

Mixed mediums

EXHIBIT / ANGELA MELECA GALLERY

LIFE OF STRIFE

Five-artist show examines hardships, grit of Lebanon

By Peter Tonguette | For The Columbus Dispatch

At the Angela Meleca Gallery, all eyes are on Lebanon. Five artists who were born in the Middle East nation are featured in the new exhibit “Action at a Distance.”

Through photography and other filmed imagery, Youmna Chlala, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (a married couple who are collaborators), Rhea Karam and Rania Matar powerfully evoke both the strife and resilience of their country.

The exhibit in the Downtown gallery has personal significance for director Angela Meleca, the granddaughter of a Lebanese immigrant.

“He passed away when I was 12, and so I think a lot of it for me was feeling that I missed out on being able to spend more time with him,” Meleca said.

The featured artists were born within an 18-year span: the oldest (Matar) in 1964 and the youngest (Karam) in 1982. Consequently, their work reflects the specter of the Lebanese Civil War, which gripped the country from 1975 to 1990.

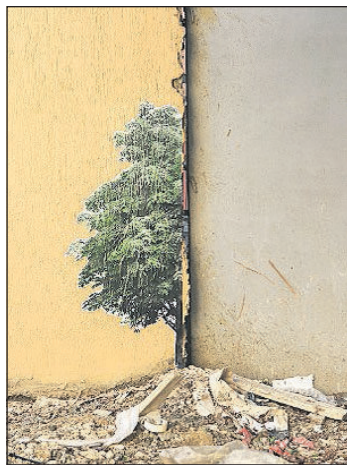
“It was interesting and exciting for me to see artists who were born and came from that region during that time, to see what they’re investigating and what they’re addressing during their practice,” Meleca said.

Among the issues that emerged, Meleca said, was “displacement.”

For example, Matar turns her camera toward child refugees in the capital city of Beirut.

“They’re just blending in with the graffiti-ed walls, the sidewalks, the decaying buildings,” Meleca said. “She really wanted to make it her mission to give them their identity back ... by photographing them.”

In fact, Matar’s subjects assert themselves through her photographs. One shows a 6-year-old Syrian boy who stands determinedly, with his hands on his hips. Behind



“TS_04” by Rhea Karam

At a glance

■ “Action at a Distance” continues through May 27 at the Angela Meleca Gallery, 144 E. State St. Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Call 614-340-6997, or visit www.angelamelecagallery.com.

him is a graffiti-lined wall; the graffiti might be unpleasant — streaks of red deface the image of two figures with a balloon — but the boy’s stance suggests fortitude.

Karam’s photographs depict a different sort of displacement. The artist adheres large prints of foliage — based on photographs she has taken of trees in Central Park in New York City — to buildings in Beirut; she then photographs the final result. In one shot, the cut-out image of a leafy green tree is affixed to a yellow wall; the tree’s lushness contrasts with the neglected surroundings, including rubble in the foreground.

Place is equally elusive in Chlala’s series “Notes for Leaving and Arriving,” in which frames from 8-mm film footage — depicting unexceptional environments in Beirut, including courtyards and swimming pools — are placed



“Tamer 6, Beirut” by Rania Matar



on both sides of lightboxes. The images differ depending on which side, and from which angle, the lightboxes are viewed.

A more hopeful vision is offered in photographs by

Hadjithomas and Joreige. The artists reflect on the legacy of the Lebanese Rocket Society, a group whose work at Haigazian University in Beirut resulted in the development of rockets in Lebanon

LEFT: “The Lebanese Rocket Society, Restaged #8” by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

in the 1960s.

Hadjithomas and Joreige (also the directors of a documentary about Lebanese society that played at the Wexner Center for the Arts earlier this month) photographed a replica of a rocket speeding through Beirut on the bed of a truck. The pictures present streets interrupted by a blur of motion (the truck carrying the rocket replica).

The exhibit embodies Meleca’s passion for bringing art “from the Middle East to Middle America.”

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