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Patience Allows Art Time to Fall into Place

SULTAN SOUD AL QASSEMI

An old adage goes: *Time doesn't change, time reveals*. For me, no other artist's work better embodies this idea. To admire and to understand the work of Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, one must be ready to accommodate both space and time, and be armed with patience. Enter the room, glance hurriedly at a work, make your way out, and you will surely miss the point. The point being that to create the work and to admire it is a process, and the journey here is the product on display. Your reward, as a viewer, is the pause that allows you space and time to breathe, to comprehend, and to absorb.

Transformation is another attribute of Charbel's works. A block of ice and a lake, captured in a timeless photographic image, are both H₂O; they are one and the same in different forms. One can imagine the block of ice melting and reuniting with the lake or the stream below. However, it's not only the block of water that is frozen, but also time itself.

When I first encountered Charbel's work at Grey Noise in Dubai in 2014, I found myself captivated by his methodology, which for me demonstrated a high level of dedication, backed by artistic research and skillful execution. Following my visit, we acquired three works—*Mixed Water, Lebanon, Israel* (2013), *The Sun Is My Only Ally* (2012), and *From Water to Water* (2013)—for the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah. I recall reading the words "The sun is my only ally" on a work on paper, with a yellow text so faint you would almost miss it if you were in a hurry. To read it, one must pause and not only look but also observe. The artist maintains that it was "written by the Beirut sun," which in my imagination burned it over several days.

His work should ideally be situated in the context of his upbringing. He was born in Lebanon in 1981, just as the Lebanese War was raging in its seventh year. The war's effects would last well after its official end in 1990, with the destruction of infrastructure having palpable repercussions for years after. By the end of the war, time had not simply stood still; the clock had, in fact, seemingly turned back. Beirut, the once flourishing capital city, would need decades to recover, while much of the talk was of

how things were before the war. And yet an entire generation of Lebanese who came of age after the war were able to see beauty amid the destruction. To see it, one must pause, and not only look, but also observe.

My encounter with Charbel's work coincided with my own drift away from collecting contemporary art as I became more drawn to modernism. I also felt that some of the contemporary art I was exposed to was rushed and lacked a firm grounding. However, my faith was restored by a number of artists, of whom Charbel was a prime protagonist. It was easy to be captivated by his meticulous process.

Rarely have I seen conceptual artists who can transgress the realm of aloof, abstract notions and touch the everyday person, as he has. One of the works that I vividly recall encompasses his philosophical approach to art. In *Night Enclosed in Marble* (2012–14), Charbel "captured" the night in a marble box. Yet by opening the box, one voids the work itself. One may hold, acquire, and own the box, but one can never truly attain what's captured within.

The work of this artist leads me to paraphrase a popular vernacular saying: "Patience allows art time to fall into place." Whether it is through light and darkness, or the melting of ice or wax, or the slow and steady evaporation of water, for Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, time is of the essence.