

Exhibition

Aref El Rayess. Artworks (1958–1978)

11 May. — 10 Sep. 2023



Temps Moderne et Tiers Monde ou *La marche des peuples du Tiers-Monde entre le Développement et la Révolution* (Modern Times and Third World or The march of the peoples of the Third World between Development and Revolution), Signed and dated, 1974-1975. Estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

Press Dossier
Institut Valencià d'Art Modern

IVAM

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Curated by: Catherine David



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Aref El Rayess.

Artworks 1958–1978

A major player on the Lebanese cultural scene between the 1960s and 1980s, Aref El Rayess (1928-2005) remains largely unknown, with a relative eclipse following his death. His absence from the international radars is partially due to the complexity of the man and a multi-rooted work – Lebanon, Senegal, France, Italy, the US, and Saudi Arabia –, but is also linked to the very specific conditions of visibility (and invisibility), due to the many events that dramatically affected these years.

In its paradoxes and in its singularity, with flashing breakthroughs and dim impasses, the oeuvre of Aref El Rayess is an exemplary, uncompromising, modern journey. It is the result of the “inner requirement” of a worried and committed subject, observant and mindful of the political, social and cultural crises of his time, rather than the “isms” and sequences expected of the modern canon.

Precocious and largely self-taught, extremely gifted, not very disciplined, amused observer, often caustic, he was fascinated during his adolescence by untimely, yet vital “impressions of Africa” experienced in Senegal, which will follow him his whole life. His formal path, and his oeuvre, are declined in cycles, reiterations, and reminiscences, in different fields (experience of mime and comedy in the 1950s) and varied mediums (drawing, engraving, painting, theatre sets, sculpture, and collage) he is freely experimenting.

In many ways, from the portraits of the Druze fighters from the 1958 uprising, to the brutal allegories of the Third World revolutions and the war in Lebanon (1975-1990); from the Italian matterist abstractions to the *Flying Carpets* of the 1960s, or the drawings imbued with a ‘cosmic’ spirituality accompanying the poems of his friend Kamal Jumblatt, an exceptional political and spiritual leader assassinated in 1977, Rayess’s work is that of a seismograph recording the thwarted desires and hopes of an era, through clearly heterogeneous formal inventions, testifying to an extremely free thinking and vision.

1958

From July to October, in the context of the Cold War and the Suez Canal crisis, a complex political situation brought the pro-Western President Camille Chamoun into conflict with the Arab nationalist militias. There was unrest in the major Lebanese cities and a guerrilla war broke out in the mountains between the loyalists of Naim Moghaghhab and the insurgents led by Kamal Jumblatt. Rayess went to Moukhtara, the stronghold of the Jumblatt family, and documented the events through a series of sketches and portraits of Druze fighters.

In homage to the martyrs who fell in the conflict, he designed the Bakaata memorial in collaboration with Kamal Jumblatt and Wahib Bteddini, a painter and sculptor. The memorial is an architectural and sculptural cemetery and place of remembrance, whose original concept and syncretic iconography – associating elements and symbols borrowed from various Eastern religions and metaphysics – are a reference to Jumblatt's spiritual knowledge and experience.



Ananda/Farah series, 1970s.
Estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery,
Beirut/Hamburg



Kamal Beik Jumblatt, 1958.
Estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery,
Beirut/Hamburg

Drawings for Kamal Jumblatt *Ananda-Félicité*

In an article published in *L'Orient-Le Jour* dated 17 February 1978, Rayess mentioned his work on a series of Indian ink drawings inspired by Kamal Jumblatt's poems. A series of these drawings for the poems *Ananda-Félicité* published by Kamal Jumblatt in 1975, were produced for a book which never came out is presented here.

Among this selection retrieved in the archive a sequence of seven drawings transcribes some poems in a form evoking ancient scrolls. A second series combines fragments of poems with Chinese ink and wash drawings. The third series accompanies some of the verses with symbolic figures related to Druze and Vedantic metaphysics, of which Kamal Jumblatt had a profound knowledge.



Après la torture - Algérie (After the torture - Algeria), Signed and dated "Rayess 60", 1960. Estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

Italy, October 1960 – June 1963

Rayess lived in Florence and Rome where he studied painting and sculpture. After living in Paris in the 1950s, he discovered ancient and modern art in Italy, and the post-war scenarios which in the 1960s were particularly rich and contrasting, just as the debates between figuration and abstraction. He was attentive to these diverse expressions, from Renato Guttuso and Lucio Fontana, to the futuristic figures and advertisements (such as Campari) by Fortunato Depero. At this time, he produced the matter-ist abstractions of the *Temps et murs* (Time and Walls) series, using various materials (sand, plaster, stone and molten glass) on canvas and masonite. These abstractions were presented at La Licorne gallery in Beirut, together with the small glazed clay sculptures made in Rome and the historical figures of the *Salut aux Martyrs de la Révolution algérienne* (Homage to the Martyrs of the Algerian Revolution), which he offered to Algeria in 1972.



