

Requiem

Annie Kurkdjian

albareh
art gallery

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In the summer of 1978, at the very beginning of the civil war in Lebanon, my family had to flee Beirut at very short notice: for several days rumours had been circulating that our neighbourhood was being targeted for a massacre. My parents, both Armenian genocide survivors, knew all too well the horror that could transpire; we arranged our affairs at lightning speed and left Beirut to take refuge in a chalet in the mountains, to which a friend had left us the key. There it was, one night after I'd overcome my first ever bout of insomnia and managed to sleep a little, that I had my first nightmare.

I was six years old.

I saw the vast stretch of uncultivated land surrounding the chalet: it had become a tremendous black expanse no longer made of earth but of some new material expressly designed for mourning. Across the surface rolled an infinite number of dunes, graves for the denizens of the earth, dead one and all ... The earth was utterly devoid of living creatures! An apocalyptic landscape worthy of Ezekiel! I walked holding my father's hand. We were the sole survivors. Rapidly we walked across the graves of the dead in search of a way out of this macabre landscape. My father, who had never lost his smile even during the worst nights of bombardment, had a look of terror on his face; I watched him, followed him and felt his sorrow without speaking. I felt tremendous compassion for him and his anguish was my own. I no longer knew if he wanted to save me or I him. We absolutely had to find a way out. The solitude of this place was absolutely suffocating. But we were trapped in the land of the dead and there was no way out.

In the morning I woke to find myself in the chalet with my family still alive – but from then my child's heart was heavy. Never before had I been to such a place; it seemed there was an entire world of suffering and sorrow previously unknown to me. My nightmare hadn't come out of the blue. It was a first vision of Hell and the prospect of returning there scared me to death.

Six years later, when I was twelve years old, my father was murdered in an armed robbery committed by close acquaintances, people with no souls, working for evil; the newspapers called it a massacre. Photos of bullet-riddled bodies in pools of blood were available to all the media the day after the crime.

My father was robbed of his life. I was robbed of my closest friend, the person I loved most in this world. I was robbed of my family ... A beautiful green plant, deeply rooted in the soil, which would soon have yielded the most beautiful flowers, had been ripped up before its time ... I had been orphaned.

The day of his funeral, amidst the general adult panic, I was stopped from going to the ceremony because I was deemed too little to comprehend and deal with violence and death. For the first time I stayed at home idly moping waiting for the adults to return.

I traipsed through the rooms of the empty house, which now seemed too big and too cold; lying around

somewhere was the dress my mother had been sewing for me to wear on Easter Sunday, in a week's time. A lovely floral dress which, in the mirror, opened my eyes to my womanhood and made me feel so happy and so proud. But it wasn't finished yet; the top wasn't joined to the skirt, the zip and waist were missing. There was no way she would finish it before Easter or after. As for my womanhood, it'd have to be born in a paltry child's dress, a dress of mourning. Eroticism's first blooms would have to unfurl on a ghastly macabre background, and life itself would blossom under the improbable sign of death.

When the adults returned from the funeral, despite everybody's grief, it was agreed to let my father remain among the dead. This was only common sense. From then on he would be absent, marginalised, exiled. He began to be spoken of in the past tense, never present. He no longer had a voice, his voice had been torn away, his speech stolen ...

For me, my father remained unburied. Months passed and he did not leave. I knew he still had things to say; I strove to find a new formula to save our language, at first by means of letters in which I detailed all our news, although I had no idea where to send them.

I didn't want to let him go, nor could I. Nor did he want to leave me. Burying him would have meant accepting the fact of his death and consequently accepting an unchosen destiny, a destiny imposed by the stupidity of soulless men. At the age of 12, I already believed in the supreme value of freedom, in the right to choose my path. My father himself had inherited this value. I was convinced there could be no love without freedom and consequently no life. I absolutely could not tolerate being dictated to in any way, I had a horror of any imposition, especially when it came to destiny. As a result, I found it impossible to abandon this man whom I loved, who had been betrayed, robbed and killed, who had died alone. It wasn't his choice, or God's. To have let him slip away would have been to lose myself by accepting lies and injustice. What good is a life scripted by others? It was time to distance myself and organise a new life with all the love and courage I could muster. Start from scratch. An immense solitude lay ahead, the solitude before resurrection but also a long sojourn in the land of the dead, from which a way out into life had to be found.

So I took my father by my little hand and we found ourselves in the great desert of death, just like in the nightmare I had when I was six. We decided to make our journey together. Once again we wandered, just the two of us, across the dunes, outside of time, and for a very long time, long years, light-years, without ever letting go our hands and never saying a word. United only by the same profound sorrow, the same terrible fear, and the same search for peace.

