

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Boghossian fetes Lebanese artists

By Niamh Fleming-Farrell

BEIRUT: Pascal Hachem and Tagreed Darghouth are the winners of the inaugural Boghossian Foundation prize for young Lebanese artists.

The Belgium-based foundation feted the two artists at a reception and exhibition in the Beirut Souks.

Both born in 1979, Hachem and Darghouth were selected from 61 artists to take the prize in the sculpture and painting categories, respectively.

Darghouth emerged as the uncontested winner from a field of applications from 48 painters, which the foundation's 10-person jury narrowed to a short list of four.

Over the past half decade Darghouth's exhibitions have explored such topics as the treatment of domestic workers in this country (*Mirror, Mirror* 2008), Lebanese body image (*Fair and Lovely* 2010) and the colorful terminology used to describe weapons of mass destruction (*Canticle of Death* 2011).

The jury received applications from five sculptors, which they further whittled down to a short list of two.

Speaking at the awards ceremony, jury member and foundation president Albert Boghossian said choosing a single laureate for sculpture was "difficult." But "after a long discussion, the jury unanimously designated Pascal Hachem the prize winner."

Strolling through the Jeweler's Souk exhibition space, where a sample of the winners' works are on display, it was immediately apparent that, quite beyond working in different media, the work of Hachem and Darghouth shares little in common.

Rather than working with traditional media like clay, stone or metal, Hachem deploys everyday objects – kitchen knives, forks, match boxes and the like – to create works that often take the form of mechanical installations. Darghouth works within the conventions of acrylic paint on canvas.

Upon reflection, however, similarities can be detected in the artists' work. In their various ways, both artists make unsettling pieces. Both ask viewers to question what they know and what they think of their physical and discursive surroundings.

Darghouth's materials may be relatively conventional but she is by no means a mere decorative artist. Rather her work stands as a strongly resonant commentary on contemporary realities.

Works displayed at the ceremony from her "Canticle of Death" exhibition reflect the array of code names Britain used for its weapons of mass destruction since the mid-20th century, such as "red angel" and "blue parrot."

Seven different canvasses depict mushroom clouds, each a different color of the rainbow.

On other larger canvases, the artist has painted skulls against backgrounds of kitsch floral or tree motifs, juxtaposing unnatural death with world's rigorously determined flora.

Created in 1992, the Boghossian Foundation has been active as a philanthropic organization supporting various educational, urban development, artistic and cultural projects in Armenia, Syria and Lebanon.

In setting up this prize, the foundation collaborated with Solidere, ALBA (the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts) as well as APEAL (the Association for the promotion and exhibition of the arts in Lebanon).

Eligible candidates must be 17-35 years of age and be of Lebanese nationality or else have been resident there for five years. Joining Albert Boghossian on the selection committee-jury were curators, museum directors, arts educators and critics from Belgium and Lebanon.

The foundation decided to forego the prize for jewelry, the third category selected for the 2012 prize. Instead it unanimously decided to substitute it with a workshop for students of the jeweler's craft, to be held at ALBA during the coming academic year.

Compared to Darghouth's canvasses, Hachem's works appear altogether more conceptual. Several of the pieces in his exhibition "Bring the boys back home," staged in London in 2010, used matchboxes as a central motif. Each was slid open just enough to reveal the photo reproduction of a hand gesture, one often employed by speechifying political figures – including one prominent Lebanese politician.

From work to work the gesticulating matchboxes were deployed to evoke a range of themes – from the deadening repetition of political discourse, to its flammable flimsy-ness. The artist's work suggests that political life is at once combustible, fragile and ultimately transient.

In his 2008 exhibit "I'll race you," mounted as part of a group show at the ruin of Beirut's City Center Cinema, the artist drew upon his background in engineering and design to comment on the eagerness of Lebanese developers to raze the city's architectural patrimony in favor of shiny, in the view of some observers soulless, tower blocks.

The installation is comprised of a row of six hammers, aligned on an automated mechanism in such a way that each tool takes a turn striking the interior wall of the City Center – the last remnant of Lebanese Modernism in the retooled downtown core.

Hachem and Darghouth each received \$10,000 prize money along with the opportunity to show their work at Villa Empain, the restored art deco palace in Brussels that is the Boghossian Foundation's home.

The 2013 edition of the Boghossian Foundation prize will be awarded to artists working in photography, video, new media and illustration.