayeb invokes domestic totems: endless personal photographs and precisely-noted details of family lineage, the kind of small object meaningless to anyone but their owner, woven among with the universally-legible icons of

Lebanese history. Archival photos, maps, photocopied pictures, newspaper clippings and hand-written receipts are jumbled together, sellotaped or stapled to the surface. These are frequently framed or defaced by the artist's sketches, ringed by thick-penned text or minute furtive jottings: the product of an obsessive personal cartography. The first in the series, *The Golden Era of Culture, 1920-1960*, boasts a Lebanese flag improvised at its centre, formed of red dabs of sticky lipstick and coiled thread, a twist of green approximating the cedar tree. Strings of tiny plastic beads, shiny ribbon and cheap tinsel encircle statements writ large in childish hand. In the second work, *Independence, 1960-1975*, Ghorayeb repeats many such tropes, with greater intensity. In these, the pre-war years, the messy threaded flag is hemmed in black. In the lower left hand corner, an image of the Sursock Museum goes up in flames. Pictures of politicans, singers and Ghorayeb's family are literally threaded together by frenetic, irregular stitches. The third work, *Cain and Abel, or the Fratricidal War, 1975-1990*, approaches the surface as the city itself, divided in two by a red ribbon, either side thickly labelled East and West. The strings of beads now cling to the peripheries, as the news takes on a central role. Pixellated television stills, yellowing newspaper headlines, Ghorayeb's fat-nibbed sketches: every spare inch holds blank-faced people shrunken in cars, shouldering rifles or bunkered underground, their faces lengthened into death masks, their eyes fat dots like scars from gunfire.

The temporal ambiguity of collage, and its refusal of the fixed, becomes an appropriate space for the intersectional mapping of geo-political and personal mythologies. Although the time of all three panels appears to be treated definitively—each named for a specific chunk of history—the temporality internal to Ghorayeb's images is constantly destabilised and contradicted. Sub-headings denote different periods to the titles of each panel, the neat borders of the paintings' time leaking stories that don't fit within them. Nineteenth century coins are sewn to the surface, while an old watch permanently reads sixteen minutes past one. The old Ottoman order appears to remain in circulation, yet time at some point has stopped. Though this purports to be the 'Golden Era', the word for war, *al-harb*, dominates the top of the picture, its true title ('From Greater Lebanon to the Euphrates: Art, Culture, Literature') almost illegible underneath. Foreshadowed, *al-harb* returns on the third panel, where the very word splits the dates in two. The numbers 1, 9, 7, 5 are forced against the upper edge of the frame, as though not to impinge upon the sketch of soldiers underneath. The events of history push time out of joint, force it to the border, threaten its coherence. This panel makes constant references to sons and fathers: 'Fils de son pere' reads a notice in the top left, 'tel pere, tel fils' the lower centre. Ghorayeb is concerned with generations and inheritance, the cycling of political ideologies and personal patterns. Images repeat like echoes across all three works (a bad photo of 'I ♥ Beirut', like a tourist's fridge magnet, returns again and again), as though their emergence and re-emergence is to say that although the logic of linear time is observed through politics, and recorded by newspapers, human memory obeys few such rules. Elsewhere, over an urgent sketch of two people wide-eyed in conversation, a half-scrawled sentence reads, 'who told you that Lebanon does not own the past and the future?'

Collage in this vein intersects an ongoing concern in the work of Lebanese artists, particularly following the civil war, with the (im)possibility of adequately writing history. Examination and infiltration of the infrastructure of historiography and the archive, and the power inherent within such apparatus, characterises the work of many artists in the

1990s and 2000s. Collage was historically developed and instrumentalised in the service of unsettling visual paradigms in painting, and questioning the construction of meaning in art. The expanded temporal and material field it involves—through the integration of external elements in the space of the image—facilitates artists', such as Ghorayeb's, interrogation of such themes in works on paper.

Newspaper: rewriting history

Newspaper was a key external element in the work of early collagists. The graphic flatness of its text and semiotic significance of its headlines made it a principal formal device of Cubism. In a myriad of Cubist works, the newspaper marks the dates and years of their making, asserting the connection between painting and the present day, and dissolving the distance between art and life. Witness and testament to contemporaneity, newspaper grounds the constructed space of the image. However, by the end of the century, the neat hierarchy between the internal image and external signifier has been undone, as works such as Nada Sehnaoui's *Painting the L'Orient Le Jour*, 1999, take the newspaper as vehicle and foundation for collage itself.

