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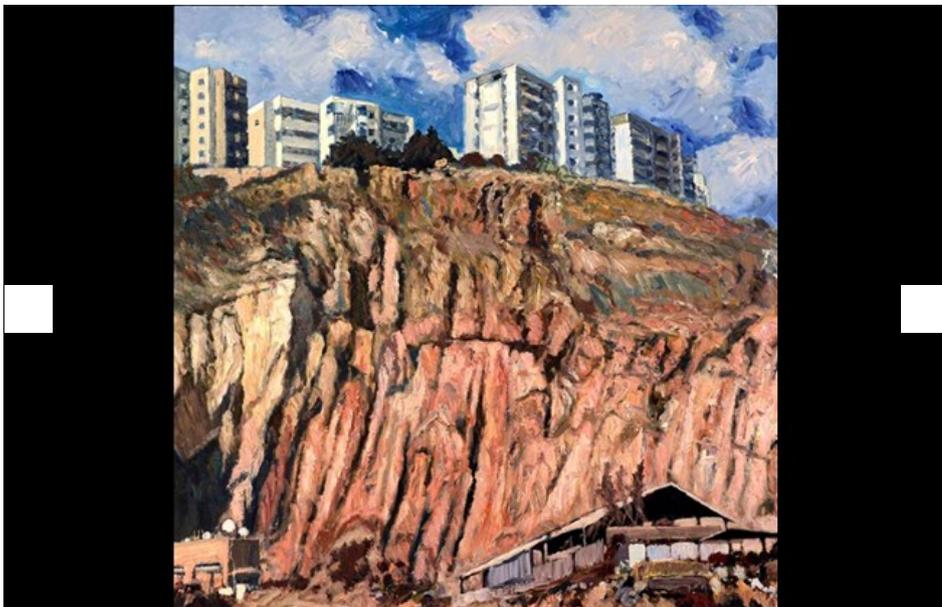
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## Culture

Jan. 29, 2015 | 09:04 PM

# Beirut Contemporary and climate changing in the art market



### Summary

Nammour is president of The Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon. She spoke to a group of journalists and other interested individuals invited to last Friday's reception to mark the official launch of "Museum in the Making" an



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Jim Quilty | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: "I am often asked, 'Why a museum? Why here? Why now?'" Rita Nammour told her audience. "For us, Lebanon has long been the home of forward-looking thinkers and a hub of artistic creation, the cultural and intellectual beacon of the Middle East.

"After many years of conflict and political division, Beirut not only persists. It is thriving artistically."

Nammour is president of The Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon. She spoke to a group of journalists and other interested individuals invited to last Friday's reception to mark the official launch of "Museum in the Making," an international

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campaign to establish Beirut Contemporary, a museum of modern and contemporary art.

At the top of the list of eight targets APEAL has sketched for itself is assembling a permanent collection. To help build it, the association will hold an art auction on Jan. 30 at Casino du Liban, with its proceeds going to acquisitions.

The works that will go under the hammer for APEAL have been donated by the artists who made them, the galleries who represent them and the collectors who purchased them.

Created by artists from around this region, the 21 pieces date from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries and reflect the various influential movements of the time. They range from academic studies like Habib Srour's 1885 oil "Nu Académique," to contemporary works such as Ayman Baalbaki's 200x250 cm acrylic "The Parliament," from 2014.

Several Arab modernists are represented – including the pair of bronze figures that form Michel Basbous' 1952 "Dancer" and an untitled canvas by Paul Guiragossian, dated 1980.

Comprising the bulk of the pieces, the canvasses are augmented by a smattering of sculptural works and photographic prints. Stylistically, the selection runs the gamut from figuration – Omar Onsi's 1935 oil-on-panel "Landscape," – to abstraction – Dia Azzaoui's 2014 bronze "Imaginary Plant."

Founded in 2008, APEAL is an international nonprofit organization, with headquarters in Lebanon and the U.S. The association interprets the "promotion" and "exhibition" in its acronym quite liberally and has expressed ambitious goals to create a scholarship program for young Lebanese artists and to contribute to the conversation among Lebanese artists and curators and their overseas counterparts.

APEAL may be best known for having shouldered responsibility for the Lebanese pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, which featured Akram Zaatari's video installation "Letter to a Refusing Pilot."

The timing of APEAL's museum initiative is as intriguing as the initiative itself.

