

AGENDA

LEBANON

THEATER

**'Madad'**  
The Sunflower Theater,  
Sami Solh Avenue, Tayouneh  
Until April 3, 7 p.m.  
03 035 298/01 381 290  
Mariam Hamoud, Jessica  
Khazrik and Ziad Boustani  
journey into the abstract with  
this theater performance, part  
of the "50 Days 50 Years" fes-  
tival. In Arabic.

**'Zenga ... Zenga'**  
Babel Theater, Cairo Street,  
Hamra  
April 2, 8:30 p.m.  
03 135 519  
Qasim Istambouli's new play is  
divided into three sets combin-  
ing comedy and tragedy, and  
dealing with the stories of the  
Arab revolutions we are still  
experiencing today. In Arabic.

DANCE

**'L'Étreinte & Beyrouth O  
Beyrouth'**  
Theater Monnot, Achrafieh  
Until April 3, 8:30 p.m.  
01 202 422  
Nada Kano's Beirut Dance  
Company presents a mix of  
Kano's new performance "L'E-  
treinte" and "Beyrouth O Bey-  
routh" inspired by Raza Hama-  
di's artwork "Men in the  
Cities."

FILM

**'Shivers'**  
St. Joseph University,  
Damascus Street, IESAV  
Amphitheater, Achrafieh  
April 6-10, call for times and  
schedule  
01 970 253  
This film cycle focuses on  
Spanish horror and fantasy  
movies, including classics and  
short films by young directors.  
Subtitles in French or English.

ART

**'33° 50' N, 35° 50' E'**  
Piece Unique Gallery, Aris  
Kanafani Street, Saifi village  
Until April 9  
01 975 655  
Melkan Bassil's photography  
exhibition deals with the con-  
templation of Lebanon as a  
galaxy formed of little  
Lebanese planets.

**'Vers de Nouveaux Horizons'**  
Surface Libre d'Art Gallery,  
Jardin Dadour, Jal al Dib  
Until April 13  
04 715 500 / 04 716 600  
Joseph Rouhayem's solo exhi-  
bition is inspired by religious  
icons but offers a new perspec-  
tive on society and the body.

**'Rencontre'**  
Chahine Gallery,  
Dunant Street, Verdun  
Until April 20  
01 346 522  
This exhibition displays paint-  
ings, sculptures, stained glass  
and art deco pieces from 150  
Lebanese and Arab artists.

**'La Reine de Tyr et autres  
sculptures'**  
Espace Kenaneh Kunigk,  
Gefnor Center, Hamra  
Until April 20  
01 738 706  
Simone Fattal exhibits her clay  
sculptures of warriors, cen-  
taurs, bulls and dancers echo-  
ing the age of antiquity.

**'Affiches sur Scene'**  
Beirut Theater, Ain al Mreisseh  
Until April 2  
01 363 328  
In association with the French  
Cultural Center, photographer  
Pascal Colrat exhibits a series  
of posters he created for cultur-  
al institutions, theaters and  
some of his personal creations.

JUST A THOUGHT

It has never been my object to  
record my dreams, just the deter-  
mination to realize them.

Man Ray  
(1890-1976)  
American artist

INTERVIEW

# Reviving Lebanon's Sputnik moment



Hadjithomas and Joreige's sculpture at Haigazian University.

Hadjithomas and Joreige explore the little-known history of the Lebanese Rocket Society

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie  
Special to The Daily Star

**B**EIRUT: Anyone passing through the neighborhood of Kantari in the last few weeks may have noticed a strange spire peeking out from behind the hedges of Haigazian University.

From the street, the spire looks like a thin white rod pointing above the surrounding buildings at a rakish angle to the sky. It could be the tip of a flagpole knocked out of alignment, an absurdly long spear or an ominously high tech, disturbingly out of place weapon.

However, turn into the wrought iron gates and enter Haigazian's leafy courtyard, and the spire turns out to be the needle nose of a rocket — one of two gleaming white iron sculptures produced by the artists and filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige.

Part of an ongoing, multi-faceted art work that includes videos, installations, archival images and a forthcoming film, the sculptures are named for and inspired by the little-known history of the Lebanese Rocket Society, which was founded at Haigazian 50 years ago.

Each piece is an 8 meter replica of the Cedar IV, the most famous of the high performance projectiles that were launched over Lebanon in the 1960s, only to disappear in the Mediterranean immediately thereafter.

"What's strange is that no one remembers this story," says Hadjithomas, "even though it was on the front pages of all the newspapers. We know this kind of amnesiac Lebanon, but this was a positive thing."

The story of the Lebanese Rocket Society began in 1960, when a math and physics teacher named Manoug

Manougian joined the Haigazian faculty. Assigned the task of revamping the school's science club, Manougian rounded up a group of students, mostly freshmen, and turned their attention to rocketry.

Beyond learning the principles of thrust, drag and lift, the students wanted to design and build their own rockets. Their ambitions were epistemic. They wanted to study and explore space. Instigating a weapons program was never on the agenda.

Within a year, the science club rebranded itself the Haigazian College Rocket Society. The group launched its first few rockets in the spring of 1961: first a tiny one that lifted off from a remote farm for a small audience of students, then larger ones reaching higher altitudes and attracting greater public attention, governmental scrutiny and regional envy. This was, in effect, the Arab world's entry into the space race.

By the spring of 1962, the Lebanese Army was securing the launch sites, the rockets were reaching heights of 20 kilometers or more, and other universities were eager to get involved.

Lebanon's president, Fouad Chehab, invited the society's members to a meeting to commend them on their work. The U.S. and the USSR dispatched ambassadors and cultural attachés to check out what they were doing.

