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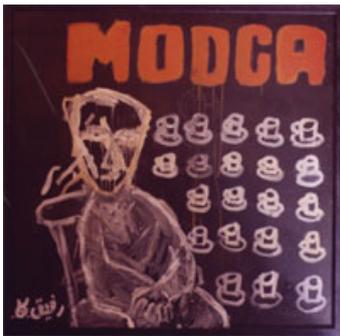
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### Rafik Majzoub

With Hands Unfolded: Public Portraits and Majzoub's Outsider Art  
by Kirsten Scheid

Every few years Lebanon's apartments and office buildings become a vast outdoors portrait exhibition, as candidates for parliamentary elections wage their campaigns by vying for virtual presence in the form of acrylic hand-painted on plywood. Local residents announce their support for a candidate by commissioning these likenesses and hanging them from their balconies. The greater the urban space covered by a candidate's face, the more his chances of winning seem to be. Given that people generally cast their votes in terms of the what is assumed possible and sensible, a candidate's actual presence in the forthcoming parliament is secured in advance by his ability to mobilize sufficient virtual presence in terms of enough plywood mounts, acrylic paints, willing brushes, and available balconies. Yet the pictures are often comically simplistic, evoking laughter as much as deference. This was especially true until the late 1990s because the high cost of advanced printing facilities together with the limited number of Beirut's professional poster-painters meant that the demand for outdoor portraits had to be fulfilled by amateur painters who were commissioned to copy preferred photographs to the best of their ability.



It was into this visual setting that Rafik Majzoub cast some of his first publicly displayed works in the mid-1990s. Raw paint handling, frontal positioning, schematized features, accompanied by sardonic captions characterized a series parodying outdoor candidate portraits: "La'ihat al-Wad` /The Situation Ticket," was the name of a piece showing ten suited males distinguishable only by their head shapes. In 1996, "the situation" of Lebanon was not only that of the promised-land of rampant reconstruction but also that of the appointment of the majority of wartime militia leaders to government posts, the massive crack-down on television and print media, the rapidly accumulating state debt, and the utter inability of the government to confront effectively Israeli aggression, as exemplified by the Qana massacre in April that year. The laughable figures on Majzoub's wooden surface were the people responsible for "the situation" or the way things are, and their absurdly staid likenesses promised a perpetuation of the prevailing order as has been delivered at every Lebanese election since (including this year's). Viewers could disparage them in their exaggerated one-dimensionality but not miss the way they leered out from the wood, fixed both in their features and their parliamentary positions. Nor could viewers forget that this reference to election portraiture, like Majzoub's other forays into chalkboard imagery, advertising posters, and street signage, was a reference to visual production outside the conventional art world, to visual production for which the public itself had to be held accountable. By occupying a pictorial formula that is part of society at large, Majzoub's work presents a compelling commentary on the



relationship of painter to public and public to world.

The way Majzoub has claimed a visual space for his own work is worth considering further. Bringing election imagery into rarified atmospheres such as Beirut's elegant Sursokk Municipal Museum resulted not only from Majzoub's trivializing the visual space occupied by these self-important predecessors – the apparently absolute public submission to the "given situation" – but also from his simultaneously appropriating a visual realm that had been marked off by a cosmopolitan anti-establishment style, a style which had, by the late 1980s, become thoroughly established. Rendering his critique of public and politic alike in the art-brut style made famous in Lebanon by the fashionable French artist Jean Dubuffet, Majzoub both visually inserted global fine art into Lebanese patriarchal, sectarian politics and intellectually inserted Lebanese worries about post-cold-war economic and political development into an aging, depoliticized art style.

It was through portraiture of nobles that painting on canvas gained a respectable social position in Beirut at the turn of the nineteenth century. Pictures were praised for attaining camera-like verisimilitude while commanding human, not mechanical, labor. Yet, with his deliberately artless, anti-mimetic style, Majzoub took the comically simplistic painting of would-be nobles engendered by elections to its logical extreme, revealing that the real politicians are but caricatures themselves of effective public representatives. Thus, if art brut was formulated in the metropolises as the art, in Dubuffet's phrase, of "those unscathed by culture," whose self-expression in painting is thus direct and sincere, then it has been applied by Majzoub to mean the opposite – the intensely, cosmopolitanly informed choice to see deliberate deviance in the people responsible for public life, including both politicians and average people.

Majzoub's critique of "the situation," while common enough among the "inarticulate" electorate, was unique among artists active in Lebanon, who were then generally busy embracing the positive aspects of the situation and not the negative. While others like Greta Nawfal, Charles Chahwan, Charles Khoury, Julie Bou Farah, Raouf Rifai and Joseph Harb employed expressionist and "raw" styles for dealing quixotically with psychological encounters, Majzoub alone consistently integrated personal and public tropes in his works to create an incise polemic on the results of Beirut's experience of economic and political globalization, or succumbing to the New World Order. While Majzoub's style has been that of an outsider commenting on the social condition, his position for doing so has been that of a global insider, viewing the local situation from the perspective of a common history of struggles and expectations. The upshot is a kind of imagery that is both eminently intelligible to local viewers without training in art history and yet also insistently ensconced in the international art scene for viewers who are interested in influence and innovation.

Over the past decade Majzoub has carried his interest in portraiture to new purposes, putting his style in conversation with expressionist painting, such as that of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Like the Brooklyn subway artist turned gallery darling, Majzoub, who has frequently painted the panels surrounding construction sites, continues to invest in prefabricated imagery like icons, billboards, photocopies, printed words, and anatomy sketches. The effect of sharing stylistic elements with internationally famous artists while dealing with more place-bound visual and political repertoire is ambitiously ambiguous. Perhaps it is in a series of paintings examining social consumption practices in Beirut that the impact of Majzoub's dexterous mix of levels of belonging and engagement can be seen most clearly.

