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Aiwa! Artists head for higher ground

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ALEY: Ghassan Maasri wasn't sure the place where he grew up would hold much interest for a group of artists who would be coming to Lebanon from all over the world for an intense two-week workshop. The small corner of Aley where he spent his childhood is a half-hour's drive from Beirut. With a smattering of low stone buildings surrounded by unruly gardens and all carved into a rocky hillside overlooking the Mediterranean, the place looks much like the quaint mountain village it must have been some 50 years ago - except for the fact that it was seriously pummeled during Lebanon's Civil War.

Today the gardens are overgrown and the houses are punctured with huge gaping holes.

Maasri's parents, who rode out the war years in Beirut, returned to find their residence not only damaged but ransacked as well. They have been slowly restoring the lower floors of their house.

But other buildings around them remain empty, the owners not yet willing to return but also not yet willing to sell the land to developers who would surely raze these old structures to the ground for the more lucrative construction of high-rise apartment buildings.

A few years ago, Maasri, 33, an artist who makes installations and videos, attended the Braziers artists workshop set deep in the English countryside. The idea behind Braziers is to invite a diverse collection of artists to one place for a concentrated period time to create work through the exchange of ideas and in dialogue with their peers.

A year later, Tamara al-Samerraie, 28, a Kuwaiti painter, video and installation artist who is based in Beirut, attended Braziers, too. When Maasri and Samerraie came together to compare notes and discuss the possibility of starting something like Braziers in Lebanon, they had to come up with a site to host the workshop. When British artist and Braziers co-founder Gill Ord came to Lebanon to help them get the project off the ground, Maasri took her to Aley.

"Do you think it's interesting?" he asked her.

Ord, in effect, responded: "What, are you kidding? Yes!"

AIW:A, the Artists International Workshop Aley, opened officially on September 18, when 20 artists from Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Germany, the U.K., Pakistan, China and Mexico made their way to Maasri's house. (Hanan Hirzelleh, contending with the unpredictable border crossings and visa issues that have become endemic for artists from Palestine, arrived a few days later). The two-week workshop, tagged by the participants as Aiwa! like the Arabic colloquialism, follows the model of the Triangle Arts Trust, which began in 1982 and has held 90 workshops for 2,500 artists in 28 countries from Australia to Zambia ever since.

Maasri's neighbors warmed to the workshop immediately and many have offered to put the visiting artists up in their nearby homes. Along with funding from the Ford

Foundation and the Prince Claus Fund, the Aley municipality offered its support, as did Electricity of Aley's Albert Khoury, whose property lies adjacent to Maasri's.

"We quite like the idea that we have small houses and big gardens," Maasri explains. When he discussed the project with Khoury, they decided, "Let's bring people here and have fun."

Until October 6, the artists are spending most of their days and nights on site. They began the workshop by discussing their respective art practices and showing each other their work. Then they built themselves a small bar and got down to choosing a space and creating new work. On Sunday, AIW:A opens to the public for a day-long exhibition, where each artist will have the opportunity to unveil what they've done with their time in Aley.

During an early visit on Wednesday, Auj Khan from Pakistan had nationalized two abandoned wooden doors and was sanding them down to make a support for two paintings. Ann Course from the U.K. was creating a mammoth flag and searching for a proper flagpole. Samerraie had taken over the end of a hallway to create an installation with an old record player converted into a music box with a dancer rotating on top. Maasri had started to construct an architecturally inspired installation made from huge stacks of plastic chairs. Mohammad al-Riffai from Egypt and Cynthia Zaven from Lebanon were working together on a sound installation with projections, making innovative use of a bank of spare water tanks. Chinese artist Yingmei Duan was setting up props on a rooftop for a day-long performance piece.

"It's a harsh place, it's all stone, everything's destroyed by war," says Maasri, stepping gingerly up a makeshift staircase to a building that has been thoroughly cleaned up by Egyptian artist Mahmoud Khaled.

The artists took their time finding a space to work with, adds Samerraie.

"There are so many spaces with such a different feel, and I think people did find it quite laden," says Ord, who is both facilitating and participating in the workshop, which Maasri and Samerraie hope will be the first of many.

"The spaces are powerful," admits Maasri, to the point where they can be intimidating for the artists involved.

But in a sense, the workshop is so far mirroring the more organic and generative end of Lebanon's post-war reconstruction process, whereby wrecked spaces slowly transform into places with potential.

"On the first walkabout we did, everyone was amazed by the destruction of the war," says Maasri. "But after that, they started to think spatially."

For more information, e-mail aiwaworkshop@yahoo.com.uk or call +961 3 801 763 or +961 3 429 218. The open day takes place on Sunday from 2-7 p.m. in Aley, past the Bitar Station and the Saint George Greek Orthodox Church.

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