With its profile rising, the group changed its name to the Lebanese Rocket Society and initiated the Cedar series, from Cedar I through Cedar VII. Most of the rockets were successful, Cedar IV so much so that it was emblazoned on a postal stamp commemorating Lebanon's independence.

But accidents did occur, including an ill advised experiment with propellant chemicals that deprived one student of an eye. In 1966, Cedar VII exploded on its ramp before liftoff. It turned out to be the last launch.

No one knows for sure why the rocket program ended, but by 1967 it was gone. The society disbanded. Its members scattered across the globe.

The war with Israel that summer must have been a factor. Some say France asked Lebanon to give the rockets a rest. Others argue that Israel's spy net work wormed in among members of the group. Before the rocket's curious return to Kantari six weeks ago, few remembered that Lebanon had ever had a Sputnik moment of its own.

"We wanted to have the rocket in Haigazian for students to remember this story," says Hadjithomas, "and for people to cross the street and ask them selves, what is this?"

"What can come from Lebanon?" she asks.

"It's always weapons or war. But the rocket was for scientific purposes. It shifts the gaze, and this displacement is something that interests us."

On Feb. 22, Hadjithomas and Joreige unveiled the first sculpture in Beirut, during an official ceremony replete with a dramatic white sheet draped over the piece. Haigazian's president, Paul Hadjistian, officiated over the event. With camp and humor, the sheet was whisked away to reveal an ambiguous artwork, which doubles as a gift to the university in tribute to its long standing commitment to science.

A few weeks later, the second sculpture arrived in Sharjah. It now stands in a square in front of an art museum, one of several works erected in public space for the tenth Sharjah Biennial.

A more elaborate articulation of Hadjithomas and Joreige's project four video screens and a room filled with 32 accordion folded prints remains on view inside the museum through May 16, subtitled "Elements for a Possible Monument."

"Monument is a big word," says Hadjithomas. "We have no pretensions [about making] monuments but we are interested in how you create something that stays and deals with a moment in history. We don't work on memory. We work on a relation with history."

"We are not interested in nostalgia for the 1960s," she explains.

"We are more interested in how we perceived ourselves as Arabs in the 1960s. What were our notions of modernity, science and knowledge? What was our faith in all that and why did it disappear?"

The Lebanese Rocket Society was, in effect, a dream hemmed in by defeat. Hadjithomas and Joreige have returned to a moment of possibility from the past, but their purpose is to revive its potential in the present.

"We really wanted to do something on this possibility of dreaming. Today it has special echoes, but for me these people were dreamers. I want to dream with them in the present."

There are easier ways to dream than moving two rockets around the Middle East in a time of widespread upheaval. The Haigazian sculpture traveled to Beirut from Dbayyeh, where it was made, on the back of a flatbed truck, escorted by a sizable security detail. The Sharjah rocket required two months of logistical work.

"To put the rocket in boxes and find someone willing to ship them was really difficult," says Hadjithomas.

"We had to get authorizations. We had to see ministers. The army had to come, check the boxes, see that the rocket is empty, and understand that it's just a sculpture because, of course, it looks like a missile."

"This was only possible because the biennial helped us and supported our idea," she adds. "This was only possible in the territory of art."

Sharjah Biennial 10 is on view through May 16. For more information, please see [www.sharjahart.org](http://www.sharjahart.org).



The Lebanese Rocket Society posing with the Cedar III rocket moments before launch.

REVIEW

## Lebanese pianist takes audience to a lost world

By Chrime Lahoud  
Special to The Daily Star

**B**EIRUT: "When I think of playing piano, I think of traveling," said the Lebanese pianist and composer Walid Nahas after his performance at theater Monnot Thursday night.

Nahas' one night only show presented the release of his new album, "Immersion." He told The Daily Star that it took him quite some time to compose this

album because he had some "emotional and personal baggage." However, "I wouldn't have done it without all these experiences I've been through," he said.

The first time Nahas touched a piano he was 8 years old. Since then, he has rarely taken his hands off of a keyboard. Before welcoming the musician on stage, the Lebanese opera singer Lama Tyan told the story of the relationship between the pianist and his instrument.

Nahas' piano has been in his family for generations. First, it was "a wedding gift from Nahas' great grandfather to his

wife," Tyan said. Then, it belonged to the pianist's grandmother, who offered it to the young Nahas.

The audience could see that the Steinway & Sons piano has had many musical experiences with different pianists the wood is well worn and the piano still has its original ivory keys. The emotional baggage that ties Nahas to his piano could be felt all through his performance.

"Nahas is today's romantic figure" said Tyan. The listeners witnessed an affectionate bond between Nahas and the piano as he performed his musical compositions, which submerged the audience into the pianist's world.

As Nahas played, we could enter his romantic sphere, imagining scenes from romantic films and dreamy ballads. He offered listeners a palette of emotions: Light and subtle musical notes represented love and affection, but as Nahas switched to sharp and heavy sounds the audience could imagine a quarrel between two characters, or even anger.

Listeners were almost hypnotized by this genius who plays as though in a trance, with eyes closed. Nahas played, reacted and listened to his piano rumbling as his fingers touched the ivory.

He only opened his eyes at the end of each composition as though returning to reality, and leaving his own utopian sphere abandoning his paradise.

Nahas gave a voice to his piano, and the latter expressed the pianist's feelings. Observing Nahas with his piano was like seeing a loving relationship. At the end of his performance, Nahas bent down and kissed his instrument.



Walid Nahas with his Steinway & Sons piano.

## Mise en Scene Dechamby exhibit to open on April 7



BEIRUT: Caroline Dechamby's "Serie Mise en Scene - Papillons," oil on canvas and plexiglass, 150 x 120 centimeters, is part of her solo exhibition "Mise en Scene" at the Q Contemporary gallery in Downtown. The show opens on April 7.