

Beirut gallery hit by the August 4 blast reopens with new show

Galerie Tanit is showcasing the work of local Lebanese artists under the theme of togetherness

Lemma Shehadi | Beirut | Jul 5, 2021



Galerie Tanit has reopened with a new show called Togetherness showcasing the work of local artists. The gallery had been severely damaged during the Beirut blast on August 4 last year. Dimitri Nassar, Courtesy of Galerie Tanit

Beirut gallery that was damaged by the August 4 port blast has reopened its doors, amid the -ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon.

Situated less than 600 metres from the Port of Beirut, Galerie Tanit sustained enormous damage to its space and -artworks. Today, the walls have been repainted and the glass windows restored. But the builders haven't left yet, and the sound of loud drilling reverberates from the back room.

"Reopening the gallery has been a miracle," its owner, Naila Kettaneh-Kunigk, tells The National. The challenges were emotional and physical, she says. "For months I wasn't ready to reopen. I had to find myself, think, and come to terms with the wounded and the dead." The building's architect, Jean-Marc Bonfils, who was at home in the apartments above the gallery, died from the impact of the blast.

Galerie Tanit's opening exhibition, entitled Togetherness, features the work of 21 artists residing in Lebanon. "A lot of young artists lived in the area affected by the blast. I had to do something for them," says Kettaneh-Kunigk.

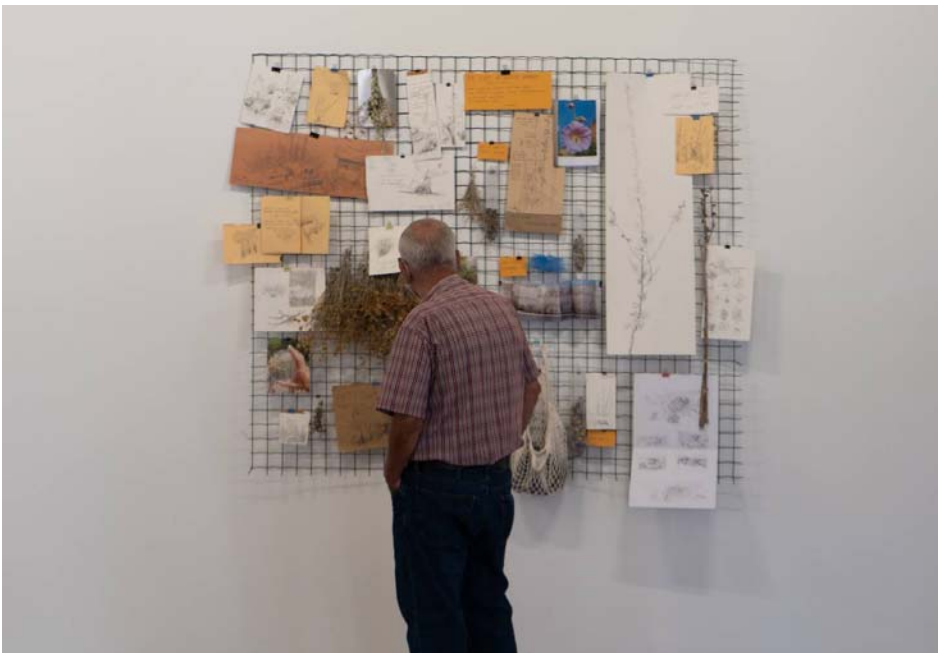


'A Stretch of Water' (2021) by Laetitia Hakim & Tarek Haddad. Dimitri Nassar, Courtesy Galerie Tanit

After an open call for submissions, 17 projects were selected by a jury, which included -Kettaneh-Kunigk. In the first room, artist Rayane Raidi's painting of stretched, interlaced bodies echoes the exhibition's theme, which aims to "describe, question, challenge and embrace the thought of being together again".

Many young artists and recent graduates appear in the show. "It's an opportunity to get to know the new generation of artists, follow their trajectories and organise overseas opportunities for them," says Kettaneh-Kunigk. "They are Lebanon's future."

Artist Elias Nafaa, 24, developed a light installation on the changing nature of private and public spaces as a result of the pandemic. Nafaa says -coronavirus-related restrictions gave him the "comfort of stepping away from the world to take a pause". But, he says, "our intimate private spaces were invaded with work calls, and the voyeurism that came from working from home".



A visitor at Togetherness exhibition in Beirut. Courtesy Galerie Tanit

The interactive installation consists of moveable white cubes with coloured lighting, and was made using textures and materials commonly found in the home. "It's a playful piece that encourages viewers to participate and rethink how we live together," says Nafaa.

Maysa Al Khoury, 24, produced a photo and video installation about the days spent in isolation with her bed-bound grandmother.

Amid the country's financial crisis, many artists are struggling to purchase materials. "We're forced to keep all our ideas on paper," says Nafaa. The gallery, he says, supplied the resources needed for his installation.

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Some works in the exhibition directly reference the crisis. Photographers Noel Nasr and Cliff Makhoul's series *Devaluation* highlights the impact of the Lebanese lira's depreciation on daily life. The artists show what can be purchased from Lebanese supermarkets with a 1,000 lira note, the currency's smallest: a teaspoon of Nescafe, three quarters of a banana, 10 pine nuts or eight individual Lipton tea bags. Once pegged at about 66.6 cents to the dollar, today the 1,000 lira note is worth less than 5 cents. Meanwhile, artist Eliesh's video installation shows footage of Lebanon's October 2019 revolution, with a focus on the feet of the marching protesters.