Published in Beirut since 1970, and itself an amalgam of two earlier papers, L'Orient Le Jour is a Lebanese French-language daily. Sehnaoui's project, made during the year preceding a new millennium, involved the obscuring, highlighting and rewriting of history as it was happening. During the days of 1999 that she spent in Lebanon, Sehnaoui painted the newspaper's front page every day, circling the important, highlighting the amusing, erasing paragraphs in bright, wet slashes, muddying sections in censorious blocks and bathing images in thin runny pools, leaving paint to run in ladders down to the hem of the page. In December, she painted every front page almost entirely white, and November she shredded them all. However, for the months of July and August, when she was out of the country, Sehnaoui instead created collages: each a single front page, blown up to enormous proportions.[4] Clipping, photocopying, pasting, painting, Sehnaoui amalgamates stories from across the month, compressing the distance between herself and news at home. In August, bleached and sparse, a tiny clipping about the Ayloul arts festival nestles alongside news of an earthquake in Turkey. Images of a lunar eclipse sit below the half-cut headline, *Un Liban désert…*, with a red paint-blotched moon blooming in the top right-hand corner of the paper. A single, wavering brushstroke tapers from it down the column, held to the main page with delicate strips of tape; a thin rib clinging to the body. Unsettling the authority of the newspaper's voice, Sehnaoui retains the intimate marks of her news' reconstruction, materialising the subjectivity of history's writing.

In July, an article commemorating the 30th anniversary of the moon landings is pasted next to a report from Human Rights Watch condemning Israeli war crimes: a utopian event from the past contrasting the contemporary pain of the Palestinian people. In making them proximate, Sehnaoui calls attention to the single network of political power (in this case American) that produced both iconic human triumph and the apparatus of Israeli violence. Further up the page, the main headline is given to *Puente-Cruz: un*

4. Sehnaoui would sometimes cut-and-paste into the daily front-pages too, but they remained small-scale and each connected to the day in question, unlike the large-scale single collage works made for July and August. The month of April is also large-scale and fascinating—Sehnaoui took the front-page from April 1975, the very beginning of the Lebanese civil war, as the base for her intervention that month.

duo détonnant, with an on-stage snap of the salsa singer and jazz musician performing at Baalbek festival. Sehnaoui's impossible day imagines one in which music might make front-page news. The project reveals the newspaper as a space that defines whose lives and actions become historiographically significant. Far from a neutral resource, newspapers are legible only to those who speak their language, and read by those who share their politics. Painting L'OLJ's cover daily drew attention to the political privilege and social power exercised in its pages, yet Sehnaoui's large-scale collages achieve something further—the writing of an alternative, the reorientation of power, the re-organisation of the ruins.

Conclusion

Little critical writing exists about collage. As a form, it is often considered secondary in the practice of artists, living somewhere on the level of the sketch or draft. General consensus might consider it a staid, out-dated medium, developed to address formal problems long-resolved by Modernism. Yet there are issues in which collage is implicated that remain of critical importance to the work of contemporary artists: the relationship between representation and the real, and the relation of these to time. Although Nada Sehnaoui's *Painting the L'Orient Le Jour* is representational where Shafic Abboud's *The Sand Book* is abstract, both works use collage as a space to explore the interaction of material. For Abboud, this is chemical: the way something wet changes a surface as it dries, how much it crackles, how opaque it remains. For Sehnaoui, it is conceptual: how texts from different days rupture the temporal specificity of a newspaper; whether a brushstroke can challenge its absent, omniscient authority. Hanibal Srouji and Laure Ghorayeb are both concerned by the origins and consequences of conflict in Lebanon. Srouji's work is elemental and abstract, Ghorayeb's legible and cartographic, yet each takes the collage as a site for examining the effects of history. In the former, this manifests through the erosion of metal; for the latter, this means accumulating and reorienting the visible remains of the past. Abboud uses sand to destabilise the literal communication of the book. Gathered at the limits of the earth, sand marks the interstice between land and the sea; it constitutes the substance of the border. *The Sand Book* renders such ambiguity legible, incorporating into image the agelessness it embodies. This text has argued for collage as a medium that cleaves open and breaks down distinctions between what is internal and external to the image. The external temporality of Srouji's rust incorporates the span of its decay into the picture's own temporal logic. Ghorayeb's talismanic fragments pull the historical moments to which they refer into the unsettled time-scape of the collage, rendering the visualisation of history appropriately complex, ambiguous and multiple. As Sehnaoui visualises literally, collage refuses the straightforward narrative and the singular time.

