



THE ART OF RAWAS

Mohammad Rawas stands today at the peak of an outstanding artistic career. Those familiar with his work will welcome this volume as a much-needed permanent source of reference, while those encountering the artist for the first time can enjoy a unique introduction to his work in the 235 reproductions presented here. In the accompanying text, the artist himself provides a fascinating insight into his life and work, his compositional techniques and sources of inspiration. A painting by Rawas offers a complex visual and conceptual experience – both compelling and enigmatic, charming yet vigorously challenging. Constructing our own shifting narratives around the diverse elements of his paintings, we also explore the thought processes that led the artist to assemble these particular groups of images to form his original statements.

Born in Beirut in 1951, cosmopolitan and internationalist in his thinking, Rawas frequently ‘quotes’ images from European art and photography – from Michelangelo to Peter Blake, from Vermeer to Nadar – as well as from his Middle Eastern roots. In their new contexts, figures from familiar works of art seem to remind us of the continuity of beauty and human creativity – a calm space within a complex and often calamitous world. Set against these statements of artistic continuity are fleeting moments captured in the photographic images that form a striking element of his compositions – though, paradoxically, this fleetingness is given a permanence within the total work of art.

Words and three-dimensional assemblages, too, find a place on many of the canvases, further extending a work’s expressive possibilities. Although the assembled elements cannot be fully experienced in print, superb reproductions give a strong sense of the contribution these precise and delicate structures make to the diverse creative tensions within each work. It is by these varied and original means that Rawas invites us to interrogate our experience of the world across time and cultures, through collected images that shimmer with the contingency of the moment.

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SAQI

RAWAS

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RAWAS

Conversations with Nazik Yared

Edited by Heather Reyes

SAQI

Cover painting: THE AMUSEMENT PARK, 2000 (detail)

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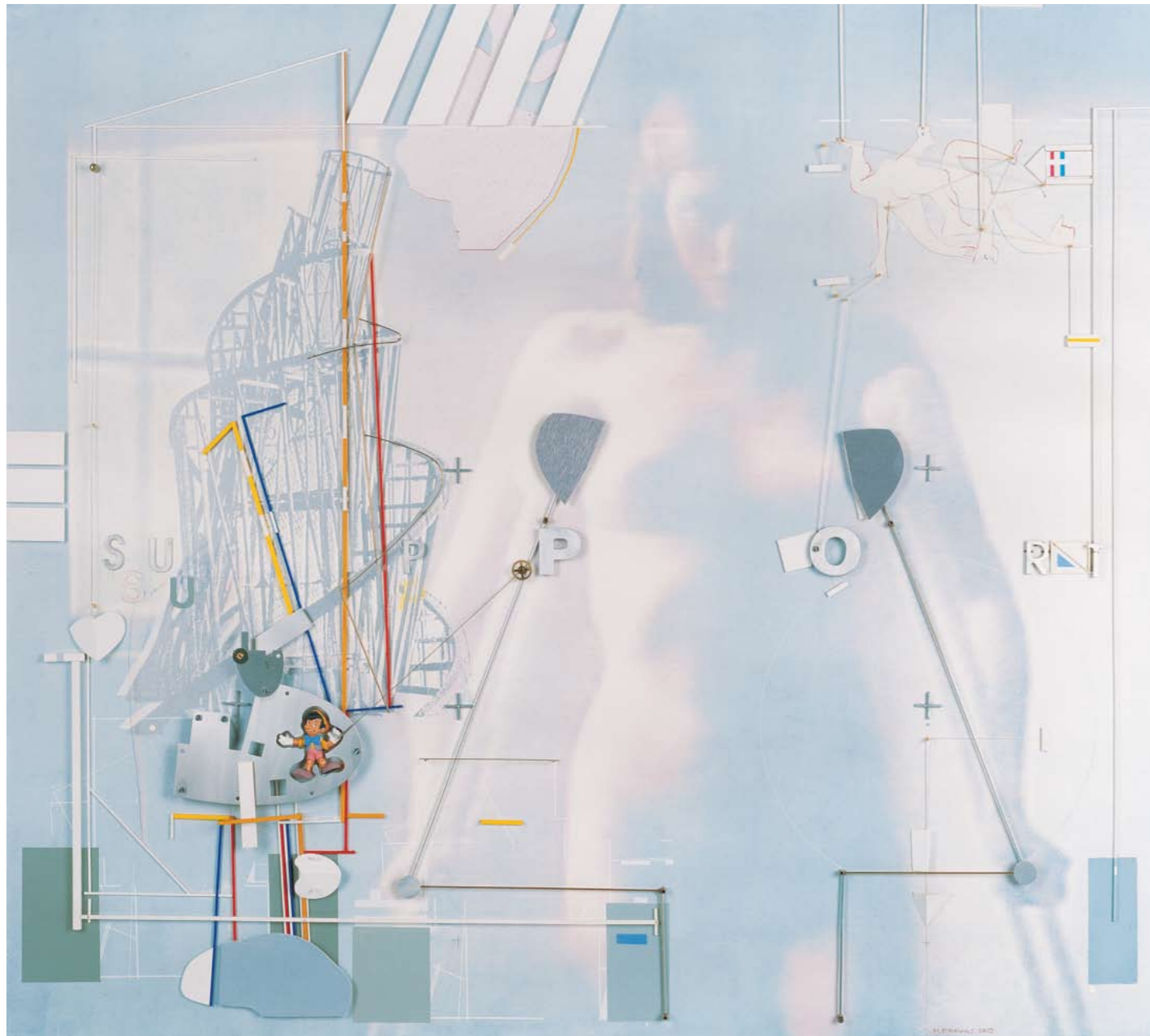
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Foreword

