

# RAED YASSIN

Walking the Line Between  
Comedy and Tragedy





Dad smoking  
© Raed Yassin



War of the Hotels  
© Raed Yassin

**LEBANESE ARTIST RAED YASSIN DELVES INTO POP CULTURE TO RE-CREATE MEMORIES. HIS WORK IS RICH, COLORFUL AND OFTEN FUNNY, EVEN THOUGH DEEP DOWN IT IS ROOTED IN A PROFOUND SENSE OF LOSS.**

**Raed, can you tell us where you are and how your artistic journey brought you to where you are today?**

I was born in Beirut, but left for the south at an early age. My mum thought it would be safer than the capital. I had a cultural interest from a young age. First, in theater and poetry. As a teenager, I published three poetry books and I studied music: double bass and flute. In terms of art, I was very interested in installation and performance art, but I could not find anything related to that when I went to university, so I chose the thing closest to that: theater. My earliest work that I still show today is my graduation project, a kind of essayistic, arty documentary called "Beirut" about marginal people in the suburbs.

**One of your last works was Yassin Haute Couture, which was shown at Beirut Mafra Gallery. Can you tell us a bit more?**

That was a big exhibition I worked on for about eight years. It consists of many parts, starting with a text telling the story of a famous fashion designer, Samir Yassin, who happens to be my father. As he became known as a designer, he

received commissions from famous people in Lebanon and the region. In Saudi Arabia he designed a dress for a princess with whom he had an affair. But, as she was married, he had to flee to Beirut where he opened a shop. His career ended when he was murdered in mysterious ways.

The text also mentions Samir's brother who had a cabaret in Beirut called 1001 Nights. So, the setting is all about glamorous Beirut in the late 60s and early 70s. The text is important because it offers you the key to the exhibition, which you need to understand the many parts.

One part is called "Princess of Oblivion" which consists of five photos of dresses Yassin made for the princess, yet she never wore them because he never sent them. Then there is a series called "Playmates of the Month", consisting of 18 images, Playboy centerfolds from the 70s and 80s, on which Yassin drew his designs. "Proposal for a Proposal" consists of photos and embroidery on canvas, which are Yassin's proposals for the princess' wedding dress. And then there is the film: "I Hate Theater, I love Pornography", which shows 8mm footage of nude playmates and tells the story of Samir's

brother, who also went to Saudi Arabia and had to run away, because he had slept with a princess.

What I tried to do here is to create confusion. Are there really two brothers, the one an elegant fashion designer and the other a nightclub owner? Or are they two faces of one and the same man?

**So what part is fact and what is fiction?**

I'm not going to tell you! My father was a fashion designer. That is all I can say.

**Is Yassin Haute Couture also a tongue-in-cheek comment on society? Like fashion and pornography are two worlds not that far apart?**

I'm not interested in making comments about society. I believe in imagination. I create situations and confusions. If people in the audience think about or question society, it may trigger things. But I'm not interested in making direct comments. I don't want to be dictating. Art needs to be open to make the audience think and make comments.

## “I’m not a story teller. I am a liar.”

### **I loved your work *Dancing Smoking Kissing*, in which your father again played an important part.**

This work has been shown in many places. It was a big success. Every time I present it I do so under a different name. In Beirut it was called “Dancing Smoking Kissing”. It is based on old family photos that got lost because of war, displacement or just moving from one place to another. So, a lot of photos of me, my siblings and my parents got lost.

So, I decided to recreate them from memory using textile and embroidery, as both my parents were tailors. And embroidery entails sewing. Sewing memories back together. So, I made sketches of what I remembered and then worked with an artist who makes designs for embroidery machines.

But the work is not just about recreating memories. I also question memory itself. Memory is not a clear-cut thing. For example, there is one photo I remembered and recreated showing my parents on their honeymoon with a famous Egyptian actor named Emad Hamdi and his twin brother. When my sister saw the work she told me I could never have seen that photo, because it had been lost long before I was born. So, I remembered that photo only because my parents and family must have often talked about it a lot - see how memory can play tricks on you.

### **In *Disco* your father turns out to be Egyptian film star Mahmud Yassin.**

Yes, I happen to share the same family name with this famous Egyptian film star. So, I created the story that my dad had left for Egypt to work there and sent money back every month. Slowly however, he sent back less and less money and just postcards. Then one day I watch a movie with Mahmud Yassin, in which he dances with a woman and so I claim that is the last thing I ever saw of my dad.

It is again a work about dealing with loss. It is sad, but at the same time very colorful and funny. It is a reflection of the contradictions in me and my life. I'm a pessimist, a nihilist, but in a positive way. Life is hard. The world is going in a weird way, but I'm determined to live my life in the best possible way.

### **Why this constant creating and recreating of your father? Why does he play such an important role?**

Well, I'm an artist and musician of course. But I'm also an orphan. I only realized how this affected me until I was a bit older. I lost my mum when I was about 25 and my dad when I was not even five. My dad was killed in the Civil War, although he was not a war casualty. He was robbed and killed.

Naturally, our life as a family changed completely. We lost everything. And I think my life as an artist started back then. Not literally. But my work always goes back to that time. As I didn't grow up having a father, I decided to create and recreate my own. If I don't like him as a fashion designer, I just make him an Egyptian actor. In doing so there are many lies in my work and I am very happy to say that.

But my work is not just about my father. Being an orphan is also an allegory for being alone. I often feel an orphan in society, in politics, in arts. And my father is also a key, a means, to be able to reflect on certain emotions, society, pop culture etc. My work is personal and reflects on pop culture.

### **You consider yourself a story-teller?**

I consider myself an artist who has so much to say in so many different ways. An artist who uses all kinds of means to say what he has to say: video, photos, light, music, fashion, sex, lies ... The most important are the lies. So, I'm not a story teller. I am a liar.



Left  
Miss January  
Right  
Miss June  
© Raed Yassin



Opposite page  
In Baalbek  
On this page  
Kisaing  
© Raed Yassin

**How important is humor to you?**

I love art that has humor. And I think I'm a very humorous character. I love to laugh. I love to make jokes about myself. Actually, I even love to make jokes about myself when there is no one around! So, yes, humor is very important to me.

**Pop culture plays an important role in your work. Do you consider yourself a pop artist?**

I don't care much about categories, but I understand it can be important for some people as a means to understand my work. I consider myself an artist, a conceptual artist, who uses pop culture, which plays such an important role in society and human consciousness. I have always loved to make works as an homage to pop culture, which can be anything from fashion, music and cinema to cars, billboards, even sandwiches. So, I use pop culture, but I am not a pop artist.

**What do you think of the division of low-brow and high-brow art?**

I don't care about it. Both are very present in my work. In my music I really try to break with such boundaries. I may do very clever classic or contemporary compositions mixed with very "chaabi" or folkloric beats. People are a mix of contradictions and I like to reflect that in my art.

**Do you think the art world tends to take itself too seriously?**

Yes, very much so. It's annoying. I love art but I hate the art world. It is about meetings, showing off, egos. It is an economy made up of museums, collectives, galleries, even universities. I'm part of it. I cannot deny it but I try to avoid it. You could say I try to shake the columns of the temple and hope one day it will all fall on my head. That's one reason I'm happy to also do music. It gives me balance.

**What are your plans for the future?**

I'm preparing a solo exhibition on Andy Warhol's visit to Kuwait in 1977. I have all the archives and I'm manipulating them for a show called "Warhol of Arabia", which will be presented in Sharjah.

**Any final words?**

No, I'm not going to give any "final" words, then no one will be interested in interviewing me again in the future!