We walked onward over the graves of the dead. We were the sole survivors. Humanity entire was buried underfoot. We walked over the graves of murderers, his own executioners, the traitors who dared attack him and escape with impunity. We walked over the graves of apathetic people who found it so easy to enter our fatherless home and make us feel even more alone, the graves of people who

abused widows and orphans, who found it so easy to enter our unprotected lives and ruin what was left to ruin.

We walked over the graves of imbeciles, hypocrites, liars, warmongers, corrupt officials in league with criminals, and an infinite amount of other graves of soulless men and women.

My father became all the martyrs. He became all the suffering people, all the victims of injustice, all the murdered innocents, the orphans, the widows, the exiles, the dying. He became the Crucified One.

In my hand I held the hand of all suffering humanity, with the graves of the soulless underfoot. In this way we explored the length and breadth of the land of dead. It was death that allowed us to discover the mysteries of life and love. Bound by our love of father and daughter, we grew up together.

Then, one day, many years later, I looked behind and saw that the long way we had travelled in sorrow was covered with colours.

By dint of silence, a language had been born. By dint of wandering, a path had been found. Love could cross the land of the dead intact and adorn it with a thousand joys all the while.

Strange flowers grew all over the black land behind us, watered with our tears ... I had made paintings in the desert solitude. Paintings of freedom and life, made by my own hands and my father's. They were the flowers of a new destiny.

They grew everywhere behind us in abundance. Bursting with colour all the way.

Paintings which took root in the black soil of death and came to life by dint of the love and patience we released with every step. Strange flowers, hard and soft, sad and joyful, black and many- coloured. Free paintings that opened a dialogue with life. Paintings endowed with a voice that nobody could ever steal again. A thousand and one ears were listening, the earth was filling with new inhabitants, healed and upright, thirsting for freedom and inspiration., who were coming to quench their thirst in the oasis of our work. We were no longer alone.

I no longer wore an orphan's clothes, my father sorrowed no more.

All the same, we continued on our path because there was no way out of this country; but it didn't matter because we had come close to peace ... almost.

We proceeded through the black land for a long time yet, but everything behind us was coming into bloom. At every step we left behind some of our work. A work of peace. A work entitled "Requiem" that would never fall silent, inviting every lover of life to the communion.