Mohammad Rawas (signs M. El Rawas) is one of the most innovative Lebanese artists on the contemporary scene. His art is multifaceted and dynamic, using symbols and references from different categories of art and from human experience to create ambiguous worlds that seem to stand outside a particular place or time. His paintings take on an intriguing life of their own, nourished by inner tensions and a powerful sense of alienation from specific cultural contexts. He is dedicated to the endless quest of manipulating paint and mixed media, and to breaking the boundaries of conventional pictorial techniques.

The text which follows is based on a number of interviews with Rawas, conducted by Nazik Saba Yared, and on additional material contributed directly by the artist. It is hoped that the reader will enjoy hearing Rawas's own voice as he gives a fascinating insight into his life, his working techniques and the many influences that have shaped his powerful and unique artistic vision – as well as providing detailed comments on many of the works reproduced in this volume.



SUPPORT, 2003
Silkscreen, oil and assemblage on plywood panel
88 x 98 x 3 cm
Collection Mr. & Mrs. O. Hamza

Exhibited at Sursock Museum Salon d'Automne, Beirut, 2003

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SUPPORT, 2003 (detail)

Beginnings

I was born on 26 May 1951, on Beirut's Tariq al-Jadida (New Road). It was so named because it lay in an unbuilt area on the city's western outskirts – at that time just dunes of clean sand and reeds with only one other building apart from the one we lived in. We occupied the ground floor of the two-storey building belonging to my uncle. It was a small apartment with a big window from which you could see the distant seashore. The house had a garden with lots of flowers and fruit trees tended by my grandmother. Over time, buildings mushroomed around us and, with the rapid spread of these concrete constructions, the garden disappeared and the once two-storey building was transformed into a six-floor apartment block. I was angry and sad to lose the horizon of the seashore, to lose the garden and watch the unplanned construction of tall buildings as they rose, suffocatingly, all around us. Our flat became dark and lost the sunlight that had once brightened it. Even now I hate to live in a building's lower storeys not lit by the sun's rays. Sadly, Beirut tends to suffer from a lack of urban planning: its cityscape is a mess and became even worse during the 17 years of civil war, when public and civil rules were broken on all fronts, including planning and design.

