

The Banal as a Symptom of War

| by Zena Meskaoui

The Saradar Collection sheds light on a number of artworks that deal with the subject of war, varied representations that provide an insightful terrain for research. Completed during the 1975-1990 Lebanese War, the works selected gather artists with diverse backgrounds, styles, and concerns. The shock of war, however, brings up common features for this diverse 'mosaic' of artists, particularly in their reactions to the early years of the conflict.

In this essay, I look at works by the artists Samir Khaddaje, Seta Manoukian and Jamil Molaeb, briefly comparing them to works by Martin Giesen and Mohammad El Rawas, all produced in the early years of war. Their shared features include repetition and *faits divers*, two notions highlighted in previous essays in this series: Sarah Rogers' "Seriality: Artistic Production during the Lebanese Civil War"; and Stefanie Baumann's "*Faits Divers*: Notes on a Recurrent Figure in Lebanese Contemporary Art" respectively.¹ The former essay deals with the art produced during the war, whereas the latter discusses postwar art (after 1990).

Placing these two features together, I put forward another reading of the re-active work produced during the first years of war centered on Hal Foster's notion of traumatic realism in *The Return of the Real*. The idea is grounded in Lacan, among others, who "defines the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real". Repetition, Foster argues, plays a key role since "the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated".² Thus, "Repetition is both a draining of significance and a defending against affect."³

This strategy is indeed a common feature in the works from the Saradar Collection that deal with war. The day-to-day account—in other words the *faits divers* translated by Baumann as 'miscellaneous'—is or becomes ordinary no matter how out-of-the-ordinary it may in fact be. The *faits divers* that the artists account for are forms of realism.

1. "Saradar Collection | Saradar Publication | Essays," Saradar Collection, accessed February 25, 2019, <http://www.saradar-collection.com/saradar-collection/english/programmes/saradar-publication-essays>.

2. Hal Foster et al., *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Fourth Printing edition (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996). P. 132.

3. Ibid., 131.

Repetition is embedded in this day-to-day account. The artists have sometimes treated the realities of war in the form of series (Manoukian's *Hospital Series* and Molaeb's *Diary of a War*), reverberating with repetition both in the content and by the use of various formal schemes. Through repetition, Foster argues that "several contradictory things occur at the same time: a warding away of traumatic significance *and* an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic *and* a producing of it".⁴

Indeed, war's effects are traumatic, and the artists use various strategies to cope with a war that "invaded every aspect of life".⁵ Paul Mourani recalls "the difficulty of dealing with the subject of war", Samir Khaddaje confronted "the triviality of dealing with any other subject".⁶ Martin Giesen states in *Galerie épreuve d'artiste* that he "felt that nothing apart from fleeting television broadcasts captured the brutal impact on the urban face of Beirut".⁷ Giesen's statement hints at the difficulty of representing the subject of war without a sense of competition with other media, or falling into mere duplication.⁸ He resorted to "focus[ing] on the reality of destruction rather than on formal exploration or psychological ramifications".⁹ This is a strategy used to different extents in the works discussed in this essay. Cityscapes and human figures capture *everyday living* in a state of war, *everyday life* in a city at war. It's a strategy that processes the extraordinary into the banal. But this very effect of rendering the out-of-the-ordinary mundane provokes "several contradictory things": "a warding away of traumatic significance and an opening out to it".¹⁰

The fact that artworks dealing with the subject of war were "hardly" displayed during the first years of war is significant.¹¹ An apparent lack of interest in exhibiting the subject of war can be contrasted with the extensive production kept hidden by artists and private collectors. Many works would only 'appear' publicly after the war ended. Understanding the lack of public exhibitions on the subject of war during the war is complex and depends on a variety of factors—the art galleries' vision, artists' willingness to show, and the audience's reading of the exhibited work, to name a few—all within a context in which the priority was to meet the population's basic needs. Thus, Molaeb's *Diary of War* was published in the form of a book in 1978. Samir Khaddaje "resisted" exhibiting his work until 1989. Only on their friends' insistence would Khaddaje and Mark Mourani co-produce *maarad lawhat (An Exhibition of Paintings)* at the Carlton Hotel. Seta Manoukian did show her cityscapes at Georges Zenni's space *planoula Elyssar* as early as 1978-79, but her work wasn't read as dealing solely with the subject of war.¹²

During the war artists, like everyone else, were bombarded by daily images of desolation in the press. They would often use press photographs as source material to

