

**John Jurayj**  
**USA/Lebanon, 1968**

***A Special Kind of Wasteland: John Jurayj's Paintings of Beirut***

*The sun has gone under. The desert is at my mental door because Beirut is a special kind of a wasteland. It defies our means, belittles our intelligence, defeats the will.... Once this is said, its mystery unfolds, its beauty too.*<sup>i</sup>

–Etel Adnan

John Jurayj paints landscapes of war-torn Beirut. His canvases feature ghosts of the city's bombed buildings—the destruction overlaid with drips and streaks of luridly vivid neon paint. Strife has scarred the city, torn asunder its historical memory, created flows of emigrants from its ports. By estimates, more Lebanese live in exile than in the country itself. “This is my concrete reality; I was born in America,” Jurayj explains. “It is this diasporic distance that informs my art.”<sup>ii</sup> This interstitial space of exile creates a distance that permits “ways of seeing” that suffuse Jurayj's paintings.<sup>iii</sup>

Exile produces complicated geographies that disrupt one's sense of place, shape one's identity, and color one's experiences. Despite the distance of time and space, trauma creates ties that bind. “Trauma is a productive experience,” Jurayj told me as he walked me through an exhibition of his paintings in Chelsea in 2007. “I read the images of Lebanon from a space of trauma, an inherently emotional and personal trauma that creates a space—between myself and Lebanon, between myself and my father. They both remain, in a sense, inaccessible to me.” Jurayj's cultural politics, then, are deeply personal. He is an Arab-American; he is an artist; he is a gay man whose father was born and raised in Lebanon. The weight of a war-torn homeland, of familial expectations, of different registers of masculinity bears down. Edward Said, whose work has deeply influenced Jurayj's art, spoke of the “need to reassemble an identity out of the refractions and discontinuities of exile...”<sup>iv</sup> In a sense, Jurayj reassembles his identity in his paintings.

Jurayj mines photographs of Lebanon from his family albums and press archives. “My work is a translation of these images through different aspects of art history—abstract expressionism, large-scale landscape paintings.” The formal aspect of his painting is referential, showing influences of Gustave Courbet and Gerhard Richter. “Courbet is a god to me,” Jurayj says. “He showed the *materiality* of paint.” Richter's formal experimentation stems from his own personal history—split between representational painting and modernist abstraction, each affiliated with the ideologies of the divided postwar Germany.<sup>v</sup> Jurayj's artistic approach embraces both strategies of painting. Through the layers of neon abstractionism, one sees the skeletal remains of buildings—the U.S. Marine barracks bombed in 1983, the site of the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005, the buildings pierced by missiles in 2006.

This is Jurayj's concrete reality. Though he lives and paints in New York City, his gaze is directed at Beirut—and within the rubble, he has found its insidious beauty and his own sense of self.

## Shiva Balaghi

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<sup>i</sup> Etel Adnan, "Time Desire Fog," (2004). [www.blithe.com/bhq8.1/8.1.04.html](http://www.blithe.com/bhq8.1/8.1.04.html).

<sup>ii</sup> Jurayj's quotes are from interviews with the author in December 2007 and March 2009. Much of my own thinking about art and exile, which appears in other writing, has been informed by my profoundly revealing conversations with Jurayj.

<sup>iii</sup> The term is borrowed from Berger; see John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972). Jurayj was born in Chicago to a Lebanese father and American mother (see artist's bio).

<sup>iv</sup> Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 179.

<sup>v</sup> The influence of Richter on Jurayj became clearer to me as I viewed the excellent exhibition "Gerhard Richter Portraits" at the National Portrait Gallery in London in winter 2009. For an erudite discussion of the connections between form and history in Richter's work, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloch, "Divided memory and Post-Traditional Identity: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning," *October* 75 (Winter 1996): 61–82.