Mohammad El Rawas
Beirut Topography

by Maymanah Farhat

A FLOW OF GOODNESS INTO THE CITY, 2009
(90 X 90 X 3.5 CM) OIL, ACRYLIC, GICLEE PRINT AND ASSEMBLAGE ON PLYWOOD PANEL

When the Lebanese Civil War erupted in 1975, the local art scene disintegrated as everyday life in Beirut became a matter of sheer survival. Prior to the onset of the conflict, Lebanese contemporary art had been in its primary stage. While an older generation of artists blossomed under a modernist period that lasted well into the 1960s, those who were finishing their academic

training and beginning to exhibit in the early 1970s had little opportunity to gain footing with contemporary trends. Amidst the closure of galleries, an exodus of artists and intellectuals, and the suspension of an otherwise flourishing cultural environment, those that stayed in the capital often worked in isolation. Some artists addressed the violence in private while others chose to avoid the subject altogether. Few occasions arose for the formation of art movements and in many regards the works of some of the country's most prominent figures remained frozen in time at no fault of their own. This made for highly disjointed art that, as a whole, experienced little progress over the course of two decades.

Consequently, a common misreading of contemporary Lebanese art is that it did not begin to evolve until the 1990s, when a so-called post-war generation of young artists emerged with work that is conceptually driven and reflects upon the nation's brutal past. Often utilizing narrative approaches and the concept of archiving while grappling with the social remnants of its recent conflicts, these artists have come to represent the nation's art for much of the international art world. What such assessments fail to identify, however, are the major contributions of artists like Mohammad El Rawas, who not only continued and furthered contemporary art throughout the war, but also provided the formalistic breakthroughs that have been necessary for Lebanese visual culture today. A look at a number of works that were created during the Civil War and take Beirut as a focal point reveals the many ways in which the artist laid the groundwork for such developments.

When reviewing over four decades of El Rawas' oeuvre a significant facet of his art immediately becomes clear. Accompanying diverse subject matter and myriad experimentations are layered narratives that merge the visual with the conceptual, the past with the present, the real with the mythological and the consecrated with the sensual, as ostensibly paradoxical elements converge, giving birth to other legends. These components are brought together with a compelling mix of draftsmanship and design and a noticeable drive for dynamism, one that stems from a creative process that is intellectually and artistically driven. At times this is combined with acute sarcasm and wit, can be laden with irony, or—as in the case of over a dozen works that address Lebanon's modern reality—is accompanied by an overwhelming sense of reflection and foreboding.

Although Beirut (where he was born in 1951 and has resided for most of his life) has never been a conscious or predetermined theme for the artist, there are certain aspects of his paintings and graphic works that resonate with the spirit of the city. Many of his compositions have been executed with cool blues and warm earth tones that are punctuated by vivid areas of light, a color scheme that is reminiscent of Beirut's Mediterranean environment. And in the vain of the city, which is rarely concerned with purported cultural distinctions between East and West, El Rawas has embraced a range of influences as he extracts then transforms composites of visual culture in the quest for a new aesthetic. As the artist asserts,