4. Ibid., 132.

5. Paul Mourani, "Samir Khaddaje Biography," 2012.

6. Ibid.

7. Amal Traboulsi, *Galerie Épreuve d'artiste: Chronique d'une Galerie Sur Fond de Guerre*. 1st ed. (Anis Commercial Printing Press, 2018). p. 51

8. The realism of the drawings and the absence of color is commented and to an extent justified—as if an apology for the crudeness of the subjects—in the introductory essays and articles of 1977-1978: Samir Sayegh in his essay "Wajeh al dahiya wa wajeh al chahed" justifies the realism of the work, 'as a duplication to attest the fact that one is both a victim and a witness'.

9. Amal Traboulsi, *op cit.*, p.51.

10. Hal Foster et al., *op cit.*, p. 132.

11. Giesen quoted in Amal Traboulsi, *op cit.*, p. 52.

12. Marwan Farah, "Richa Taqtahem Al Harb wa Touhawer Aljerh Al Naazef," *Al Nidaa*, 1979. <http://www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/art-writings>.

re-construct the realities of the war they were living. *Untitled* (c. 1978), a triptych by Samir Khaddaje, is part of a series of drawings that take photographs as their starting point. It now has a spectral feel due to the effacement of the thin lines that draw the figures. The central drawing in the triptych displays the most prominent figure: the outline of a dead body. The repeated outline of the right side of the corpse makes the dead resonate, almost infinitely. His left limbs are subtly cut by the edge of the sheet. They continue onto the right sheet where a blank vertical strip separates them from the figure wearing military uniform who transfigures into a civilian wearing a suit. The left drawing with the figure of young boy holding bread uses the same re-pasting technique, and also employs the use of different scales. In the following strip, the bread transforms into weapons, and the boy is replaced in the last strip by the figure in military dress. The strips run vertically, marked by a thin line that cuts out the sketched figures and enhances the re-pasting technique. Khaddaje's drawings bring together miscellaneous actors in the war: the military, young and old civilians, centred on a corpse.

Another drawing, also *Untitled*, highlights the immanence and mystery of death. A prone corpse covers the surface of three large 99 x 76 cm sheets of paper. As the description states, "Its parts are fragmented, magnified, repeated and depersonalized".¹³ Khaddaje "seems to dissect" a dead corpse as if to reveal its secret, a hidden truth.¹⁴ The light shading that forms the body also weakens its presence emerging from the blank white background. The image evokes the spectral presence of war. The mix of lucidity and indifference with which the dead corpses are rendered reduces them along with the other figures to unidentified actors in anonymous events.

During the same period, Khaddaje produced an ordinary street scene, *Untitled* (c. 1978). The triptych is a cityscape with buildings in the background and people going about their daily activities. Nothing in the drawing explicitly indicates the looming threat. The same banality envelops this inside-out scene where "three men, two civilians and one religious are sitting on a couch". The scene was originally an interior that was probably "exported from a press photograph of a political meeting" and re-pasted into the cityscape.¹⁵ The military figure on the right reminds the viewer of the banal encounters in a war-torn city. The use of charcoal gives prominence to the human figures, while the buildings fade out, merging with the white of the paper. White vertical strips traced by the erasure of existing lines and shading cover up the whole pictorial space, unifying the interior with the exterior scenes, and conveying a blurred image of the whole. The blurring of the whole scene feels like a recollection of some indefinable threatening event.

The three drawings relay an impassive account of miscellaneous actors and events in a city at war, intertwining life and death under the placid gaze of the artist—and the viewer. The indifference paired with the thorough outlining of the dead body on a blank background is reminiscent of a crime scene. The banality conveyed by the work and its resistance to narrative conjoin to become *faits divers*, those news items that "do not fit under the usual categories of politics, culture or economy". "They appear both trivial (...), isolated (...), and spectacular" with no segregation

13. Excerpt of the description of the work on [saradarcollection.com](http://www.saradarcollection.com).

14. Excerpt of the description of the work on [saradarcollection.com](http://www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/collection-details?collid=267), <http://www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/collection-details?collid=267>

15. Ibid.

between the banal, the horrific and the tragic.¹⁶ The meticulous rendering, spread across three sheets of paper that both complete and fragment the body, recalls an investigation in order to apprehend (the cause of) death—the ultimate subject in war—an im-possible task. It is this element—the meticulous, almost obsessive, rendering—that invokes the spectral presence of the event, revealing as it conceals.

