

People-watcher Mireille captures the faces of Beirut

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Mireille Merhej, a 27-year-old painter and sculptor, said that the theme for her latest work came from hours of watching people while sitting in Beirut cafes.

"When you watch people walk by, you can read all their emotions, fear, happiness, love. It's a good way to see the world," she said in an interview on Thursday before the inauguration of the exhibition.

Merhej is one of 12 artists whose work is featured in a month-long exhibition at the Space of Art Gallery in Clemenceau. A Lebanese American University graduate who specialized in fine arts and advertising, Merhej said that she only began painting when she was 19.

Pointing to her work on the wall, three-dimensional acrylic paintings on wood, Merhej explained her unique style: "I began with flat, two-dimensional painting, but then I grew tired of it. Since I came from a



Mireille Merhej with some of her 3D works

background in sculpture, I decided to combine the two. "Now, whenever I sculpt something I feel like painting it, and vice versa," she added.

One of the pieces depicted a man reading *The Daily Star* over coffee on the Corniche. An actual copy of the paper was glued onto the wood, folded

into the man's hands. "It was just a trend I saw at the coffee shops," Merhej explained. "I had used Arabic papers before. But recently, every time I went to a cafe I saw people reading *The Daily Star*, so I thought I would use it in my art."

Even a quick glance around the gallery walls reveals that the

12 artists featured in the exhibition have different styles, belying the notion that there is a "Lebanese" approach to painting.

Samar Corbani, Space of Art's manager, explained that the eclecticism was intentional.

"I wanted a different sort of exhibition, one with no grand opening and a very comfortable atmosphere which allows viewers to relax and take their time," she said.

And it's difficult to imagine a more comfortable setting than Space of Art, luxurious couches, lounge-chairs and tables cover two floors, offering art fans a cozy seat from which to view the gallery's paintings.

While the exhibition is Corbani's first, she has already started planning another show for September that will feature one sculptor and one painter.

As for Merhej, who spends her days immersed in the world of advertising and her nights before an easel, she dreams of having her own exhibition at a large gallery.