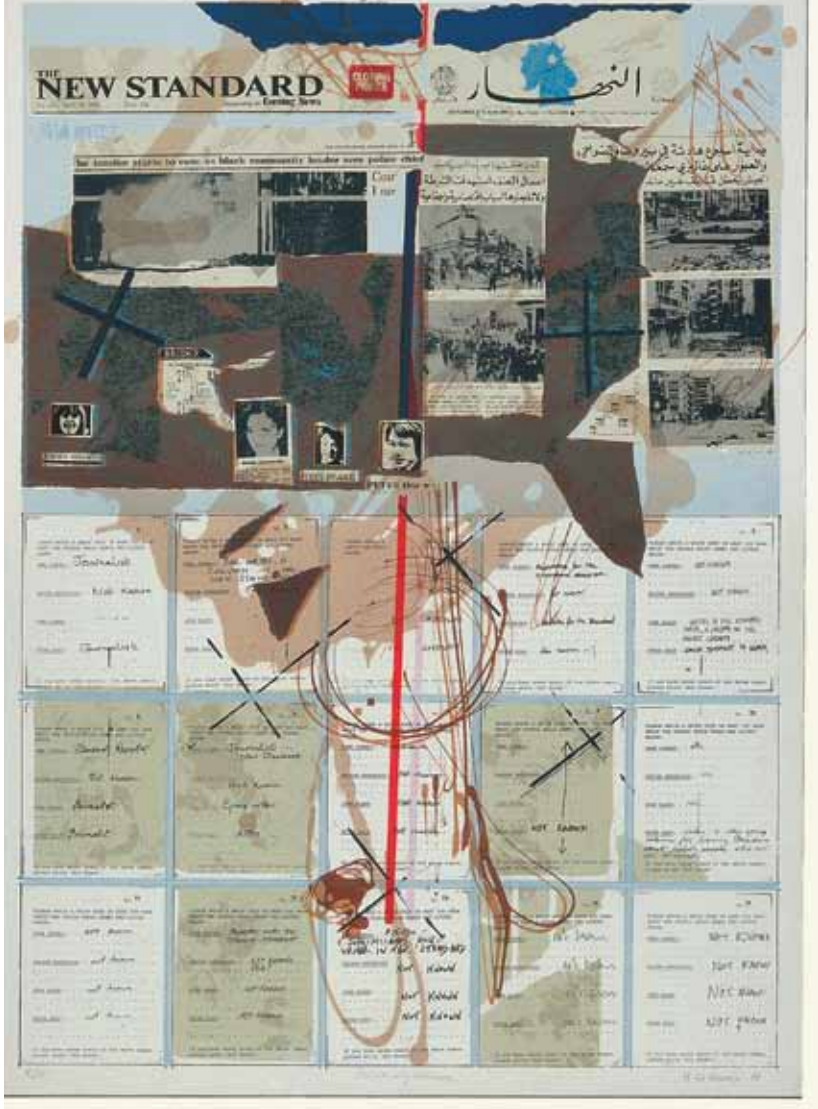
I find ultimate joy in breaking the barriers between times, eras, cultures and geographical limits. They do not exist for me, and I believe in the cosmopolitan approach where things are really open, free for all to exchange, to give and take. 1

1- Reyes, Heather, ed. 2004. The Art of Rawas. Saqi: London.

This is in addition to works in which he appears to address Beiruti society directly. His frequent juxtaposition of diverse forces resonates most within this context, reading as a reflection of (or more appropriately, a reaction to) the all too tangible reminders of Beirut's incessant rise and fall, those physical and psychic markers that seem to plague every inch of the metropolis. Refusing to be defined by the rigid social strata that maintain Lebanon's deeply engrained religiosity, rampant political corruption and obstinate tribalism, he frequently takes aim at the whirlpool of contradictions that fuels its never ending saga, and does so unabashedly. All the more impacting is how El Rawas undermines these factors not with obvious references or simplistic representations but with poetic subtlety, building intricate compositions that often possess universal themes.

At first glance, it is difficult to define the artist's work purely on an aesthetic or formalistic basis. Throughout the years, his paintings have demonstrated a steady departure from traditional approaches, most notably with the use of collage, the addition of mixed media and assemblage, and the execution of work on everything from canvas to cardboard. In some instances he has used oil or gouache while in others china ink or pencil (or a combination of some or all of the above) are visible. This has emerged alongside a stirring body of lithographs, etchings and gum prints that is of equal importance. Throughout his career, El Rawas has regularly blurred the lines between painting and conceptual work. It is this boundless scope that has made him one of Lebanon's most influential artists and a pioneer of its contemporary art.