The same impassive eye pervades in Seta Manoukian's *Hospital*, a series of drawings from 1972 to 1976. They share some similar features with Khaddaje's drawings: the subject is produced as an everyday event. Unlike Khaddaje's meticulous rendering, Manoukian's figures are sketched with hasty interrupted lines conveying fragments—viewers must complete the image themselves. The unfinished outlines of the wounded body-shapes merge with the white of the paper support, creating an ephemeral image. The facial expressions of the drawn figures are as inexpressive as the eye that documents the events. Manoukian too recounts reality as a collection of miscellaneous events. The formal aspects of the work, its lack of colours and use of lines, accentuate a detachment also found in her acrylic paintings of the war that convey urban everyday life.

Ibrahim El Ariss' 1982 essay "Cent ans d'art plastique au Liban", detects a change from her early paintings of the 1960s and 1970s. After the war, the space inhabited by the human figures shifts from interior to exterior, from the intimate to the city of Beirut: "the street, the terraces, and the squares". The human figures are re-pasted in the exterior space of the city. The difference in scale between human figures and buildings, and the free colouring of shapes create a formal language that echoes the detachment of the facial expressions and accentuate the alienation of the human figures from their environment. A number of paintings exemplify the above-mentioned features: *Les arcades* (1985), *La Fête rose* (1981) and *Fragile: un temps horaire compté pour chaque homme*, which featured in black and white in a 1984 exhibition at Elissar Gallery. El Ariss argued that war was the catalyst "transporting Manoukian's vision to the exterior", to a city that was a "theatre of violence and terror". He highlights the complex account of the real that Manoukian reveals in her work, but he doesn't make any other specific references to the war when discussing the content and form of the work. Effectively, the works mentioned above give away few representational signs of the on-going war.

Marwan Farah's review in *Al Nida'*, "A Brush Plunges into the War and Dialogues with the Open Wound" (1979), echoes El Ariss reading of Manoukian's work as a detached and realist account of everyday life in the city.¹⁷ Farah argues that "Seta Manoukian stays outside the painting, or behind it. What appears on the surface of the painting is the strength of her talent and the art of her vision".¹⁸ Farah and El Ariss put her work in context, and yet if for El Ariss war is only a catalyst, then Farah pushes the reading further to reveal the threat that this "detached and realistic" account of everyday life transmits. He classifies Manoukian's paintings as "black visual comedy in the same way

16. Stefanie Baumann, "Faits Divers: Notes on a Recurrent Figure in Lebanese Contemporary Art," 2017, www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-publication-essays.

17. Marwan Farah, "Richa Taqtahem Al Harb wa Touhawer Aljerh Al Naazef," *Al Nidaa*, 1979. <http://www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/art-writings>.

18. Ibid.

that Ziad El Rahbani's plays are black comedies". He explains the analogy as follows: "in these paintings black comedy fuses with the tamed tragic".¹⁹ Indeed, Khaddaje and Manoukian's repetitive accounts of the miscellaneous both hide and reveal, in the very act of hiding, war's affect. The realism of the figures, the use of various scales and their collage-like organization of space, add to the uncanny effect that reveals what is not, and to an extent what cannot be, represented. The ordinary subjects they repeatedly depict—the living and the dead, the civilian and the military, the wounded, the built environment—are the anonymous actors in these *faits divers*, the spectral events in which fear, death, destruction, bombing, etc. are designated but not represented. In the works by Khaddaje and Manoukian, it's the subject itself that is the symptom of an on-going war despite, or maybe because of, the war's banality.

In contrast, Jamil Molaeb's *Civil War Diary 1975-1976* takes as its subject matter the very effects and affects of war. The 'book' consists of thirty-three drawings in black and white. The theme of war is translated into thirty-three scenes referring to specific events in the Lebanese war or symbolizing the war's effects. *April 13*, refers to the bus massacre that took place after an altercation between two militias the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Phalangist Party's Kataeb Regulatory Forces (LF). It ended with the massacre of the Palestinians in the bus provoking retaliation by the PLO. It now often marks the date of the start of the war. In Molaeb's drawing the subject is dramatized, summing up a seemingly endless series of massacres in a single scene. The bus takes up most of the pictorial space, cutting off the buildings in the background and framing the foreground. The corpses, in the form of stylized human figures, are also emphasized. They form a chain running down from the bus to the floor and vice-versa, a vicious circle made of dead bodies. Some lie strewn on the street, others pile up, extend and fill the whole of the bus. In the massacre, Molaeb draws together the causes and effects of any war, taking the bus that refers specifically to the Lebanese war as its staring point.

