

Inside the Studio and across Space and Time of Ginane Makki Bacho

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Le plateau, 2005, mixed media on wood, 80x120cm - Courtesy of the artist.

Photographs. Lithographs. Big, brash abstract canvases. Intimate, diminutive works in mixed media. Portraits. Nudes. Compositions in garish colors. Handbags embossed with Matisse-like prints. Sculptures so shockingly raw they hit like a jab to the chest. The studio where Ginane Makki Bacho works -long and labyrinthine- is literally overflowing with art. That art is varied, like evidence of restless energy and an endless drive to experiment with new material. Bacho has been producing work for decades, in Lebanon, in New York, in Washington DC. To regard her oeuvre all at once is to understand how she collapses both time and space in her art. In Bacho's work, the past continually jumps into the present and geographic locations blend together, twisting into more psychological terrain. Born in Lebanon, she studied literature before committing

herself to visual forms of expression. Moving In 1984 to New York, she studied fine art at Pratt, an institution that offered her a keen platform for exploring the quality and texture of lithographs, silk screens, and etchings. She took photographs, made books, participated in gallery exhibitions. She slid into the groove of big city living with its relentless pulse of inspiration. But New York could never negate Beirut and much of the work the Bacho created in the States reflected back her life in Lebanon and memories of the war. Old fears and ancient anxieties surged up anew. Eventually, she settled down in Washington, DC. But then, in 2000, Bacho came home, and for a few years she shuttled back and forth between Lebanon and the States, unsure of whether or not she could reconcile her time abroad with a life in Beirut, uncertain if she could adjust to

the disorientation of leaving one location for another. It's been only recently that she has decided to stay, in Beirut, a city that is, in and of itself, always shifting. Bacho's shrapnel sculptures, produced in Beirut in 1983 in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion, have immediate impact. They are rough looking things, all jagged edges and malicious intent. Yet under Bacho's hands these bits and pieces of busted bombs have become mournful, sorrowful, painfully resilient. Bacho has mounted them simply and given them titles like "Exodus," "Resurrection," and "Never for Sale." The narratives behind these sculptures hardly need explanation. They speak volumes about the physical and psychological damage of war, whether locally inscribed or universally understood. Bacho's early work in New York is pared down to a palette of black and white. Her lithographs have discipline and restraint. Color began to creep into her work slowly and with seeming trepidation.

Two large-scale abstract canvases from 1988, offer bright hues of blue, red, green, and yellow, but the smudged lines are studied. The break comes with a series of Fauvist self portraits -- jarring, jangling, vibrating with emotion, sarcasm, and often disgust. Bacho's palette of lurid purples and blues suggests agitation as well as an explosive desire to express oneself immediately, in the moment of creation. "For me," says Bacho, "an artwork is just how you feel at the right time." As her time in New York drew on, Bacho grew distraught with news from home. "New York gave me a lot of energy and power, I couldn't have survived there without it, at times, however, I was in New York but my mind was in Beirut. "Two mid-sized canvases of mother and child, each cast in pink and scrawled with graffiti, were stoked by her memories of having to take her family down into a bomb shelter in Beirut. These works bring visceral life to the sensation of performing numerous roles at once. As she explains, "I was a mother, student and an artist, such multitasking can make one feel invincible, it also makes one feel afraid, waiting for cracks to form, watching for signs of everything crumbling. To look at them now, these canvases still function as a kind of therapy. They are honest, disrobed, their pink color akin to exposed and vulnerable skin. When we paint, we can't hide." A final canvas offers a violent eruption of colors. Her classmates at Pratt once told her it was



The Goddess, 2005, mixed media on wood, 120x90cm - Courtesy of The French Institute in Beirut

like a study for Lebanon's Guernica, strong enough to be blown up to mural size. It is claustrophobic, overcrowded composition, and therein lays its strength. To experience episodes of violence is to run through so many emotions, scenarios, and blows to the ego that one's mind gets as cluttered and chaotic as a city under siege. Bacho's canvas captures that collapse.

When talking about these works, she says they are "impressions, like a first draft of writing, this likening to literature is telling." Bacho's work struggles to express itself. It fights for an adequate language to convey meaning, to make sense. It reaches for metaphors and images and nuggets of linguistic brilliance. In the same way a writer wrestles for the right words to capture thought, Bacho draws on a vast vocabulary of visual materials. She bends lines around ideas, makes harsh marks to suggest actions. In its striving, her work lays bare her creative process. These are not refined or studied productions. They are not sleek or streamlined. Rather they are spontaneous, sharp, and sudden. They are the infliction of wounds and they are felt visually as such. To see them now is to sense that scars heal but they remain, they fade but they remind.