

culturally complete, artistically satisfied

Words by Souraya Salam

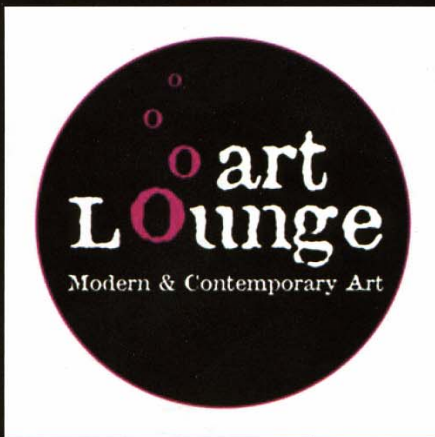
Art Lounge© is located between a border separating Beirut's Armenian Bourj Hammoud and its industrial quarantine area nearby the port, close to the legendary BO18. I'm sitting near an open window and nearly drowning my voice is the sound of the busy motorway overlooking the capital's river. I'm surrounded by design books and loud background music that suggests a rappel of a Hotel Costes CD in the middle of a huge hangar. Since I set foot here, I've been wondering to myself: why haven't I discovered this place earlier?

Nino Azzi is the proprietor of a large art collection that he can be proud of. Yet here, his concept of Art Lounge goes beyond art: it is an attempt to create an interaction between art and people and to envisage a broad cultural program. Art Lounge is an approach to bring "this" Azzi tells me. His ultimate aim is to create this location I am sitting in. Somewhere that goes beyond the traditional art gallery. This "gallery" invites your 5 senses to participate.

"You can sit, have a drink, look around. Maybe smell some incense even," Azzi goes on. The art is here, you see it. A mixture of contemporary and modern. Most of the space is decorated with experimental Asian-inspired Pop Art while the rest of the canvases fall into a large variety of categories still staying within the modern: Contemporary Art, Pop Art, Post War Art. The point is there is more than meets the eye, between originals, screen prints and collages on light boxes; once

again, the art is here.

"It just makes sense" Azzi insists, to have a place where one can enter, see the sights, enjoy a cigarette and sit on Art Deco, 60's or simply random furniture. "I wanted comfort. Something inviting" and that is what the several couches and fauteuils offer. But what is Art Lounge really? You can read a book on a secondhand hairdresser's chair, sit on a stool while staring at a Warhol or just stand up sipping on a drink and conversing in this large and colorful space. That is what it is now. But Azzi has bigger plans for this space.



Art Lounge plans to open in the early spring (its only open to close friends and relatives at the moment) and will aim at offering legroom for any cultural experience: an exhibition, a concert, a cultural conference, an audio visual gathering or just a party. "I want to make art accessi-

ble. There is a lack of good art galleries and artistic spaces in Lebanon. I am doing this for the Lebanese people. Share my art set with them." Azzi wants to broaden the Lebanese's minds artistically. The owner also intends on giving room for creation. He believes art is a "dialectic" where one has to appreciate and create while all the elements need to be present. That is why his hangar is offering so much, a way to make art more approachable. A social breathing space is necessary to allow the art to be appreciated better Azzi believes.

Planning to represent local established or even emerging artists, Azzi wants to give all a chance to display their creations, offering everyone the opportunity to participate and communicate through colors, shapes and many other elements. "I want to give people tools, an opening to be less intimidated by art." The possibility to approach art with more easiness. Serving drinks and providing seating allows a more laid back atmosphere, permitting the artistic ingredient in people to come out.

But was the choice of location chosen by intent or practicality? "A bit of both" he answers. "It would be unrealistic to find such a large space in Downtown and not pay exorbitant rental prices. But I also wanted an industrial area, in order to emphasize the link between consumerism and Pop Art." The latter form of art is about mass production and consumerism. Any product can be artistic and any

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piece of art can be a product. "I also wanted the location to highlight the avant-gardism of the place". He needed it to be out of the mainstream, completely off stream: "you can't have a subversive art site right next door to Aishti". The location needed to fit with the theme of the project.

But what is it that makes Art Lounge different from other cafes or bars where tasteful art is displayed? Here, you can take pleasure in classics such as Liechtenstein while fresher artists such as Indonesian based American artist Symon or a more multihued Jenson can also be enjoyed. But here anything can be demonstrated too, from a product to any design object to a simple reading of anything that evokes creation. People, not just artists, can have the occasion to explore their artistic side. Art Lounge gives one the ambivalence to chose: between hues, seats, drinks, books and much more allowing most to enjoy and create art themselves if they feel the need to. Experiencing all of them was personally very pleasurable. Art lounge is culturally complete and its opening is anticipated by many. Once it is open to the public, there is no doubt they will be more than artistically and leisurely satisfied. ▼