Graduating from the Institute of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University in Beirut in 1975, the early



RELATIVELY UNKNOWN, 1981, (81 X 58 CM) SERIGRAPHY.

stages of his artistic career unfolded during the outbreak of the Civil War. Although his work developed alongside painting trends of the time, his compositions were divided with a complex sense of spatiality—a feature that has remained significant throughout his oeuvre.

This is evident in the oil on canvas painting House (1975), which El Rawas created while confined to his family's Beirut home during the upheaval of the war. House is predominately executed in rich blue and vibrant red. Cut by an uneven horizontal line with fluid brushwork, the artist renders several forms, such as a large rectangle and smaller objects that appear to makeup a still life of everyday goods, with quick sketches. The word "house" is written in English

and in French, hinting at the boundaries of an interior space. Painted in an expressionist style that is on the verge of abstraction, the work indicates the influence of American art movements such as Abstract Expressionism—which he had conducted his final project on at the Institute of Fine Arts—and Pop art. The colorist piece has emotive power, as its vivid hues seem to suggest a stark outlook of isolation, perhaps even alienation. The employment of text also points to a technique that stems from his interest in "breaking the barriers between the two means of expression, the read and the visualized." [2]

House proved to be the final work for the Lebanese artist before he stopped painting for two years. In 1976 he joined his parents, whom had relocated to Damascus. There he worked as a set designer for Syrian television. His break in painting was tied to the all-too-present trauma of war and the experience of being uprooted. After moving to Rabat, where he taught at the Ecole Normale des Institutrices, El Rawas emerged from his suspended creative state. Three months after accepting the teaching position of a friend wanting to return to Lebanon from Morocco, he began to paint again, embarking on a new direction in his art, one that revisited his previous experiments in collage and resulted in a series of gouache paintings that incorporated other mediums.

When collage wasn't the predominate form, his paintings took on the appearance of graphic works, as he sought to reproduce the effect of photographs without the existence of edges, creating the "mechanical look" that can be found in a printed image. He also increasingly used "words and text as both communicative and compositional elements of expression." He had begun these explorations in collages that involved "concepts" prior to his hiatus from painting while still at the Institute of Fine Arts.

Once resuming his art, he was drawn to the "objective reality" of a subject that was retained via a camera. He included (or appropriated) ordinary images (i.e. those that lack "artistic" intention) by drafting an exact copy of the photograph amidst compositions that were divided into several spatial planes. The incorporation of photographic images is another formulistic component of his painting that has been essential ever since, as they often "lend themselves to borrowing, adding to and working on." [4]

Above all, his compositions were "no longer arranged according to the conventions of representational painting" as he strove to encourage "analytical and synthetic thought" in the appreciation of his work. [5] These gouache pieces were executed with a limited palette of mostly white, grey and black and often revolved around topics that invoked the violence of Civil War Lebanon. Equally striking is that they were painted using a technique that eliminated "the painterly sensibility of the artist's 'hand marks,'" which was achieved by spraying gouache onto the surface with an airbrush and was emphasized with the use of technical drawing that avoided an indication of "gestural practices" indicating personal expression. This leant to creating a certain quality to the work, one that was removed from the direction of contemporary Arab art at the time, which focused on painterly approaches.