Particules de mont puget II, 1996, another work by Hanibal Srouji, is dotted with dark blots, bleeding ink across two large panels. The painting brings to mind walls pock-marked with holes; the blunt ends of branches against a thin curtain wrapped around a balcony; stones half-melted in the snow, the mountainside for which it's named. Like Jurdak's stippled clouds, Srouji's unfocussed forms hint at layers beyond the surface, the recession of figures into mist. And yet the eye is pulled constantly to the top of the canvas, where awkward chunks appear to have been sliced from the picture, and pasted back on to it. These square-ish patches, slipped from place, cast 'shadows' behind them, in flat matte paint. Yet shadow and square are never the same shape; and some

shadows are cast by nothing at all. Through the most rudimentary of perspectival gestures Srouji's collage knowingly disturbs the integrity of the image he creates. The artist thus unseats the authority of the viewer, for whom simple perspectival perception is no longer possible. As the work of Abboud, Sehnaoui and Ghorayeb attests, though Cubist collage unsettled the eye, the critical power of contemporary collage lies in its ability to unsettle assumptions beyond the visual; to subject diverse material to the effects of another; to blur the distinction between inside and outside, the virtual and the actual. Trompe l'oeil may be the oldest trick in the book, but in the hands of contemporary artists, collage remains capable of learning new ones.

Biography:

Rachel Dedman (b.1989, London) is an independent curator and writer based in Beirut; her practice navigates art historical research and contemporary practice. Recent exhibitions include *Labour of Love,* Palestinian Museum (Ramallah, 2018); *Kindling,* Fotopub (Slovenia, 2017); *Midad: The Public and Intimate Lives of Arabic Calligraphy,* Dar el-Nimer (Beirut, 2017); *Unravelled,* Beirut Art Center (Beirut, 2016); *Halcyon,* Transart Triennal (Berlin, 2016)*; At the Seams: A Political History of Palestinian Embroidery,* Palestinian Museum (Beirut, 2016)*; Incidental/Peripheral,* MUU Galleria (Helsinki, 2015); and *Space Between Our Fingers,* across Ashkal Alwan, Arab Image Foundation, Mansion, The Hangar, Dawawine (Beirut, 2015). She is the co-founder of collective Polycephaly, and a resident of Mansion, Beirut. Rachel has written for Ibraaz, Reorient, Spike, the Mosaic Rooms and the Journal of Art Historiography, among others. She holds a First-class degree in the History of Art from Oxford University, and was the Von Clemm Fellow at Harvard University, specialising in Islamic art history and contemporary art from the Middle-East. Rachel was a participant of Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace Program, Beirut, 2013/14.

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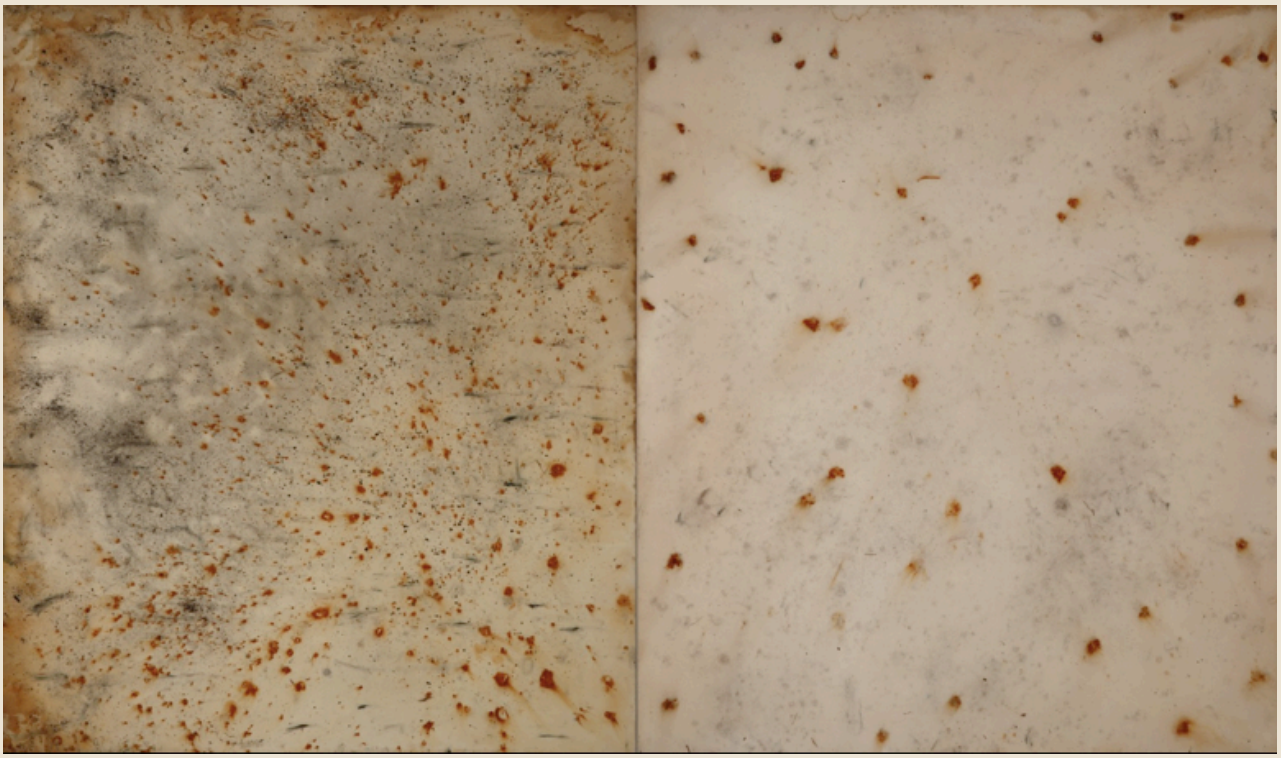
1 | Halim Jurdak
Untitled. 2000
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

