

Guerrilla marketing

A new book chronicles the war of images waged in Lebanon's political posters – and the way artists and designers shaped the country's larger conflicts, writes Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

Walk through the streets of virtually any neighbourhood in Beirut and you'll find the faces of political leaders – past and present, local and foreign – plastered onto construction walls, building façades and shuttered storefronts. Lebanon's president, Michel Suleiman, has gone so far as to call for an end to the relentless posterage, but his pleas have been largely ignored, and the city is still marked by ubiquitous images, large and small, of Hassan Nasrallah, Imad Mughniyeh, Nabih Berri, Musa Sadr, Michel Aoun, Rafik Hariri, Saad Hariri, Samir Kassir, Gebran Tueni,

Pierre Gemayel, Bashir Gemayel, Elic Hobeika, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Syria's Hafez and Bashar Assad and Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Some of the city's posters are tattered and torn while others are freshly pasted, evidence of the ongoing process of marking territory as loyal to one faction or another. Some of the names and faces on the posters have changed over the years, but the poses, slogans, sentiments and styles are recycled again and again, an apt metaphor for the politics of a country that seems cursed to continuously replay the sectarian conflicts of its civil war.

What haunts the streets of Beirut is not the scars of war past – though they are still visible, on buildings pockmarked by bombshells and bullet holes – but the spectre of conflicts future, whose scripts are foretold by the posters jostling for prominence in what passes for public space (in the absence of grand public parks or plazas). With parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in Lebanon this spring, the paper arms race is certain to intensify further in the months to come.

Zeina Maasri's new book, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*, is the first sustained study

of Beirut's poster wars, and the first serious and comprehensive investigation of the way that fifteen years of fighting left an indelible mark on the city's visual culture – one that persists to this day. Maasri is not the first person to single out the posters as a uniquely Lebanese phenomenon: in recent years a number of Lebanon's visual artists have taken the posters as subject and inspiration.

Jalal Toufic's short video *Saving Face* (2003) offers a clever rumination on the thick texture created by the accretion of posters for various candidates who are apparently vying for public office, even though the winners have been decided in advance and behind closed doors. For an artist's project that appeared in a special, Beirut-themed edition of the German magazine *Shifft!*, Ola Sinno launched a hoax political campaign by papering her neighbourhood with posters of her own face accompanied by the slogan: "Acknowledge Me!" In 2004, the anonymous art collective Heartland staged an urban intervention, titled *Al Murashah* ("The Candidate"), for which the group used a round of municipal elections as an occasion to create an imaginary politician, plastering his enigmatic face across the surface of the city.

In a handful of essays, historians, sociologists and urban theorists have explored the impact of political posters on the residents of Beirut, suggesting that these seemingly benign pieces of paper guide the ways in which people move through the city, barring them from one neighbourhood while welcoming them in the next. As physical manifestations of confessional tensions, these posters have contributed significantly to what Samir Khalaf, a professor of sociology at the American University of Beirut (AUB), has described as the geography of fear and the reterritorialization of space in Lebanon's post-civil war era.

Maasri, a graphic designer and professor, has collected some 700 political posters, culled from the archives at the American University of Beirut, the media offices of various political parties, the personal affects of former partisans and the

ageing portfolios of artists, illustrators and designers, whom she interviewed over the course of her research as well. In April 2008, Maasri presented parts of this collection in a meticulously installed exhibition titled *Signs of Conflict*, which was produced by the arts organisation Ashkal Alwan for the fourth edition of the Home Works Forum in Beirut.

In the five years since she began her research, Maasri has been collecting, documenting and digitally archiving her poster collection, and she brings to her work a designer's touch for making the material accessible and interactive. Anyone can visit AUB's website and spend time with the posters online. But what sets *Off the Wall* apart is the arguments she makes and the conclusions she draws.