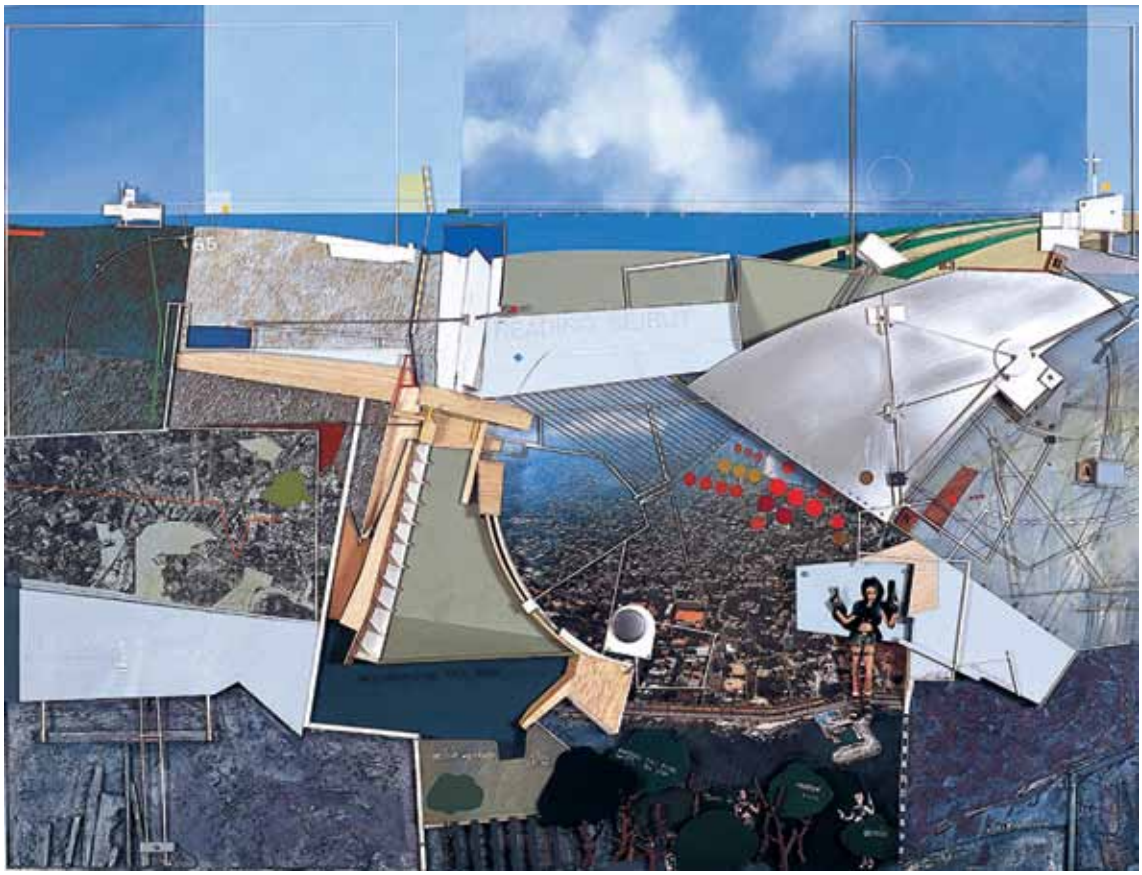
2- Correspondence with the artist, September 13, 2010.
3- Ibid.
4- Ibid.
5- Ibid.

Struggle for Civilizing More Human Societies (1976) is one of El Rawas' most remarkable paintings from this period. Referring to the killing of a group of people who had lined up for rationed bread outside a bakery in Beirut, the artist revisited the war torn city that he had experienced before leaving for Damascus. The mortar bomb that killed most of these civilians also took the life of his friend and fellow painter Ibrahim Marzouk. "Such atrocities were justified by Lebanese warlords and leaders of the various fighting factions as an inescapable price for a free, prosperous and civilized future," the artist explains. "It seems to me a warping of human nature to try to impose one's own beliefs on others, especially in such a violent way." [6]

A small image of this queue is depicted in the upper portion of the painting, as the lower part is connected through a narrow tunnel that leads down through layers of earth that are drawn with elaborate patterns and geometric forms. Lines intersect, as these shapes appear stacked atop each other, creating a bunker-like environment. This ornate maze also resembles endless mounds of debris, the remnants of war that branded the city with a dismal existence.

Between these colliding structures march three unidentifiable militiamen, the first of which is drawn in white as the other two stand behind him in the shadows. Surrounding their figures are white circles of varying sizes that are interrupted by similar red dots, an apparent reference to bloodshed. Below the militiamen

6- Ibid.