2- 3 | Mohammad El Rawas
Escapism. 1980
Beirut Revisited. 1989



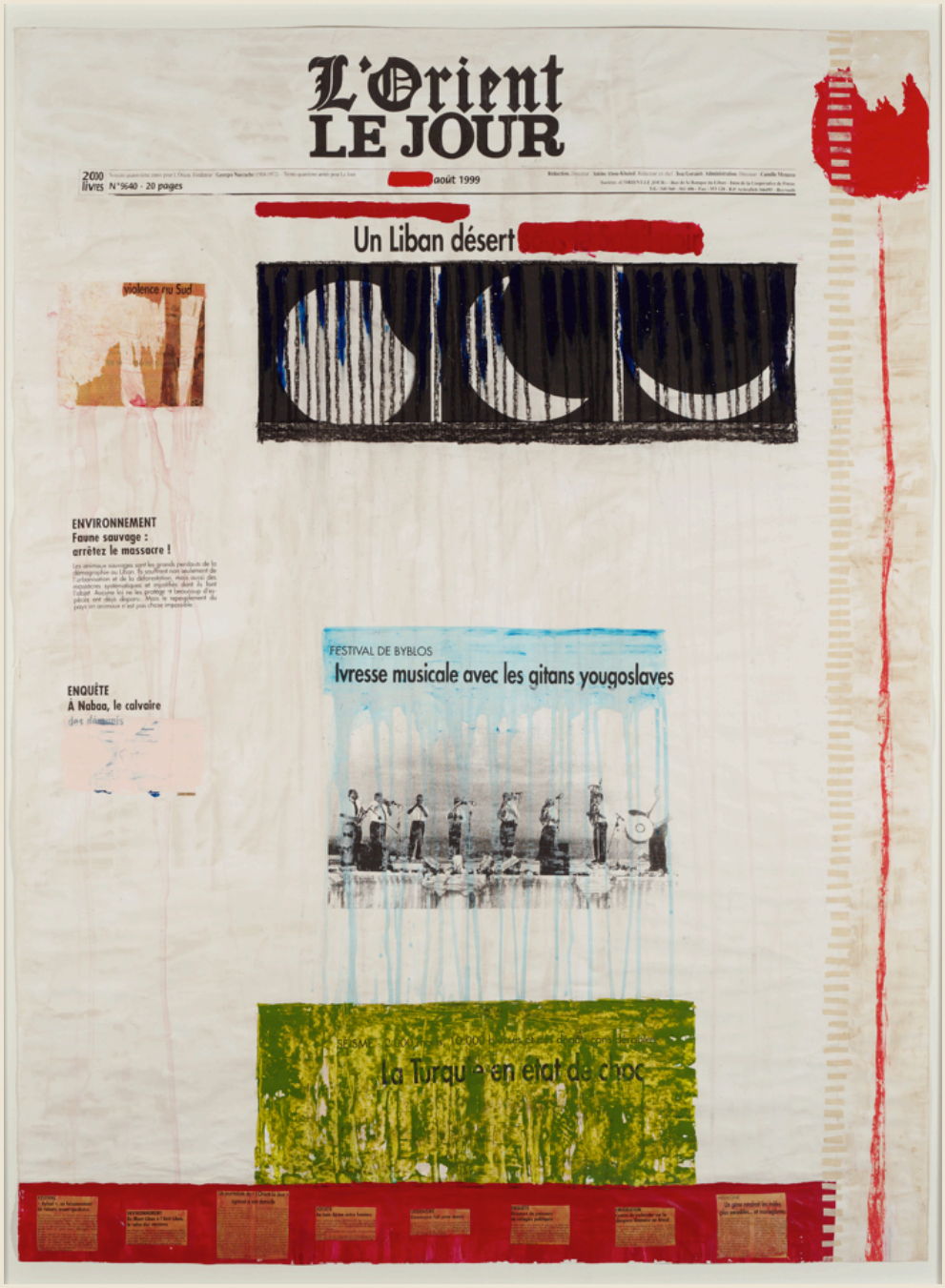
4 | Hanibal Srouji
Rust Rush. 1995
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