The fact that Beirut Contemporary could be the city's first public museum of contemporary and modern art is a symptom of the Lebanese condition. In some respects, Beirut resembles European cities of approximately the same size and population. In other ways, not.

Its various divergences from European models relate to a complex snarl of causes – including militant challenges to state security, of course, and the eccentricities of the Lebanese "state."

Historically, Lebanon's officials have betrayed little interest in erecting the sort of institutional infrastructure for arts and culture that Europeans have taken for granted since the 20th century.

Lebanon has not supported its artists through public funding, for instance, or provided incentives to encourage property owners to preserve Beirut's once-impressive architectural patrimony. No surprise, then, that a museum of modern and contemporary art has been absent from this landscape.



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By the late 1990s, these shortcomings seemed incongruous with the international stature of the country’s contemporary artists, who were becoming celebrities on the international art circuit.

In the 2000s, the development of ambitious arts infrastructure projects in Gulf states like Qatar and the UAE accentuated this incongruity – particularly as the works of several Lebanese modernists came to be among the darlings of a regional art market coalescing around internationally significant art fairs in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and by a secondary market driven by Christie’s Dubai and Sotheby’s Doha.

The gulf between the quantity and quality of Lebanese cultural production and the dearth of museum-quality exhibition spaces grew – with Lamia Joreige and Sandra Dagher’s Beirut Art Center initiative being the principal exception to this rule.

As was the case among artists in Palestine, where the development of arts infrastructure has been similarly stunted, “the museum” even seeped into the arsenal of concepts with which some Lebanese contemporary artists toyed in their work.

APEAL plans to open Beirut Contemporary in 2020. The structure will be situated near the National Museum, on a generous plot of land donated by Université St. Joseph for a 50-year period, with an option to renew afterward. APEAL says “four significant collections have been consigned to the museum on long-term loan.”

“We have access to the [privately held] AK Collection,” Nammour told The Daily Star. “The Ministry of Culture’s collection will be available on loan. A third collector prefers to remain anonymous at this time.”

Acquisitions will be overseen by a curator, who has yet to be chosen.

In the meantime the process is being guided by an advisory committee whose members include some well-known figures in the region’s modern and contemporary art circles – Venetia Porter, Islamic art curator at the British Museum; Jack Persekian, director and head curator of the Palestinian Museum and Artistic Director of the Qalandiya International biennial; Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, the two-man team making up the Art Reoriented curatorial platform; Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans-Ulrich Obrist are co-directors of London’s Serpentine Gallery,

Nammour says Beirut Contemporary will be more than a warehouse for artworks. Like Beirut’s more successful art centers, the exhibition of its permanent collection will be complemented by a slate of public programs.

Beirut Contemporary could be the city’s first contemporary and modern art museum, but it is not the sole initiative of its kind.

In the past few years, a number of groups have announced private initiatives to build public museums of contemporary and modern art in Beirut. Each project boasts different assets.

A central cog in the artistic production of Beirut before 1975, the Ibrahim Sursock Museum has just renovated its iconic Ottoman structure and hired a respected curator to oversee its small permanent collection and create a public program.



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Another museum project is that of Artistic Cultural Events and the Saradar Group. ACE aims to constitute and manage a collection with the aims of launching a museum to host it and promoting art in Lebanon. It has constituted a professional advisory board to judiciously expand Saradar Group's existing collection.

When so many different groups move to revitalize a city's art exhibition infrastructure at about the same time, it suggests a significant change in the climate, something strong enough to overcome the several long-standing impediments to erecting a museum of modern and contemporary art.

"Nothing's changed," Nammour says. "Lebanon remains unstable ... Lebanon has always been the place of intellectuals, the place where culture spreads around the Middle East.

"We believe that museums are a place for social change and progress. Lebanon needs more museums. Many people believe in Lebanon and they believe in culture. I think ... culture is the only way to save Lebanon.

"There is more interest in art now, worldwide, than ever before, not only in Lebanon. There wasn't as much interest in contemporary art in Europe 10 years ago as there is now."

Nammour agrees that Beirut's museum rush does reflect the remarkable growth of the international art market.

"But there has always been an interest in culture in Lebanon," she adds. "I think people feel as though they need to give something back."

For more information, see [www.apeal-lb.org](http://www.apeal-lb.org).

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on January 29, 2015, on page 11.

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