As far back as I can remember I would copy pictures from comic magazines like *Sameer*, which I read weekly. I would also trace or copy floral patterns onto the bedsheets for my mother to embroider, since back then many people would buy fabric and make the sheets themselves. I still remember the brand of DMC threads she used for this embroidery – threads that came in graduated shades of every color. Besides that, I would draw on ordinary paper with colored crayons or pencils and stack all my drawings in a box which I put on a small bedside table.



A COMPOSITION WITH THREE DANCING NUDES, 1971
Pencil on paper
23 x 23 cm
Artist's collection

The Lebanese University: The Institute of Fine Arts

On finishing high school, I enrolled at the Lebanese University to study English literature. After one year I decided to change majors and joined the Institute of Fine Arts in that University.

I do not think that any teacher at that Institute taught me much. This is not out of the ordinary, for it is a well-known fact in art schools all over the world that one does not necessarily learn from the teachers. What leads to developing one's own work is the surrounding atmosphere created by seeing other students' work, learning from their mistakes and then from one's own. But what bothered me most was the subjectivity of the tutorials: the teachers' comments and observations were made without convincing justifications. However, I did manage to learn something from a tip passed on by the artist Rashid Wehbi. We were drawing from a plaster cast of grapes. He showed me, on the margin of my paper, how to render the effect of a three-dimensional, oval-shaped grape by not extending the shading to the very edge, leaving a lighter area at the rim.



Top
 MODERN AZ, 1975
 Collage on paper
 23 x 19 cm
 Artist's collection

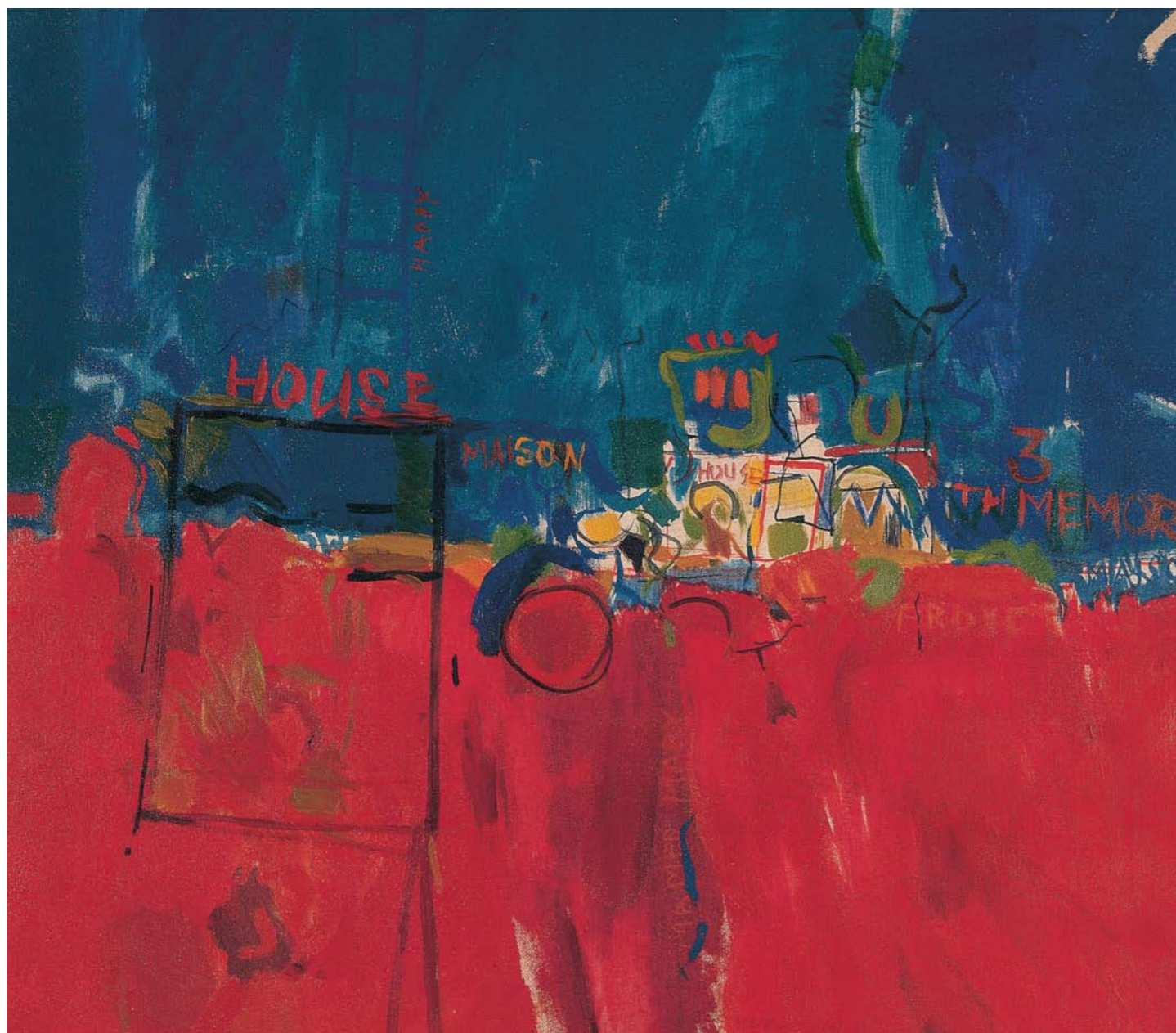
Bottom
 ART, 1975
 Collage on paper
 18.5 x 16 cm
 Artist's collection