Annie Kurkdjian

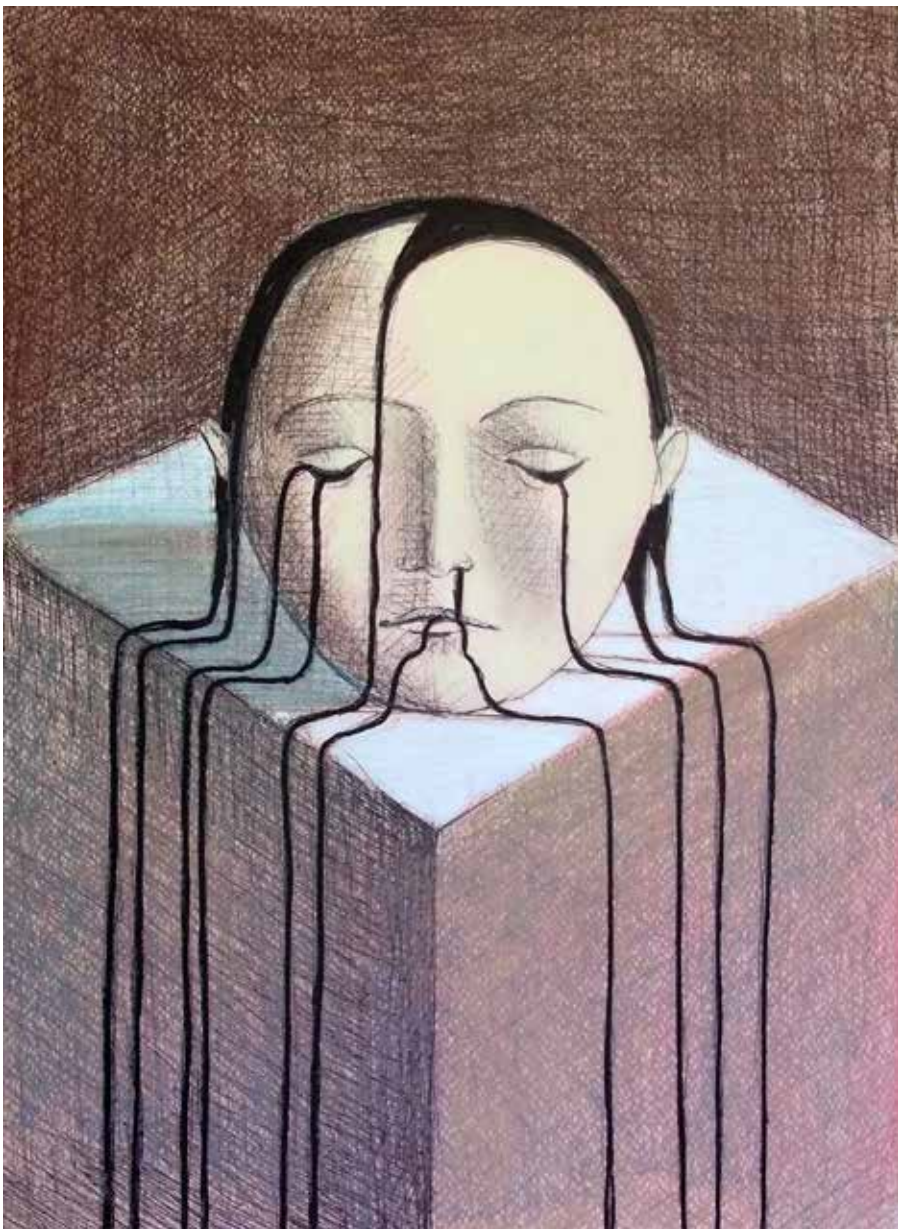
2016



Requiem
Acrylic on canvas
120x100cm
2016



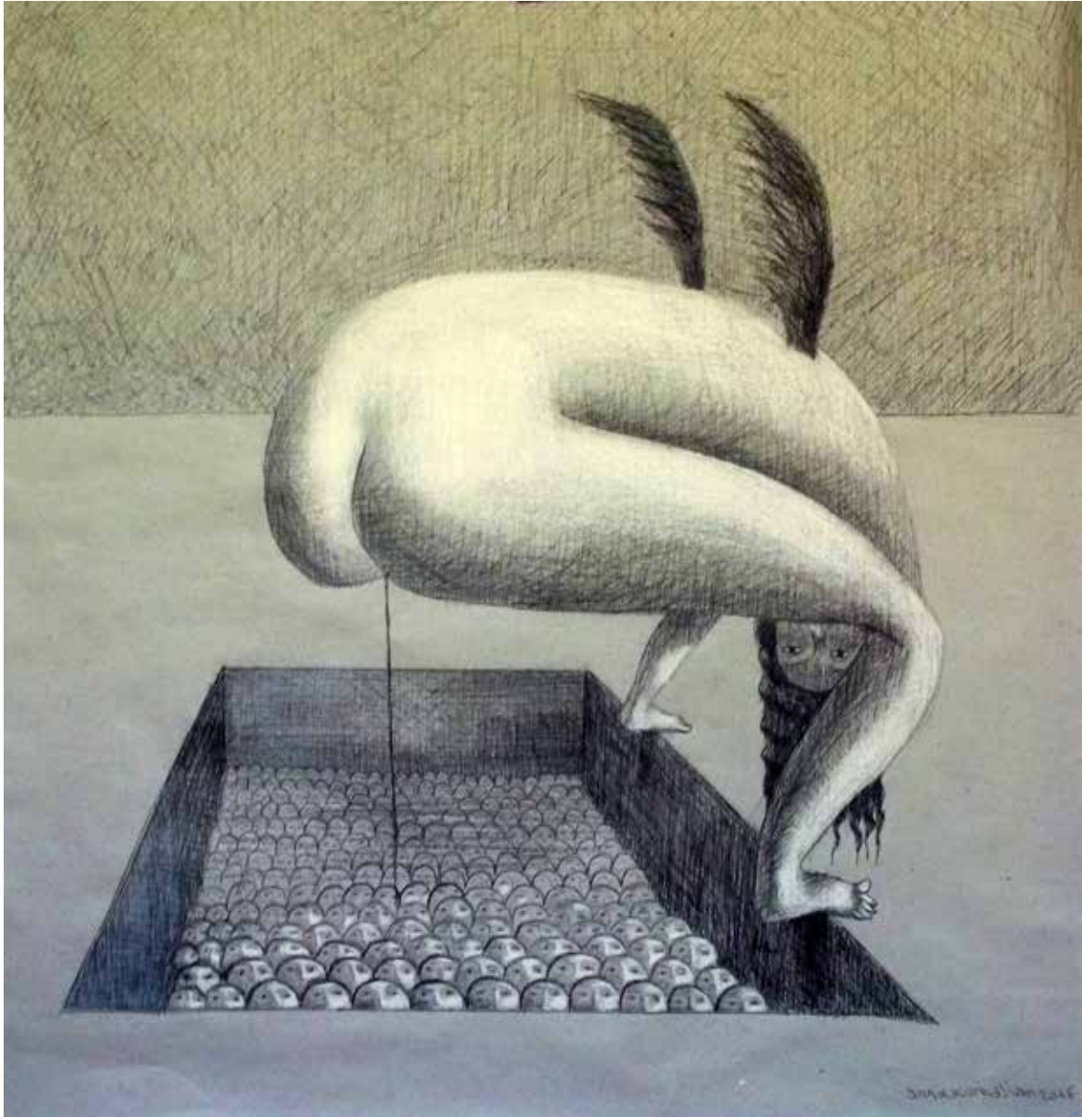
Requiem
Pastel and ink on paper
78x74cm
2016



