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War-themed art is popular in the Middle East, but some say the fixation limits artists, writes **Ben Gilbert**

Battle fatigue

To many people, the words "Middle East" are synonymous with conflict and war. Negative and simplistic depictions of the region, especially those perpetrated by the art world, infuriate Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury.

Gallery owners, curators and collectors in the US and Europe have pigeon-holed Arab artists into creating "war art", says Khoury, feeding Western perceptions.

Khoury's outrage is expressed in a collage and sculpture titled, *P.O.W.* or *Prisoner of War*, exhibited at the Beirut Art Centre last week.

The point, he says, is to create awareness and spark a discussion among Lebanese and Arab artists about the "war slot" to which they've become "prisoners".

"It's scary to see that all contemporary artists today are being put into that slot, even those who have a lot more to say in their work," says the architect, one of the most prominent in the Arab world.

"Lebanese and Arab artists aren't celebrated through aestheticising war, and fetishising war... what I call the neo-colonialist fantasy of what Lebanon is and what the Arab world is."

Ironically, Khoury says he came to this view in the 11 years after he gained international fame for his own war-themed projects that have been called "combat architecture".

In 1998, he created B 018, an underground nightclub on the site of a massacre in Beirut in 1976, during Lebanon's 15-year civil war. A year later, on the old front line that once divided Beirut's warring militias, he designed a sleek underground sushi restaurant next to housing for war refugees. A few blocks away, Khoury gutted and wrapped an abandoned house in steel mesh for a high-end restaurant called Centrale. The bar was suspended above the dining room in a steel, gun-like tube; windows slide open for a view onto downtown Beirut.

The projects were Khoury's reactions to war and urban space; among them, the way Lebanese society dealt with memories of the war and the way the war altered the fabric of the city. But he now says the war theme has become commercialised and clichéd.

"Artists have a responsibility, and I'm slowly realising that we're becoming passive actors in a scenario we don't have much to do with," he says. "We're just riding the wave, as there's demand for [war-themed art]. I think there's another modernity, and other issues at work in this part of the world. This has been overused."

Art from the Middle East focusing on conflict has been wildly successful with collectors and curators in recent years, especially

following the September 11 attacks in the US and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Lebanese curators and gallery managers say.

"They're all excited lately about Iranian art, Arab art and Middle Eastern art," says Joy Mardini, manager of Espace Kettaneh-Kunigal gallery in Beirut, who previously worked at Christie's auction house.

"I'm happy for us, for the Middle East. Finally someone is listening and looking at our work."

Unfortunately, the war scenes are selling very well abroad.

Although numerous Lebanese galleries and art institutions held war-themed exhibitions over the summer, many artists reject Khoury's claim that they are "prisoners".

"The works I do about photography, as a market, are much more successful than the works I do about war," says Akram Zaatari, whose pieces are displayed in London's Tate Modern gallery and the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

"Collectors have told me they are fed up with war and say they'd like to collect images of flowers and not violence."

Although he gave Khoury permission to use a collage he created about the civil war in the *P.O.W.* exhibit, Zaatari criticises it as a shallow effort.

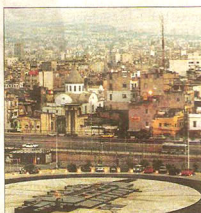
"It's a joke," Zaatari says of the *P.O.W.* collage. "It's a generalisation; he picked up examples to illustrate an argument as opposed to exploring that argument well."

Beirut Art Centre director Sandra Dagher, who earlier held an exhibition featuring works created during the civil conflict, says war is a common theme in Lebanese art because the country is still dealing with such issues.

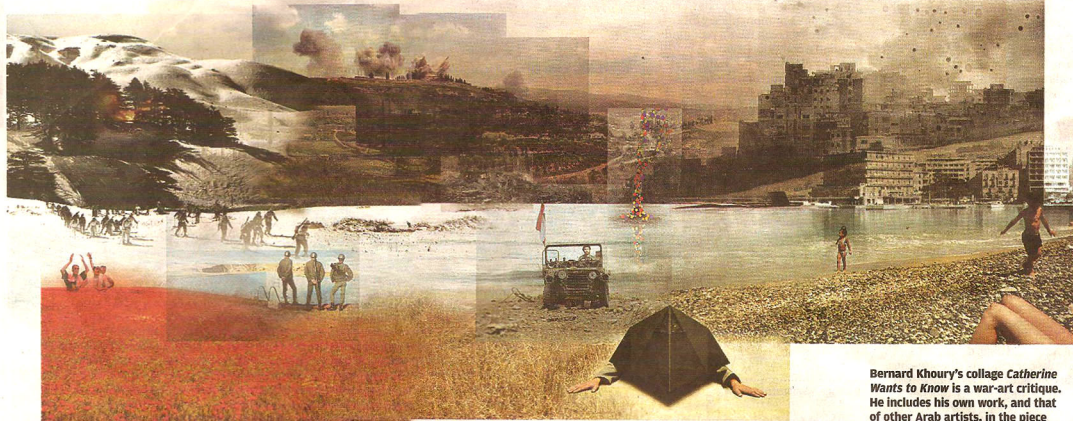
"It's normal that artists work in the context of where they live,"

Dagher says. "And all of us are still living the traumas of the war. It ended 15 years ago officially, but we still live with the tension. Every time there's new political tension, people go into this flashback of what happened. I think people don't talk enough about the war."

But Dagher says Western curators are guilty of selecting work from Lebanese and Arab artists' portfolios that fits certain



Khoury's underground nightclub B 018 (foreground) was built on the site of a massacre in Beirut in 1976



Bernard Khoury's collage *Catherine Wants to Know* is a war-art critique. He includes his own work, and that of other Arab artists, in the piece

preconceived notions of the Middle East.

And as much as she regrets that Western interest in Lebanese and Arab art revolves around conflict, Mardini says "war is sexy" and it sells, if only for the moment.

"I think we're going to get to the point, five years from now, 10 years from now, when people are going to be fed up and artists are going to feel it, and they're going to change," she says. "It is a wave, like art deco or art nouveau."

However, Zaatari hopes war-themed art isn't simply a phase; he's more worried criticism of such work could deter artists from exploring the subject.

"I'm afraid of people being marginalised because the serious work has not even started on the civil war," he says. "The terrain has not even opened up. What you have heard until today is nothing. I have not opened the files for the Lebanese civil war because I do not know where to start."

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