



War time, Peace time



Janet Rady talks to Jean-Marc Nahas, the renowned Lebanese artist whose latest exhibition in London provides a first-hand account of traumatic events in Lebanon

IT WILL come as no surprise that Jean-Marc Nahas, one of Lebanon's most prolific and best known artists, deals predominantly with issues of war and peace. No one can deny the effect that decades of war have had on the people of Lebanon. However, unlike some of his fellow artists for whom the drawn-out conflict appears to have had little tangible impact on their artistic expression, for Jean-Marc, the scars of war run deep within his psyche, healed only by the cathartic practice of drawing.

I met him at his exhibition, *War Time, Peace Time* (September 10 - October 3), at Rose Issa Projects in Kensington, West London, to find out more about the man and his work. Surrounded by large, cartoon strip-like, sketchily executed, energy-infused inky images of angst-ridden people, animals and birds, Jean-Marc begins half in English, half in French with the story of his life. He gets straight to the point.

Jean-Marc was born in Lebanon in 1963, and as a child growing up in Beirut surrounded by civil conflict and political turmoil, he experienced first hand the unspeakable atrocities of a society out of control. Unable to cope with the traumatic effects of this war, he decided to leave for Paris, on his own. He was just 17. With no formal artistic training but with many years of accomplished drawings to his credit, Nahas was admitted to the Ecole des Beaux Arts. There, he remained for almost five years. After a spell back in Beirut, he was on the move again, this time to Montreal. Life as a practising artist there, however, was not for him an easy one, so once again, he found himself on the rebound back to his Levantine homeland, where he has remained to this day.

The four bodies of work from his ongoing series, entitled 'Catastrophe', 'War Toys', 'Café Series' and 'Peace Time', provide on the surface a narrative story or chronological commentary on events in Lebanon. Thus, in his earlier darker, monochromatic 'Catastrophe' pieces of 2000, we catch a fleeting glimpse of a dystopian world in which Picasso-like faces and figures, rabid dogs and Hitchcockian birds are all seemingly caught up in some unseen action movie, the sinister plot of which eludes us. His next work, 'War Toys' (2004),

'Catastrophe III' (2000) by Jean-Marc Nahas, paper collage on canvas (above-left)

'Peacetime II' (2005) Jean-Marc Nahas, mixed media (above-right)

begins to lighten up, the palette moves away from purely calligraphically inspired black and white to reveal colour-soaked images on a minimalist light white ground. Yet, despite this leavening, we are still presented with fragmented and nightmarish scenes of agonising figures, juxtaposed with snarling dogs and vividly animated birds, all at variance with one another.

Three years later, and in complete contrast to the hostilities of Nahas' war scenes, we see in his 'Peace Time' works of 2007-08 a new beginning. Men playing football, families off on holiday, portraits of ordinary people, everyday faces. These quotidian scenes, inspired by the works of Marlene Dumas and William Kentridge, bear little resemblance to the hideous past from which they have emerged.

Finally, the 'Café Series' produced last year completes this reversion of the former torment-filled memories of war. Now executed in full colour washes covering a complete canvas, the drawings offer vignettes of people going about their daily, even rather plebeian, lives. Men and women chatting in the cafés, calmly waiting to be served or just standing around – there is no evidence of the hyper activities of war in sight.

So there we have it, a vision of one man's perception of the development of the political situation in Lebanon. Or do we? Look again, however, and the work begins to take on a much more profound meaning when we realise that it is not so much a reference to actual events as a first-hand view of Nahas' innermost feelings and turmoil and struggle to come to terms with it. On re-examination, therefore, it becomes apparent that 'Catastrophe' relates to the endless bad dreams that used to come back to haunt him. Gradually, coming to terms with his demons and moving on to his last 'Café Series', Nahas explains, with a tinge of ironic melancholy, that he dislikes solitude and therefore prefers always to work in coffee shops to ensure he is constantly surrounded by other people. Despite this admission, however, here we begin to see a sense of cheerful hope in this latest, less emotionally charged series. The future, it seems, is bright.

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