New Directions

The need to push my work in a direction that would encompass intellectual content increased after coming across two books: *Art Without Boundaries: 1950–1970*, by Gerald Woods, Philip Thompson and John Williams (Thames and Hudson, London, 1972) and *Movements in Art Since 1945* by Edward Lucie-Smith (Thames and Hudson, London, 1984). These two books became my precious points of reference and my constant companions. I was always looking through them, intrigued by the versatile means of expression artists used, particularly photography. My earliest attempts to introduce photography into my work (in 1973, while still an art student) used collaged pictures from magazines.

My notion of the importance of the textural manipulation of the painted surface of the canvas was triggered and developed by my discussions with Michael Fani, whom I first met as a fellow student at the Institute of Fine Arts. He was well-read and more knowledgeable about art than any of us then, and although he dropped out of the Institute, he remained my friend. It was through discussions with Fani that I came to understand the meanings and theoretical justifications of modern art movements. I worked with him on preparing my final graduation paper on American Abstract Expressionism, a movement which greatly influenced me, particularly the work of Arshile Gorky. My final graduation project was inspired by one of this artist's paintings, *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* (1944).

Although ranging between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, Robert Rauschenberg's work fascinated me too, particularly his



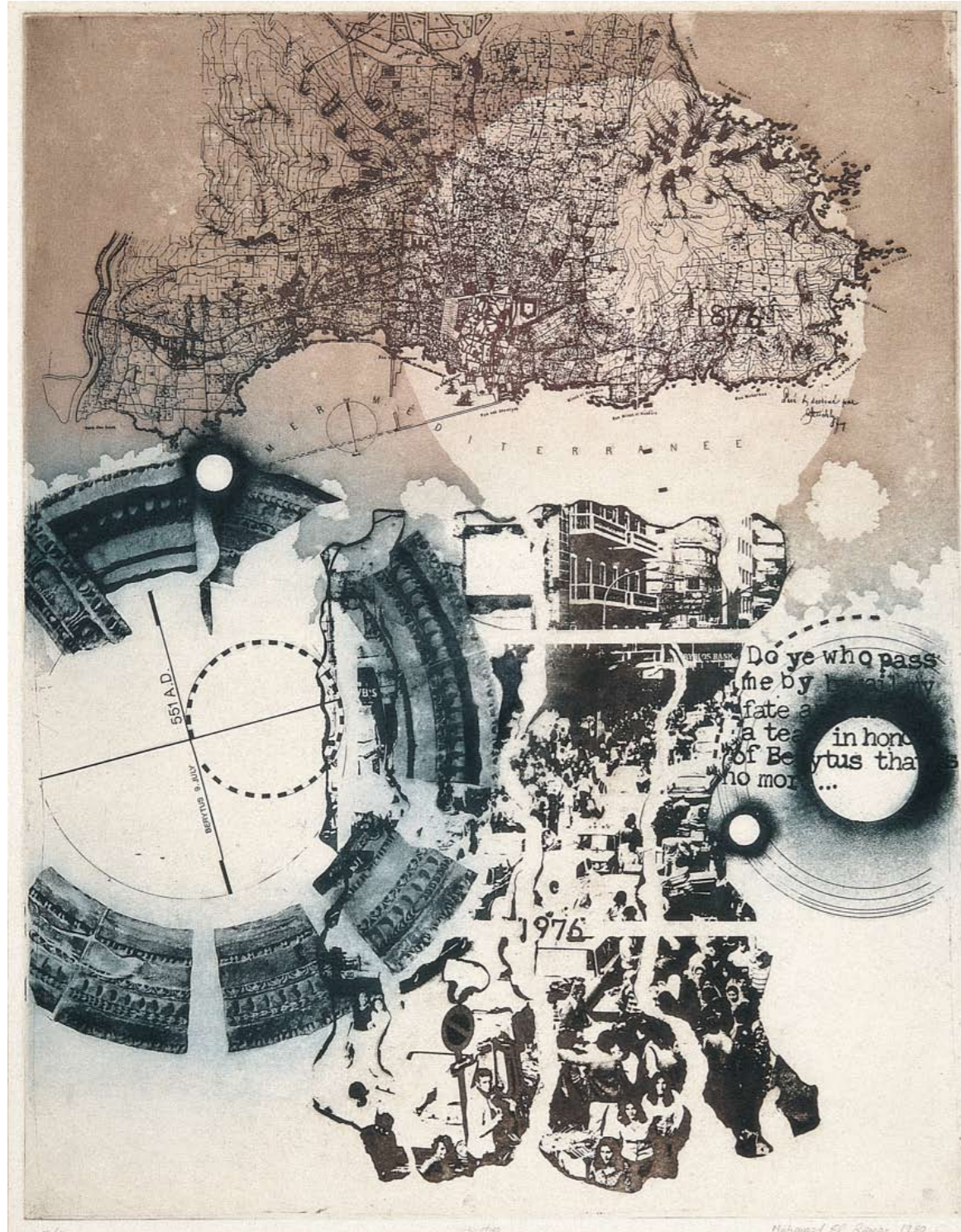
HOUSE, 1975
Oil on canvas
60 x 75 cm
Private collection

Trauma, Change ... and Crucial Developments

Neither at the Institute nor at home was the question of one's 'faith' ever raised, and it never occurred to me to ask about my fellow students' religion. I was never involved in politics, the more so because most of the political parties in Lebanon are affiliated with certain religious sects. If one's own thoughts are not sectarian, then one tends not to be aware of sectarianism in others. But the liberal, tolerant, 'normal' atmosphere in which I lived and believed was suddenly challenged by the Lebanese civil war.