READING BEIRUT ii

STRUGGLE FOR CIVILIZING MORE HUMAN SOCIETIES, 1976, (70 X 50 CM)
GOUACHE AND INK ON PAPER

is a "case number" that indicates the archival organization of the image, or the historical documentation of the event in general. The title of the work "Struggle for Civilizing More Human Societies" is written across the top of the painting directly above the crowd of civilians and appears as though applied by a typewriter. It is here that we see the artist shift away from producing a conventional picture.

As a result, the artist is able to engage the viewer with the probing of history and the questioning of society through the suggestion of a narrative that is not only depicted within the picture plane but moves beyond the visual as evidence of an ongoing act—the process of documenting the war. In the end viewers are prompted to consider more than just the imagery before them. The painting is multifold, moving past the realm of aesthetics into conceptual art. And yet, at the same time, visual representation remains central to the work. Created during the war, it is a reminder of the violence that consumed Beirut, leaving it destitute and in ruins.

Struggle for Civilizing More Human Societies is quite possibly an indication of how El Rawas, as an artist, as a witness, or even as an insider looking through a foreign (or outside) vantage point, was processing Lebanese visual culture and its reality at large. Bombarded by photographs of the war, these works not only continue the experiments in art that he was delving into at the time, they seem to emulate the imagery of news prints.

In addition to being grounded in formulistic practice, his elimination of the edges of ordinary photographs depicting the war can thus be understood as the artist attempting to process the psychic nature of their significance within the larger context of the nation's modern history.

Liberty (1977), a gouache, pencil and china ink on paper work, which displays his early aptitude in realism, reflects on his exile from Lebanon by emphasizing the mundane daily routine of walking to and from the art school where he taught in Morocco while simultaneously alluding to the latent impact of the war.

In the center foreground of the composition is an antiquated map of Rabat that the artist has copied in ink. The map lies directly below the word "LIBERTY," which appears in large white letters and is tilted to the side, as though stamped on the surface at random. Vertical planes that work to flatten space, so that traditional perspective is eliminated altogether, are formed with thin black lines that border areas of solid color. White strips that run both vertically and horizontally and a white grid-like plane serve as visual unifiers that guide the viewer's eyes along various points in the composition.
Set against this grid is a drawing of a skeletal foot that has been drafted with precision, as though perfectly reproduced from a medical book. This human remain presents a morbid overtone to the work, particularly because the use of the word "liberty" stands in such great contrast. The drawing is reminiscent of those found in scientific studies and lies as if situated on graph paper. Connecting the image with methodological procedures, it implies an emotionally detached and sanitized approach to the obtainment of "liberty." Reflecting on the painting the artist has confirmed, "it was less a celebration of my return to freedom of expression and movement (represented by the skeletal foot) as a result of being out of the war zone than a cynical commentary on my situation." [7]

And yet there is the strong presence of the subconscious at play as skeletal remains are typically associated with death, the map of Rabat can easily be mistaken for a cross section of Beirut and the notion of "liberty" is as cynical as the obtainment of freedom through violence seen in Struggle for Civilizing More Human Societies.

In 1979 El Rawas exhibited the works that he produced during his stay in Morocco at the Recontre Art Gallery in Beirut in his first solo show. While most critics and much of the public considered his series to be more inline with the graphic arts rather than fine arts out of a lack of fully understanding his new approach, one particular critic foresaw the innovations that the artist was offering well in advance. In her critique of his paintings Marie-Therese Arbid wrote in Lebanon's L'Orient-Le Jour that:
One finds a complex tone in Mohammad Rawas: neither the rejection
of the East nor the acceptance of the West. Hence these most eloquent
graphical works of art which are, in reality, first attempts at finding a
new language…It is infinitely reassuring to see new talents emerging —especially talents searching for a language particular to this country
which has had enough of existing in a state of wretched moral isolation.
After obtaining a scholarship from the Lebanese University to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in 1980, he sustained the

7- Ibid.