Ila al maaraka (Let's fight), *Zata yaoum* (that day), *Al hajez* (roadblock), and *Al tefl al jarih* (the wounded child), take their starting points from the common events of any war, as their titles indicate, raising them to the level of a generic fact of war. They are everyday events of war, like *Al tachiieh* (funerals) and *Fil four* (at the bakery). Other drawings, such as *Al hamir terkab bachar* (Donkeys on people), include animals or hybrid human-animal forms in staged scenes, an acerbic commentary on the stupidity of war and of humankind. Sharks replace the human figure in *Al moujtama al duwali* (International community), symbolizing the beast in all humans. Another set of drawings symbolize feelings of fear, grief and sorrow, like *Al sarkha* (the scream), *Doumou hal harb* (War tears) and *Assafir al harb al hazina* (sad birds of war). *Civil War Diary*, despite its metaphoric and symbolic language, is a lucid catalogue of war's outcomes. It recollects the *faits divers*—that is, according to Bauman, the narratives that exceed defined categories and range from "strange incidents happening to ordinary people" to "abominable crimes".²⁰

19. Ibrahim El Ariss, "Seta Manoukian 1945, Excerpts from the Essay 'Cent Ans d'art Plastique Au Liban' .," Saradar Collection (blog), 1982, <http://www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/art-writings>.

20. Stefanie Baumann, *op cit*.

The placid expressions on their faces, the simplified forms and their repetition help the viewer maintain a distance despite the crudeness of the subjects—massacres (*13 nissan* [April 13]) and torture (*Akbiat al taazib* [underground torture] and *Zata yaoum* [that day]). The formal aspect of the works diminishes the violence they encompass, making them bearable. The titles, such as *Dhata yaoum* and *13 nissan*, for works that illustrate respectively an abominable massacre and a horrific act of torture, reduce them to miscellaneous events. His account of the outcomes of war is not realistic in the same way as Manoukian or Khaddaje, who grounded their accounts of war in the city of Beirut and used a more naturalistic and formal style. Yet Molaeb's realism and the formal language employed—the repetition of figures, the degree of abstraction, and the placidity of the depicted figure—alienate the viewer, producing “contradictory things” that both reveal and obscure, fostering traumatic realism.

The strategies employed above are echoed in the work of Martin Giesen and Mohammad El Rawas. Giesen's *El Borge* and *Marlboro Man*, and Rawas' *The April Lilies Died*, *The Dream of War Time*, and *Berytus* use the same placid eye and city space to account for everyday life in times of war. Giesen's naturalistic watercolours frame specific scenes of everyday life that transmit a sense of desolation. *The Dream of War Time* by El Rawas also transmits this despite, or perhaps because of, the lucidity of his account. El Rawas' work is typically constructed from a multitude of drawn and painted parts that include realistic images of everyday life collaged at various scales.²¹ El Rawas' work is an assemblage of miscellaneous events in a city in war. It became less an account and more a synthesis as the war continued.

In this selection of works the violence of war and its emotional effects are kept at a distance. Whenever the work deals with the horror of massacres or intense emotions (such as in Molaeb's works discussed here), the various formal and symbolic languages attenuate the violence of the subject's emotional impact. The placidity of the observing eye safeguards the viewer's integrity, amplifying the process of alienation from the external uncontrollable events. This process of distancing permits the artist to identify with the viewer, erecting a safety net between the viewer-artist and what cannot be grasped or identified within. Thus, it reveals what it conceals.

The recurring subjects from ordinary life form repetitive accounts of everyday life. As Hal Foster has argued: “Repetition is not a reproduction in the sense of a representation (of a referent), or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier)...repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic.” The extent to which the works by the artists discussed above and the other works from the same period screen the traumatic real—a reality “which is nonetheless returned, accidentally and/or obliquely, in this very screening”—is worthy of discussion.²² War is a traumatic experience, these artists seem to suggest, it cannot be represented, but rather circumscribed and reduced to everyday events. It's no coincidence that this mosaic of artists chose to reflect on the ordinary no matter how out-of-the-ordinary it may have been. In war, the extra-ordinary

21. Collage is a significant feature in the work of Lebanese artists. For more on the subject see Rachel Dedman, “Signs of Times: Collage in the Work of Six Lebanese Artists,” Saradar Collection, n.d., <http://www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/programmes/saradar-publication-essays>.

