VOGUE
ARABIA
JUNE 2020
THE WOMAN
BEHIND THE ICON
Majida El Roumi
Her first cover in her
45-year-long career
STRENGTH, PRIDE, RESILIENCE, HOPE
LOVE LETTER
TO LEBANON

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Defiant, hopeful, resourceful – these are the movers and shakers of Lebanon

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MAYA IBRAHIMCHAH

With one-third of Lebanon's population living in abject poverty and 1.2 million subsisting on an average of US $5 per day, Maya Ibrahimchah's non-profit organization, Beit el Baraka, is a lifeline for many. Ibrahimchah reaches out to the forgotten members of society – the elderly and impoverished – putting food on the table and giving them the dignity of care and love. "Not helping them would've made me miserable," she says. "I look at some people around me who watch their country sink and do absolutely nothing. And I pity them." Along with helping people access medical care and improving their living conditions – even settling utility bills – one of Beit el Baraka's most needed initiatives is its free supermarket in Karm el Zeitoun. But Covid-19 has closed its doors, forcing Ibrahimchah and her team to adapt – and quickly. They now deliver supplies to more than 1 000 doorsteps, following stringent protocols. Beit el Baraka is also working with Lebanese Food Bank and 95 NGOs on one of the biggest responses in the country, distributing food boxes and vegetable seeds to 50 000 families with the support of the army. Her plans are bold and expansive: for Beit el Baraka to produce its own food through agriculture and farming projects; free schooling for all; and adequate pensions. "The human element in Lebanon is the shield that has always protected us from the hostile political environment we live in," Ibrahimchah says. "The beauty and magic of life in Lebanon lies within this warm and human bond between us."

DRESS, **JESSICA K**

ADIB DADA

Planting trees in the thick of a revolution might seem counterintuitive to some, but to Adib Dada, founder of theOtherDada Integrated Consultancy & Architecture, trees speak to our very souls – and the interconnectedness of it all. Dada and the NGO which he helped form, Regenerate Lebanon, engage in "guerilla gardening" to help bring lifeless areas around Beirut and its river back to verdancy. "There's a strong underlying environmental and social justice component to the revolution," he says. "There was such an energy." The environmental activist, who studied biomimicry in the US after gaining his architecture degree in Lebanon, feels strongly about reclaiming the city's public spaces. "There are so few public spaces in Beirut and for me it's a deliberate act to make them inaccessible – public areas bring people together but our leaders want us to be apart, they don't want us to join forces." During the protests, Dada and his team also helped clean up the streets and provided food from an off-the-grid, solar-powered kitchen with its own water filtration system, while planting 2 000 trees and shrubs, encompassing 17 native species. "Our intention is to bring life back," he says, by recreating ecosystems with their urban afforestation efforts. "It seems like such a benign, non-political act – planting a tree, it's hard to argue with that – but for me it's politically charged. When you're planting native tree species, it's like you're saying you're bringing back the people as well."

SHIRT, **EMERGENCY ROOM**

IMANE ASSAF *(CENTER)* WEARS TOP, **MAISON RABIH KAYROUZ**; ROULA ABDO *(LEFT)* AND LEA BOU HABIB WEAR JACKETS, **JEUX DE MAINS**

IMANE ASSAF

Strolling through the streets of Hamra in Beirut – socially distanced, of course – striking murals loom overhead. The revolutionary street art depicts images of resistance and famous Beirut residents, adding a sense of dynamism and immediacy to this most vibrant of cities. Imane Assaf is the firecracker behind Art of Change, a movement she pioneered after watching a BBC documentary about how street art helped uplift a rundown neighborhood. She roped in a few British artists to collaborate with local ones in Beirut during a two-day festival in 2017 – but it was when the revolution came that the true power of art to question the status quo was brought to a natural denouement. Work like Roula Abdo's mural We Shall Pass, depicting two hands opening the concrete barricades put up by the government, became a viral symbol of the movement; as did Lea Bou Habib's murals focusing on women empowerment. The culture of art in the country was palpably changing. "Lebanese artists can sometimes feel a bit strangled by society," Assaf says. "I think it's about culture more than government. But it's changing in a huge way. Artists are realizing they have to be free in their art."

Art of Change is not Assaf's only initiative. With her NGO Ahla Fawda, she is distributing food parcels to families as well as organizing concerts outside hospitals, including the ones of Joy Fayad singing on a crane. "We thought, what can we do to bring joy to the community?" Assaf shares. "It's had such a positive impact on all of us, the reaction was overwhelming."

