The reconstruction of Beirut is well underway. It’s a city of elegant high-rises, fast cars and beautiful people. But, as Cristina Ruiz reports, the undisputed party capital of the Arab world is putting art at the heart of its resurgence. Photography by Marco Argüello.
and so I brought them.”

while standing in front of another one of his nudes. “But then I was worried about showing these works here,” he tells me, pieces back together to construct pixelated, textured images.

The town, he says, offers the opportunity to show the political works that “the Arnaldo Pomodoro cast iron statue of a king he bought to stand in front of his store at the corner of the street where he used to work”.

But the reconstruction of Beirut is now well under way. Today this is a city of elegant high-rise blocks, luxury shops, fast cars and flashily dressed people. It is the undisputed party capital of the Arab world, with a diverse and exciting nightlife and excellent restaurants and bars. Much of the downtown area has been rebuilt. And cultural projects are at the heart of this regeneration. More than half a dozen museums or galleries are in the works or have recently been completed in or near Beirut. One of them is a vast contemporary art museum inside a department store complex just outside the city at Jal el Dib, designed by the British-Ghanaian architect David Adjaye for the retail magnate Tony Salamé who founded the Aïshti fashion chain. When I visit, the gallery is showing an impressive selection of American works from Salamé’s collection, with major pieces by the art world’s biggest stars including the African American Glenn Ligon, Th Mo Gates, and Kehinde Wiley.

As we sit sipping coffee at tables on the museum’s waterfront promenade overlooking the city, Salamé tells me that the reality of life in Beirut today is at odds with how the world perceives it. “Tourists are worried before they come here, but when they arrive they immediately feel the spirit of the place,” he says. The Lebanese are incredibly welcoming to visitors and have a legendary ability to carry on in the face of adversity, he adds, noting that “People here do not feel unsafe. Life is good again.” Salamé will inaugurate a new retail complex with another art gallery, designed by the late Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, in downtown Beirut in 2020. And he is just one of the influential art collectors in Beirut who have opened or are planning to open their own display spaces.

Many of these collectors have loaned works to Rose Issa’s show at the Beirut Art Fair – Ourouba: the Eye of Lebanon (Issa translates Ourouba as ‘Arabicity’). Raouf and Saeda Daloul, two of Beirut’s most prominent art buyers, are the owners of a round painted portrait of George W Bush encircled by 12 pairs of men’s shoes – a reference to the incident at a 2008 press conference when an Iraqi journalist threw his shoes at the former US president – by the Iraqi-Canadian artist Mahmoud Obaidi. The work attracts a crowd of giggling visitors who line up in front of it to take selfies. “In our part of the world, we have many things to say,” notes Issa. “There is so much oppression, so much injustice, so many double standards… But we also have an irrepressible sense of humour.”

Obaidi now lives in Beirut, which is fast becoming an artistic hub for the region. “He tried to live in Doha, but after a short while he said, ‘I’m coming back to Beirut,’” says Issa, explaining that the city is attracting artists from “Syria, Iraq, Palestine and other Arab countries because here they can live freely. They can go out to a bar and drink with their friends. There are many places where they can’t do that.”

The art galleries are returning, too. The Lebanese dealer Mark Hachem, whose eponymous gallery has spaces in New York and Paris, opened a branch in Beirut five years ago. “In this city, you feel as if you are part of the development of a new artistic movement. After many years cut off from the rest of the world, collectors here are buying so much art. Commercially, it has been amazing for us. I didn’t expect it,” he tells me at his stand at the Beirut Art Fair in front of a magical, abstracted cistoscope constructed from natural materials such as stones, ash and pine needles by the Lebanese artist Charbel Samir Assou. One dealer who never left is Salih Burzakat, who opened his first gallery in Beirut during the civil war. “It was like a –

Where to stay

Le Gray
A five-star hotel that has the personality to match its grandeur. Le Gray houses a spectacular art collection, much of which is sourced locally. The attention to detail is second to none and the city views from the infinity rooftop pool will never, ever get old. Deluxe double rooms from £292, including breakfast. campbellgrayhotels.com

Dar Al Achrifeh
Stay in the family home of Jamil – a local textile designer, and possibly the nicest man in Beirut. You’re moments away from the Sursock Museum, the rooms have Art Deco furnishings, and your balcony has watched over nearly a century of the city’s history. Twin rooms from £67, including breakfast. daralachrifeh.com

Saifi Urban Gardens
Set back from the east side waterfront, Saifi Urban Gardens shares two renovated buildings with NGOs, artists and an Arabic language school; you can’t stay without having a fascinating conversation – though it is worth it for its murals alone. Rooms from £42. saifiurban.com

Where to eat

Le Gray
This is one of the best places to eat in Beirut, with a stunning view across the city and the sea. The menu offers a mix of Mediterranean and international dishes, with a focus on fresh, local ingredients. Lunch is the best time to visit, as the restaurant is much quieter in the morning.

Dar Al Achrifeh
Located in the charming city of Lebanon, Dar Al Achrifeh is a charming guesthouse that offers guests a unique and authentic Lebanese experience. The guesthouse is located in the heart of downtown Beirut, just steps away from the Sursock Museum and other major attractions. The guesthouse offers a variety of rooms, each with their own unique style and character. The guesthouse also offers a variety of services, including a roof terrace, a library, and a restaurant.

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BEIRUT WAS THE FIRST ARAB CITY TO CELEBRATE GAY PRIDE

Statement of resistance. I was young and stupid then,” he says. A year ago he inaugurated a stunning new space in a former cinema converted into a gallery by the Lebanese architect Makram El Kadi, which Barakat describes as “the biggest white cube in the Middle East”. When I visit, elegant abstract sculptures by the Jordanian artist Mona Saudi are on display. Next year’s shows include one devoted to the Palestinian artist Abdul Rahman Katanani who was born and still lives in the Sabra refugee camp outside Beirut. Katanani is one of the many revelations of Issa’s show at the Beirut Art Fair, where his works include a huge sculpture of a wave constructed entirely from barbed wire.

On the last day of my trip I have breakfast on the spectacular roof terrace of Le Gray, the Campbell Gray Hotel in downtown Beirut. Surrounded by carob trees and bougainvillea, I gaze out over the city at the Mohammad Al-Amin mosque, with its soaring minarets. The building, which opened in 2008, is just metres from the St George Maronite cathedral, completed in 1894, their proximity a powerful reminder that, for the most part, Muslims and Christians in Beirut today live peacefully side by side. Life on the ground continues irrespective of prevailing media narratives. Cities rise and then decline. And then sometimes, against all the odds, they rise again.

British Airways flies to Beirut six days a week from London Heathrow. Flight time: just under five hours.

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