HOUSE, 1975, (60 X 75 CM) OIL ON CANVAS

development of this aesthetic, incorporating additional methods as he refined his use of the photographic image. There he learned how to create lithographs, etchings, block prints and silk screens and came to understand the "significant sensibilities with regard to texture" of each medium, an aspect that was also crucial to his painting.

In London he continued to explore the Civil War as it raged on in works that often incorporated several techniques. Although obtaining a sense of stability and physical safety abroad, he experienced an acute state of worry and emotional distress nonetheless. Reflecting on the process of determining his subject matter during an interview with Beirut gallerist and curator Saleh Barakat, El Rawas explained:

Every work is a reaction to my emotional and intellectual interests or to circumstantial conditions prevailing at the time hence the variety of themes tackled in each work. I do not subject my themes to a value-judgment process; A trivial theme is as valid to me as a crucial one as long as the process of handling it is an interesting one. Evidently, the painterly and pictorial physical medium of the work is open to all appropriate possibilities of research and experimentation. [8]

The etching Berytus (1980) was the first work that the artist produced after arriving in London. Exploring the historical legacy of the Lebanese capital, he incorporates several iconic images of

8- Interview with the artist conducted by Saleh Barakat in conjunction with the exhibition "The Road to Peace, Painting in the Time of War" (19751991-), Beirut Art Centre, 2009.

Beirut that are taken from various points of its centuries old past. A map from the late 1800s of the metropolis by Danish vice consul Julius Loytved hovers over a photograph that has been torn into pieces and burnt. The black and white image shows the Hamra district of Beirut, which, although once prosperous and known as an intellectual hub, is littered with the make-shift stalls of vendors whose nearby shops had been obliterated during the first part of the war. Adorning this city centre are the architectural ruins of the legendary Roman faculty of law, which was destroyed in 551 AD as a major earthquake shook the Mediterranean. Linking his nation's ancient past with its contemporary history, El Rawas emphasizes its continual devastation while reminding Lebanese society of its fragility, as the glory of its cosmopolitan core can be quickly unhinged when its communities become mere instruments of political strife.

The overbearing presence of the war despite living away from its epicenter lingered throughout his London works. One particular silkscreen that continued his examination of archival practices and the documenting of the Civil War with striking foresight is the Relatively Unknown (1981). Comparing the front-page stories of two newspapers (Lebanon's Al Nahar and England's New Standard), El Rawas found that while both publications covered a riot that occurred in the UK only Al Nahar featured news about the Lebanese Civil War. Adding a conceptual element to the work, he included questionnaires from a brief survey that he had conducted about what individuals "took in" when reading the news. These appear distributed in the lower half of the silkscreen as though meticulously distributed with scientific or historical evaluation in mind. Above these small sheets of paper are crudely cut clippings from both newspapers, which are arranged side by side and compare and contrast coverage of the "newsworthy" stories of April 14, 1981.

The graphic work has the appearance of a mockup, suggesting that the documents that are arranged within its rectangular format are only preliminary. Further enunciating their impermanence, El Rawas has distinguished certain areas of the composition with black markings, as though determining which will eventually be eliminated.

Relatively Unknown underscores the ways in which history is determined and questions the process through which personal, national and international narratives are established. How are such domestic conflicts viewed through global perspectives? How are communities informed (or impacted) by the transmitting of such information through various lenses? How are these lenses influenced by sociopolitical contexts or cultural climates and in what ways do individuals consider what is presented when it relates specifically to their immediate reality? How does such information go from existing in the personal realm to becoming the domain of collective experience or even mass consumption? El Rawas considered all these questions in 1981 and yet they still remain relevant to Lebanon's unfinished chronicling of its recent history.

