



In the southern most wing of the Baalbek Museum, a museum of archaeology at the ancient ruins of Baalbek in Lebanon, in a room known as the ‘Cities of the Dead’, an unknown man and woman mourn the loss of a child. Their grief was carved into a marble slab around 200 A.D. It expresses the eternal nature of their love but also the transience of their own lives. Intangible emotions are set against the physical weight, texture and temperature of the cool stone. Next to it is an unidentified object, draped in a sheet and placed on a plinth, like a Hellenic sculpture but entirely made of concrete. It is part of a wider series of sculptures, titled *Derivable* (2015) by the Lebanese contemporary artist Ziad Antar. “They are modelled on photographs of sculptures that I took during a visit to the Jeddah Sculpture Park,” he explains. “At the time, the sculptures were covered in white sheets to protect them during renovations.” The series invites the viewer to reflect on issues surrounding art in public spaces, but also on authenticity and originality. Alongside seven other artists, Antar was invited to show his work at *The Silent Echo*, the first contemporary art exhibition to be held at the ancient ruins of Baalbek, Lebanon.



Clockwise, from left: *Foundation* by Ai Weiwei; an installation by Theo Mercier and Marwan Rechmaoui's *Pillars*. Images courtesy of India Stoughton

The Silent Echo opened on 17 September with a sense of urgency. In response to the Islamic State’s highly mediated destruction of important historical sites, including the destruction of parts of Palmyra in Syria, UNESCO has made the preservation of cultural heritage in conflict zones a priority since 2014. “*The Silent Echo* is absolutely a reaction to what is happening in the region,” says curator and co-organiser Karina Al Helou, in reference to the destruction and looting of archaeological sites and artifacts in Syria and Iraq, which pre-dates IS, “but it is also a study of iconoclasm, archaeology and cultural identity.” Founder of Studiocur/art, a not-for-profit curatorial platform in Paris, Al Helou co-organised the exhibition with the arts consultant Diane Abela, who is based in London. “Baalbeck has a rich cultural heritage, but the city and its inhabitants have suffered from the absence of tourism, because of its location near the Syrian border,” explains Abela. “Our aim was to help bring visitors back to the city and to engage the local community.” As well as the exhibition, which had strong support from the Mayor Hussein Al Lakkis and the municipality of Baalbeck, a conference on ‘Archaeology, Obsolete Past and Iconoclasm’ was hosted by Studiocur/Art in partnership with UNESCO at the Musee Sursock in Beirut. A theatre programme linked to the exhibition which engaged the local

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Ziad Antar

community of Baalbeck also took place in October. Al Helou reported that on the second Sunday of the exhibition alone, Baalbeck received 4,000 visitors.

The destruction of heritage, from conflict, natural disasters and even local ignorance is a strong theme of the exhibition.

In the main wing of the Museum, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei’s gigantic piece *Foundation* (2015), used the stone foundations of an old Chinese home which had been torn by property developers. Elsewhere Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmaoui’s series *Pillars* (2015), recreates model high rise buildings using rubble and concrete from buildings in Beirut that have been destroyed during the civil war. Susan Hiller documents dying languages in her video installation *The Last Silent Movie* (2007-08), and Paola Yacoub brings to light the excavation of Beirut’s ancient cities which took place after the civil war.

Yet the exhibition also offers a wider reflection on art and archaeology. “Every period has its own perspectives on ruins and ancient artefacts,” says Al Helou. “In the 19th century, European travellers on the Grand Tour adopted the Romantic view. Gradually the approach became more empirical and scientific.” In turn, *The Silent Echo* asks what perspectives contemporary art can bring onto these sites. “I believe that artists can offer a more nuanced and philosophical angle,” says Al Helou.

Most striking was the dialogue created between the contemporary works, and the ancient ones. “Baalbek has an imposing historical force,” Antar explains. “It will affect whatever object you put in there. As an artist, I felt a sense of danger trying to make an intervention in such a space.” Inside the Roman Temple of Bacchus, the Lebanese sound artist and composer Cynthia Zaven set up her sound installation *Perpetuum Mobile* (2007-2008). A single note is struck on the piano and repeated asynchronously across twelve amplifiers, which are arranged in a circle inside the temple. “The resonance within the temple is really powerful, and it really carries the sound,” Zaven explains. “Seeing the piece in Baalbek among the ruins moves me more than exhibiting it in a gallery,” says Zaven “I love seeing the residents of Baalbek sitting in the middle of the temple, simply taking in the sounds and the space.” ■

The Silent Echo ran until 17 October. studiocurart.com