In 2000 Majzoub painted a self-portrait whose title elides his own existence with that of a café, the Modca. This haunt of intellectuals and tourists opened on a central corner of Beirut's main shopping district, Hamra, in the 1970s and was distinguished for decades by its little orange tables. Around them the thinkers and worriers of Beirut would gather to tackle publicly Lebanon's situation, or at least to appear to be doing so. Indeed, appearing at Modca became such a ritual for some Lebanese public figures that it became a way of measuring their intellectual or political production, and their sitting their idly became a threat to their image. The 2000 version of this portrait offers a psychologically intense presentation of the café patron's entrapment in his public occupation of space, as the limbs are splayed across space, the frenzied modeling of paint defies the subject's self-absenting pupils, and the warmth and fullness of tones describing the body contrast with the watery, tempestuous background, which threatens to claim the chair and absorb the hands. In fact, this picture is one of the rare portraits in Majzoub's oeuvre that shows hands in use – most subjects are either armless or have their hands pressed to their sides in a stance of immobility – yet even here the hands, as Joe Tarrab has suggested, seem to be paralyzed between grabbing the table and throwing it.

A 2004 version, however, changes the terms of the representation. It is no longer painterliness that presents the subject's quandaries; indeed, elements hinting at a narrative, or an underlying will, have been completely excised from the later version. They have been replaced by iconic components: an innumerable series of espresso cups, a faded logo ("MB"), and the café/patron name in the very lettering that was mounted above the café for so many decades. Contrasting with the grid of coffee cups, indicating both regularity and infinity, the patron is now but a sketch figure whose unfinished rendering emphasizes his essential formlessness. How has this patron occupied public space and responded to Lebanon's contemporary situation? Like the café's logo, the patron has faded, and his ability to respond had been reduced to a pair of hands neatly folded in his lap in an attitude of resignation reminiscent of Whistler's mother. All that remains are the standardized cups, memories of what was at Modca but portents, too, of how (apparently) replicable that experience is. This picture of a ghost-like Modca patron and public space was painted post-humously, after the café's closure in 2004 due to competition from the globally rampant Starbucks chain, a closure which was protested by youth and neighborhood activist groups. Majzoub, who participated in that protest, has said that for him art-making is just one aspect of living as an engaged member of a given society. Considering this painting, viewers may be encouraged to make art-viewing but one step in their own engaged living.

That same year Majzoub painted several pieces which can be viewed as companions to the Modca portraits. A work inscribed with "Drink" in Arabic and English script shows a man's face in profile merging with the notorious red Coca-Cola logo. The Coke ads that appeared in Beirut in the 1990s showed profiles of people with their heads exuberantly back and their hands tipping a can into their open mouths in an act of boldness, initiative, indeed self-assertion. Here, however, there are no hands to show that the cola is being drunk as the result of the drinker's will. Likewise, no tilting of the head indicates pleasure in the act of drinking. There are only the eyes shot with blood-red corporate logo, staring at the viewer as dark fluid pours in where a shout can consequently not come out. Visually, Majzoub has formulated the analogue of the Coke slogan-command, "Drink." Imbibing this liquid literally nullifies one's agency. The face's rough, angular outlines contrast strikingly with the airy, techno-modern carbonation bubbles, but if there seems to be a fundamental difference between the drink and the drinker, this is belied by the fact that the very basis of the drinker's depiction is a commercial advertisement for the drink, a poster ripped from a wall in Beirut and given to Majzoub by a friend.

The slogan "Come to Where the Flavor Is," this time only in Kufic Arabic script, dominates another piece produced the same year. Here the Arabic word for "come" (ta'al) almost encloses a man's tired, jaundiced face and blemished lungs, presented as a crude anatomical slice. Majzoub has printed the Arabic words on A4 paper and pasted the sheets across the canvas. He deliberately introduced mechanically perfected and produced font to contrast with his brush's uncertainty. The face is further set against a flag-like form – dark grey and maroon stripes below, computer language "0" and "1" in the upper left corner where the stars of an American flag would be. In cinemas throughout the Arab world, five minute long ads prior to film screenings made the Marlboro Man astride his gallant stallion a palpable symbol of American virility. Here instead, the portrayed figure seems beyond ability to taste, let alone enjoy, flavor. His grid-mouth has lost its sensual aspect and come to resemble an industrial smokestack. With a cigarette spewing smoke jammed into his throat more by the given situation than by willed choice, the man Majzoub has revealed symbolizes not virility but the gullibility and passivity of consumers led astray by unremitting slogans and consumed by the product to which they have become addicted. Indeed Majzoub's critique takes on larger significance, and his style attains multi-pronged critical impact. For, handless, this anti-virile creature has become a motor for industrialism and commercialism, a central agent in fact in the destructive relationship between the first world (where fewer and fewer people smoke) and the third world (where banished products are now aggressively marketed). The way the smoker set against a flag-icon draws to itself a translated slogan recalls the large numbers of people around the world who incessantly swarm to America physically, ideologically, or emotionally. Simultaneously however, Majzoub's own style dares to hover around contemporary American art, for it blatantly employs techniques that are the signature marks of art metropole giants such as Basquiat.

In sum, Majzoub engages elements from Beirut daily visual experiences and non-local repertoires with equal ease. Yet by doing so he does not reflect a Beirut cosmopolitanism anymore than his peppered ancestry reflects a migratory lifestyle. Rather, by combining diverse elements and giving them new life in visual form he creates for viewers in 2005 a concrete sense of Beirut as multilayered, simultaneously local and transnational. Viewers of his seductive yet slippery work are invited to become responsible for those junctures and to react to them with hands unfolded.