What is quite profound about these specific examples of El Rawas' work is that they were created long before a significant number of artists and intellectuals began to investigate the many sides of the Lebanese war. Today much of the artistic and academic cultural landscape of the nation is concerned with the events of the conflict and the resulting historical amnesia that was encouraged by politicians and community leaders and has only made the legacy of its violence all the more present.

Although the examples that are discussed in detail were created while he was living abroad

for a short period of the Civil War, he continued to address its formidable course (and the impact it had on his daily life) once returning to Beirut in 1983, where he has remained ever since. Upholding aesthetic experimentation as the foremost element of his work, he has taken his painting into new territories with the employment of photorealism (an extension of his fascination with the visual properties of photography), various forms of printmaking such as transfers and gum prints, and the manipulating of depth and perspective with assemblage.

This is found in portraits of heroines that are taken from art history or painted using live models, alongside images from commercial art, imagined or actual landscapes, photographs, text and architectural details. More recently he has incorporated three-dimensional toys, dolls or action figures from popular video games, cartoons or comic books that are subsequently embossed with symbolism (a technique that was later found in the installations and collages of some emerging Lebanese artists). These figurines are placed within cityscapes or confined interiors that have been built up from the surface so that they protrude from the plywood panel upon which he has delineated his composition, creating the impression of multi-dimensionality while evoking the predominate views through which the artist has witnessed the various transformations of his city—the actual and psychological windows that only a place like Beirut can create.

In these recent paintings El Rawas maintains the same energy and momentum with which he produced his earlier work while offering an innovative artistic style that is in a constant state of evolution—one that is sure to influence many more generations of artists.

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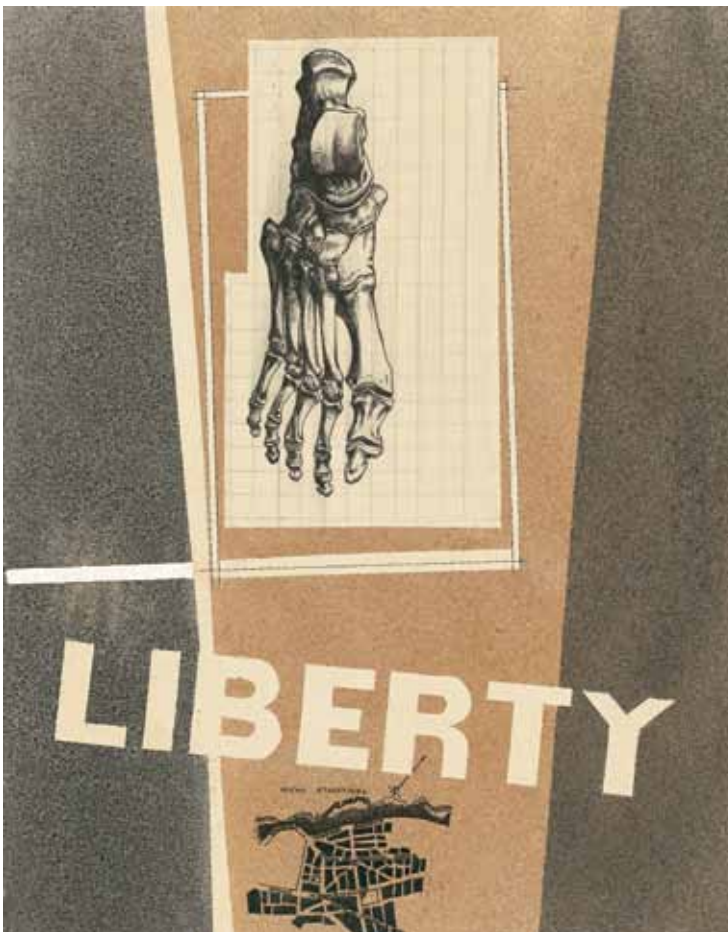

LIBERTY, 1977, (62 X 47 CM) GOUACHE, PENCIL AND INK ON PAPER.