





Abraham Karabajakian at KA Collection in Beirut

a voice for ARAB ART

Displaying modern and contemporary Arab art under one roof, the KA collection has high hopes in furthering the dialogue for Arab art alongside a new museum in Beirut. Rebecca Anne Proctor speaks with collector **Abraham Karabajakian**

Abraham Karabajakian at KA Collection in Beirut surrounded by works by Paul Guiragossian, Marwan Kassar-Bach, Shafic Abboud, Huguette Caland, Amine El Bacha and sculptures by Salwa Raouda Chouair.



Situated away from the chaotic cacophony of sounds common to downtown Beirut is the serene Dbayeh waterfront. Here, on the fifth floor of a 900-metre apartment is the KA collection, a private non-profit art space housing the joint collection of Abraham Karabajakian and his friend and partner Roger Akoury. A literal treasure chest of Arab modern and contemporary art is displayed in the space, which is set up in the manner of white cube gallery-cum-sleek residence, a selection of more than 650 pieces of artwork in addition to 200 artworks from Karabajakian's personal collection. Bridging the genres of painting, installation, sculpture and photography, here slender silhouettes of Paul Guiragossian are positioned alongside the corrugated-iron sculptures of Palestinian refugee artist Abdel Rahman Katanani, the expressionist oil paintings of Ayman Baalbaki, Erel Adnan's evocative landscapes, Huguette Caland's sensual figures, and the anthropomorphic sculptures of Alfred Basbous.

Housed in KA Collection are nearly all the major Lebanese artists from the last century. "The purpose was to show modern Lebanese artists who were not yet shown in museums," says Karabajakian of the art space that he co-established in 2011. "We didn't have any projects yet for a museum in Beirut." Today plans for several

institutions dedicated to modern and contemporary Arab art are in the works, notably the BeMA, of which Karabajakian is a board member and cofounder. "KA Collection will become part of the BeMA," he says. "We are working on finalising the project and having the institution on ground as soon as possible."

Karabajakian's mission is to build a collection of Lebanese art united under the slogan of "joy, freedom and harmony." He wants not only to share his collection with others but also offer another way to view Lebanon. "It's very important to be known internationally through positive things and art is one of them," he says. "Culture is the strongest weapon we have to fight violence and misery. Seeing beautiful things will create beautiful minds. Listening to refined music will elevate and open up our spirits. I strongly believe that art unites the Lebanese, art can and should be a building block in our national identity. We never ask an artist's religion or from which village he or she comes; we only say that he or she is a master or a genius. We only say his or her work is beautiful, marvelous and stunning."

Over the last 20 years, through much research and travel, Karabajakian built his collection. It all started one summer vacation around 1995 when he was vacationing in Paris. "I was walking around the city and spotted a gallery with interesting work," he recalls. "The exhibition displayed a group of Yugoslavian artists and

The COLLECTOR



A view of the KA Collection featuring paintings by Aref El Rayess (left and right) and Hugueite Caland (center) and sculptures by Nadim Karami, below. A landscape by Marwan Sahmarani, bottom; a landscape by Etel Adnan.

I was immediately drawn to the lithography of Kiro Urdin." Karabadjian bought this work. "It was the lower price but at the time it reduced my vacation budget considerably. It was completely worth it." And from that moment, it began. "Taste is like a muscle," he says. Each trip that Karabadjian took would lead him to discover and learn. "I was very young and didn't have big budgets and I loved art. In the beginning I began buying etchings and lithography and then it developed to include painting and sculpture."

Karabadjian lives and collects by the motto that "one can never like something that is unknown to him." The title of collector doesn't appeal to him. "When you have more works than you can put on your walls people call you a collector but I had no intention to be so—it was simply for the love of art," he emphasizes. Karabadjian notes how the price of an artwork can also change its aesthetic allure to many viewers. "When people would see a Saliba Douaihy they would often comment 'my son can do that.' But then, when some of his works sold for a record price at Christie's, they changed their discourse." Karabadjian believes that what has happened in the Middle Eastern art market over the last decade has caused people to view art from the region differently. "Works by modern masters from the region have been hidden away until recently—some of them have been literally thrown away," he says. "Now people are realising the importance of their country's art."