Untitled, ca. 1963. Estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

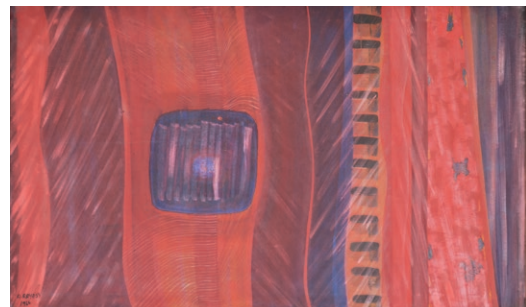
USA, May 1964 – June 1965

His stay in the United States, including a trip to Mexico in early 1965, was a decisive cultural shock and the discovery of a new world where speed, cities, daily life and behaviour were all very different from what he had been familiar with in Lebanon and Europe. He celebrated and illustrated this discovery with touches of humour and irony in the drawings, watercolours and gouaches in the pages of these five exceptional leporellos. They constitute a deeply personal travel diary just as much as an aesthetical treatise in which Rayess exposes and comments on his sources of inspiration, as well as an original formal, cultural and spiritual project.

In museums, galleries and salons he looked at and met with Marc Rothko, Joseph Albers, John Franklin Koenig and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as Hans Hoffmann and Frederic Kiessler, who he became friends with and dedicated the painting-poem *Naître, c'est commencé (sic) à mourir* (Birth is the beginning of death).

The leporellos are notebooks of ideas and forms that also present the first sketches of the *Tapis volant* (Flying Carpets) series, canvases and gouaches inspired by views of the roads and highways of Los Angeles, and Hoffmann's colour palette.

Back in Lebanon, Rayess considered a facsimile publication, which never came out.



Untitled, Hommage au tapis volant (Tribute to the flying carpet) series. Signed and dated "A. Rayess 1966", 1966. Guggenheim Abu Dhabi



Untitled. *Hommage aux bâtisseurs Islamiques* (Tribute to Islamic builders) or *Hassan Fatbi* series. Signed and dated "El Rayess 1972", 1972. Estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

Homage to Islamic builders, 1972

In January 1972, on the occasion of the talk *La contemporanéité en architecture arabe moderne* (Contemporaneity in Modern Arab Architecture) given by Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) at Dar El Fan, Rayess met the Egyptian architect known for his pioneering work in rural areas, the construction of the village of Gournah, near Luxor, and the subsequent book *Construire avec le peuple* (Building with the People), published in 1970. He then entrusted him with the plans for his house in Ouzai, south of Beirut. This series of drawings in oil pastel was inspired by their exchanges, the first of a lengthy series devoted to traditional Arab architecture. Later on, Rayess produced several Utopian projects inspired by the oil economy and culture in Saudi Arabia, where he stayed and worked from 1981 to 1989.

The flowers of Rue Mutanabi – off the Place des Martyrs an exhibition by Aref Rayess
wednesday, 28 feb. 1973
Galerie Contact, Beirut 1973

This exhibition of paintings and drawings, whose title is an explicit reference to the neigh-



Zoubour Chareb El-Mutanabbi – Le sentinelle endormi (The Sleeping Sentinel), *Les fleurs de la rue Al-Moutanabbi, place des Martyrs* (The flowers of Al-Mutanabbi Street, Martyrs' Square) series. Signed and dated, 1972. Estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

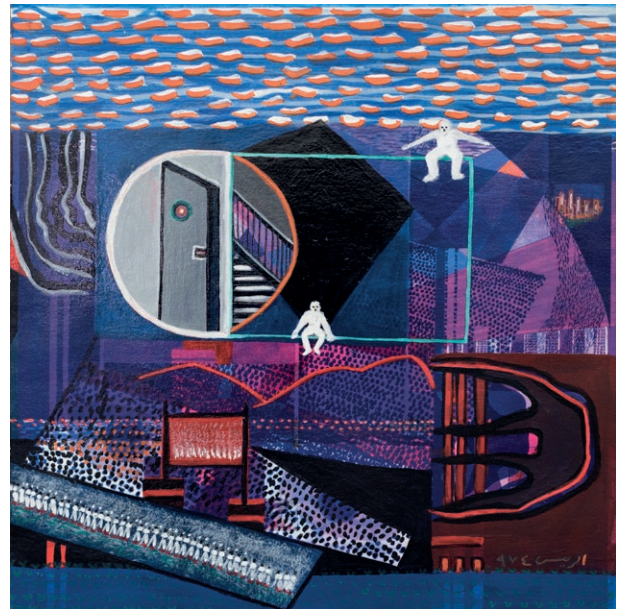
bourhood and well-known street of the Beirut brothels, is accompanied by an invitation (presented in vitrine in the exhibition) designed as a fac-simile of a page dedicated by Al Safa Lebanese newspaper to a long interview of Rayess with the critic Joseph Tarrab – "Body workers". In this interview he focuses on the question of prostitution in its social and primarily symbolic dimension (moral, intellectual, and political prostitution) and as a sign of the degradation of the state of the country.

