

**Sophie Kazan Makhoul** reflects on *Portals and Pathways, a Journey Through Reality and Imagination*, the inaugural exhibition at the Nuhad Es-Said Pavilion for Culture in Beirut.

The Nuhad Es-Said Pavilion for Culture is the new extension of Beirut's National Museum (BNM) and was inaugurated on 18 September last year. Despite the intense political situation in the Lebanese capital and the bombings that followed, the building has remained open in the spirit of resilience that has guided the BNM since it was built in 1942. Originally intended as an archaeological museum, its impressive collection of around 100,000 artefacts maps the country's ancient history and its diverse socio-cultural heritage. Situated on the dividing 'Green Line' during the country's long civil war, the BNM has been an enduring stalwart in the city.

The new pavilion stands along the eastern flank of the national museum and is named after the art collector Nuhad Es-Said. Designed by Raed Abillama Architects, the single-storey structure is intended as a welcoming and community-focused annex and houses additional exhibition spaces and a much-needed café. Its façade is dominated by three floor-to-ceiling doorways, which have been taken up by curators of the Beirut Museum of Art as the theme for this inaugural exhibition, *Portals and Pathways, a Journey Through Reality and Imagination*. The show features modern and contemporary art by 33 Lebanese artists, from private collectors and the collection of the Lebanese Ministry of Culture, including Saloua Raouda Choucair, Lamia Joreige, Nabil Nahas, Michel Basbous and Shafic Abboud. It transitions between time and space, past and present, reality and imagination, through four chapters or themes – Memory, Myths, Perception and Territory – with each engaging the viewer along these magical pathways.

One large immersive installation stands apart from the exhibition, at the entrance of the pavilion, and that is because it was made expressly for the opening of the new space by the contemporary artist Alfred Tarazi. Entitled *Hymne à l'Amour* (*Hymn to Love* or *نشيد الحب*), it has been described by Tarazi as "leftovers from my father and mother's lives". Almost 60 carved wooden doorways of various sizes, assembled from traditional buildings and suspended from metal frames, fill the space. The artist's father George Tarazi was a craftsman from a family of antique dealers and Tarazi's appreciation of the carvings and their conception revives filial memories of "the magician" to whom he owes his own artistic abilities and aesthetic sensibilities.

Tarazi's mother, Renata Ortali Tarazi, was an archaeologist and her memory is also rooted in the exhibition space. Her son tells the viewer, "You are here in the National Museum of Beirut in my mother's realm; it is here that as a young girl she drew inspiration and strength to build her life". The doorways in the installation make up a forest of entrances and pathways, scattered with sculptures, large metal coffee pots and other artefacts, like an archaeological dig. Stepping through the entrances of



Alfred Tarazi. *Hymne à l'Amour*. 2022. Photography by Mohamad Rifai

the installation, the viewer can read 'stations' from the artist, describing intersecting moments of Tarazi's childhood, memories of his parents' story and that of Lebanon more generally.

Through the notes linked to each doorway, the viewer is invited to step through Tarazi's past and his perceptions of the present with visual, written memories. These thoughts are poetic and linger with the reader long after they have visited the installation. Perhaps that is the point. The exhibition is a joining together of the world of the artist's parents, his own history and that of several generations of Lebanese whose working lives and those of their parents and grandparents were turned upside down by the eruption of the civil war and all the events that have followed in this beautiful and historic city, racked by tragedy and memory. Not so much a journey of sadness as a bittersweet moment of historical reckoning, the installation is an extremely moving and honest exchange, a sharing of the hymn of love for the artist's parents. 'Parents' in the Mediterranean sense can include wider family members and relatives. In the dazzling and bright new building, *Hymne à l'Amour* has all the beauty and abandon of Edith Piaf's soulful 1940s classic of the same name. It offers hope and reparation, and speaks of new beginnings – as long as there is love.