Moreover, each artwork in Karabadjian's collection has a particular story, not just in its subject matter and theme, but also in the way that it was acquired. "When I began collecting works by Etel, not many people had heard of her." The largest work by Etel Adnan that Karabadjian acquired was from Nadine Bekdache at her gallery Janine Rubeiz in 2010. He had learned about the artist through his research and then met Adnan in Paris. "I was so seduced by her persona," he beams. "Her works are so simple



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and small but as powerful as huge complicated paintings. Artists who create such beauty reveal refinement, sensitivity and genius. I appreciate that. You can see it when you look into the eyes of Etel and also those of Hugueite Caland."

While Karabadjian focuses largely on works by Lebanese modern artists, KA collection is also home to pieces by major contemporary Arab artists like Nabil Nahas, Abdel Rahman Katanani, Marwan Sahmarani, Ayman Baalbaki, Mona Hatout, Akram Zaatar, Ziad Antar and Lamia Joreige, among many others. "They work in different media that I can't easily hang with the modern paintings. We have quite a big number of contemporary artists in the collection that need a different art space."

This leads us to the subject of curating. Karabadjian clearly has an eye for which works converse best through subject matter and aesthetic. "I wouldn't call myself a curator," he laughs. "You need to have the passion to do something." That "something" stems back to when he was growing up in his Armenian home in Lebanon. His father, who owned several boutiques, loved art and music—he even published a book about the songs of the Armenian Church. "My father and uncle owned several boutiques and I used to help them decorate the show windows," he remembers. "Maybe I should have been an architect." Despite the wars in Lebanon, Karabadjian's family stayed in the country and he enrolled in a law programme at Beirut's Saint Joseph University, but later decided to complete a Bachelor's degree in Management. He went on to obtain an MBA in Marketing at his alma mater and is an insurance broker by profession. "If you have two amazing paintings and you don't know how to hang them you can really downgrade them; it's an art form that people need to learn," he says of the placement of his artwork. "The



works need to marry well; they need to speak to each other." Clearly, there's an aesthetic balance that resonates throughout the collection. Subtleties of colour, form and texture dance before the viewer offering each one their take and place in Lebanese modern art history.

"What I love about modern art, a movement that started in the late 40s, is the message of both freedom and beauty," he recalls. "I love both abstraction and colour. Abstraction for me is about a liberated mind—when you look at an abstract painting you can see whatever you want. You can go anywhere you want, and colour provides joy and beauty."

Over the years, Karabadjian's collecting took him on a mission to do something for his country. Similar enthusiasm has led prominent Lebanese collectors such as fashion mogul Tony Salameh to establish the Aishti Foundation, banker Raymond Audi to decorate his corporate office with modern and contemporary Lebanese art, and Ramzi and Basel Dalloul to also establish their own museum. "All the participants in the Lebanese art scene are changing the face of Lebanon through art."

Karabadjian's particular mission has been to defend Arab modern art. "My passion for collecting became a mission. Most galleries are working with contemporary art because it is easier," he says. "It seems like the majority of the events, newspapers, magazines are driven by the contemporary." Modern art is part of a shared Lebanese history—it's about forging an artistic discourse with the past. "Everyone talks about wars and hatred but by speaking about the Middle East through art we will embellish the region and open it up to harmony peace and dialogue." The time couldn't be more right. ■

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Left: paintings by Aref El Rayess; a sculpture by Mounir Maanin. Mergedish; above: 'Hide and Seek' by Abdullah Katanani; below: paintings by Aref El Rayess and sculpture titled 'Couple' by Alfred Babisous.

