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Mandy Merzaban interviews artist Zena El Khalil

MM: Let's begin with the basics, where did you grow up?

ZEK: I spent the first 15 years of my life in Lagos, Nigeria. I then went to boarding school in the United Kingdom for three years, and only moved to Beirut in 1994 where I attended the University of Beirut. After graduating with a degree in graphic design, I moved to New York City for a Masters of Fine Arts, where I focused on installation and mixed media.

MM: Why did you begin to write a blog during the 2006 Israeli invasion? How did writing on an online platform effect or play into your experience during this tumultuous period?

ZEK: The very first morning that our airport was blown up, I was surprised at how little reaction there was both from the Lebanese people and the international media. That night as the bombs began to fall, I started writing emails describing my situation and emotions. I was very scared and honestly believed I was going to die that night. I felt that if I died, I at least wanted people to know how I died. I did not want to be another nameless war victim. Like Sharazade, I believed that by writing, I would stay alive. It felt impossible to die if so many people were listening to me 😊. The electricity, thankfully, stayed on. Internet was working. So I kept writing. The next morning, I found a lot of responses in my inbox, encouraging me to keep writing. After three days, the Guardian newspaper syndicated the first three days of my blog to newspapers across the world. I was being followed by people as far away as Hong Kong and Alaska, and even our neighbours south of the border.

In a way, writing was my way of contributing to establishing a "history" of a specific time and place. Like other artists my age, I am interested in the syndrome of collective amnesia in Lebanon. The 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon saw the beginnings of Arabs reaching out to technology in order to communicate during tumultuous periods. Iran was to follow soon after with Twitter. And of course, what is happening in Tunisia and the rest of North Africa is spreading like wildfire, through the use of film and sound uploads, both on phones and the Internet.

MM: Do you think a Blog is part of your identity or your art practice?

ZEK: That specific blog was part of my art practice. It started the first day of the invasion and ended the night of ceasefire. It is a piece in itself, having a specific purpose, time and place. I only went back to it twice after. Once to announce the passing away of my best friend Maya, whom I had been writing about during the attacks and second to share a story of a friend in Palestine who was unexpectedly caught in an Israeli raid, and also almost died. Almost like putting finishing touches on a painting. I try and take the violence around me and turn it into something docile and harmless. I try and record. I try to protect my memories. In May 2008, I was invited to speak at the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, Norway. I believe that if

enough people are working toward peace (through art, education, music, literature, meditation, dialogue and action) it will eventually happen.

MM: When did you begin to cultivate your distinct style? What is your rationale for materials that appear in your artwork?

ZEK: I have been interested in vivid colours, glitter and fabric for as long as I can remember. A lot of it has to do with what I experienced seeing as a child growing up in Lagos, one of the most populated and lively cities on earth. My visual vocabulary today is the result of an infatuation with life on the streets, religious shrines (Christian, Muslim, Druze and even tribal African effigies), and consumer culture. My work is about the here and now, so I believe that the materials I use should represent the present time and space I live in. I use glitter because glitter reflects light. And light is "Energy", Energy in the sense of a greater power out there. I have a very meditative relationship with my art making.

MM: Objects like toy soldiers, glitter, plastic flowers and Barbie dolls are symbols of Western consumerism and can influence the identity development of youth. A Barbie, for instance, is often depicted as the ideal female form yet the doll doesn't stand upright. How does utilising such items as your medium relate to your observations of Beirut culture?

ZEK: I was born in war. Everything around me now is war. War has always been. I was born in 1976. I grew up watching far too much TV. I watched cartoons, music videos and wars being televised. I grew up with Madonna and Michael Jackson, Iron Maiden and Bon Jovi. Spandex, lollipops, MTV, glitter, shoulder pads, the war to control oil, Glam Rock, hairspray, Thatcher and Regan, Barbie and Ken, to me, are the backdrop that represents a generation that grew up pink. Pink is like cotton candy. It's fluffy and sweet. Too much of it though will leave your teeth rotten and a bad pain in your stomach. Walking along a street in Beirut, one will find a large painting of a martyr, next to a shop that sells lingerie, next to a billboard advertising beer, next to a cop holding a Kalashnikov, next to a man with a pushcart selling the latest pirated Shakira CD. I am trying to expose the superficialities of war in our region and how it affects our daily lives. My work is a by-product of both political and economic turmoil. I highlight issues of violence, gender and religion and how they find their place in our bubblegum culture.

MM: In an excerpt from your memoir *Beirut, I Love You*, you say "there is a thin line between reality and dream, the problems with trying to live in a post-war city are many. Nothing works the way it should, not even the people". Could you elaborate on this concept in the context of your mixed-media and performance works?

ZEK: Chaos. I live in a world of chaos where dream and reality collide. Things happen that seem too absurd to be real. I don't sleep well at night. My dreams are polluted with horrific images and experiences. It is hard to find security, so I have to create my own. The more I create, the safer I feel. The more glitter I use, the closer I am to light... to the source. I take that which is rooted in violence and then I de-contextualize it so that it no longer exists. I want to negate the negative.

M: You run the Beirut International Marathon in a bright pink wedding dress every year. How did this start and what are you hoping to convey with this performance?

ZEK: When I began this performance piece in 2003, it was as a social experiment. I was at that age that people in this part of the world deem “marriage material”. Mothers started passing by our home to sort of “check out the goods” and see if I was fit for their sons. At first I was horrified, but then decided to go with the flow and see what I could make out of it. I created a performance piece called *Wahad Areese Please!* (A Husband Please!) in which I get to go out and pick my husband, and not vice-versa. I chose the Beirut International Marathon as a venue because it is the only event in Lebanon where you have people from so many different backgrounds in a common space. I bought a wedding dress; spray painted it pink, and walked the 10-kilometre course in the dress. I asked people questions about their concept and expectations of marriage. Most of the discussions were about material wealth and property. Very little spoke of love. I was also trying to open a dialogue about civil marriage (which we don’t have in Lebanon) and women’s rights to pass of nationality (which we don’t have in Lebanon).