

# Art history, pop culture, political violence and religious texts

Mohamed Rawas' latest exhibition in Beirut cracks them all open for creative meddling and artistic debate

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**B**EIRUT: Mohamed Rawas' latest exhibition in Lebanon, and his first at Aida Cherfan Fine Art in Downtown Beirut, throws up a wealth of art historical and pop cultural references – from Velasquez and Andrew Wyeth to Japanese manga and the quirkily clipped language of teenagers' text messages. Rawas' work has long been layered, but the accumulation of material evident in the 16 new paintings on view through December 31 is extreme.

The last time Rawas held a solo show in Beirut was in 2004, at Galerie Janine Rubeiz in Raouche. The exhibition was timed to coincide with the publication of his first major monograph – a mid-career retrospective-in-print published by Saqi Books and titled "The Art of Rawas." The new show represents the work he has done between 2005 and 2007. It is also accompanied by a publication, this one more modest in size, for which the poet Antoine Boulad offers an imaginative response to Rawas' work.

Owner Aida Cherfan may have jumped the gun on the timing of this show – the gallery is literally spitting distance from the Grand Serail, the seat of Lebanon's much maligned, malfunctioning government. The opening followed just hours after Parliament's seventh failure to convene for the election of a new president. But Rawas, for his part, is completely uninterested and resolutely unaffected by the political shenanigans going on in the building nearby. "It's not an issue for me," he says simply.

Still, there are three works in this show that delve into the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. One was used, in detail, as the cover for "Lebanon, Lebanon," an anthology of writings and drawings about Israel's 34-day bombardment that was put out by Saqi just a few months after the cessation of hostilities. This is something of a surprise. Political violence in Lebanon is a theme Rawas hasn't treated directly since the dark days of the Civil War.

"When I was studying in London in the early 1980s, all of my themes were about war in Lebanon," he says. "When I [returned] to London last summer, I was sort of running away... and I found myself coming

back to this subject. Had I stayed [in Beirut] I wouldn't have been able to produce anything. I am a person who believes you need peace and quiet and comfort, even physical comfort, to do healthy art.

"When you're here, you are already too involved mentally and emotionally," he explains. "Too little space is left for the creative process. Creating a work of art in a healthy way consumes you all. You need to have this."

Judging from the new works, Rawas has managed to carve out more than a few moments of peace and quiet and comfort over the last three years. With bits of balsa wood, aluminum and string meticulously built up over portions of canvas that are painted both finely and coarsely, these pieces have texture as well as physical and metaphorical depth. Each work is a precisely rendered world where meaning is generated through the interac-

tion of various and unexpected compositional elements.

There is a little bit of everything on view in the show at Aida Cherfan. There are landscapes, interiors, nudes, classical sculptures and replicas of 1950s, Beirut-style modernist architecture. But a painting's membership in any of these genres, when it comes to Rawas' work, is nominal at best. One may detect a horizon line here or a shrub there but such parts don't add up to a sum that comfortably calculates nature or the sublime.

Likewise, nudes have always been a part of Rawas' arsenal and, whether grainy and clipped from magazines or painstakingly re-created in a hyperrealist style, they have also always been cool and emotionally distant. Now they take on a playful yet slightly sinister dimension in that they come in the form of tiny, shiny figurines that Rawas picks up from highly specialized boutiques serving the many sliv-

ers of Japanese subculture.

And yet themes tethered to, say, the environment and sexuality, politics and religion, science and technology, art and myth, are present. They just aren't rooted in the visual symbols in which one might obviously expect to find them. They are triggered elsewhere, in the relationships orchestrated among all these things that are placed between a plywood panel support and a pane of glass that is sometimes as much as seven centimeters out, all encased in a frame thick enough to be called a box.

If a linear history of modern and contemporary Lebanese art were ever to be seriously plotted, then Rawas would have to occupy a pivotal position in it. He is a hinge between generations and a key link between the older painters and the younger conceptualists, and between the commercial and the critical strains of the Lebanese art scene.

It's a role he shares with very few. Perhaps only the paintings and public art projects of Nada Sehnanoui serve a similar function.

Rawas is a formalist to be sure, and an illusionist as well, playing as he does with perspective. But his paintings are headier than the bulk of those done by the artists who came before him. He is highly, almost obsessively skilled and unlike a whole crop of other painters who currently make and show work in Lebanon, his compositions are never slapdash, never solely expressive or only intuitive. They are as cerebral as they are intricate. One of the reasons Rawas has an actual base of collectors is probably that his paintings can be looked at for hours, even years, like a riddle challenging to be solved.

