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Christina Hajjar

***Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان**

November 4th - January 2nd, 2023

Shisha Bans have impacted the livelihood of migrant-business owners since 2016, threatening sites of sanctuary for their customers in urban centres across so-called-Canada. Here in the city, scholars like Mitra Fakhrashrafi have archived histories and futures of Muslim placemaking in the GTA, insisting that shisha lounges model alternate ways of inhabiting space<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile in Edmonton, community advocates continue to challenge municipally-elected officials<sup>2</sup>, following their ruling on a sunset clause phasing out shisha lounges (effective July 2021<sup>3</sup>). In Winnipeg, Christina Hajjar's organizing and art practice respond to questions of placemaking through embodied acts of diasporic connectivity. By queering space and time through an imaginative hookah lounge storefront complete with dreamlike aesthetics, *Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان creates a deeply

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<sup>1</sup> Fakhrashrafi, Mitra. "'Pass me the hookah': an assessment of Toronto's 'shisha ban' as related to Muslim placemaking, forced displacement, and racializing surveillance." (master's thesis, University of Toronto, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Cook, Dustin. "Council committee rejects proposal from community advocates to reinstate shisha lounges in Edmonton," Edmonton Journal, last modified April 28, 2021, <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/council-committee-rejects-proposal-from-community-advocates-to-reinstate-shisha-lounges-in-edmonton>.

<sup>3</sup> Cook, Dustin. "Ban on shisha lounges July 1 expected to force some Edmonton businesses to shut down," Edmonton Journal, last modified June 13, 2020, <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/ban-on-shisha-lounges-july-1-expected-to-force-some-edmonton-businesses-to-shut-down>.

personal yet fictive place of belonging for queer and trans Black, Brown, SWANA (South West Asian and North African), and/or Muslim people.

Using symbols and a delicate balance of overt and covert references, this work is an ode to public spaces of both gathering and cultural nourishment. Complete with displays of honour toward quotidian experiences, Hajjar manifests an interpretation of her dream shisha lounge, while also monumentalizing a set of deeply personal and familial items that she treasures. Influenced by the events of the Lebanese Civil War, *Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان is an imagined queer space for remembrance, connection, leisure, and pleasure.

Christina gracefully embeds an array of social, cultural and political references throughout her work, including sobering nods to the impact that colonial violence, imperial exploitation and war has had on Lebanese communities. Signage along the storefront, for instance, relates to a destroyed florist shop depicted in *Beirut, Never Again*<sup>4</sup>. Directed by Jocelyne Saab (1948-2019) with poetic narration written by Etel Adnan (1925-2021), the documentary follows experiences of everyday life after the Beirut massacre of 1975<sup>5</sup>, detailing early stages of civil war in Lebanon through a child's eyes. While reflecting on the value added in centering the perspectives of young people during war, Saab shared the following during an interview with Olivier Hadouchi: "je ne pouvais que rendre hommage à leur lucidité [I had no choice but to pay homage to their lucidity]."<sup>6</sup> By grounding her installation with ethics of solidarity and care, Hajjar uses placemaking to curate a site of warmth for other young people carrying lucid memories of grievous circumstances. Notwithstanding the intergenerational trauma we as children of

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<sup>4</sup> *Beyrouth, Jamais Plus*, directed by Jocelyne Saab (1976; Lebanon).

<sup>5</sup> Rafei, Rania. "Lebanon: Sibling of Syria," YouTube, Al Jazeera, March 13, 2013, <https://youtu.be/Ft00kYSSwCA>.

<sup>6</sup> Jocelyne Saab, interview by Olivier Hadouchi. Critical Secret, April 2, 2013, <https://www.criticalsecret.net/OlivierHadouchi-Conversations-avec>.

immigrants carry as a result of colonialism, war, and other historic ruptures, *Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان is a reflection of what shisha lounges mean to so many Black, Brown, SWANA, and/or Muslim people in urban cities from coast to coast. Described as an anchor for community gathering, Fakhrashrafi reveals that “in the face of increased surveillance, unaffordability, erasure, and other structural determinants that continue to shape life for Muslim people, the shisha lounge [albeit imagined or real, act] as a site to negotiate and transform these circumstances.”<sup>7</sup>

*Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان is more than just a stand-in for a gathering place, it displays reverence for the women and femmes in Christina's life. Namely, the dreamlike blue used throughout the interior wallpaper is a nod to previously exhibited work developed alongside her sister through a series of portraits. On the other hand, elements of the wallpaper and the storefront itself are named after Hajjar's mother, whose name translates to “morning dew in a rose” in Arabic. Roses are thematically expansive, in that rose water is also a vital aspect of Arab customs including tea rituals, desserts and skin care. Christina has come to know so much about her own lineage through oral histories passed down by her mother, and *Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان is yet another site of departure for her continued creative practice centering connectivity, remembrance and play. This is particularly true for those who may not have had the opportunity to cement their own narratives. Experimenting with a unique set of archival practices, Hajjar moves beyond gallery walls, adorning an alluring future in which lineage is not forgotten.

Those of us who are invested in more livable futures are keenly aware of continued gentrification, the disappearance of affordable Black and brown venues across urban centres, and the criminalization of spaces in which we convene.<sup>8</sup> In particular, we are

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>8</sup> Bin Shikhan, Amani. “As clubs become condos, Rebeka Dawn's parties remind Black Torontonians that celebration is ours too,” CBC, last modified June 4, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/as-clubs-become-condos-rebeka-dawn-s-parties-remind-black-torontonians-that-celebration-is-ours-too-1.4690210>.

attuned to the ways in which these disappearances disproportionately impact BIPOC and queer and trans people.<sup>9</sup> Understanding that we are always already at the brink of dystopic conditions, Christina hones in on her expertise in event organizing by creating conceptual event posters as discreet invitations of levity in an era of morbid unease. Avoiding more obvious signage - like a rainbow sticker, for instance - troubles what queering urban futures might mean for those who have always been here.<sup>9</sup> Producing an embodied balance of culturally relevant and queer and trans friendly event posters within an imaginary hookah lounge, *Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان highlights the urgency in creating liberatory spaces of imagination and celebration such as these.

In 2019, a group of artists involved with the collective Way Past Kennedy Road generated an exploration of radical placemaking traditions through an exhibition called *Habibiz*. In the process, one of the questions we interrogated was this: “How do Black, Indigenous and racialized people reckon with the familiarity of being re/moved?”<sup>10</sup> What *Habibiz* and *Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان both offer, are reminders that shisha lounges across Toronto, Winnipeg, Beirut or Gaza are in many ways sites for transcultural connectivity - sanctuaries in which diasporic people are drawn to one another. While discussing her exhibit, Christina revealed that “part of its charm is embedded in cultural narratives, and the associations visitors bring with them.”<sup>11</sup> Enchanted by the charm of memory, of pleasure and of connectivity, time moves slowly at *Lebanon's Rose* وردة لبنان, inviting each of us to stay a while.

- Jessica Kirk

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<sup>9</sup> Mikdashi, Maya. “What A Queer Urban Future Looks Like: Beirut,” *Jadaliyya*, last modified May 23, 2016, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33297>.

<sup>10</sup> *Habibiz*, co-curated by Mitra Fakhrashrafi and Jessica Kirk (Margin of Eas Gallery, 2019), <https://www.mitrafakhrashrafi.com/habibiz>.

<sup>11</sup> Christina Hajjar in discussion with author, December 2021.