



## Travelling artwork captures scene frozen in time during Beirut blast

► Recently displayed in Brussels, the installation is part of a wider effort to support Lebanese artisans



Post-Disaster Room consists of furniture sourced from a Beirut flea market, coated in recycled paper. Photo: Menart Fair

**Maghie Ghali**

Feb 15, 2023



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Upon entering Villa Empain in Brussels [at the recent Menart Fair](#), visitors were confronted with a petrified scene of disaster and destruction: a dining room covered in ash, chairs smashed, glasses knocked over, a shoe left lying under the table and the food left untouched.

The scene in the installation *Post-Disaster Room* might be imagined, but it's grounded in the reality of the aftermath of [Beirut's 2020 port explosion](#).

Created by Italian designer and architect Gregory Gatslerelia, who lives in Beirut, and Italian-Lebanese designer Joy Herro, the installation — which has travelled the world, including a show at Abu Dhabi's Jubail Island last October — invites viewers to contemplate what happened just before that moment and what will happen after those few seconds of frozen catastrophe.

"The idea behind it is obviously the tragedy that we experienced in Beirut, which happened during the afternoon when people were doing their normal things," Gatslerelia tells *The National*.

"This daily moment, maybe getting ready for dinner or welcoming family home from work, was disrupted by the event and suddenly there's a moment of silence, of desertion, because everybody went to hide and everybody went crazy in the aftermath of that moment.

"This moment maybe lasted five minutes, five hours or five days, but it's about the impact on the daily routine put in tragedy," he adds. "How devastating it was, not only on the personal level, as I had huge destruction in the office and at home, but the widespread loss of life. It put us in a state of shock and stillness."

Made from several pieces of furniture sourced from the Flea Market in [Beirut's Basta](#), knocked over and broken, everything has been covered in recycled paper made by Lebanese artisan Clayper, which mimics the texture of grey ash, similar to the remains of Pompeii.



Gregory Gatslerelia and Joy Herro. Photo: Great Design Disaster



Gatseleria says the papier-mache coating the whole installation is also a metaphor for the “residue left by shattered dreams” and invokes the religious idea of dust unto dust.

“We tried to find something that represented all social classes in Beirut. You can find this type of furniture that looks classic but they're very cheaply done and found in most homes,” he says. “They had to have that decorative element, that's why we opted for more classical than strictly modern — I don't think contemporary furniture would have had the same visual impact.

“We needed a candelabra, those classic chairs, as it was also an ode to the heritage that was destroyed in the event,” he adds. “I also didn't want something that completely defined a class or a group of people. It's like a normal Lebanese house.”

Gatseleria first moved to Beirut in 1996, seeking a more dynamic design and architecture scene following several years of working in Toronto. With Lebanon reopening to the world and slowly rebuilding its urban landscape after the civil war, which raged from 1975 to 1990, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to explore the region. Despite numerous upheavals since, Gatseleria has never left.



Post-Disaster Room presents a scene frozen in time, inspired by the 2020 Beirut blast. Photo: Maghie Ghali

"In 1995 I was thinking about New York, but I have a couple of friends from Beirut who said: 'No, you have to come to Beirut. Everything is happening over here,'" he recalls. "I felt more like a pioneer coming back and helping rebuild the country, being a part of this amazing thing that was happening and the growth in the region."

"I had to adjust. I don't mind that; it's part of an exciting life. It was very intense but really rewarding and the type of projects that were proposed to us in the region were of a very high scale," he adds.

"In Beirut, I've experienced things that I read about in novels and history books. I've seen tragedy, I've seen hope, I've seen so many different emotions, and it's better than that regular routine in a 'safe' place. I like the excitement, it's good inspiration and whenever everything is positive, you enjoy it much more. You never take anything for granted here."

The installation is part of the wider Great Design Disaster project that the designer started with Herro in 2019, which aims to promote sustainability by rethinking the way design is framed.

Instead of buying endlessly reproduced, poor-quality pieces of furniture, the Great Design Disaster advocates supporting the disappearing craft scene by working with local Lebanese artisans on bespoke pieces and connecting them to global clients.

Rather than showcasing products at design fairs like Salone de Mobile or Dubai Design Week, the studio often displays less tangible poems or signs, inviting viewers to dream up their own designs for themselves.

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Gatseleria says he aims to draw clients into projects and facilitate their own creative process. "It's being able to express ideas and then put them into reality, with the collaboration of a client, bringing them in to be part of the concept of the project, and this is what is really exciting," Gatseleria says. "It's not just producing something beautiful and trying to convince the client. It's having their soul in it, having them express their own ideas and desires."

"In the beginning, they're very shy, but then suddenly when we start showing them pieces, materials, and so on, they get really hands-on and then we can really start working on a piece that has strong ties with their feelings," he adds. "We took the philosophy of celebrating what I call the 'hidden heroes' — the artisans and craftsmen who produce designs for big international designers. We promote them, talk about them and celebrate them."



Osman Yousefzada, *Untitled 2* from the Wrapped Objects collection, 2022, hand-blown Murano glass, 35 x 27cm. Photo: Maghie Ghali



Omar Chakil's alabaster works in Le LAB gallery stand at Menart Fair. Photo: Maghie Ghali





Menart Fair artistic director Joanna Chevalier, left, and director and founder Laure d'Hauteville. Photo: Jules Monnier



Alexandra Catelain-Orange's ceramics, based on the Olivea series by Etel Adnan; ceramics, 50cm. Photo: Alexandra Catelain-Orange