JOY FAYAD

Standing precariously at the top of a crane outside of a beleaguered hospital is perhaps not every singer's idea of an open-air concert, but when Joy Fayad got the call from Imane Assaf from Ahla Fawda NGO, she only had one answer: "I immediately said yes!" The live concert outside Rafik Hariri Hospital in Beirut in April was meant to uplift and entertain health workers, while keeping social distancing measures. It was such a success – video footage went viral within hours – that the concert was repeated at the head office of the Lebanese Red Cross and a further 10 hospitals across the country. "I believe in the power of music and the strong effect it has on someone's state," Fayad explains. "Seeing the medical team and the patients smile, dance, sing, and cheer after all they've been going through was proof of how music can help us transcend this situation, at least for a moment." Setting aside her fear, Fayad and musicians Aziza and Oliver Maalouf performed popular and uplifting Arabic and English songs, a banner attached to the crane saying "We'll get through this together" fluttering in the breeze. "It was an amazing and very emotional experience," the singer says. "The excitement and the urge we had to share the music outgrew the fear we might have felt. Not only were we elevated physically by the crane, it was an emotional elevation as well, seeing the medical heroes happy and smiling."

SUIT, RONI HELOU;
BELT, DIAMONDOGS

CARL GERGES *(LEFT)* AND FIRAS ABOU FAKHER WEAR BOMBER JACKETS, HUSSEIN BAZAZA

MASHROU' LEILA

Equally known for their scintillating electropop as for their progressive politics, Mashrou' Leila is something of an anomaly in the Arab world: an internationally successful act who deftly play with genres, while being outspoken in their support of inclusivity and diversity. The pandemic may have brought their summer plans to a halt, with dozens of performances cancelled, but the four-piece – Carl Gerges and Firas Abou Fakher in Beirut and Haig Papazian and Hamed Sinno in New York – are still working on new material. One theme that probably won't make it to the recording studio is Covid-19. "We're sick of being inspired by problems!" Gerges says half-jokingly. "It's what we've been doing for 10 years. Bombings, assassinations, wars, socio and political problems... For once we've reached a point where we want to write about other things." They might want to explore beyond pointed social commentary, but Mashrou' Leila has played a pivotal part in the revolution. Their music ricocheted during protests, giving voice to the anger and frustration of the youth in particular. But will society shift, the band wonders. "We don't change, we just adapt; it's a very Lebanese quality, a blessing and a curse," Gerges says. Despite their unblinking awareness of the country's challenges, Gerges and Abou Fakher are reluctant to leave. "We've had the opportunity so many times, but I have an attachment to Lebanon, even though it pushes me away," Gerges says. Abou Fakher picks up the baton. "One of the things that keeps me here is the opportunity for people to recognize that the creative class has a big role to play in imagining that things could be different, or better, or more inclusive. This idea and responsibility of imagining change is important. I think that's why a lot of people have chosen to stay."

HUDA BAROUDI WEARS DRESS, **BOKJA**; MALAK BEYDOUN WEARS KAFTAN, **SARAH'S BAG**, SARAH BEYDOUN WEARS KAFTAN, **SARAH'S BAG**, MARIA HIBRI WEARS DRESS, **BOKJA**

BOKJA: HUDA BAROUDI AND MARIA HIBRI

Huda Baroudi and Maria Hibri founded Bokja as a space where luxury and craftsmanship can come together in exquisite textiles, furniture, art, and design – and now, they're sharing that spirit by creating reversible silk face masks. At first, they donated the masks to frontline warriors in Beirut but due to popular demand, Bokja now also sells the masks, with proceeds being donated to medical centers and NGOs. "We've been doing this work for 20 years and it's part of our temperament and ethos to always contribute in one way or another," Hibri explains about the genesis of the project. "When we saw the scale of things in the first week that the virus hit... We were so shocked by the conditions the frontline workers are forced to work in. It gave us the oomph to start rolling up our sleeves." Each mask is unique and buyers don't get to choose which one they like – "It's like those chocolate eggs with the surprise inside!" Baroudi smiles – and is crafted by hand in their Beirut atelier. "Even though we've created more than a thousand masks, we take a moment to make sure each one is special. The smile is the most beautiful thing in the face and now since you can't see someone's smile, our masks put a smile on your face," Hibri shares. The cheerful fabrics add "a dash of color and hope" the pair says, "happiness and safety together." Yet they don't want the pandemic to distract attention from the revolution and their true wish for their country – an end to corruption, and government transparency. "I wish that during this time, we can become stronger and wiser," Baroudi says. "It might be a far-fetched dream, but without a dream, nothing can be accomplished," Hibri concurs.