Fawwaz Traboulsi's foreword and Maasri's chapter on the aesthetics of Lebanon's political posters are swift and confident. The pace of Maasri's introduction, however, is grinding, like day one in a cultural studies class. Here, Maasri takes immense care to delineate and define her terms, such as discourse, articulation and hegemony. She gives ample credit to the work of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose wide-ranging concepts she tailors to the specifics of her case study. The language could have used some finesse, but the precision with which Maasri treats certain theoretical constructs lends tremendous credibility to her work.

The thrust of her argument is that Lebanon's political posters do not constitute propaganda campaigns but rather mark symbolic sites of struggle. She reads the signs, symbols, texts and images of the political posters that were produced during the civil war as evidence of how different communities and factions fought to define, assert and articulate themselves on Lebanon's social, cultural and political landscape.

The sheer number of groups whose posters Maasri considers speaks volumes about the factional chaos of the civil war: the book features examples from Amal, Hizbollah, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), an assortment of independent Nasserite movements, the Lebanese outpost of the Baath Party, the Communist Party, a conglomerate of other left groups, the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon, the Progressive Socialist Party, the Kataeb Party and the Lebanese Forces. Maasri groups them into themes – such as leadership, commemoration, martyrdom and belonging – and explores the visual iconographies and textual strategies at play.

The most illuminating passages in the book are those that examine competing posters wrestling to define the same event. The Lebanese Forces and the Arab Liberation Front (a faction of the PLO), for example, produced dramatically different

posters commemorating April 13, 1975, the date when Kataeb fighters ambushed a bus full of Palestinian passengers in the neighbourhood of Ain al Rummaneh, killing more than thirty and sparking the fuse of civil war.

The LF poster, from 1983, glorifies combatants (and, by implication, bloodshed) in an illustration that hovers above a slogan reading "April 13, The Dawn of Freedom." The Arab Liberation Front poster links the Ain al Rummaneh incident to the loss of Palestine in 1948, collapsing the two events into a single, tragic narrative of devastating dispossession. The LF poster tries to capitalise on an eight-year-old "victory," probably for the purpose of recruiting future fighters in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion, the assassination of LF leader Bashir Gemayel and the horrific massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila camps – while its Arab Liberation Front counterpart seeks to cast the start of the Lebanese civil war as yet another episode in the epic of Palestinian resistance.

Off the Wall is peppered with a number of revelations, such as Maasri's discovery of a cache of SSNP posters in which partisans who had signed on for "martyrdom operations" took photographs of themselves and wrote down a few final words before blowing themselves up. The appearance of their posters on the streets of Beirut signified the sordid execution of their missions.

But the most significant and instructive portions of the book are those that put forth an uncomfortable but urgent argument about the role artists have played in shaping not only the terms of Lebanon's political discourse but the twists and turns in its violent history. In the early days of the civil war, many leading artists contributed to the political poster campaigns of various parties. Omran Kayssi, from Iraq, created posters expressing solidarity with South Lebanon and promoting resistance to Israeli incursions. The Lebanese artist Rafic Charaf adapted his painterly style to posters for Amal. The Lebanese artist Paul Guiragossian, whose paintings are now a benchmark of modern and contemporary Arab art auctions in London and Dubai, contributed artworks for posters that were circulated by the Communist Party.

Youssef Abdelkeh, a former Syrian dissident who is currently represented by the Ayyam Gallery in Damascus and Dubai, also created posters for the Communist Party. Jamil Moleab, the darling of Galerie Janine Rubiez in Beirut, made posters for the PSP. Ismail Shammout, the grandfather of modern Palestinian painting, made posters for the PLO's Lebanon branch. Kameel Hawa turned out several posters for the Baathist-oriented Socialist Arab Union; Amr al Rayess for the Lebanese National Movement; Pierre Sadek for the Lebanese Forces; and Wajih Nahle for the Kataeb Party.