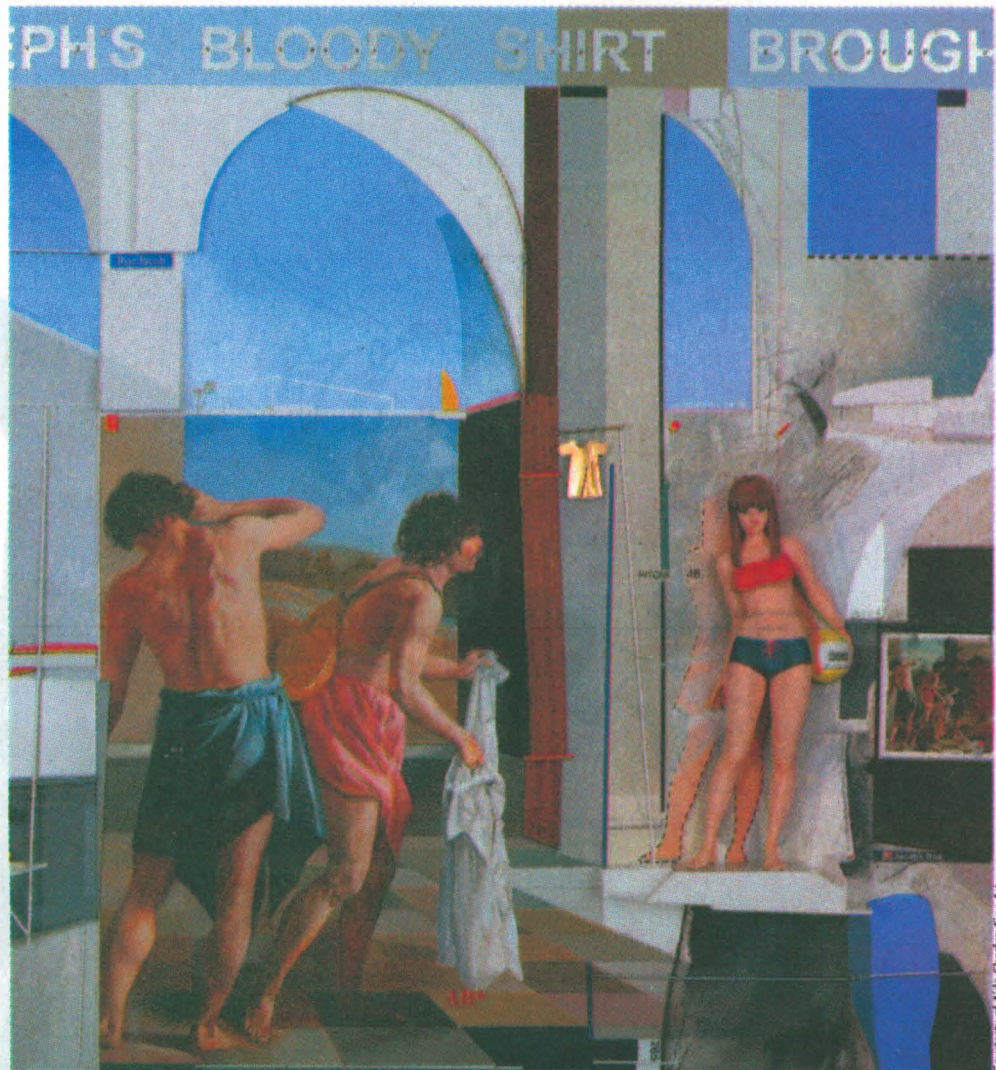
The work "Joseph's Shirt," for example, references a painting by Velazquez based on the Biblical account of Joseph bringing a bloodied coat to Jacob. But in Rawas' piece, Joseph offers the garment to Hitomi, one of the artist's Japanese figurines, by mistake.

"It has to do with my attitude toward myths," says Rawas. "They become like taboos. You can't even negate them. Religious subjects and themes make me suspicious."

When asked if he thinks artists should be able to crack open, mess around with and reinterpret religious texts, Rawas frowns sharply. Not just the texts, he says, voice booming, "the whole of religion." A beat passes. "All of them."

So, in Rawas' constructed universe, 78.5 centimeters wide, 88.5 centimeters tall and 5 centimeters deep, Joseph's blood type is AB positive. Like someone stuck in a time machine gone haywire, he travels past triple arches along Rue Jacob and ends up near a white modernist structure called Jacob's Villa. What he finds there is not Jacob himself but rather a buxom teenager holding a volley ball against her hip. But then again, that assumes there is a narrative operating on a single plane. And there are enough multiple and competing planes here to wonder, venture an answer and second guess yourself all over again.

**Mohamed Rawas'** latest exhibition of paintings is on view at Aida Cherfan Fine Art through December 31. For more information, please call +961 1 983 111 or check out [www.aidacherfan.com](http://www.aidacherfan.com)



"Joseph's Shirt," one of 16 works in Rawas' current exhibition, blends art history and pop culture.

Courtesy of Aida Cherfan Fine Art