The war in Lebanon broke out in April 1975 between armed Palestinians and the Lebanese Christian militia. It soon turned into a sectarian battle between Muslims and Christians, a situation I could not tolerate. Could things turn upside down so suddenly? Had I been living a big lie? Or had I been so naive as to not realize the political struggle for power that was going on behind our apparently stable and liberal-minded society? I was deeply shocked to realize that things were not what I had imagined them to be, and I was left with a very bitter feeling that shook my belief in liberty, freedom and culture. Besides the physical threat of bombs and rockets, this traumatizing cultural shock caused me to stop painting for one and a half years. The last painting I did before stopping was *House* (1975), which I painted while confined to our home, using the only paints that were available to me there. It was a spontaneous and nervous application of mainly blue and red. All the paintings that I had left at the Institute were destroyed by the war.

Because staying in Beirut became dangerous, my parents decided



BERYTUS, 1980
Etching
68 x 53 cm

Exhibited at the Third World Biennale of Graphic Art, London, 1980 (Honourable Mention).

London

The work I did in Morocco became my admission portfolio to the Master's program at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London.

I had obtained a scholarship from the Lebanese University to study abroad and applied to the Slade for a Master's degree in printmaking. In 1981 I went to London, a city I had visited once before, during a study tour in 1974, and which I remembered having liked a lot – more than Paris (which was included in that same trip). When I arrived in London, I stayed first with a close friend and then moved to a one-room flat near Victoria Station.

At the Slade I was introduced to the elaborate techniques of printmaking that included etching on metal plates, stone and plate lithographic printing and silkscreen printing. I was overwhelmed by all the facilities and workshops that were at the disposal of the students, and would spend eight to ten hours a day in the workshop, working and learning a lot, because I felt this to be a rare period in my life which offered me so many opportunities for extending my knowledge.

Yet I remember that the first couple of months there were problematic, mainly because I experienced an 'artist's block'. It was difficult for me to cope with these new techniques and to adopt them as a means of personal artistic expression, for there is a great difference between the method of planning and designing a painting and that of a fine art print. On the other hand, printmaking opened up vast horizons and enabled me



HER NEAR PAST, 1982
Oil on canvas
100 x 72 cm
Collection Mr. & Mrs. S. Chatila

Exhibited at the Sursock Museum Salon d'Automne, Beirut, 1982

Return to Beirut

On my return to Beirut in autumn 1981, I was unable to continue the work I had been doing in England: there was no chance of doing any lithography or silkscreen work due to the absence of any such workshops in Lebanon, and whatever was available for etching was at an extremely primitive level. I had to go back to painting.

My continuing obsession with the photographic image led me to attempt a new approach: the photorealism style of painting. This is when I produced *Her Near Past* (1982), my first work in photorealism. It was a new development in my career. However, it differed from the methods and approaches of the conventional photorealistic style of painting. I placed the painted photorealistic image adjacent to the other elements of the painting, which were given a more abstract treatment. This combination was a new experiment that enriched the vocabulary of my artistic experience. I still often use this style in my work. It is a time-consuming process but unique in its expressive qualities.

My first fine art print after returning to Lebanon was *A Childhood Moment* (1981), which used etching and 'gum printing' – a fascinating technique I had learned at the Slade. It involves coating the paper with a light-sensitive emulsion, mixed with watercolor paint. When this coating is dry, a photographic negative is placed on top and exposed to a source of ultra-violet (UV) light. In London I had used a professional 'light box': in Beirut, this was replaced by direct sunlight on the balcony.

When I started teaching at the Lebanese University I developed an etching studio and started producing my work



THE CONFERENCE OF THE FISH, 1989-1990
 Oil, mixed media and assemblage on canvas and wooden panel
 114 x 140 x 4 cm
 Artist's collection

Exhibited at:
 - Sursock Museum Salon d'Automne, Beirut, 1991-1992
 - 93^e Salon de la Société Internationale des Beaux-Arts (SIBA) Paris 2000

The Question of 'Identity'

