



At this year's annual Arte Laguna Prize in Venice (Italy), Nuart's Martyn Reed convened a Land Art/ Urban Art panel intended to explore the growing pervasiveness of street art in creating "museums without walls." Populated by professionals including Dr. Susan Hansen of Nuart, independent curator Simone Pallotta, and Mattias Givell of Wanas Konst, the discussion "[reflected], from different perspectives, on the new tendencies and directions both in urban art and land art, offering a challenging dialogue between two apparently contrasting forms of art." Reed additionally presented Lebanese artist Jad El Khoury with the Land Art And Urban Art prize, a prestigious accolade accompanied by a residency at this year's Nuart in Stavanger.

#### Burj el Hawa\* : A Towering Achievement\



Reed explained that El Khoury's "Burj el Hawa", a street art installation completed in May 2018, "was a standout work leagues ahead of anything else." The work, titled in English "Tower of the Wind" occupied a massive unfinished building which has stood as a symbol of the country's devastating civil war. El Khoury himself explained "the tower is located in the heart of Beirut's center, the first 4 floors serve as an army base while the other 28 floors are empty." The artist managed to sneak past its ground floor, and "with the help of a team of 6 people we installed 400 pieces of drapes 2.5x1.5m each on all the empty black windows of the abandoned floors. The installment had to be fast and discrete since I did not take the permission of Solidere (the owners of the building and most of the city center), hence during the 6 days of work on site, the curtains were rolled on themselves to avoid being seen from the street." Reed described the final result as a "towering achievement, literally in this case."

El Khoury's powerful project proved a natural fit for this award presented by Nuart. Reed stated that "El Khoury's work shows, that for this generation of street artists, the streets function not only as utilitarian arrangements for travel, commerce and profit, but also as deep repositories of memory and meaning for those who occupy and move through them, a place of continually contested perceptions and negotiated understanding that anyone can participate in shaping should they have the desire and ambition to so."

## About The Artist

According to Selection Arts, Jad El Khoury is a street artist and interior architect born in 1988 in Baabda, Lebanon, in the final years of the civil war that ravaged the nation from 1975 until 1990. The website reported that "he is best known for his fictitious characters, referred to as Potato Nose, which includes a series of doodled cartoon characters drawn in black outline with exaggerated yet simple features. The characters he draws are inspired by the people he has met through his travels or drawn from his imagination, yet they are always rooted in the broader socio-political context in which he works." El Khoury employs four major themes in his work that are "linked to tell the story of the psychological process each individual [experiences] at some point." "Single Man" symbolizes the escape, when one seeks solace from the chaotic, at times cruel society we live in. El Khoury explained, "after getting bored from living in his own bubble he leaves the country like most of the youth in Lebanon, searching for a better future elsewhere."



*"War Piece" embodies the confrontation that the "Single Man" soon faces. "After living a year in Kuwait, Single man discovered that there's never a perfect society. He comes back to Beirut to face the issues that made him leave in the first place. 'War Piece' represents the confrontation phase. I started highlighting Beirut's war traces that we see in every street, while transforming them into positivity. For postwar generation to learn from what happened 45 years ago, and for the war generation to face the memory and move on. Those war traces are not just city scars of missiles and bullets, they also represent all the remains of the Lebanese civil wars that we still live in our daily lives, like the bad infrastructure, corruption, pollution, etc..."*



The "connection" motif can be found in an array of El Khoury's work. It highlights the process of moving forward. "On an individual scale, after the confrontation, and in order to move on, a connection with the inner self [that needs] to happen." The theme can also be seen in his work with SWATCH's 'Art From The Street' initiative. El Khoury stated that, "it is a celebration of a melting pot of people from different backgrounds, coming together to create a peaceful organic shape that looks like the neural links in the human body... the plan is to keep spreading this theme, hoping to connect more people and more cities together."

*"Tower of Wind," the theme utilized in the work for which El Khoury received his award from Nuart, highlights the final stages of healing with a dance of happiness. The artist wrote that "if*

*one manages to connect with themselves and with others, magic happens. In this installation, I managed to make a war icon dance with the wind. 400 colored curtains that we usually see on the balconies of poor neighborhoods in Beirut, were installed on the black windows of "El Murr" Tower. Colors in motion [spread] positive vibes and Happy faces all around the city. Passers went from wonder to astonishment in all state of confusion..."*

El Murr Tower has sustained numerous transitions in its role over the course of its existence, from "an architectural icon of innovation of Beirut's Brutalism age, to a snipers' tower between west and east Beirut during the civil war, to a never-completed architectural landmark, to an abandoned structure with no plans for renovation due to neoliberal urban development approaches controlled by political powers."

In transforming the laden icon from a symbol of pain to healing, El Khoury epitomizes the purpose of street art. He conducted the project without corporate sponsorship or even legal permission. His motives were entirely ideological, driven by the intention to make a profound impact on the

citizens of his homeland. He described the “Tower of Wind” installation as an “urban catalyst” which “works on joining a divided city between East (Christian clusters) and west (Muslim clusters), by raising questions regarding the collective identity’s crisis of Beirut.” The risk associated with making such a statement was intensified by the “context of censorship and high power-dynamics which is promoting the process of erasing the war memory of the city”.



Though the installation only lasted for three weeks after the Solidere ordered its removal, El Khoury wrote that “a documentation of the whole process was exhibited in Platform 39 gallery Beirut, the show included a live dance performance by Alexandre Paulikevitch for he gracefully danced as the curtains were dancing in the wind, celebrating the freedom of expression.” Here, its impact can live on in history.

### **A Society In Denial**

As street art festivals and organizations continue to grow in influence, projects like “Tower of Wind” stay true to the medium’s core principles. With this work, El Khoury makes a powerful statement whose themes resonate with communities fighting painful histories across the globe. As he said, “no one wants to talk about it, the history books at school stop on the independence in 1943, so like so many others of my generation I started to question this gap in the never documented history of Beirut. And after exploring with urban art interventions, I got to the conclusion that Beirut is IN DENIAL of its painful past, hence the healing process of the city is on hold, and we currently live in a new form of civil war. I believe that the civil war will always go on if Beirut doesn’t decide to stop and face its past in order to move on.” How many painful events must our society grapple with before we finally turn our gazes towards a better world?

\*Burj el Hawa intervention was made possible with the support of Letitia Gallery.