

AGENDA

LEBANON

FILM

'Cell 211'
Cervantes Institute, Maarad,
287 B Building, 2nd floor
March 6, 6 p.m.
01-970-253
Daniel Monzón's 2009 feature looks in on two men on different sides of a prison riot – the inmate leading a prison revolt and the trapped prison guard who poses as a prisoner.

READING

'Cage'
Bardo Café, Mexico St., near
Haigazian University
March 8, 6 p.m.
To mark International Women's Day, Joumana Hadad will join Mary Ham-moud, Mary Schumann and Nour Fawaz in reading excerpts from her book "Cage," in Arabic, followed by a discussion.

SEMINAR

'Other Gentrifications'
Architecture Lecture Hall,
AUB
Through March 6
The 2015 edition of City Debates assembles international scholars for three days of discussions on urban trends in the neoliberal eastern Mediterranean, and beyond.

ART

'Leaving Soon'
Ayyam Projects, Beirut
Tower, Zeitoune Street, BCD
Through March 20
01-374-450
This solo show features Lebanese artist Myriam Dalal's work, which centers on car bombings in Beirut since 2013.

Taysir Batniji and Anna Boghigui
Sfeir-Semler Gallery,
Tannous Building, Karantina
Through March 7
01-566-550

Diversity resonates through this double-bill of solo shows featuring new and recent work by painter and illustrator Anna Boghigui and Gazan multimedia artist Taysir Batniji.

MUSIC

The Tyre International Music Festival
Al-Hamra Theatre, Tyre
March 7-11
70-903-846

REVIEW

Unfinished conversations on identity

Works rooted in Britain, South Africa and Algeria resonate keenly in Lebanon

By Jim Quilty
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Tucked away in the back of the Beirut Art Center, a triptych of screens replays three brief conversations between two women.

The first, "Mother and I, France," finds a woman, French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, speaking with an older lady, her mother. The pair takes turns asking questions of each other – Sedira speaking French, her mother speaking Algerian Arabic. For much of the exchange, the women appear to be talking past one another, since, for the purpose of this work at least, Sedira's mother doesn't understand French.

On the second screen, "Daughter and I, England," a similar conversation is played out between the artist and her pre-teen daughter. In London-accented English, the daughter quizzes her mum about what it was like growing up. The artist replies in French, a language her daughter doesn't understand. With every response, incomprehension settles upon the daughter's face.

"Grandmother and Granddaughter, Algeria" takes this premise to its comic extreme. The amused-looking gran asks the artist's daughter a few incomprehensible questions in Arabic. Unable to answer, the granddaughter occasionally glances at the camera miserably, as if for translation. After several moments of this, the Anglophone granddaughter begins asking her gran what it was like growing up. Looking bemused, all the older lady can do is grin at the camera, muttering that she doesn't understand a thing.

Sedira's 2002 "Mother Tongue," as this triptych is called, is a master class in concision. Its few minutes of non-dialogue relate a complex, decades-long story of how migration and assimilation can fray and sever the bonds of organic communication.

Formal simplicity aside, "Mother Tongue" alludes to a myriad of timely socio-cultural and political questions. While its "narrative" never strays beyond the monologues of inquiry and recollections of coming-of-age stories, it suggests the utter



From John Akomfrah, "The Unfinished Conversations," 2012, three-screen installation, HD video, color, sound, 45 min.

absurdity of making generalizations about individuals on the basis of their presumed cultural affiliation – "North African," say – or identity.

"Mother Tongue" is among the six installations that make up "Unfinished Conversations," an exhibition of film and video work by Sedira, John Akomfrah and Penny Siopis now up at the Beirut Art Center.

More than any other medium of visual art, film is preoccupied with narrative, fictive or otherwise. These three artists share an interest in the relationship of narrative and media, which they use to unearth and interrogate questions of individual identity. Derived from Akomfrah's work, the exhibition title "Unfinished Conversations" is a metaphor for the never-ending formation of identity.

The centerpiece of this exhibition

is Akomfrah's 2012 installation "The Unfinished Conversation," which contemplates the formation of a mind – that of Jamaican-born U.K. academic Stuart Hall.

Covering the same ground as "The Stuart Hall Project," Akomfrah's 2013 documentary, "Conversation" is staged as a large-format three-channel installation, an appropriately immersive delivery system for this embracing story.

One of the founding editors of "The New Left Review," credited with co-founding British cultural studies as a school of thought in the 1960s, Hall was very much a public intellectual. Over the decades he figured in any number of broadcast documentaries and such, so Akomfrah had a wide and varied visual archive from which to draw.

Yet one of the great strengths of

"Conversation" is the skill with which it departs from the classical documentary template.

Over the course of its 45 minutes, "Conversation" intersperses footage, recordings and still photos of Hall, his family and cadre with a wealth of "contextual" material – including archival footage from his family home in Jamaica, working-class life in 1950s Britain, various military conflicts (the Franco-British invasion of Suez in 1956, the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia and the Vietnam War), as well as snippets of jazz and gospel performances and voice-over readings of poetry and fiction by such authors as Blake, Dickens and Virginia Woolf.

Hall believed identities are forged at the intersection of the psychic and the historic and "Unfinished Conversation" is devoted to setting its subject within the web of society and culture, politics and economy from which he emerged. The power of Akomfrah's work lies in the fact that, after an absorbing 45 minutes, Stuart Hall emerges a uniquely individual figure – much more than the sum of his parts.

The single-channel video work of South African artist Penny Siopis does not have the aesthetic and intellectual embrace of Akomfrah's piece. A painter who sometimes works in film, she is particularly attached to 8mm – moving pictures without audio, atop which she applies soundtrack and appends monologue or interview-style dialogue.

Siopis' four pieces reflect a diverse range of subjects, introducing viewers to four documented, yet

virtually unknown, stories.

"My Lovely Day," her 21-minute work from 1997, mingles archival footage from colonial and early independence South Africa with home movies featuring youngsters cavorting in the sea and the family garden sometime in the last quarter of the 20th century.

The story conveyed in the film's subtitles seems to recollect her British grandmother's migration from Smyrna to South Africa.

"Obscure White Messenger," 2010, a fictive interview, and "The Master is Drowning," (2012), an imagined testimonial, recount stories of two men who set out to assassinate South African Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd – the architect of that country's Apartheid regime.

In the five-minute "Communion," from 2011, an Irish nun and doctor named Sister Aidan narrates her own death. She was stoned, beaten and burnt to death by a mob – which included several members of her congregation and several more patients – who in 1952 rose up in anger against the police brutality of the Apartheid regime.

Of the three artists in this show, Siopis' work is most intriguing in formal terms. The quality of these 8mm films varies wildly and the celluloid occasionally betrays the marks of having been wadded up and pitched in the bin. These textural motifs are a striking complement to the stories they help tell.

Not only do these tales range far beyond sanctioned narratives of pre- and post-Apartheid South Africa, the figures whose stories they recollect resist easy classification within these narrative tropes of race and class.

None of the artists contributing works to "Unfinished Conversations" are Lebanese, yet art lovers who attend this show in hopes of finding escape in other people's stories may be disappointed.

The tales Sedira, Akomfrah and Siopis tell about race, religion, migration and identity are intimately well known by Lebanese. Only the locations differ.

"Unfinished Conversations" is up at the Beirut Art Center through 2 May.



A video still from "Obscure White Messenger," (2010).



Zineb Sedira's three-screen installation, "Mother Tongue" (2002).



Photos courtesy of the BAC