

Exhibition at Tripoli's International Fair explores time and collapse

The opening of the exhibition “Cycles of Collapsing Progress” at the Rachid Karami International Fair reignited interest in one of the most ambitious works by the influential Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer.

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The Rachid Karami International Fair opened to the public last month, as part of a monthlong exhibition of contemporary art in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli. The fair’s tragic history — which includes the interruption of its building by civil war — and the architectural venue’s artistic importance were central to the exhibition’s themes of collapse and historical cycles.

“Cycles of Collapsing Progress,” an exhibition organized by the Beirut Museum of Art and STUDIOCUR/ART, a Paris-based nonprofit, runs at the fair from Sept. 22 through Oct. 23. The show features some 20 works, ranging from sculpture to video art, addressing the cyclical nature of time and destruction. The Tripoli Citadel serves as a satellite space, also exhibiting works and hosting various activities.

The abandoned fair itself exemplifies the themes of collapse and time, curator and founder of STUDIOCUR/ART, Katrina el-Helou, explained to al-Monitor. “The art and the space, we [needed] to create a synergy between these two things. The exhibition is about a general reflection on historical cycles. ... The fair symbolizes the history of Lebanon, an unfinished dream, [one that is currently] collapsing as well.”

The Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer designed the fair in 1962. Niemeyer was a forerunner of modern architecture and the creative mind behind such iconic buildings as the United Nations Headquarters in New York and those of Brasilia, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its modernist architecture. The fair was Niemeyer’s largest project outside Brazil.

The Lebanese government, under President Fouad Chehab, commissioned the fair during a spate of nation-building infrastructure projects. According to the original concept, the fair was to serve as a center of trade, culture and leisure, incorporating some 15 daring and experimental architectural structures.

Upon arriving in Lebanon, Niemeyer explained to the daily L’Orient–Le Jour that the fair would be a “museum of the modern object” and include a number of technological feats,

such as a floating stage in the theater controlled by a hydraulics system, and novel venues, such as a combination helicopter pad and space museum.

Niemeyer's ambitious goals never came to fruition, however, as the onset of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 left the International Fair incomplete and abandoned. The fair, named after Lebanon's 10-time prime minister, was scheduled to be finished in 1976. By the time the war intervened, Niemeyer had managed to finish most of the project, including a theater, an exhibition hall, a space museum and a pavilion.

At various times during the war, the fair, in strategically important Tripoli, 53 miles from Beirut, was occupied and fought over by Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese Sunni forces. The site, with its dilapidated modern architecture and tragic history, emits a melancholy aura, both because of its unfinished structures and remains of the war.

Roy Samaha, a Lebanese artist exhibiting at the event, told Al-Monitor, "The location itself, it represents a symbol of failure, this utopic dream that never happened ... a poetic failure ... a Greek tragedy."

Samaha produced a short film for the exhibition that explores the connection between solar cycles and political movements. He describes it as a "reading of history from a more universal perspective." This perspective reflects the exhibition's theme of cyclical collapse as the sun goes through a "calm period and an agitated period."

Some artists have taken the opportunity to make use of Niemeyer's work. Zad Moulataka, a French-Lebanese musician and artist, set up a sound installation inside the chipped, concrete dome of the fair's experimental theater. Blurring the line between the natural and the man-made, Moulataka hung ropes, vine-like in appearance, from jagged steel bars descending from the roof. He also played an unnerving musical composition consisting of mixed synthetic and organic sounds.

"The [theater] seemed like a womb, in a natural state, so my first idea was to record my own heart. [In the theater] you hear my heart and techno-beat crackles, which I recorded from my hair," Moulataka explained to Al-Monitor, highlighting the installation's mix of nature and modernity.

Adapting Niemeyer's work comes with incredible responsibility and pressure. Moulataka overcame the daunting legacy of adding to Niemeyer's work by ignoring the architect's cultural impact and focusing only on the art itself. He explained, "You have to forget the social aspect of his work [and] only be in his energy and the incredible imagination of this architect."

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