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Arts, Culture & Lifestyle Writer

Material Matters

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I talk with Lebanese artist Aya Haidar ahead of her upcoming exhibition, *Year of Issue* at Bischoff/Weiss and stitch together the style, substance and success of her London-based multidisciplinary practice.

Jonathan Velardi: It's unbelievably almost ten years since we first met at the Slade School of Fine Art. I'd like to start with talking about an opportunity we both shared during our time at the Slade. I can remember being very excited for you when you were awarded a place at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) on exchange in 2006. Having experienced SAIC for myself the year before, I knew what an effect it was going to have on your practice, as it did mine at the time. How important was your exchange to SAIC?

Aya Haidar: Chicago was definitely a pivotal moment in my early career. At the Slade I didn't want to limit myself to painting, media or sculpture. Most of my art has been about concept more than medium, so when I went to SAIC the variety of media on offer was overwhelming. I remember applying to do animation or something digital. These classes were oversubscribed so it was actually a happy coincidence I found myself in the Fiber and Material Studies department. I thought weaving and knitting were simply practical pastimes - how could this be related to my art practice? Within the department there were many different subjects that were so engaging: one of them was 'Propaganda and Decoration'. Just the sound of that title, in that department, was amazing. They had huge weaving, sewing and screen printing studios as well as the expertise behind it from so many tutors.

JV: Tutors whose practice it was working with those very media - who were actively exhibiting and working on projects and commissions.

AH: Completely. Because the tutors were practising artists they were a resource as much as the facilities were. I wasn't afraid to try anything.

JV: You explored your craft, quite literally, during your time in Chicago. Were you as fearless with your concept?

AH: A lot of the subject matter I was exploring out there was politically engaged. I was from the Middle East, making art about the Middle East and the discourse from critique shaped my work critically, conceptually and aesthetically. On my return to London from Chicago I was much more confident as an artist as well as a thinker. The way I looked at art completely changed for me.

JV: The art versus craft debate remains contentious despite the feats achieved to date by the likes of Turner prize-winning artist Grayson Perry. You're a practising contemporary artist based in London who continues to use the very media you discovered at SAIC. What's your opinion on the art versus craft debate?

AH: Craft is very much about the medium. Something that falls under craft can be beautiful and utilitarian and it can stop at that. Where craft ends and art begins is the manipulation of the material. Fibre in itself is historically, socially and politically loaded. Where art comes into it is when concept is introduced – the voice of the artist behind the material.

JV: Things that are perceived as craft speak louder to non-art audiences by way of familiarity. Subsequently the handmade emits a greater accessibility than a conceptually-bound artwork. I believe these are the core ingredients that make your work so potent.

AH: The materials I use are especially loaded – loaded from a feminist perspective but also from a very personal perspective. My history was passed down to me through the medium of craft. Culturally, this is such an important part of where I'm from. As you say, it is something that is so familiar – everybody has a history with material: something personal to them that their grandmother made or knitted. The industrialised world we live in now was not like this several generations ago. The handmade is very important in my practice. No matter where you are from, the material is where we can go back to and it is something that is both familiar as well as having the ability to hit people emotionally. When you see something that is sewn, woven or knitted there lies an inherent narrative - even if there is a disturbing or heavy message on it - you know someone's hands made it and this human element brings a contact between the artist, the artwork and the viewer.

JV: Both cultural and personal narratives play important roles in your practice. How do you balance being objective and subjective?

AH: I may be dealing with socio-political issues in my region, but it's not my intention to be political with my art - these are universal issues that can be interpreted as social issues. My work is not about statements but interpersonal revelations - stories that I have seen and experienced; things I have been told. I'm creating an arena for discussion and reflection by breaking down the stereotypes of the region that I am from and revealing untold stories that are never reported on the news. For instance, I look at regional conflicts across the Middle East – I never talk about Lebanon versus Israel versus Syria versus Iran versus America. It's more about the stories of separation between mothers and children and the human cost of these conflicts, which is so far removed from the cycle of global politics. These subject matters are things that people can relate to: issues of displacement, forced migration, human rights. These are things someone in Mexico or Zimbabwe can understand just as much as someone in London. The way in which I communicate all of this is through stitching, embroidery and weaving - that's the language that was translated to me where I'm from. Just as you are a writer and communicate through words, I communicate with thread.

JV: Who passes on these narratives to you and where do you source the 'untold' today?