Living and practicing my art in Lebanon, the question arises of how much I feel Lebanese or Arab. The answer is that I do not feel I belong to a certain nationality, and hate to be labeled by it. I believe nationalism to be an artificial construction, therefore I do not consider myself related to a specific nation or nationality. I do not feel I belong to any category. I care for individuals, no matter what their race, nationality or religion. I have never had any political interests, affiliation or tendency. I do not read the papers and usually rely on the BBC World Service for information on global events: following the local news is often a waste of time. True, I am aware of all the serious social problems in my country and feel that something should be done about them, but not by me: I have other aims in life. Thus I never felt the urge to become directly involved in any form of public service. But, ironically, many of my paintings reflect political issues in the broad sense of the word. Although the injustice in the world affects me deeply, I consider different individuals to have different tasks in different fields, and if individuals accomplish their tasks well, this will be an indirect improvement of the whole. If I am focusing on my art and doing it well, without jeopardizing my principles and standards, I am, in a way, serving society. I feel angry at all the injustice, misery and aggression, but I do not let it deflect me from my task, which is to do what I am doing to the best of my ability.

Naturally my art, in a way, reflects my attitude towards nationalism and belonging. What matters to me is the quality of



VICTORY GIRL, 1997
 Oil, mixed media and assemblage on plywood panel
 74 x 74 x 2 cm
 Collection Ms. N. Halawi

The Creative Process: Controlling the Spontaneous

Putting things in order is a rule of life for me, because I cannot function in a space that is not tidy. It is only in an ordered environment that I have peace of soul and mind and can live in harmony with my surroundings. And it is only then that I can start to paint.

In contrast to this need for discipline and organization, I hate to plan a work of art beforehand. I never prepare a sketch of my painting prior to starting it because this would kill the excitement of discovery while a work is in progress. A certain element might catch my interest – a picture, a shape or an idea with which to start the work. Then, to expand and develop that initiating element, I allow ideas and thoughts to be projected upon it – or to grow out of it – in terms of themes and visual particularities. Thus, gradually, the whole work is completed. This is the only way I can maintain my interest in what I am doing, remain amused by what I am discovering, fascinated by how this or that idea occurred to me, and how particular links were established. For me a painting is, first of all, a combination of visual elements bound together by the principles of design. On one level, it is an endless game of experimenting with the multiple possibilities of combining the visual elements – lines, shapes, textures, values and colors – through the design principles of symmetry, contrast, conflict, unity, balance, dominance, repetition and harmony. It is a complex and truly joyful exercise to build a work of art through the application of these disciplines. Secondly, a painting is a mental and emotional product that addresses our intelligence and feelings. Yet, at both the visual and intellectual levels, I allow for ‘accidents’, for an unintentional effect or idea to occur. Later, I judge whether to keep it or not. I would say that a work of art I have created is a demonstration of



GENETICALLY MODIFIED PLANTATION, 2003
 Encaustic, oil and assemblage on plywood panel
 79 x 89 x 3 cm
 Artist's collection

The View from the Present

Art, for me, is an esthetic visual discipline the rules of which are shared by all other design practices, whether graphics or interior design, architecture or industrial design. As all these practices share the same engagement with the visual reality around us, I am just as interested in designing a poster, a book cover, or anything else related to the field of visual esthetics.

I have learnt – and am still learning – many things in the process of creating works of art. I used to overload my work with visual details, but less so now. I am also becoming more subtle in my conceptual statements and more selective which, in fact, is harder because it means having to look only for the essence of things.

On the behavioral level, I have learnt patience and rule out setting a time limit for finishing or stopping work on a painting because in art, as in everything else in life, I believe one should avoid shortcuts. I give things the time they need to develop and mature, at the pace they need. I have always hated rushed actions. I cannot, for instance, accept having to finish ten paintings in six months in order to meet a deadline for an exhibition.

Looking back now at the work I produced during 1982 and 1983, I judge it with a critical eye, although at the time I was fully convinced of the validity of what I was doing. And, had I not accomplished the volume of work I did during this period, I would possibly not have moved on into new areas. The paintings were easy and somehow superficial; looking back, I feel that what