

Error inspires National Library art show, for a cause

By Sana Shaban
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The first thing you see entering the Lebanese National Library's Sanayeh location - Lebanese University's erstwhile College of Law - is the Ottoman-era architecture.

An enormous banner on one wall lists the names of the artists who have donated works to the National Library Rehabilitation Project.

The library's reading room is now hosting "Betassarof" (Adapted) an exhibition of recent work by 53 Lebanese artists, curated by Nadine Bekdache, proprietor of Galerie Jasine Kubeia, and Kasim Bekdache.

Organized by the Culture Ministry in collaboration with the Lebanese National Library Foundation and Galerie Jasine Kubeia, the show's object is to contribute to the preservation and restoration of Lebanon's artistic and cultural scene.

The foundation of the National Library collection dates from 1921, when Philippe de Trazan donated over 20,000 books and 3,000 rare manuscripts to the post-Ottoman, pre-Mandate Lebanese state.

The National Library's holdings suffered after Lebanon's Civil War broke out in 1975. Its storage area was ransacked and many rare volumes and papers were lost.

What survived was transferred into storage and largely forgotten. Then, in 1999, the Culture Ministry organized "The National Archives: A Collective Memory," an exhibition credited with provoking the creation of the National Library Foundation.

"Betassarof," National Library Foundation President Randa Daouk told The Daily Star, was inspired by the book "100 Years of Journalism in Lebanon 1878-1978" (Cent ans de la presse au Liban, 1878-1978), which was notable for its chapters being printed in the wrong order, making it unfit for distribution.

The project engaged artists to find a bright side to the pagination error.

"Every artist was given between one and seven books, to do with what they want," Bekdache told The Daily Star. "The artists were given complete creative freedom. Their only mission was to produce a piece of art inspired by the book."

"The concept was to create a piece of art from the book," she continued, "which is not only art but



Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Jorjige's "Coding/Decoding, 000011101000111," 2014, binary code, 31 x 24 cm.



From Annabel Daouk's "House of Cards," 2016, video installation and photo series.

something different." The contributing artists are of different backgrounds and generations, and widely divergent practices.

"The works will be sold in order to raise money to help restore the books that were neglected during the Civil War," Bekdache said, "which will be the main component of the library."

The works on show range from video installation to papier-mache and origami, photography, sculpture, mural, collage, canvases and textiles.

"We started with contacting various galleries, who told their artists about the project. We were very keen to let the artists be happy, free and confident," Bekdache said.

"With the different generations

you can feel the creativity. They are all almost on the same level, no matter their age. They all worked separately but their works have come together as one. It is an intellectual work. They were all serious. You can feel it's serious. You have deep messages and thoughts in all the work," Bekdache added.

The works on show include a

piece by writer and artist Eyal Adnan, whose leopardlo books often combine poetry with her distinctive visual style.

Her "Untitled," 2016, finds the artist applying her brushes to pages of print - an approach followed by several artists in this show.

Mohammad El Rowas' "Acas," 2016, is derived from a deck of cards, all acas, each of which reproduces a page from a newspaper. These color images have been strayed beneath a black-and-white print of a young girl and a woman playing cards.

Artist-filmmaking duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Jorjige's 2014 piece "Coding/Decoding, 000011101000111" translates the text of "A century of journalism in Lebanon" into binary code.

Annabel Daouk's video installation and photo series "House of Cards," 2016, captures structures built from the pages of the book, which then collapse.

Oussama Baalbaki's acrylic-on-paper work "Untitled" depicts a plate of objects as still life with a fold in the middle, as if reproduced on the pages of a book.

For his installation "Up in the Clouds," 2016, Hanihal Sraoui segments gallery print-like lengths of printed text with acrylic paint, neon lights and the like.

Alfred Taran's 2016 canvas "Ragtime" apparently reproduces a series of historic book illustrations as a collage, while "The Death of the Press," 2016, Greta Nassif's ink, paper and canvas work, superimposes sketches and notation upon printed paper.

Rim El Jundi's "Journalism," 2016, applies acrylic and mixed media upon the leaves of a book. The front page lists the names of journalists killed in the '60s, with depictions of their faces sketched one atop the other, as if to create a single composite.

As an exercise in curatorial practice, "Betassarof" is a tightly focused exhibition, which may help explain some of the formal overlap among the individual works on show.

Still, the prospect of gathering work by this array of artistic sensibilities (and abilities) does promise some variety, all in a good cause.

"Betassarof" is up at the National Library from Oct. 16 to Nov. 13, from Tuesday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.