> "People are watching how brands *step up* during this time; they want to see moments of beauty, *empathy*, and solidarity"

SARAH'S BAG: SARAH AND MALAK BEYDOUN

With a unique brand born from a desire to uplift and support others, it's no surprise that Sarah Beydoun, the force behind Sarah's Bags, immediately sprang into action when the coronavirus crisis hit Lebanon. "I launched Sarah's Bag as a fashion house and social enterprise 20 years ago; this is our DNA," she shares. "We knew we had to find a way to help and decided to collaborate with our clients and partner with the Lebanese Food Bank. With their help, during the first two months of the pandemic, a box of essential food items was donated to a family in need with every Sarah's Bag purchased through our online boutique." This rapid response had the added benefit of helping keep Sarah's Bag's artisans and craftswomen employed and busy. From the start, Beydoun and her team have trained underprivileged women to create the delicate decorative elements on the handbags; a skill and ethos that could prove vital in a post-pandemic world, when people start questioning how the notoriously fickle fashion industry should adapt to changing societal expectations. "I think people are watching to see how companies and brands stepped up during this crisis, they want to see moments of beauty, empathy, and solidarity, and initiatives that give back to the community or support vulnerable people. I hope that one of the positive outcomes of these strange times could be a rise in social businesses and social enterprises in the fashion industry," Beydoun says.

OLFAT MOUNZER

It was when seeing MP Paula Yacoubian's tireless work in the public sector that Olfat Mounzer knew she had to be part of something bigger; that here was a woman who represented her and her hopes for a better Lebanon. Mounzer reached out to the politician and today, she's head of operations at Dafa, one of the country's biggest social campaigns to support underprivileged people. "I came to a point in my life where I discovered the joy of giving instead of taking," Mounzer explains of her journey. "I spend all my time at Dafa; I belong to its family now. Nothing can be more gratifying than watching a hungry child eat or an old man smile." Launched in 2013, Dafa has given assistance to more than 250 000 families, with donations of clothes, blankets, food, toys, and hygiene kits. Dafa Iftars reached out to people who couldn't afford iftar during the Holy Month, with donations made easy by using the My Trolley app. While the pandemic has impacted Dafa's work, Mounzer is optimistic. "I believe every obstacle hides some great opportunities to grow. Now, more than ever, we need to be vigilant and brave and ever ready to serve. I would like to see my beloved country rise from the ashes and for the new generation to grab power and lead Lebanon to become a modern 21st century civil country," she shares.

JACKET, HUSSEIN BAZAZA

ELI REZKALLAH

Activism and campaigning for social change come in many forms – one of the most potent being art that makes you stop in your tracks and interrogate the world. This is what Eli Rezkallah lives for. "Even before the pandemic, the situation in Lebanon was tough for the youth but it resulted in a rise of creative talent, sharing their feelings through artistic expression," the photographer, visual artist, and founder of *Plastik* magazine says. Rezkallah has created groundbreaking work challenging gender stereotypes and thrives on tackling topics around diversity and inclusivity. "Creating a safe space and platform for creativity and expression, rather than oppression, is a good start," he feels. "This helps communities rise to become an asset, rather than feeling marginalized." When he started out, he wanted to infuse color into his city, so plagued with darkness due to political turmoil. "Today, I can feel that the work we've done has influenced the scene and opened the doors for the younger generation to express themselves in an uninhibited way."

MARIANA WEHBE

The doyenne of Lebanese public relations, Mariana Wehbe is one of the most connected people in the region – but behind the glamorous contact book, Wehbe nurtures a deep love for her country and an unrelenting quest to better society. "I don't know how to exist, grow, or be without being involved in such actions," she says of her many humanitarian initiatives. But when the revolution came, her focus shifted from stylish fundraising events to working at grassroots level, volunteering with Chef Wael Lazkani and his community kitchen, Matbakh el Balad (The Country's Kitchen). At first, they helped feed protesters during the revolution, as well as refugees and activists. Then the pandemic hit – but with Wehbe's steady hand and a community of helpers, the kitchen has continued its work. "Matbakh el Balad will hopefully open a fixed kitchen soon in order to feed whoever may be hungry," she shares. "Until then, we're providing food boxes to local hospitals and people in need." Wehbe is also using Instagram Live to spread awareness about the rich seam of creativity that runs through Lebanon, speaking to interior designers, jewelers, and architects. "These interviews present an optimistic approach to a dark time," she explains. "Lebanon, and everything it offers, is as personal as it gets for me." □

DRESS, **DIAMONDOGS**; EARRINGS, **VMAR**; VINTAGE NECKLACE, **THE HOUSE OF AW MOUZANNAR**

STYLE JEFF AOUN **HAIR** JOHNNY AT SIMON EL MENDELEK **MAKEUP** CHRISTIAN ABOU HAIDAR **PRODUCTION** ANKITA CHANDRA **PRODUCTION ASSISTANT** HOMAM ABBOUD

VOGUE العربية

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أيقونة الغناء العربي

Majida El Roumi

لأول مرة على
غلاف مجلة طوال
مسيرتها الممتدة
لأكثر من ٤٥ عاماً

رسالة حبّ إلى لبنان