AH: I've always been told where I'm from by my grandmother and my parents. I've never lived in Lebanon but I've always visited. I grew up in a Lebanese household here in London where these stories were told to me. I completely consider myself Lebanese in the way that I was raised and I am passionate about where I am from. Any artwork that I make about the current situation across the Middle East is through my own personal experiences and is not sourced virtually from my computer screen or my phone. I am very active within a humanitarian context, whether it be helping refugees to cross the border from Syria to Lebanon or working with Palestinian communities in their camps.

JV: How are you able to experience these scenarios first-hand?

AH: I don't want people to think my experiences fall under bourgeois tourism. My role as both Director of the charity, Al Madad Foundation as well as a contemporary artist feed into each other. The work I do for the charity gives me exclusive access to the frontline of these areas and enables me to be proactive with a mandate to make serious change.

JV: What is AI Madad Foundation's mission?

AH: AI Madad Foundation concentrates on long-term development aid through education projects and sustainable emergency aid relief that focuses on sanitation. Not many charities work on these aspects, mostly dealing with provisions of food and shelter, which are very kamikaze in their approach. The charity is trying to break this dependency within the refugee community. In the last year we have worked directly in Syria - many international organisations are not allowed to do this. Through our contacts on the ground in Aleppo we set up a series of successful education projects and schools for children that has returned order and discipline into the very fabric of these communities that were once so broken. People forget Syria was a middle-income country and that these refugees were educated teachers, lawyers and doctors before the crisis. We look at their skills and hire them to teach or rebuild their community for a wage in order to break this cycle of dependency and to make sure their dignity and self-respect is preserved.

JV: Huge congratulations with what you're achieving with the charity.

AH: Thank you very much. We're a small charity but we do our part one person at a time, working towards long-term sustainable change.

JV: We've witnessed the marriage of aid and popular culture that was borne in the late twentieth-century. Similar motions of awareness continue today and are almost de rigueur amongst our contemporaries. How do you feel about 'artists' visiting areas of conflict whose purpose can be seen as finite in their exposure of the situation in these areas?

AH: This irritates me the most. For people to go into these areas for their own selfish purpose is wrong - it's not only artists but politicians and self-styled activists too. I don't see being an artist and a humanitarian as separate things. I'm passionate about human affairs, politics and injustices and I'm incredibly fortunate that I'm in the position where I can bring concrete change on the ground. I've seen the human cost to conflict with my own eyes. I'm told stories that have hit me emotionally and these are echoed in my art.

JV: You've had huge art success in the UK and across the Middle East. You were recently in Beirut with the charity as well as for the launch of your first public art commission.

AH: That's right. Refugee settlements are very much a part of society in Lebanon. *Dwelling* is made of corrugated iron from these settlements to create 18 birdhouses. Ironically the piece is installed in Saifi Village, one of the most elite parts of city. Each birdhouse plots the movement of refugees across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The height of each birdhouse differs and represents the number of refugees in that country from the tallest to the lowest respectively. There's no outline of a map, but it's visually interesting to see the waves of different heights.

JV: It sounds like a real departure from your other artworks.

AH: It's the first time I've worked large scale in metal - the opposite to the delicate works I'm known for. It's been a great opportunity to push boundaries on all levels.

JV: *Dwelling* couldn't be more topical - when massive displacement is taking place as a result of the Syrian conflict.

AH: The news talks about the hundreds of thousands who are dead in Syria. What I've heard echoed by the refugees is that when you're dead, you're at peace. It is the people alive who are suffering. There are 4.25 million refugees displaced in Syria alone - this isn't counting the millions who have fled to neighbouring countries. The survivors continue to suffer in these harrowing environments - they are cold, hungry and have lost everything.

JV: Would you like to do more public art commissions?

AH: I've really enjoyed working on this commission. My practice is about engagement and taking it beyond the white walls of a gallery space. I like the idea of art in everyday environments and being able to communicate with a variety of audiences in their personal space.



Dwelling (detail), 2013
Image courtesy of the artist

JV: Since your last exhibition at Bischoff/Weiss in 2011 we've had demonstrations span from the Arab Spring to the streets of Wall Street; *The Protestor* was crowned Time Magazine's Person of the Year and the revolution of classified media driven by WikiLeaks continues to challenge the status quo. Propaganda, globalization and communication are all themes reflected in your practice. How important is it for you to revisit the past, in particular during times of present day crisis?

AH: A lot of the troubles happening now stem from political relations in history. What I've noticed in the Middle East is that it boils, it explodes and then it calms and repeats itself. Everything that is happening now with Syrians in Lebanon is reminiscent to what happened with Palestinians in Lebanon. It's interesting you mention this notion of revisiting the past because my upcoming exhibition *Year of Issue* marries the past with the present. It's about dating – everything is chronologically archived. It looks at mandates and declarations of independence, revealing how actually all of it is so pointless. My artworks look at the significance of independence – are these countries any more independent now than they were? No they're not. Lebanon was made independent in 1943. Is it any more independent now than it was under the French? To answer your question, this upcoming exhibition precisely looks at the past and brings it to the present day and it will show how questionable history can be. In relation to story telling, history is very important. I'm talking about the human stories – these cannot be forgotten amongst trivial dates and policies.

