



Zena El Khalil's

Beirut, I LOVE YOU

By Maymanah Farhat

Known for her pop-infused collages and installations that explore the contradictions of Lebanese society, Zena El Khalil is one of the most exciting visual artists working in Beirut today. Placing archival material, namely old photographs of militiamen during Lebanon's Civil War (1975-90), against a backdrop of all things kitsch, such as Barbie dolls, small plastic figurines of the Virgin Mary and Hezbollah memorabilia, El Khalil has developed a distinct style that takes to task the country's convoluted recalling of history while underscoring its almost surreal day-to-day reality.

In 2006, under the onslaught of the Israeli war planes that fractured Beirut, El Khalil began the blog "Beirut Update," providing readers with a unique account of life in the ever-tumultuous Lebanese capital. These widely read "diary entries"

were distributed internationally and are recognized for their candid, sorrow-filled yet optimistic outlook on survival. This blog would inspire her most recent literary undertaking, the memoir *Beirut, I Love You* (2009), which was published by Saqi books earlier this year.

Born in London, in 1976, El Khalil first moved to Lebanon in 1994 to attend the American University of Beirut (AUB). Having lived much of her childhood in Nigeria, she was outside the country for the duration of the civil war and decided to settle there, hopeful for Lebanon's post-war future. Taking the reader from her early AUB days—when she first met Maya, a best friend who would prove to be a significant force in her life—to the 2008 presentation of her internet-based writing at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, El Khalil outlines a

love-hate relationship with Beirut, the country's cultural pulse and political epicenter. This connection to the city is defined by her daily encounters as a young woman refusing to give in to her nation's longstanding obsession with image, money and power. Things are further complicated as she rejects the ever-present political boundaries that have sliced Beirut into simmering factional enclaves.

Divided into over two dozen vignettes, the book mostly focuses on her friendship with Maya before and after her death from cancer in 2006. The two are confidantes, uniting to take on the difficulties of the city as they endure its highs and lows. Even after her death she turns to Maya's spirit for comfort, refusing to let go of her friend's presence. Recounting her time in Beirut, she is understandably often cynical, as war and conflict are scattered throughout the book's chapters. From the seizure of her ancestral home in southern Lebanon under the Israeli occupation (1982-2000) to the recent factional standoffs in the capital, her experiences are often defined by political instability.

"To hell with romance and nostalgia," El Khalil proclaims early on. This dismissal of all things sentimental defines her approach to Beirut, a city whose residents often attempt to stay afloat by turning to religion, drugs or popular culture (and sometimes a combination of all three). "We constructed an alter reality," she writes. "With time, it felt as if we had only two choices: to fall into the vortex Beirut was creating or suppress it with a simulated joy."

Describing the gritty tales of the city, she spares no detail of its failures, revealing some of its darkest moments. At times her forthright descriptions can be jarring and difficult to take in, particularly if the reader is Lebanese as the nation's sins and insecurities are exposed for the entire world to read. Yet, she is equally candid with her own history and in many ways the two are inseparable. She openly retells sexual encounters, chronicles the disintegration of her marriage, and constantly refers to her penchant for drinking. With these experiences her attitude towards the metropolis fluctuates. There are instances in which Beirut is poised as her inspiration or a long love affair, other moments prove to be more taxing and the city morphs into a predator seeking her next victim.

A believer in reincarnation, which is essential to her Druze heritage, she describes her previous life as a young boy named Hussein who attempted to travel to the US on the passenger liner Titanic in 1912. As Hussein, the author describes drowning in the ship's infamous crash. Hussein's fate is tied to that of another incarnation, Asmahan, a spirited Druze woman

who lived during the end of the Ottoman Empire and loved to sing.

As Asmahan she was determined to carve out her own destiny, often turning to song for both joy and solace. It is through the story of Asmahan that the reader first learns of El Khalil's staunchly feminist outlook on life, a way of thinking that drives her to rebel against the social norms prescribed to Lebanese women. Unconcerned with her looks and resentful of domestic things, she goes against the grain: "This Arab woman hates cooking. This Arab woman scorns Arab women who express themselves through food. I don't have time to sit all day and pick lentils. I don't have the need to discuss feminine hygiene with village women. I can go for weeks without showering."

