



*the
spirit
of
fire*

Armenian-Lebanese artist **Jean Boghossian** uses smoke and fire to spell messages of peace and harmony, writes Rebecca Anne Proctor



The L'Orient du Jour building in downtown Beirut continues to stand tall and proud. Once the headquarters of one of the most widespread newspapers of the Lebanese capital, it was founded in this very structure, the site of the clashes that took place during the civil war (1975-90). Now abandoned and riddled with bullet holes, it bears many traces of the violence that took place within it. Still, its marvellous shell continues to preserve a memory of a time never to be forgotten. Its destructed walls now appear in stark contrast to the contemporary yet sterile structure of the adjacent Beirut Souks. Somehow, there seems to be more humanity in its vulnerable appearance of wears and tears than in the glossy fixtures next door. And its humanity was led to shine even more so this September when Armenian-Lebanese artist Jean Boghossian staged his exhibition *Building with Fire* (until 28 October) within its delicate bullet-holed walls.

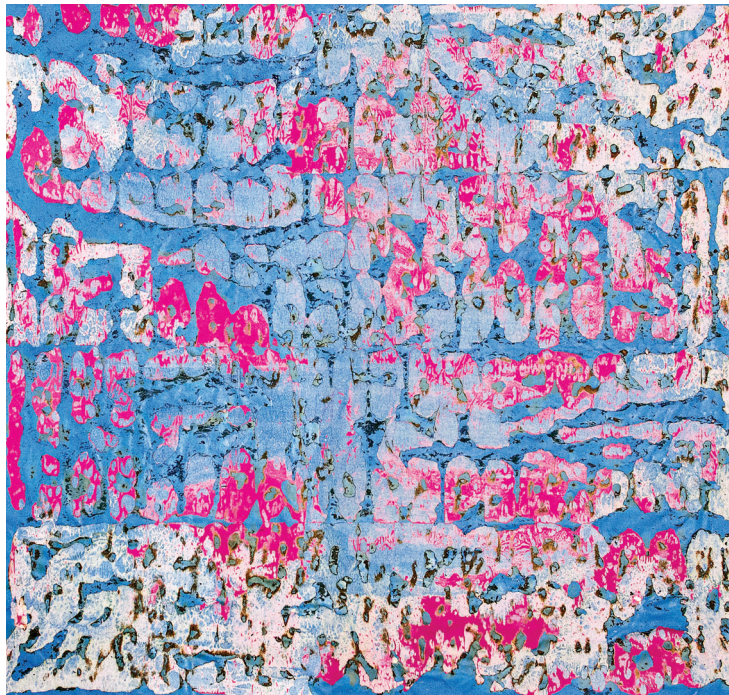
How does an artist make use of such a site of destruction? A site that continues to hold fresh memories of trauma for the Lebanese people. Over the last several years, Boghossian, has been creating his canvases using the destructive elements of fire and smoke as well as pigments that highlight the act of destruction—a creative process that connects with the destroyed aesthetic of the L'Orient du Jour building. While such elements usually spell of sabotage, combustion and finality, casting their subjects into the state of oblivion, Boghos-



sian uses them instead to create the opposite: order, harmony, hope and beauty. A walk through the L'Orient du Jour building on a sunny day in Beirut offers exactly this: blissful moments of peace and tranquillity. "My work shows how fire is not necessarily violent and can—unlike the fire of the war which causes death—bring hope and beauty," says the artist. "Like the last breath of this building that will be preserved to be reborn, I am in the preservation of ashes on my canvas."

The flames and smoke with which Boghossian realises his canvases are incorporated with such sensitivity that it is clear the artist understands firsthand the experience of violence. A man of three facets: part of the Boghossian family of jewelers; the Villa Empain – Foundation Boghossian, a contemporary art foundation in Belgium, and Jean Boghossian as the artist.

Facing page:
Arabian Nights.
2018. 190x190cm.
Acrylic and
smoke on canvas;
Installation view
of *Building with
Fire*. Beirut. 2018.
Image courtesy of
Elie Bekhazi; Jean
Boghossian at the
opening of *Flamme
Intérieure* at
Museum Ground.
Image courtesy
Museum Ground,
Gyeonggi-do,
Korea



"I come from the world of jewellery," he says, explaining how when he was six years old his father arranged a professor for him to help him learn how to draw. "He always thought that the son of a jeweller must be a designer because he didn't know how to design. Then we had to move from Aleppo to Beirut and that was the first exile. My grandfather escaped the Armenian genocide and moved to Aleppo. I was born in Aleppo and grew up there until the age of 12 with my parents and then moved to Lebanon because of the political situation. Then at the first gunshot of the civil war I left Beirut to come to Belgium." Boghossian was a stone dealer then and was one of the gemstone pioneers who travelled to Colombia and Brazil looking for precious stones. "The planes then were not what they are now," he laughs. There is something jewel-like, slightly sparkling in his paintings—references that tell of his connection with gemstones and the detailed technique that it takes to create a work of high jewellery.

