Motif and Monument for Beirut

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Violence as one theme has featured frequently in Majd Abdel Hamid's embroidery work. How can it not, when it hovers over and around the cities where he has lived? Damascus, where he was born, Ramallah, where he grew up, and Beirut, where he currently lives.

The contrast between the time-consuming, sometimes neurotic process of embroidering—a pair of hands, a needle, a thread or several, a piece of cloth, time, with the kind of violence that has preoccupied Abdel Hamid is vast. He has created several works addressing aspects of the Syrian civil war that are particularly important to him and undoubtedly enmeshed in violence as wars are.

One of these series, Screenshots (2016), is of brightly coloured figures that suggest a reference to pop art rather than dead and injured figures in pools of blood—screenshots of real people taken from news reels. The work is familiar and uncanny. It is bright and cheerful, attractive yet haunting.

Commemoration is also a key driver in Abdel Hamid's practice. Another set of works, Tadmur (2019), takes on the loaded subject of monument and memory with embroidered reproduction of the floor plans of the prison in Palmyra (Tadmur in Arabic) that was the site of extreme state brutality but was also later demolished by ISIS when they destroyed the city in May 2015.

The violence of the prison is amplified by its demolition as a monument of remembrance and grief.

Courage is another unintentional aspect of the artist's practice because of his chosen medium as a Palestinian man; embroidery. Palestinian embroidery has understandably come to occupy a vast space in Palestinian cultural identity and the need to preserve it in the context of its modern/contemporary reality and Israel's occupation. Like many other societies, from South America to China, India to Europe—embroidery developed over the centuries alongside fabric as means to embellish it—a predominantly female craft. The same applied to Palestinian society, where patterns were passed on from mother to daughter across generations, each adding their changes to age-old motifs that were distinguished by region and village. Ranging from geometric patterns to designs of nature, flora and fauna, they adorned garments recording their stories through time. Vivid colours and dense handwork follow an established tradition of functional practice and use within a national parameter.

Abdel Hamid's choice of embroidery as a practice derives from a familiar tradition within his family and societal heritage. As a means of remembering, commemorating and recording, arguably, he follows the same storytelling motivations as his

grandmothers and the many Palestinian refugee women embroidering their heritage for a living. Also similar to them, he embroiders in patterns that need to be deciphered visually, but also symbolically, as time is a dominant player in their creation, giving these textiles, like tapestries and carpets, more significant value.

That is where the overlap begins and ends. Abdel Hamid's quest for an authentic individual voice that carries his own stories pushes him outside Palestinian embroidery as a medium of national expression and political resistance today. His stories are loaded with grief and pain, violence and death. In *Muscle Memory*, he allows his practice more space to breathe, perhaps because the material is more loaded, time-consuming, more immediate, and covers the membrane of an entire city.

Majd Abdel Hamid was one of the many residents of Beirut that was physically affected by the Beirut Port Explosion on 4 August 2020. This explosion destroyed many neighbourhoods in the city, killed an estimated 217 people, and injured 7000 more, destroying approximately 70,000 homes and affecting 300,000 people. The time was 6.06 pm. This number is tattooed in Abdel Hamid's consciousness as he embroidered it repeatedly for months after the event. With glass shards in his head, he struggled to find a hospital in Beirut to treat him that wasn't saturated with wounded patients. Eventually, he had to go south to a hospital in Saida that could treat him.

Yet the tragedy of Beirut and its residents and the artist started almost a year earlier, when a mass uprising, commonly called *al-thawra* (the revolution), erupted on 17 October 2019, calling for an end to corruption and a change in the system. The banks closed; the economy collapsed. It was a point of no return, further run to the ground by the Covid pandemic months later. When the port exploded, it seemed like the last blow to a festering wound. If Beirut was already on its knees, it was now flat on the ground.

This prolonged and ongoing trauma became a directly physical one for the artist. He continued to feel the glass shards swimming in his head, stuck inside his wound, while struggling to source medication that ran out due to the collapse in the currency. The need to look for an expression of mourning was urgent yet elusive.

Retracing the seashore by foot, Abdel Hamid took repeated images of the sea and the edge of the sea on the ground he walked upon, with his polaroid camera allowing him that immediate comfort of immediacy. Abdel Hamid looked for his form of grief. The geometric square shape with external protrusions that he eventually developed became his motif of mourning. It is a complex composition, and also a multi-layered personal lexicon of grief.

First, there is Beirut. The city, *al-madina* (in Arabic), is feminine. She represents the maternal mother earth. As the skin of her inhabitants, Beirut the matrix was severely wounded with the Port explosion of 4 August 2020. Her skin that had held her children and residents was pierced, broken—exposing everyone and wounding many, the artist included. The motif is the alienation of being injured in a wounded city. Beirut became

uncanny. Like a lot of the artist's work. Little of the city remained recognisable emotionally and psychically, even if it was recognisable physically.

There is also the sea. The motif conjured from that intersection of sea and ground is another matrix like the city, deep darkness like our unconscious. La Mer in French is feminine too, like la mère, the mother whose body, whose womb engulfs.

With a motif carrying the symbolisation of a world lost, the artist delves into his mourning ritual of repeatedly embroidering the motif on different pieces of cloth. The repetition of each stitch was also a recollection of his sensation of each stitch being sown in his wounded forehead.

Inspired by a similar ritual of mourning of his foremothers with their embroidered gowns, Abdel Hamid aimed to do the same by colouring a handmade dress a dark colour as a testament of grief that was washed repeatedly until, eventually, the original colour began to re-appear.

Abdel Hamid uses indigo to dye the many versions of his motif. He then started washing and rewashing each piece, again and again, using a toothbrush to reclaim the original colour before it was darkened with indigo. This poetic ritual allows him to symbolise what is unrepresentable; death as the absolute mystery.

In his carefully devised project to consciously mourn, grief and commemorate, Abdel Hamid may have accomplished more than what he had intended. He also memorialises. He creates a monument, a visible object that is also portable and replicable. It is accessible to all at any time, immortalising this ritual more deeply than just a sizeable physical edifice in a city square, for example. This perhaps makes it very contemporary as a practice and user-friendly—another reflection of Abdel Hamid's place in the world as an artist. It is the image recorded in his mind, born out of a moment of reflection, a walk that became a motif laden with the consequence that is a monument for Beirut.

Muscle Memory is an elaborate body of work, a story told through many chapters of insistent repetition. He avoids the pitfalls that hindered him for an extended period of mourning and remains true to his voice. By carefully defining his mission of mourning and, therefore, of healing, he also avoids the collective "trap of national mania", as he calls it, the nostalgia and the projection of his Palestinian cultural identity while remaining true to his voice.

By searching, taking photos, embroidering, dyeing, and washing repeatedly, the artist delivers an eloquent and powerful homage to a wounded, much-loved city yet.

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