Although El Khalil's daily interactions with the city and its residents are written from a feminist perspective, she does not provide readers with insight into how this has impacted her work in the visual arts. In recent years, she has sought to destabilize these gender-based customs with such events as her solo exhibition "Wahad Areese, Please! (A Husband, Please!)" in 2004 and the all female group show "Shu Tabkha, Ya Mara (What's Cooking Woman?)" in 2006. Her art activism in Beirut has been no small accomplishment in a cultural scene that rarely takes these issues to the public sphere.

How has Lebanon's cultural scene weathered the ever-present legacy of the civil war and the Israeli occupation? El Khalil's story as an artist has been one of determination and action. Despite the fact that she laments "We vowed to create a cultural revolution that was a reality of everyday life. But paradoxically, the more vows we created, the more we broke. The more we spoke, the more we drank. The more we thought...the more sex we had. Nothing was getting done. Nothing would. It was bodies eating bodies," as an artist and curator she has worked to empower the Lebanese art scene. In 2006, shortly after the end of the Israeli invasion, El Khalil joined forces with gallerist Sandra Dagher to organize "Nafas," a group exhibition that featured work created by Lebanese artists during the war. The result was an internationally acclaimed exhibition that was at once urgent and profound. Had El Khalil delved into this narrative, she would have enriched the reader's understanding of just how the city is able to defy the incessant turmoil and ever-present pessimism that she describes.

From her previous lives to her current one, the author moves on to recall the moment she first decided to become an artist. During a shopping trip to Italy with her mother she discov-

ered Michelangelo's 15th century "Pietà" and it was then that she was "convinced." A delightful account of a young girl discovering her destiny, it is unfortunately one of the few references to her life as an artist that is made in the book.

El Khalil's writing succeeds best when she focuses her narrative. As each chapter seems to illustrate a point about her life in relation to Lebanon's complex history, her insight is most thoughtful when she elaborates on scenarios and takes her time developing the characters and places she sets out to portray. A description of her apartment building in Beirut's Hamra district, in which she provides musings and everyday-gossip, is particularly strong, presenting a Mahfouz-like stage of personalities and scandals that is quintessentially Beirut.

Another account of her history recalls her grandfather Mohammad and his adolescent run-in with "God." This passage demonstrates the author's quick wit, a mischievous side that surfaces when she appears to be most free and unrestrained—not bogged down by the weight of Beirut. Refusing to record her grandfather's story as told by her father, El Khalil recounts a humorous tale of mistaken identity, as the patriarch once found himself beneath the window of a couple caught in romance. The comedic misunderstanding that ensues when her grandfather's name is called out in ecstasy is the stuff of classic folktales.

Overall, such moments present a persuasive case for why it is so easy to fall in love with Beirut in light of its tragic existence. El Khalil's *Beirut, I Love You* is a welcome addition to Saqi's growing list of poignant memoirs.

Maymanah Farhat is a Mexican-Lebanese writer specializing in modern and contemporary Arab art. She received a bachelor's degree in the History of Art and Visual Culture (magna cum laude) with an emphasis in non-Western visual culture from the University of California Santa Cruz. In addition to conducting extensive research in Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, she has focused on the arts of Oceania, Africa and the Americas. In 2003 she completed an undergraduate thesis on the 19th century figurative paintings of Maori meeting houses, while in 2005 she helped organize the exhibition "Cloth and Culture in Oceania" at UCSC and assisted with a field study of 19th century Hawaiian (inter)nationalism in Honolulu, Hawaii.

From 2005 to 2007 Farhat was the editor of ArteNews, an online magazine focusing on art and culture of the Middle East and North Africa. In 2005 she began working on ArtAsiaPacific magazine's annual Almanac, which looks at the art scenes of 67 Asian nations, including 12 in the Arab world. She was the West Asia editor of the Almanac from 2006 to 2009.

She is currently based in New York City.