



The Silent Echo is the first contemporary art exhibition to be held at the archaeological site of Baalbek. Courtesy India Stoughton

A journey to the past where contemporary art meets archeology at Baalbek

India Stoughton

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Inside a room of roughly hewn rock, an installation by Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei laments destruction in the name of progress. Outside lies the sprawling archaeological site of Baalbek.

Located an hour's drive north-east from the Lebanese capital, Beirut, it is one of the largest temples of the Roman Empire, where visitors fade almost to nothing beside the Temple of Jupiter's towering columns and the soaring stone edifice of the Temple of Bacchus.

Ai's work, titled *Foundation*, invites viewers to wander among the stone bases of traditional Chinese houses hit by rapid urban expansion. A video projection, showing a looped series of photographs from the artist's Instagram feed, aims to provoke reflection on the idea of the internet as the contemporary agora, or gathering place, and pose one of the driving questions facing any civilisation: Is it necessary to erase the past in the interests of a brighter future? This is a question that is at the heart of *The Silent Echo*, the first contemporary art exhibition to be held at Baalbek.

Curated by Karina El Helou, founder of the non-profit curatorial platform, Studicur/Art, in Paris, the exhibition features one piece each by Ai, Bosnian artist Danica Dakic, Laurent Grasso and Théo Mercier, both from France, London-based American Susan Hiller, and Lebanese artists Ziad Antar, Marwan Rechmaoui, Paola Yacoub and Cynthia Zaven.

El Helou began working on the concept for the exhibition a year ago, inspired by contemporary questions surrounding archaeology and artefacts, including destruction, preservation, ownership and iconoclasm.

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"I wanted to really engage the public on their relationship with archaeology," she says. "All of the artists had their own views on archaeology: future archaeology, experimental archaeology, the passage of time, erosion, preservation, intangible heritage.

"What would the public have to say? I wanted to reflect on what they really see. Do you see beautiful architecture? Do you see it as a tourist, or take a more poetic view? Is it something you really relate to from your culture?"

El Helou chose to exhibit most of the works inside Baalbek's on-site museum – which is housed in ancient stone tunnels – highlighting the value of displaying artefacts at the location where they were found.

"The idea was mainly archaeology, iconoclasm, destruction, but also a reflection on how archaeological findings can disappear and on how civilisations disappear – the erosion of time, obsolescence," she says. "It's a huge debate because in the end, do we really need to preserve everything? Do we need to build on past things to get into the future? What do we really need to remember?"

A video installation by Hiller, which is screening close to *Foundation*, explores a more intangible sort of cultural heritage – language. *The Last Silent Movie* is a 22-minute compilation of recordings of extinct or endangered languages, played against a blank screen showing only subtitles in English and Arabic.

Snatches of conversations, stories, lessons and songs plunge viewers briefly into endangered or vanished cultures, emphasising the extent to which identity is bound up with language and self-expression, and the difficulty of preserving the intangible.

Grasso's film *Soleil Noir*, meanwhile, is eerie and mesmerising, as it explores the devastating destruction wrought by natural forces in spite of human attempts at preservation.

Filmed using a drone, it combines beautiful, sweeping shots of the abandoned streets and ruined buildings of Pompeii with a bird's-eye view of the smoking craters of live volcanoes. In Pompeii, still shots of frescoed animals are juxtaposed with footage of a scrawny white dog running silently through the deserted streets. Meanwhile, the volcanoes exhale smoke and cough up ash, biding their time before the inevitable eruption.

Grasso's video is accompanied by an ominous, dissonant soundtrack with a rumbling bassline like a distant avalanche.



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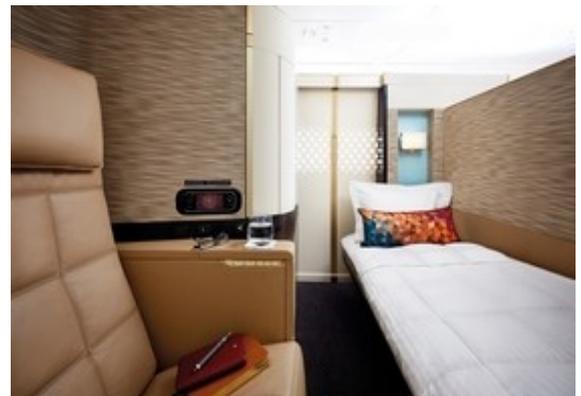
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