Blood and Freedom, 1968
Love, Death and Revolution, 1970

The two series – *Sang et Liberté* (Blood and Freedom) and *Amour, Mort et Révolution* (Love, Death and Revolution) – and the 26 elements that compose *Temps modernes et Tiers Monde* (two of them could not be located) bear witness to the complexity of the iconography and figurations developed by Rayess in the pre-Civil War and political confrontation in Lebanon and the Middle East, and also to intense struggles (Vietnam and the Wars of Independence) and tricontinental debates. Monstrous animal



Temps Moderne et Tiers Monde ou La marche des peuples du Tiers-Monde entre le Développement et la Révolution (Modern Times and Third World or The march of the peoples of the Third World between Development and Revolution), 1 out of a series of 26 collages and lacquer on wood, 1974. Private collection



Temps Moderne et Tiers Monde ou La marche des peuples du Tiers-Monde entre le Développement et la Révolution (Modern Times and Third World or The march of the peoples of the Third World between Development and Revolution), Signed and dated, 1974-1975. Estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

figures borrow from Mexican muralism as much as from Italian futurism. Recurring caricatured motifs (e.g. the ‘heads in feet’ mocking ideological stupidity and those who ‘think with their feet’) imposed a unique and powerful plastic vocabulary.

Modern Times and the Third World or The March of the Peoples of the Third World between Development and Revolution, 1974-1975

Temps modernes et Tiers Monde ou La marche des peuples du Tiers-Monde entre le Développement et la Révolution (Modern Times and the Third World or The March of the Peoples of the Third World between Development and Revolution) is a reference to the Charlie Chaplin

film, an artist and figure deeply appreciated by Rayess. He often portrayed Chaplin in his work, in particular in the large sequence of collages from the 1990s, where he also portrayed the political struggles of those intense years. These small collage-paintings with a precious finish condense and symbolise the trans-historical space (the stage, the podium and the walls on which slogans and projections are displayed), the crowds and the figures (in this case, tricontinental) of the revolution. They were inspired by the space of representation and the style of the miniature, which underwent a remarkable renewal in Algeria through the work of Mohammed Racim and Mostepha Adjaout, for whom Rayess prefaced the exhibition held in Dar El Fan in May 1973.

CATHERINE DAVID

Art historian and curator Catherine David has been until last July 2021 deputy director of the Musée national d'Art moderne (MNAM-Centre Georges Pompidou) and head of the Research and Globalisation, where she has spearheaded and internationally diverse program.

She served previously as Curator at MNAM Centre Pompidou (1982-1990) and Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume (1990-1994) in Paris; artistic director documenta 10 in Kassel, Germany (1997); director Witte de With, Rotterdam, Netherlands (2002-2004).

Her recent curatorial projects include, among others Syed Haider RAZA (1922-2016), MNAM Centre Georges Pompidou (2023); FU.The Art of YUANJAI, NTMoFA, Taichung, Taiwan (2022); Juliao SARMENTO Abstracto, branco, toxico e volátil, Museu Berardo, Lisbonne (2022); BAGY AUNG SOE (1923-1990), MNAM Centre Pompidou (2021); WANG YIN 2021, A07 Building, Beijing (2021); YUANJAI, MNAM Centre Pompidou (2020); Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago (1960-1969) MNAM Centre Pompidou, Paris (2018); Memories from the futures-Indian Modernities, MNAM Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2017), Dia Al-Azzawi: A Retrospective (from 1963 until tomorrow),

Mathaf and Al Riwaq, Doha (2017); Wifredo Lam, MNAM Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2015); Unedited History Iran 1960-2014, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris and MACCI, Rome (2014); ADACH Platform for Visual Arts, 53rd Venice Arts Biennale (2011) and Hassan Sharif: Experiments & Objects 1979-2011, Qasr al Hosn, Abu Dhabi (2011). Between 1997 and 2006 he developed the project Contemporary Arab Representations, a co-production of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; Arteleku, San Sebastian; UNIA arte y pensamiento, Sevilla and Witte de With, Rotterdam.

After a deep and extensive work in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s, for more than two decades Catherine David has contributed – with special interest in the Arab world, but also in India and China – to a deeper understanding of and inclusive of modernity, more attentive to its inescapable formal and conceptual heterogeneity.

ACTIVIDADES

Presentation of the exhibition curated by Catherine David around the artist Aref El Rayess, with a wide selection of works produced between 1958-1978.

Date: May 11, 2023, 19 h

Place: Carmen Alborch Auditorium

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