

NOW.

Make some NOISE

Sfeir's show challenges the idea of art galleries

Lucy Fielder, December 16, 2009

The blurb on the wall as you enter Sfeir-Semler's NOISE gives a taste of things to come.

It appears to describe the gallery's latest show, but has no relation to it at all. "It's sort of a joke by the curator," explains Sfeir's assistant director, Peter Currie. "It's actually a mish-mash of phrases from blurbs from previous exhibitions."

Look for clues from the headphones plugged into the wall and you'll be disappointed – the rolling audio guide describes another show, all the way over in New York at the Museum of Modern Art, for the benefit of the blind.

NOISE is no conventional exhibition, but a mischievous challenge to the idea of galleries, such as this one in the Karantina industrial zone north of Beirut, and the way they present art.

NOISE "attempts to close its eyes and tune its ears to the white noise of the white cube," according to the show's real description, and to question how much the frame and context – the gallery, the visitors and the city – affect the art. Curated by Negar Azmi and Babak Radboy for the *Bidoun* contemporary Middle Eastern Art magazine, the exhibition opened on Friday and will run until February 6.

One of the clearer examples of this is the room exhibiting unsold work from a previous show by Syrian painter Marwan. A large white cube takes up the center of the room, leaving just a narrow perimeter, cramping visitors against the works and forcing them to view them at an uncomfortable proximity.

Walead Beshty sent a series of copper blocks to the gallery by Fed-Ex, via other points on the globe. They are displayed as they arrived, smudged with fingerprints, grubby and plastered with stickers: the opposite of taking a pristine work of art and displaying it in a blank white cube with no interaction with the world outside.

"They're only considered works of art once they arrive at their destination, they have a story, they have a life," Currie says. "It's a meditation on minimalist practices."

Beshty's series of photographs from film damaged by the X-rays at Beirut airport, meanwhile, explores globalization and what Currie calls the "residue of travel".

Art and elitism

Several works highlight the exclusivity of the modern gallery, which often seems to aim at an elite (try reaching Sfeir-Semler without a car, for example).

One such is visible from the highway: Vartan Avakian's sign spells out Sfeir- Semler – signposting the usually unmarked gallery for the first time – in the Indian Devengari script, for the benefit of Asian migrants in nearby Bourj Hammoud. Inside the door is another sign in Armenian.

New York-based artist Steven Baldi has blocked off part of the space with a glass wall, forcing visitors to retrace their steps back through the show to see the works again, and also drawing parallels with the “glass ceiling” and the invisible barriers created by class and wealth.

NOISE is often playful; architect Rayyane Tabet's sculpture represents a drinking game called “Beirut”, which was dreamed up by US military personnel based here.

And Bassam Ramlawi makes his debut with a series of works based on Dutch painter Rene Daniels' explorations of artistic perspective; it turns out that Ramlawi is the invention of Lebanese artist Mounira Solh.

NOISE is a conceptual exploration, provocative and far from easy. It raises a smile and some interesting questions, and so even for those who like their art a little more conventional, it is well worth a trip.