Others chose to blend the poetic with the political. Laetitia Hakim and Tarek Haddad's sculpture of blue jersey fabric stretched to the point of transparency evokes the horizon of Beirut's seafront. But it also serves as an allegory for the crises that are pulling the country apart to the point of rupture.

References to the blast also appear through more personal works. Sarah Sehnaoui produced a series of ceramic objects representing the shattered fragments of a woman's pelvis. Zeina Aboulhosn's abstract terracotta sculptures use fragments of roof tiles sourced from a local manufacturer.



'Sky Diary' by Bettina Khoury Badr, part of Togetherness exhibition in Beirut. Courtesy Galerie Tanit

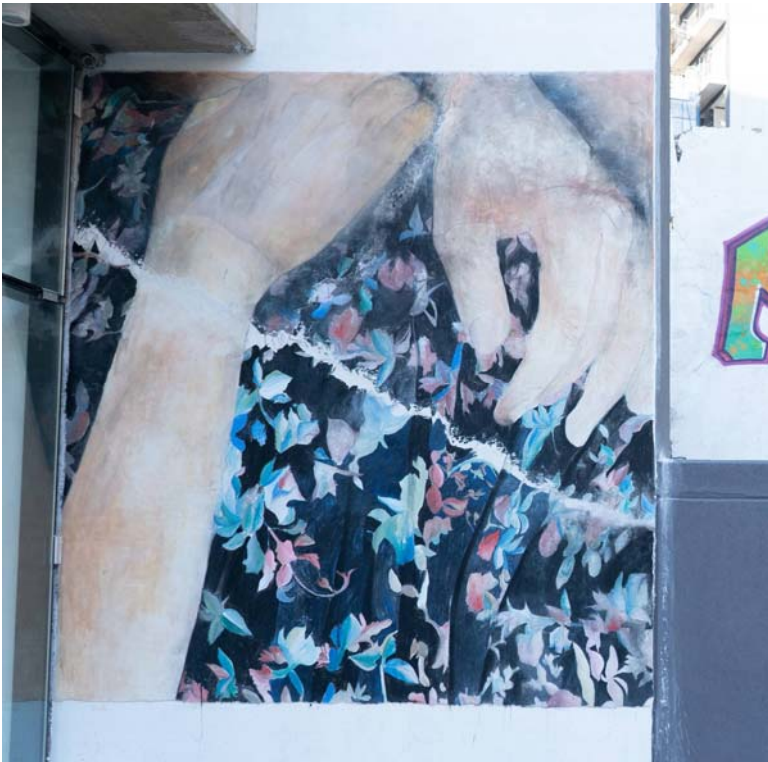
Many projects on view take the form of a sketch book or diary. Bettina Khoury Badr presents three watercolour mosaics, based on photographs of Beirut's sky taken daily since the start of the pandemic. The largest among them, *Sky Painting* (2021), is composed of 450 square watercolours of building antennas, skylines, clouds and starlit skies, arranged in a grid and a blue gradient from light to dark. A smaller painting from the previous year depicts the changing sky on the night of the Beirut blast.

In the same vein of tracing a personal journey, Christian Sleiman documented Lebanese foraging traditions through sketches of plants and bunches of dried shrubs accumulated from travels across the country. Most of

the plants were collected in urban areas, including Lebanon's coastal highway or the archaeological ruins of Baalbek.

The rituals around wild plants also appear in three leporellos by Caroline Hayek and Clemence Cottard Hachem. The series, entitled *Secrets-Soleils*, is centred on three wild flowers that are indigenous to Lebanon: the mallow, the poppy and the cyclamen. Using photography, drawing, text and collage, the leporellos reveal a "real and imagined" cosmogony on those three plants.

Kettaneh-Kunigk hopes the exhibition will help to support Lebanon's varied, but increasingly isolated, art scene. "It has become a bubble with few galleries or outlets for the artists," she says. "Banks often bought the work of young Lebanese artists, but they are now in crisis, and local Lebanese collectors prefer more classical works." Responding to this, artistic duo Jeanne et Moreau offer a critique of Lebanon's art market by presenting a non-hierarchical list of Lebanese photographers.



'The 5th month' by Chafa Ghaddar outside Galerie Tanit. Courtesy Galerie Tanit

Adjacent to the gallery, Lebanese artist Chafa Ghaddar, who lives in Dubai, unveiled a permanent fresco mural to mark the reopening. Entitled *The 5th month*, it depicts the clothed stomach of a pregnant woman, and is based on a photograph the artist took of herself mid-pregnancy. The woman's fingertips gently touch the fabric of a black silk dress, with a colourful flower print and lace edges.

Ghaddar hopes the mural can contribute to the revival of her native city. "As I live abroad, I struggled to find a topic that could depict the violence that happened here. I didn't want to parachute an idea," she says. "This painting came from the idea of touch and transformation."

Togetherness runs at Galerie Tanit in Beirut until Saturday, August 7

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/2021/07/05/beirut-gallery-hit-by-the-august-4-blast-reopens-with-new-show/>