The art of science fiction from Algeria to Pakistan

Sawas’ “A Space Exodus” has been widely shown since the artist completed the 5 1/2 minute video in 2009. The work is at once a humorous salute of Stanley Kubrick’s cult sci-fi classic, “2001: A Space Odyssey,” whose soundtrack uses the same music, and a serious reflection upon the Palestinian condition.

Sawas’ work can be read in hopeful terms – a Palestine flag planted on the moon. Really signifying an unoccupied land for a people driven from their own, a superpower successor for a people associated with Western occupation and drift. It sets worlds away, with a woman drifting in space, alone, after calling for a ‘jasamaan’ that does not answer.

In the context of “Space Between Our Fingers,” Sawas’ film asserts in addition even what the viewer is aware of; its width from around the region – and occasionally yet – contributing to a larger body of work taking its cue from science fiction and outer space.

“Space Between Our Fingers” is funded by U.S. non-profit arts organization Opera, through its Fringe Program. The show is curated by Rachael Dekin, a British expat and arts writer currently in the midst of a yearlong career-break/endurance stint at Weekees.

Despite Dekin chose to stage the show in multiple locations because finding a single non-profit venue in Beirut proved challenging. A multiple venue platform does encourage viewers to spend more time in each show, though individual exhibits tend to be rather sparse and visiting the entire show is a time-consuming business.

At Mannie’s, Sawas’ video is paired with five black-and-white photos by Janavee al-Alani, reaching to the peeling walls.

“Shadow Stars II” is a series of landscapes, taken from video footage the artist took from a light aircraft. The series of bird-eye-views images are marked by pronounced shadows upon barren landscapes, punctuated by ruins and brutal military infrastructure, offering alien traces on the surface of the moon or some distant, lifeless planet.

Two Gemmytext spaces host “Space Between Our Fingers” exhibit. The Arab Image Foundation has hung three photos from its archive showing an Arab rocket flight, or rather the contrails left in its wake, so taken by Assaf Kadouk. The act was one of several experimental craft launched in the 1960s by the Lebanon Rocket Society, whose (largely forgotten) existence and accomplishments has inspired Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s sprawling art and film project of the same name.

Complementing Joreige’s small format black-and-white snaps, the surface of the library’s peripherally well-labeled “Shadow Purification (Arabic Version),” Fayyad Baghdadi’s colorful paper work that registers the stars of national flags as right-pointing constellations.

The screening room of Deebawi is hosting the show’s screening cycle, as well as another Alia Elzouz piece. Like the work hung at Assaf Kadouk, the 2015 Journey to the Moon,” Diab’s piece uses found paper as a medium, specifically on an ad for the movie from which the piece takes its name.

On the poster, the viewer’s sense has applied a handsome inkjet image of the cosmos, again framed by an elaborate design executed of classic Palestinian art, the work’s colors and scale make it more aesthetically pleasing than Elzouz’s and Kadouk’s, and the origin of the medium lends it additional irony.


The matter of Arab or Muslim science fiction, and the depth of it, has been a talking point for some years now, and was the subject of a lively panel discussion hosted by Weekees during the 2013 edition of Home Works, Assaf Kadouk’s forum on cultural practices.

Dekin was inspired to create this show by a symbol she saw spray painted on walls around the city – a Cedar tree on the moon beside a rocket, marked with the words “Believe It.” The image stamens from “The Lebanese Rocket Society” project.

“Golden Record” is one of six installations performed by Joreige and produced for the “Rocket Society” project. It’s on show at The Hangar, UMAM D&B’ni’s artists exhibition space, though when The Daily Star visited it was temporarily on the Arts.

The 2011 work was inspired by the U.S. probes Voyager 1 and 2, which 1977 launch were based on carrying golden records intended to regale extraterrestrial audiences with a selection of sounds reflecting the diversity of life on earth.

“Golden Record” consists of a vase projection of an enormous spinning gold disk, accompanied by a recording of archived sounds from 1960s Beirut, which create a retro-auditory portrait of the city at that era.

Blended with the sound of the contemporary city, this audio work is at once historical and nostalgic, touching on issues surrounding Lebanon’s uneasy coexistence with its violent past.

Nearby, glass vitrines display UMAM’s extensive archives, displaying original newspaper articles from the 1960s and 70s, reports on Lebanon’s space program as well as the landmark extraterrestrial journey of Syrian cosmonaut Muhammad Faris.

Faris plays a role in Ali Cherri’s “Pipe Dreams,” also on show in The Hangar. It combines old audio tapes to reflect upon such issues as public profile, politics, history and the media.

On a small television, film footage shows former Syrian President Hafez Assad in a seemingly scripted chat with Faris, who in 1987 spent eight days in space, making him the second and last Arab to do so.

“We, President, I am content and happy to see the country I love,” Faris says. “I saw it wonderful and beautiful as truly is… it is superb and wonderful. I am very happy with what I saw.”

Cherri’s projects a second, larger image that overlaps the television screen. Shot after the Syrian uprising began in 2011, the footage shows statues of Assad being removed on the orders of his son and successor, Bashar.

The work creates a wonderful juxtaposition of the father’s monumental moment of triumph and the war’s forlorn decades later to present his father’s Image being torn down by protesters.

“Space Between Our Fingers” is up until May 30. For more information, please visit www.宀座Xœgi.org/exhibitions/deebawi.php.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on May 20, 2015, on page 12.