Maasri ties the aesthetics of wartime posters to the development of modern and contemporary art in Lebanon and the Arab world at large. She explores how influences from Latin America trickled in by way of the Organization in Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia and Latin America – a group that was established in Cuba in 1966 for the purpose of promoting liberation movements in the third world – and the readily exportable visual codes of class struggle and revolution. Oddly enough, she links the production of political posters to illustrations for children's books, and to the practice of *yafta*, popular across the Arab world, which involves stringing public banners across city streets to

offer commentary during moments of popular uprising or political campaigning.

Because Maasri approaches political posters as visual culture, and through the lens of cultural studies, she grabs hold of an argument that art historians would likely dodge: namely that artists are not apart from politics, that their work is not merely responsive but actively engaged, that the aesthetic object is not isolated but is rather implicated in conflict and that artistic practices are not necessarily removed from the waging of wars.

If the political posters of Lebanon's civil war informed the construction and articulation of political identities and positions, then the artists who made them bear some responsibility for shaping that discourse. Artists, in this regard, were partisans rather than bystanders. Even if they did not fight themselves, they helped to mould the subjects who did.

Maasri's methodology – analysing artworks within their complex social and political contexts – is particularly crucial at a time when curators are tying themselves into knots trying to find meaningful frameworks for the presentation of Middle Eastern

art. At a panel during last year's Art Dubai fair, a terrific spat broke out between the artist Lawrence Weiner and the curator Venetia Porter over the meaning and implication of Porter's exhibition *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, which, in its Dubai iteration, included two examples of Weiner's work among some 75 other artists united only by their use of calligraphy. Porter argued that the calligraphic bound artists of the modern Middle East together under a shared identity, without reference to any one country's political history, because calligraphy was tied to Islam and considered sacred. Weiner, meanwhile, argued that calligraphy was no more than typography, and that Porter's reading of it was no less than exorcising.

In the catalogue for *Word Into Art*, Porter argues that the works are signposts in a shared history; she asserts that "texts tell stories," and that words embedded in images "provide us with real snapshots of history as well as revealing reactions to the region's devastating conflicts during the past few decades... As members of emerging national communities, these artists and intellectuals had a clear view of their own identities and



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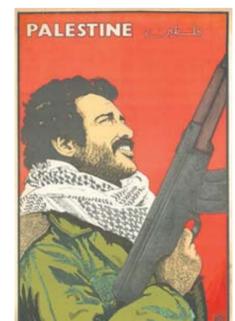
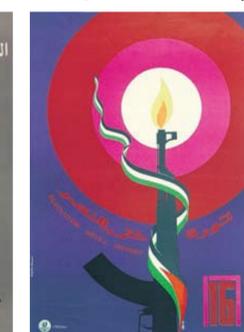
"We will resist": Political posters, like this one designed by the Lebanese artist Nazem Irani for the Lebanese National Resistance Front in 1984, are a mainstay of Beirut's streetscape. Reproduced here is a sampling of images from Zeina Maasri's new book *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*. All images courtesy of the author

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increasingly sought to express subjective and political truths through a medium that they themselves had transformed... This strongly evoked sense of identity... is arguably the single most important theme of the art highlighted here and what lends it its extraordinary richness.

It's a nice idea. But Maasri's book proves otherwise, and shows that neither identities nor meanings are fixed. Certainly in Lebanon they have never been clear. Images and texts are tools for contesting, rather than telling, stories. Calligraphy, a feature of virtually all of the posters in Maasri's collection, is mobilised for purposes of political struggle, both secular and religious. *Off the Wall* may take as its subject a visual product that does not qualify as high art. But Maasri's precise, insightful and informed approach offers an important and effective antidote to the ways in which curators sometimes generalise the life out of art from this region by ignoring the lines of inquiry that may lead to complexity, untidy and even unsavory conclusions.

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reports for *The National* from Beirut.



"The groom of the south: The martyr Bilal Fahs" says a poster made for the Shia militia group Harakat Amal by the political cartoonist Nabih Khouh in 1984

"Against Imperialism and Zionism" reads a poster from 1977, made anonymously for the Lebanese Communist Party