"So I came to Belgium because of the civil war and started working with diamonds but my father was not happy that I was studying at university when I was in Beirut," he continues. "He told me that we 'have to work, we don't have time we come from the genocide.' So I left the my studies to start working first. I was always interested in culture. First I studied economy and then sociology—I thought it was important to keep culture as a main focus point. I was not interested in business and money; I was interested in creating." Boghossian pauses for a second before he says: "Money for me is a tool—it has no purpose in itself. Money is about what I can do with it and not how I can accumulate it."

The works on view at L'Orient du Jour are filled with a wide spectrum of colours, forms, burnt paper and textures. They sing an alluring rhythm, one where the rules of spatiality and geometry have been thrown out the window and replaced with unusual and organic forms that move in harmony.

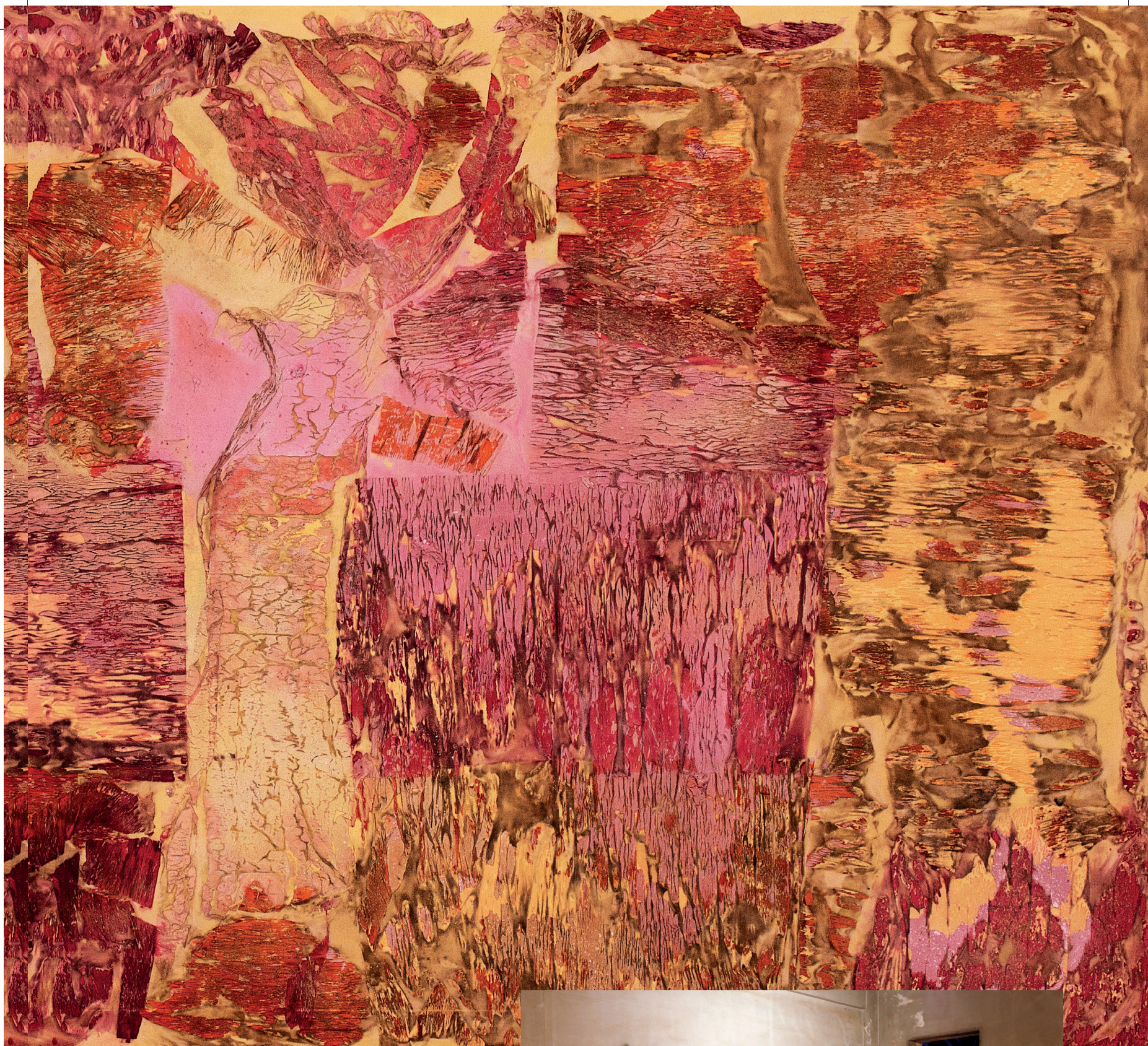
"Art has become a replacement for spirituality," says Boghossian. "You go to a museum and a gallery today more than you go to a church, mosque and synagogue. Art has become a God in itself. But it really needs to keep its modest place and be a vehicle for a better world." Here amidst this hell of devastation, Boghossian uses the same natural elements of



destruction to create new life—almost as a way of atoning for past woes. Amidst the broken windows, unhinged doors, walls slowly disintegrating into the ground, unsafe beams and steps that may see their last very soon, are Boghossian's works that offer vibrant energies to this devastated space. And through his canvases, laden with collage, writing, and numerous natural and man-made fragments, they reconcile with the past.