22. Hal Foster et al., *op cit.*, p.138.

becomes ordinary. The banality of events is *itself* a symptom of war.

The recourse to everyday life can arguably be understood as an apolitical attitude. At the beginning of the war, some of these artists had taken a clear political stance, for example by producing political posters for political parties.²³ But they seemed to draw a line between their political engagement and their 'fine art' work, reserving the latter for humanist concerns. This concern changed with time, and some of the artists, such as Khaddaje and Manoukian, went on to undertake a personal and ontological endeavour to incorporate some of the issues at stake in war. For example, Khaddaje explored the notion of violence in war and afterwards took to questioning the notion of the 'human' alongside artists from the younger generation, such as Lina Majdalanie.²⁴

Traumatic realism provides an insight for reading the work produced during the war in context: as deeply influenced by the war. It allows us to pinpoint how the very screening of the war might *point* to war. But in some cases, where there's little or no clear indication in the representation, overrating the significance of war becomes as much of a possibility as underrating its impact. Giesen recalls how "works produced and exhibited in Lebanon between 1975 and 1985 hardly treated the war".²⁵ The art critic Joe Tarrab, in an essay highlighted "the dichotomy between the socio-political context and the subjects and themes in the arts" in the art produced before the war. He argued that: "The Lebanese war (which lasted more than 15 years) dragged the artists out of their lethargy, yet without radically changing their approach."²⁶ Though admitting that war provoked a change in the understanding of art as social practice, Tarrab still argued that artists hardly ever addressed socio-political issues. And when they did, according to Giesen, they were treated "from a metaphorical distance".²⁷ This treatment, "clothed in abstraction, veiled in quotation, surrealist analogies and mythological allusions" is the very disguise that Foster divulges in traumatic realism.²⁸

Yet, for Foster, it is not the disguise but the *rupture* that is significant in traumatic realism, a rupture "less in the world than in the subject—between the perception and the consciousness of a subject *touched* by an image".²⁹ What defines traumatic realism is this point of rupture that allows "several contradictory things to occur at the same time." In the works examined above two main features were used: repetition where "this first order of shock is screened by the repetition of the image" and *faits divers* where even the out-of-the-ordinary is reduced to a banality.³⁰ The two features concur under the impassive eye of the artist to produce a rupture through "this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me".³¹ An element found in the details of the content, the form, and the technique.³²

23. Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London ; New York : New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

24. <http://www.linasaneh-body-p-arts.com/appendice.html>

25. Amal Traboulsi, *op cit.*, p. 52.

26. *Art From Lebanon: Modern and Contemporary Artists 1880 - 1975* Volume I (Wonderful Editions, 2012). p. 11.

27. Amal Traboulsi, *op cit.*, P.52.

28. Giesen quoted in Amal Traboulsi, *op cit.* P.52. Hal Foster et al., *op cit.*, p. 132.

29. Hal Foster et al., *op cit.*, p.134.

30. *Ibid*, p.136.

31. Roland Barthes quoted in Hal Foster et al., *op cit.*, p.132.

32. Hal Foster et al., *op cit.*, p.134.

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1-3 | Samir Khaddaje
Untitled, c. 1978
courtesy of the Saradar Collection



4-7 | Seta Manoukian
 From the *Hospital Series*. 1975-1976
 courtesy of the Saradar Collection



13 nissan (April 13)



Akbiat al taazib (underground torture)



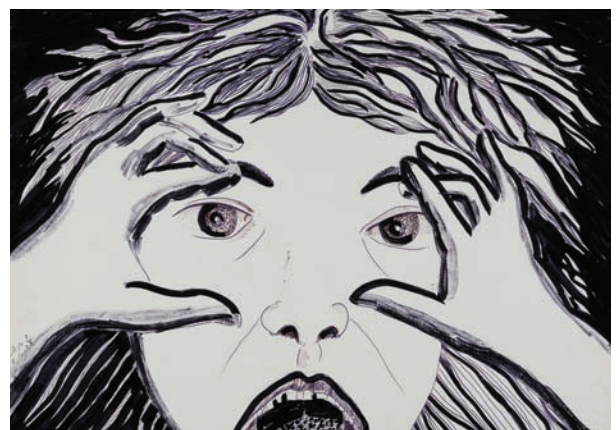
Al hajez (roadblock)



