

REVIEW

Not unlike a genocide sing-a-long

Elemental lines and bright colors mark Mona Trad Dabaji's "My Land is Not for Sale"

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BEIRUT: "I hate all politics," says Mona Trad Dabaji, by way of introduction. Judging by the paintings that comprise her latest show, "My Land is Not for Sale," though, Dabaji does recognize politics' role in the world, like it or not. It's somewhere up there with religion, work, and family.

"My goal was to show the people," she continues, "ordinary people, and how they live and work in their environment."

The title piece of Dabaji's exhibition, "My Land is Not for Sale," is fittingly representative of her corpus of work over the last three years. Her medium here is an ornate, folding wooden door, rescued from the urban wreck that Beirut's southern suburbs became in the wake of the 2006 war with Israel.

One side depicts a farmer in the Bekaa Valley, his red *kifayya* whipped horizontal off his head by the stiff winds as he utters the phrase of the title. Faceless sheep file past in the foreground. Like her other work, sharp, bright colors – like those used for road signs – fill cheerful landscapes dominated by plump subjects.

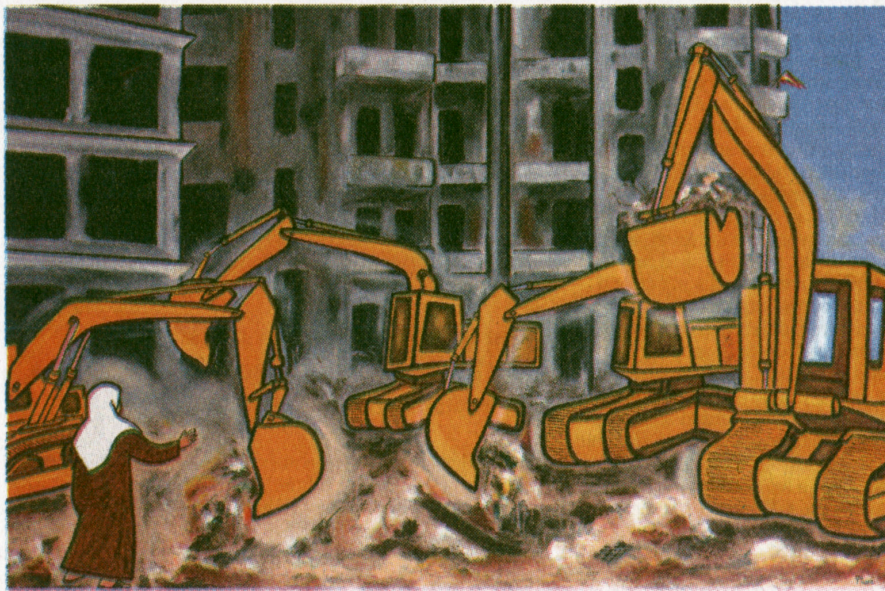
The farmer's placid face, the fluttering Lebanese flag hitched to his donkey, and the simple but bright background convey pride and hope. Aesthetically, Dabaji's images harken back to

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those in the safety instructions tucked in an airliner's seat-back pocket. Thematically, they're easy to digest but that's literally only half the picture.

Gerhard Richter – who also painted his own photographs – briefly summarized the disconnect between a work of art's subject and the universal *weltschmerz* (world-weary sadness, if you like) of its artist. "How could one be in this world without feeling dismayed by it?" Richter asked. "Even if one paints flowers and gingerbread."

After a few steps to the other side of the free-standing door, it becomes evident that, despite her desire to embrace the light, the dark of the world



Dabaji's "House V" depicts Beirut's southern suburbs in the aftermath of the 2006 war with Is-

could not be kept at bay.

The door's verso is a cacophony of images and dull colors depicting everything from animals being slaughtered and children in battle fatigues to screaming women and dismembered bod-

ies. This was the flipside – the political side – of peoples' lives.

The two faces of Dabaji's work grow out of the changing political mood of the country since 2005. That year, while a large portion of the population

expressed its desire for change and renewal, the artist set out to depict common Lebanese men and women at work or at rest in their fields or streets.

Like the subjects of a Fernando Botero painting, her figures are robust and serene – in many works eating grapes in the shade or leading a mule to market. When the optimism of 2005 slowly gave way to war and civil unrest, Dabaji's "green pastures" were superseded by the scorched earth of political violence and chaos.

|| The exhibition is a long hard look at the effect of our good intentions

The theme running through "My Land is Not for Sale" seems to be that the sometimes brutal way politics raises its ugly head is little more than an infection festering in the lives of the common man. It's not an astonishingly original message, but it is uncommon in its representation.

The artist's professed love of Matisse is evident in subject matter but not always in her style. The bucolic "*L'heure de la sieste*," with lambs resting under a tree, is a scene the great Fauvist himself may have labored to depict. Dabaji's portrayal, however, with its preference for a narrower range of color and fondness for the trappings of the human eye, is ob-

viously following a different path than Matisse.

"I draw the figures and landscape in black and white, and then fill them in with the colors," she says – or admits, depending on one's taste. Approached on the pop culture grid, her work is close kin to Art Spiegelman's series of "Maus" graphic novels or (jumping into a different genre) The Boomtown Rats' cheerful ode to mass murder, "I Don't Like Mondays."

Dabaji has created something like a children's book about heroin addicts or a genocide sing-a-long.

Some might dismiss the bright and basic color schemes or the at times commonplace subject matter of individual works as sophomoric or meandering. Yet, when considered as a whole, Dabaji's work decries the murderous consequences of political conflict on the lives of those just trying to put food on the table.

"House V" provides a case in point. It depicts a woman standing in Beirut's wrecked southern suburbs, destroyed by the Israeli bombs of July and August 2006. Four massive bright-yellow earth-movers, suspended like vultures over the rubble, are tearing the earth apart as the flailing woman pleads and mourns in vain.

Dabaji's characteristically sharp definitions between land and sky neck and shirt are abandoned here. She says her technique here involved scraping the canvas with a knife to bring the rubble to life and smearing colors together to create swirls in the dust and debris.

The woman's powerlessness in the face of the hulking machines, like her subjugation to the Israeli jets, seems an equal indictment of destruction and rebuilding. Dabaji's work suggests both are equally politicized acts, though disparate in scale, serving to weaken the enemy rather than serve the people.

The show is worth your time, if not for the layered images of the title works' flipside, then for the pleasing colors and subtle humor. It's a long hard look at the effect of our good intentions and our political ambitions but, in the shadow of Matisse, an intriguing combination.

Mona Trad Dabaji's "My Land is Not for Sale" is up at Aida Cherfan Gallery until July 31. For more information, ring +961 1 983 111.



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