

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

**Jim Quilty, 'The past, the helpless, wobbly projection', *Daily Star*, June 09, 2014**

BEIRUT: Film festivals thrive on young talent. As established filmmakers settle into midcareer yaws, it's hoped the young bloods will refresh the cinematic palette with new formal approaches and new, or at least differently told, stories.

The Lebanese Film Festival began to unwind Friday evening with a projection of Akram Zaatar's "Letter to a Refusing Pilot," the half-hour video that was the centerpiece of the artist's installation of the same name, the sole work of Lebanon's pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Screening out of competition, Zaatar's mature work served to underline how younger artists (most not yet 40) rule LFF's competition program. By the time the projections were done Saturday evening, it was evident that many of these filmmakers are preoccupied by subjects symptomatic of local production for the past decade and a half.

Human relationships are the bread and butter of cinema and Lebanese artists are fond of exploring the intersection of family and individual (quite frequently the filmmaker himself). Based on the first day and a half of projections, local filmmakers continue to be preoccupied by two related themes – "the past" and individuals on the margins of society.

Another, more regrettable, theme asserting itself in the first half of LFF was projector problems. It underscores how the advent of digital media may have made projection cheaper and simpler, but not guaranteed better quality.

A couple of Friday and Saturday's offerings did fall a bit further from the tree.

"Clear Blue Skies//Flight RK 929," by Beirut-born Anna Ogden Smith, appears to have been comprised of a pair of airport conversations – there was a projection glitch between the two. The first is a young man and woman's voiceover exchange, carried out while the camera gazes at a cluster of airliners at the Beirut airport. The nature of the conversation is kept indefinite for as long as possible, as is the second chat between a pair of air hostesses, held in the moments before their plane departs.

Projected out of competition, May Kassem's 11-minute "96.2.1" is a formally playful ode of music, one documenting the on-air and off-air behaviour of a radio DJ during his jazz program.

Lebanese filmmakers' attachment to the past can be gleaned from some of the titles they've selected for their works. "Honeymoon 58," "Eté 91," "Conflit [1949- ] [1979- ]," even "Mondial 2010" – Roy Dib's Teddy Award-winning forbidden fruit tale – all foreground tales from the past.

But that's just the films that use titular signposts.

"Pipe Dreams," Ali Cherri's award-winning video work, juxtaposes a conversation between Syrian cosmonaut Mohammad Fares, the first (and last) Arab to go into space, and then-President Hafez Assad while, 25 years later, authorities dismantled Assad statues in the wake of anti-regime protests in Syria.

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One of the more interesting works to debut at the Beirut Exhibition Center's 2013 show "Journeys Through our Heritage," Roy Samaha and Omar Fakhoury's "Incarnation of a Bird From an Oil Painting" depicts one of the (perhaps apocryphal) anecdotes swirling about the memory of the early 20th-century charismatic spiritual leader remembered as "Dr. Dahesh."

Screening out of competition, Nadim Tabet and Karine Wehbe's "Été 91" recalls a moment of youthful summer-season intimacy recounted as a series of sentiment-free shots of a swimming pool and frolicking youth, overlaid with he said, she said voiceovers.

Mokhtar Beyrouth's "Studio Beirut" glossily recounts a nostalgia-laden fiction about an early 20th-century photo studio.

Family biography inspires fiction and documentary film alike, and LFF's selection is no exception.

"The Wall," Odette Makhoul's prize-winning 24 minute-fiction, is named after the facet of her family house that drew people to shelter there during the Civil War. Focusing on the "testimonies" of characters on a sitting room sofa, the film reflects upon how walled social relations are effected once the barrier is removed.

"Honeymoon 58," Hady Zaccak's 15-minute documentary deploys the footage and still photos of public and family archives to juxtapose the memoirs of a young woman whose 1958 honeymoon vacation around Europe corresponded to the first civil conflict in independent Lebanon's history.

Toufic Khreich's 25-minute fiction "Troubled Waters" relates the story of Eskandar. A man haunted by childhood memories of a violent and neglectful father, he returns to Lebanon with his wife and kids to convince the father to return to Canada with him.

"My Father Looks Like Abdel-Nasser," Farah Kassem's 33-minute doc, is premised on the memories that percolate to the surface when a daughter interrogates Moustafa, a 70-something poet who suffers from a sleeping disorder.

Josef Kaluf's 52-minute "Conflit [1949- ] [1979- ]" documents a series of conversations between the filmmaker and his father – a former fighter with the Maronite Phalangists – about how the father's aggressive and manly manner had scarred his sensitive son's childhood.

Finally, in a gesture of amusing if inadvertent symmetry, feature-length documentaries by women filmmakers about Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia anchored both of Saturday evening's programs. Similarities aside, the intimate lyricism of Tamara Stepanyan's "Embers" is formally quite unlike Marlene Edoyan's more-ethnographic "Figure d'Armen."

The more-accomplished films of these programs – "Letter to a Refusing Pilot," "Pipe Dreams," "My Father looks like Abdel-Nasser," "Embers," "Mondial 2010" – have been discussed at some length.

Of the newer works, there are sure signs of talent, even if the films themselves are not masterpieces.

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In formal and narrative terms, “Incarnation of a Bird From an Oil Painting” is among the more engaging works Roy Samaha has released recently, leaving onlookers curious about his future collaborations with Fakhoury.

Similarly, of Nadim Tabet’s filmic reflections on the private histories of Lebanon’s recent past, “Été 91” is one of the more formally intriguing, provoking questions as to whether there will be more work with Wehbe.

One of the more finished works, Khreich’s “Troubled Waters,” is a curious blend of taciturn scripting and gorgeously desolate locations with a lensing that, while sumptuous, is so melodramatic as to be at odds with the rest of the film. The work seems not at peace with itself, but it’s difficult to know how to distribute praise and blame between Khreich and cinematographer Joud Gorani.

Equally nice to look at is Rakan Mayasi’s 15-minute “Roubama.” Yet another courageous effort to render a poem of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in film, “Roubama” depicts a day in the life of an unspeaking refugee figure named Karim. His mundane subsistence between scavenging and criminality is briefly diverted by the vision of a beautiful woman.

The Lebanese Film Festival runs through June 10 at Cinema Metropolis-Sofil. For more information about the Lebanese Film Festival: [www.lebanesefilmfestival.org](http://www.lebanesefilmfestival.org)

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<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Film/2014/Jun-09/259333-the-past-the-helpless-wobbly-projection.ashx#ixzz349Uc6mmk>