Zata yaoum (that day)



Al tachiieh (funerals)



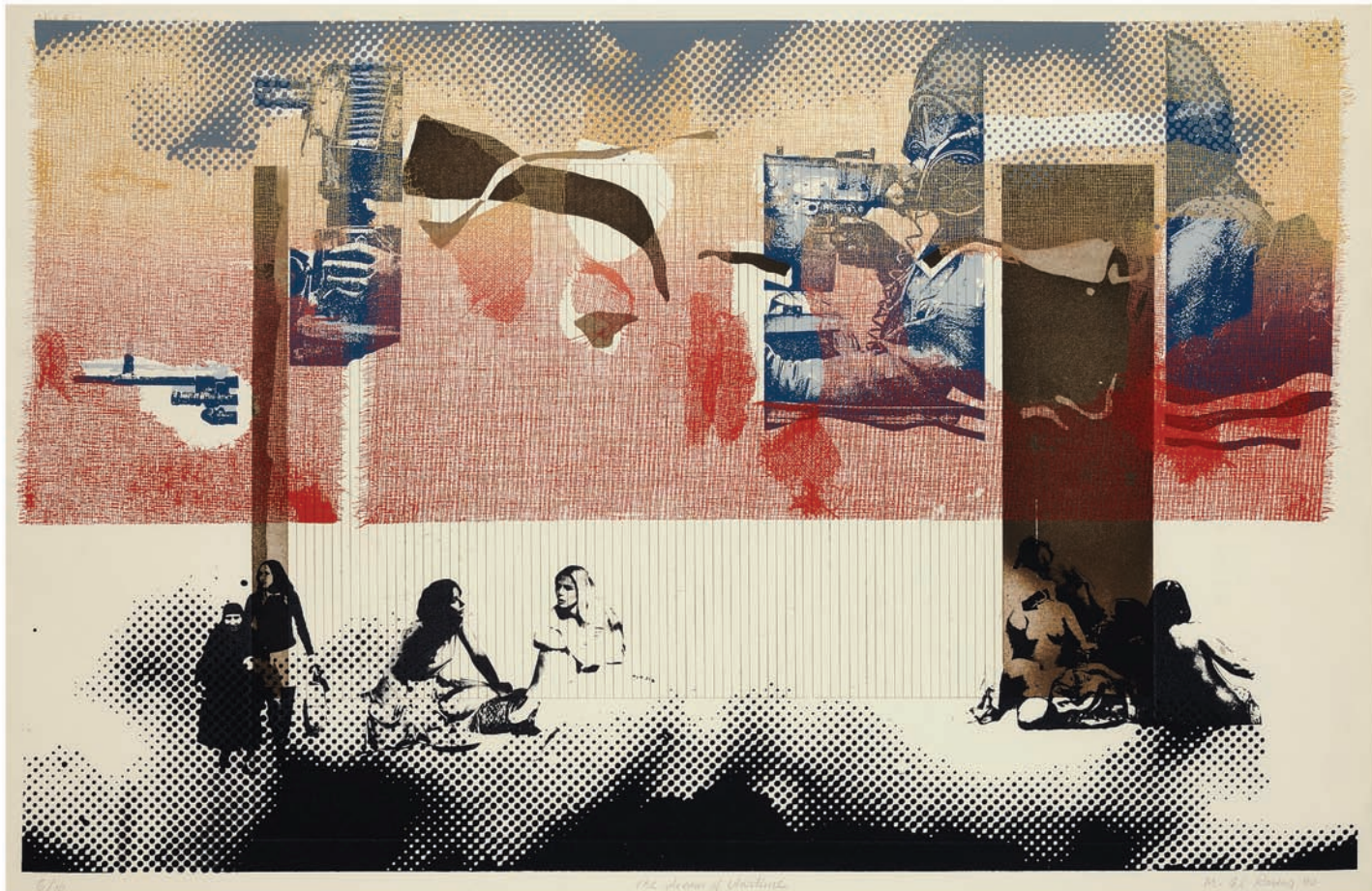
Al sarkha (the scream)



14-15 | Martin Giesen
Marlboro Man. 1984
El Borge. 1982
 courtesy of the Saradar Collection



16-17 | Mohammad El Rawas
Berytus. 1980
The April the Lilies Died. 1983
 courtesy of the Saradar Collection



18 | Mohammad El Rawas
The Dream of War Time. 1980
courtesy of the Saradar Collection