JV: You've looked at QR codes in your new body of work. I particularly like how you're re-recording these futile dates and policies by way of a process of permanence: the stitch. The digital world has entered into fiercely political territory, as a powerful tool for both the rebel and the institution alike. How have you introduced the digital into your analogue practice?

AH: This is really interesting. For *Year of Issue*, I started with a very specific concept and what grew out of it were the artworks. Even though the exhibition is about chronology and history, the breakdown of language and communication are equally important. One element of my practice is to breakdown forms of communication and rework them. In this case, I have looked at QR codes to reflect today's generation of communicating. Instead of writing something down we just scan for information. This has huge value because the Arab Spring would have never sprung if it weren't for social media. It provided a level playing field – all the information was instantaneous and it didn't matter if you were up high or down low: everyone had a voice. Technology however, also has its limits. Each QR code represents the declaration of independence from each country. When I embroidered the QR code what was interesting was that it became redundant and didn't work. The fibres create a hazy outline making it impossible for the technology to scan it and therefore translate it. The stitch created a barrier in communication preventing me to access the information. For me, it's about the strength of the old versus the new age of technology.

JV: When I saw these works for the first time, I instantly saw a strong topographic quality to them. Notions of espionage came to mind and I wondered how you felt about that.

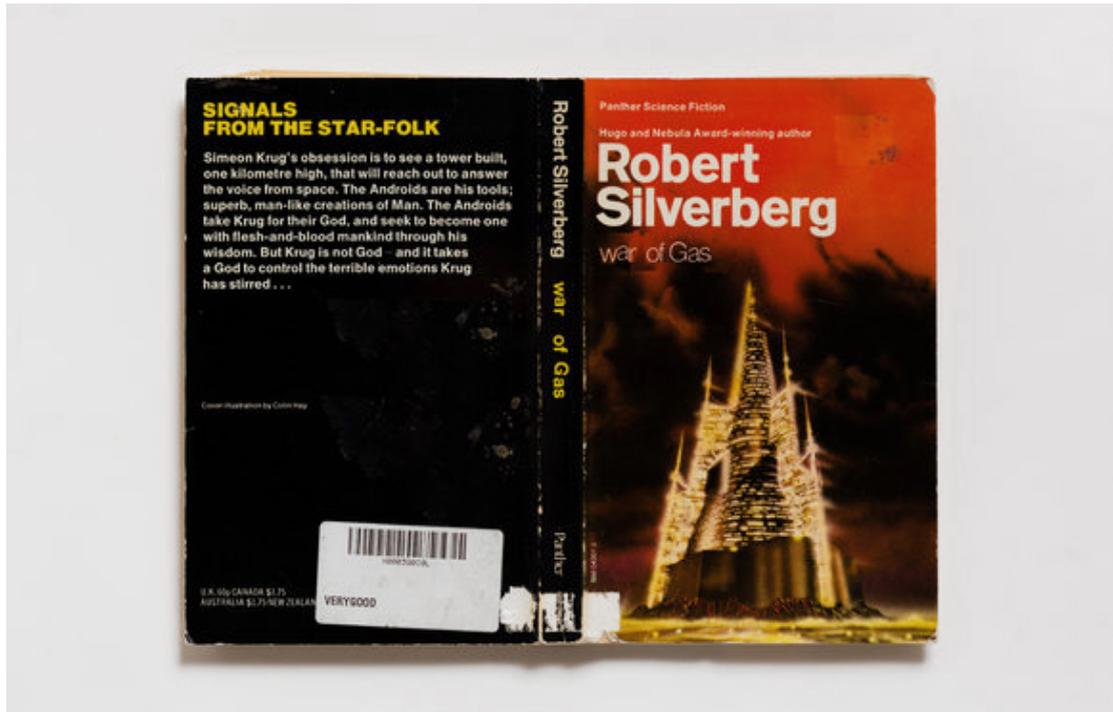
AH: They do. For the integrity of the work, I know that they're created from the declarations of independence but no one will ever know what is written because they won't be able to scan them. I like that there's this power dynamic between you and me through the artworks. People feel uncomfortable when they are kept out of the loop, or when they don't understand something. I felt this in my last exhibition in 2011 at Bischoff/Weiss, *Behind Closed Doors*, where I created an environment out of closed doors that made people feel uncomfortable.

