

apexart

2014-15 Franchise Proposal by
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Franchise location: Beirut, Lebanon

Across Beirut, painted fuzzily on underpasses and public walls, the symbol of a cedar on the moon, hugged by a rocket in flight, is accompanied by the emblazoned words BELIEVE IT. At the Haigazian University in West Beirut, a slender white rocket (physical effigy of its graffitied sister) stands to attention outside the main hall.

Both are elements of The Lebanese Rocket Society, a project by Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas. Revealing the forgotten story of Lebanese space exploration from the 1960s, the artists' multi-faceted work uses this narrative to interrogate contemporary relationships to time and history within Lebanon.

This Franchise Program exhibition hopes to explore the proliferation of outer space as image, metaphor, and utopia, as imagined by artists from or in the Middle-East. Harnessed in popular culture as the ultimate other, the great unknown, space is the subject of childhood dreaming, myth and legend, scientific discovery and global aspiration. At the same time, this exhibition takes as its starting point the assertion that artists in the MENA region are using space as a vehicle for critical consideration of local histories and the articulation of identity in societies with unstable relationships to earthly geography.

Larissa Sansour is a Palestinian artist who counters literal absence of territorial agency with regained sovereignty in the breadth of outer space. Rana Hamadeh's ongoing project Alien Encounters contemplates and complicates the notion of the 'alien' in terms of immigration law and extraterrestriality. Ali Cherri's Pipe Dreams takes as its catalyst a phone call between the Syrian cosmonaut Muhammed Faris and the late president Hafez al-Assad. His work ambivalently connects Syria's present trauma to an inspirational moment in its history. Jananne al-Ali's Shadow Sites abstracts the Middle-Eastern landscape in images that have the eerie appearance of being taken from space, drawing attention to the gaze of the satellite.

As the Lebanese Rocket Society pervades the public spaces of Beirut, it seems timely to bring together artists for whom outer space is operating as a powerful site for the proposal of alternatives – not just to spatial polemics on earth, but to strategies of historiography. Artists in this region are both celebrating little-known Middle-Eastern histories of space exploration, and harnessing the permanent otherness of space to navigate contemporary concerns. Inherently liminal, subject to transformed laws of physics, space is a site of radical potential. So, too, is art interrogating and playing with questions of place and placelessness, identity and its absence, history and its writing.