"When I'm in my studio, I'm like an alchemist who contemplates the confluence of combustible material elements I expose to fire and smoke, then decide when to stop the process as it transforms into a work of art," says the artist of his creative process. Yet how does a man with a background in gemstones become an artist? It all started one Christmas when Boghossian bought his son, then nine, an easel, with paints and brushes. "And on that same Christmas night I took the

Clockwise from above: *Untitled (Giverny)*. 2018. Acrylic and paper on burnt canvas. 195x195cm; *Untitled*. 2018. Acrylic and paper on burnt canvas. 175x275cm; *Building with Fire* exhibition opening at L'Orient Le Jour, Beirut. 2018.



easel and began painting.” He then went to an arts academy and did 15 years of training along with his diamond and jewellery business. “When I opened the door to the academy it was a paradise for me,” he remembers. “It was a cloud of creation for me.” He then studied art history, travelling from museum to museum and gallery to gallery, thirsty for a knowledge that wasn’t yet available in the Middle East. Anything abstract was a favourite—“Anything that would move art from beyond the logic.” He experimented in techniques of collage, Abstract Expressionism and *pliage* (the art of folding), until he reached fire. Pollock, Richter and De Kooning were artists who inspired him. “I think the rule of a good artist is to first be authentic yourself,” he smiles. “Feel inside yourself your emotion and your expression and then look around the world and translate it into your art without aggressiveness.”

Quietly working, relentlessly over the last 30 years, he has





“Don’t forget, I am a jeweller—when I was around 16 years old I was burning to create the jewellery,” he explains. “You will find the jewellery in my work. But I left jewellery now and am living my passion as an artist. It is a blessing because art has made me get younger while I am getting older.” Each day he goes to his studio to create for several hours, incorporating within his canvases the vibrant dry pigments, intense smoke and mixing them with acrylic paint and other materials. “I was sitting in my studio one day and wondered what would happen if I took a blow torch and put it on a yellow colour and then it became brown and then black and then the hole happened in the canvas,” he says of his early experiments with fire. Often working on several paintings at the same time, he has an innate sense of when a work is finished. Seven years later and Boghossian still works with fire. On one wall of his exhibition at L’Orient du Jour he writes in large letters: “It is fire that has chosen me.”

The display of Boghossian’s paintings on the walls of London’s Cardí Gallery is in contrast to the bullet-holed historical Beirut building. Still, the artist’s works shine the same light. A selection of paintings and books reveal his *oeuvre* to an international crowd in London, where the beauty of the fire and smoke one finds in destruction can sing again a happy tune of harmony and order. The message of peace and cultural dialogue can be found wherever Boghossian’s poignant works

are shown. “You can somehow transform the world through art,” says the artist. “You are first inspired; you then start by fulfilling yourself before trying to change the world. I believe in art as a supreme instrument of dialogue and as the desire to connect to the world. It opens the way to the possible metamorphosis of oneself in order to understand the other.”

Fire is a most fascinating natural element. “Fire is purifier and a regenerator,” he says. “And so too art can build and not destroy. While fire has the potential to kill, it also has the potential to build and create and that is what I am doing.” Boghossian is giving fire a sense of spirituality. Even in a state of oblivion something is left, something can start again, renew itself and this is the continuous sense of hope that will never die. ■ jeanboghossian.com

Clockwise from above: *Untitled*. 2018. Acrylic, smoke and pigments on canvas. 170x130cm; *Untitled*. 2018. Acrylic and paper on burnt canvas. 195x195cm; *Untitled*. 2017. Acrylic and gold paper on burnt canvas. 192x196cm.

produced a body of work that is still largely unseen. Yet over the last several years his exhibitions have been multiplying, regionally and globally. Of note is his solo show *Jean Boghossian: Fiamma Inesguibile* at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017, where he represented the Armenian Pavilion. Other showings have appeared at the Beirut Exhibition Center; Ayyam Gallery; the National Gallery of Armenia in Yerevan; Agial Art in Beirut; the Youngeun Museum of Contemporary Art in South Korea; Palazzo Vitelli in Città di Castello, Italy; and most recently, at Cardí Gallery in London. “Art must be a commitment,” he says. “Each artist who considers himself an artist must bring something new to the history of art. I am always concerned about how I can bring something new.” Boghossian is one of the few artists today working with fire.

IMAGES COURTESY OF SARA LAURA TALIB - JEAN BOGHOSSIAN STUDIO