JV: I remember the doors didn't have any handles. You created not only a physical but also a visual barricade.

AH: Exactly! It was interesting to see how people reacted to the doors and how they interacted with them. Part of my practice directly involves putting myself in uncomfortable or unfamiliar environments. I remember for my first solo show, *1982* in 2009, the most important thing about that installation was the environment. People entered the dark gallery with a high-pitched sound that inevitably causes fear and anxiety. Following on with the doors, I significantly limited access in the gallery space. Although the area was lit, people were forced to walk through tight corners and around this wall of used doors that were closed shut. I create a similar barrier with the QR codes – the works are about the selectivity of communication in the same way media or propaganda is selective in its content.

JV: But there is communication within that even though it doesn't follow through. Are you trying to make the viewer work harder?

AH: My intention isn't to hide any information. With this latest work it's about the document itself and how it's communicated. Whether you can read it or not, they are insignificant contracts. The declarations of independence don't make these countries any more independent. You should 'take' your independence – no one should 'give' it you! With my previous work, the way I communicate stories can be very direct through the embroidery of text or imagery on shoes, blankets or story quilts. Other times it's not so direct and about the break down of language. There's another piece in *Year of Issue* where I've doctored letters on envelopes that were circulated around the United Nations in the Middle East. Language is fascinating. By just putting letters in different sequences you can create so many different meanings and possibilities. By taking away one letter or adding another and it can give a whole different meaning to something. That's scary and worrying. This is what I'm highlighting in the artwork *Return to Sender* - it talks about media and propaganda and how the manipulation of words can shape peoples' perceptions. *Year of Issue* is really about language and communication whether it is visual, textual or coded.



Covered Issues (detail), 2013
Image courtesy of Bischoff/Weiss

JV: How do you interpret the role of an artist?

AH: I don't speak for all artists but in my opinion the duty of an artist is to engage with people about their environments on social and political levels. You may not be interested in what's happening in Syria or Lebanon but these are mothers, grandmothers and children that are like you and me. What's happening to them may very well happen to us. I believe it is our social responsibility to work towards becoming a global community.

JV: For anyone who hasn't seen your art, I think it's important to say that these political or humanitarian issues do not burden the works. Aesthetically, they are seductive in their execution and will speak to anyone through whatever degree of contextualisation or superficiality they wish.

AH: Thank you. I hope these new works will emotionally connect to many by way of their aesthetic and reveal the issues I'm dealing with.

JV: Who influences you?

AH: I admire Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir. Their works are so topical, poetic and aesthetically beautiful.

JV: What's the art scene like in Lebanon?

AH: Lebanon's art scene is predominantly concentrated in Beirut. There are a lot of established Lebanese galleries who represent some of the biggest names from the region on an international scale. What's more interesting is how the underground art scene is so alive. When you walk around Beirut you see a lot of witty and political Banksy-style graffiti. There's also a lot of music, theatre and artist collectives made up of students studying to be architects, doctors or scientists who are also engaging in the arts. It's an incredibly bottom-up movement, which is very important in a country where there is so much pressure and tension. It gives everyone a voice and it's really amazing how creative and innovative people are. It also brings communities together in a way like no other. I can't help but be inspired when I'm there.

JV: What area of Beirut would you recommend for culture vultures?

AH: I like Hamra district for all the cafés, bars and street art that is everywhere. I'd also recommend Agial Gallery run by Saleh Barakat who has been in the business for decades and deals with modern art. For contemporary art, The Running Horse and Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Khodr district feature emerging talent from Lebanon and across the Middle East.

JV: #HIGHLIFE

AH: *Gibran, The Play* is inspired by Lebanese literary great Khalil Gibran and his seminal work *The Prophet*. The production is currently touring the UK and the Middle East.

JV: #LOWLIFE

AH: Broadway Market in East London on a Saturday is the place to go if you are a foodie.

JV: Thank you very much Aya. It's a wrap. Or it's a stitch?

AH: It's a knot!

Year of Issue by Aya Haidar - joined by Huda Lutfi and Sara Rahbar - opens at Bischoff/Weiss, London on 21st November and runs to 20th December 2013.

Bischoff/Weiss

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W1J 8NZ
www.bischoffweiss.com

The Running Horse

Sleep Comfort Depot Building GF
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Khodr District
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Lebanon
www.therunninghorseart.com

Gibran, The Play

Theatre Royal Haymarket
London
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www.trh.co.uk

Al Madad Foundation

www.almadadfoundation.org

Broadway Market

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E8 4PH
www.broadwaymarket.co.uk

Agial Art Gallery

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