5 | Shafic Abboud
The Sand Book. (16 Temperas) .1973
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

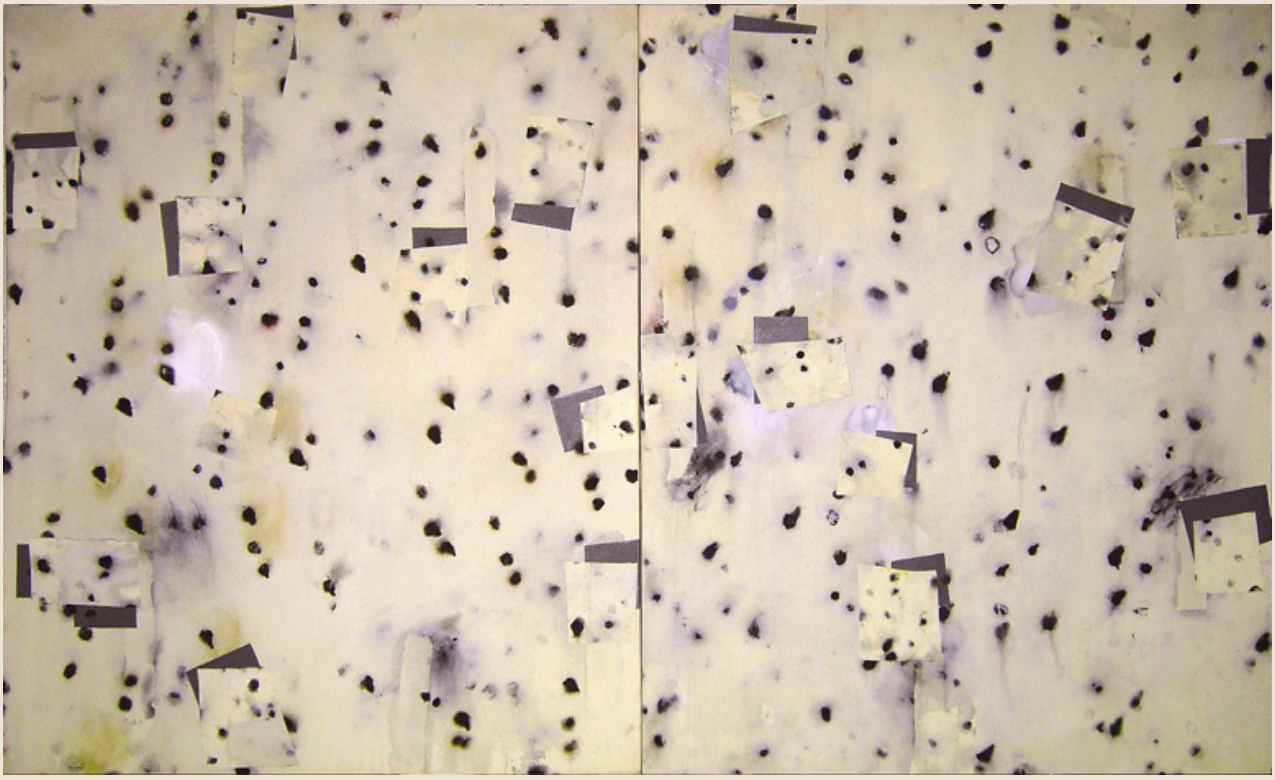
6 | Laure Ghorayeb
Beirut Calls the Future Generations. 2010 - 2011
courtesy of the artist


LES SECRETS DE LA MER ROUGE
EXPOSITION


L'Orient-LE JOUR
RLL
لبنان الحر



7 | Nada Sehnaoui
Painting The Orient-Le Jour. August 1999
courtesy of the Saradar Collection



8 | Hanibal Srouji
Particules de mont puget II. 1996
courtesy: Saradar Collection