



# BAZAAR

Harper's

ARABIA

# ART

ISSUE 27  
COMPLIMENTARY COPY

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**O**n a quiet corner of Pasteur Street is an unassuming glass-fronted façade shielding an almost-bare indoor space, except for two plants neatly placed to each side. As minimalist as it is, you'd be forgiven for thinking that this is a new concept store in the making, rather than an artist-run residency space. That is, until you see the words "Beirut Art Residency" emblazoned in black on the front.

"I knew I wanted a ground floor place and I knew I wanted it to be unsuspecting," says Amar Zahr, the young Lebanese twenty-something founder of BAR. We are sitting around a table in BAR's studio area, which is on the third floor of the same building, joined by the current artists-in-residence, Sara Naim, who is originally Syrian but grew up in Dubai and spent a lot of time in the UK, and Iraqi-British Athier Mousawi, as well as a collaborator, the Lebanese musician Charbel Haber, of the post-rock outfit Scrambled Eggs. If there's an indication of the collective spirit Zahr is trying to create with BAR, this interview format, where we all engage in conversation together, is a strong one.

"It was always in the back of my mind to develop a residency program in Beirut," says Zahr, she describes how her idea materialised over the course of a couple of residencies she participated in abroad, namely, the three-month Maumau residency in Istanbul, and a six-month residency at the School of Visual Arts in New York. "Residencies change you; they give you and your work a lot of exposure," she adds. "International artists were often asking me if such residencies existed here." And so after doing some research and finding that the Beirut-based ones didn't amount to a handful, from the newer research-based residency of 98weeks to the Arab Image Foundation's (mostly of an archival nature) and the more-established residency program by Ashkal Alwan, which targets well-known artists (as well as writers and curators) and is usually by invitation, she decided to establish her own.

Although Naim and Mousawi were invited by BAR this time around, the next group of artists - a South African, a Serbian and a French-Canadian — are among the applicants. The aim behind BAR's core six-week residency is to provide both regional and international artists with enough creative and technical support to work on their project proposals without necessarily being pressured towards a specific outcome. "We also plan to organise open studios and moderated panels after the residency, where artists can talk about their work," she says. "From my own experience, I felt that one month is too short and two months perhaps too long for artists coming here, but six weeks is just the right amount of time to give a bit of urgency to the work. Also, when I was living in Dubai [for the past seven years], I worked with Art Dubai for a while, where I managing Art Week, which is where I learned more about the strong residency program they had with the Delfina Foundation."

Zahr's formal training as an artist began with a minor during her business degree that she completed at the American University of Beirut (AUB). She grew up surrounded by art; her parents collect on a small scale and some of her relatives are artists. Her own work is diverse, ranging from painting and photography to installation and performance. "I'm still experimenting," she admits, as we discuss her recent Redeemer and Rapture photographic series, both of which feature a woman wrapped in white cloth - one is pictured in a rural landscape and the other poses inside a bulldozer, near a construction site, respectively. Yet in BAR's high-ceilinged space, which she began renovating in June, you won't find any of her artwork, which is



# BAR NONE

*A new interdisciplinary space in Beirut's Gemmayze district aims to foster creativity through artists' residencies, discovers **Nadine Khalil***

something she is putting on hold in order to manage the space and the artists. She has set it up like an artist collective, with a studio manager, who is also a painter, to help the artists-in-residence with logistics and local art suppliers as well as a content manager, also a photographer, to support them with the editorial side of things such as writing concept notes for group exhibitions. For the artists, she has chosen a two-bedroom house (that includes a private office for BAR's small team of three, a kitchen, an attic, three bathrooms and a view of Beirut's port and sea) located just a block away from the city's bustling district of Mar Mikhail, replete with bars, trendy boutiques, artist studios and hipsters.

"It's a real luxury to work and live in the same space," says Naim. "It's difficult to test the scale of your artwork until the show happens but here, you can easily transfer your idea into





Left: Athier with his work-in-progress. Above: Sara Naim's works-in-progress. Below: Sara Naim at the Beirut Art Residency.

All images courtesy of Beirut Art Residency

Mousawi says. Naim, on the other hand, introspectively explores with the different mediums of her own body. “There’s this complicated sense of living inside your body while you will never actually see inside it, it’s like this foreign space,” she says, “The information is there but it’s just not accessible. I’m playing with the idea of how the micro [cell] becomes macro [art], manipulating the image for a glitch to occur.” On the walls of the studio, the artists have clearly displayed the different stages of their work, from the initial sketch or photo until the finished product.

At the moment, only Charbel Haber’s work is invisible, until the open studio event that will take place on October 27th, where he will put on an ambient performance and video projections, exploring the aural trajectory of surf rock and the traces of this music genre that he found in the Middle East, North Africa and Mali with the buzuq and the US with the Fender guitar. “I’m creating a kind of poem that is inspired by this sound, using different mediums to tell the story I want to tell,” Haber explains.

It may be true that Zahr has chosen three interdisciplinary creators who aren’t bound by a particular theme, but that seems to be the aim behind BAR: to bring out fresh ideas and expose young talent producing art that is edgy and contemporary, experimental and interventionist, raw and urban. Think about how Zahr tested the feasibility for her project: She set up a pilot website called Crater as a case study, and uploaded pictures of a friend’s flat in order to assess the demand for an artist residency, receiving 40 applications in only the first week — it becomes evident that the kind of space BAR will become is one of diverse possibilities. It is a space that is avant-garde and forward-looking.

“For instance, in order to document what is happening here at BAR, behind closed doors, I thought that the best way to understand it is to film the artists for an hour a week, in a short documentary of them interacting and explaining their work in progress, with their permission of course, because it’s entirely a personal experience when you live and work in a house,” says Zahr. “And then we will have an ongoing vimeo series that can be viewed publicly.” Clearly, Zahr isn’t running out of ideas anytime soon. ■

[beirutartistresidency.org](http://beirutartistresidency.org)



visual form. Then there’s also the fact that if you find you cannot sleep, for example, you just step out of your bedroom and you work.” However, adds Mousawi, “[...] you also have to make an effort to step out and engage with the city.” Naim’s gallerist from Dubai’s The Third Line met Zahr at Art Basel and introduced her to both artists. In BAR’s open workspace, Mousawi’s large-scale, geometric paintings face Naim’s microscopic scans (of her own cells), as if in dialogue. Where Mousawi’s work is dramatic, modernist, expressive, tumultuous, and colourful, Naim’s is minimalist, monochrome, scientific, bodily and experiments with levels of matter and density. There’s a hint of Beirut’s urban aesthetic in Mousawi’s work, inspired by its chaos and construction sites. “You’ll find a lot of skewers in my work, which initially were meant to be flags but ended up being textiles, reminiscent of the laundry hanging from balconies,”

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