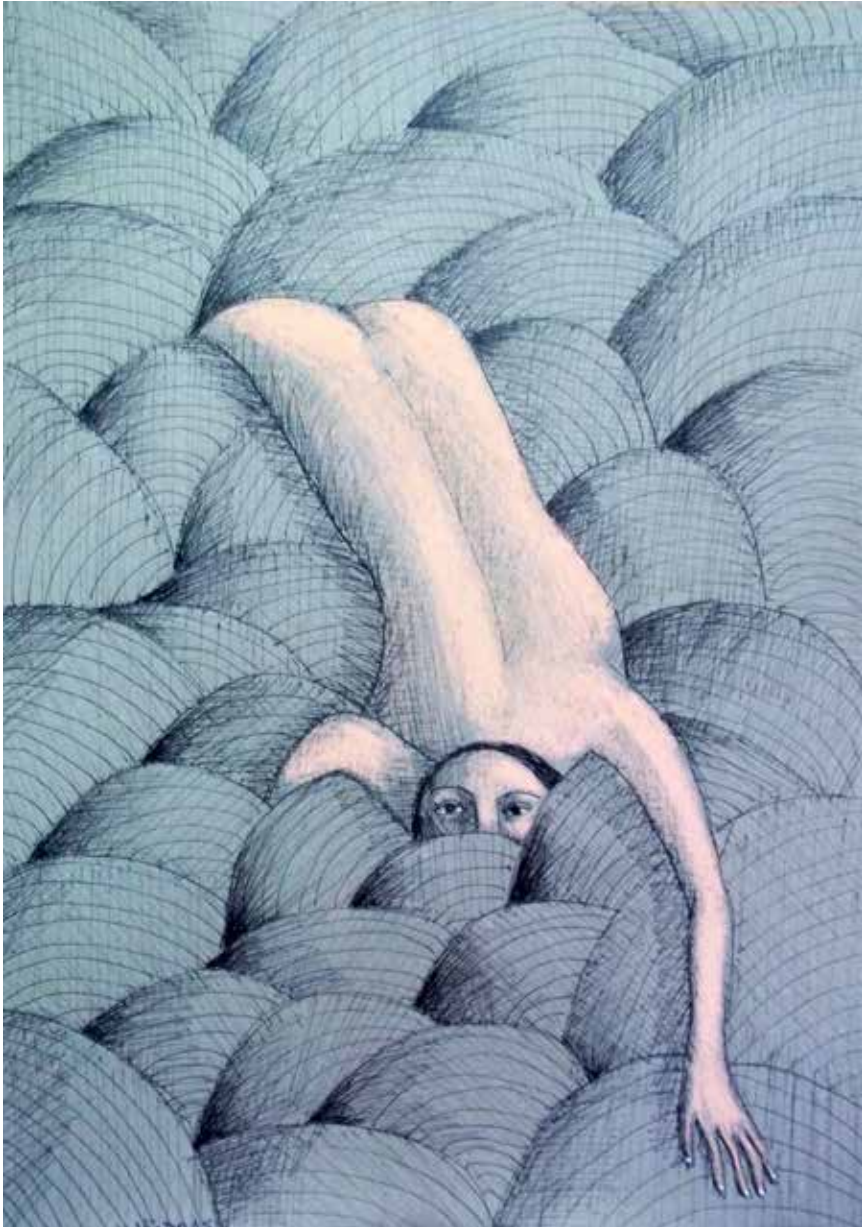
Requiem
Mixed media on paper
30x42cm
2016



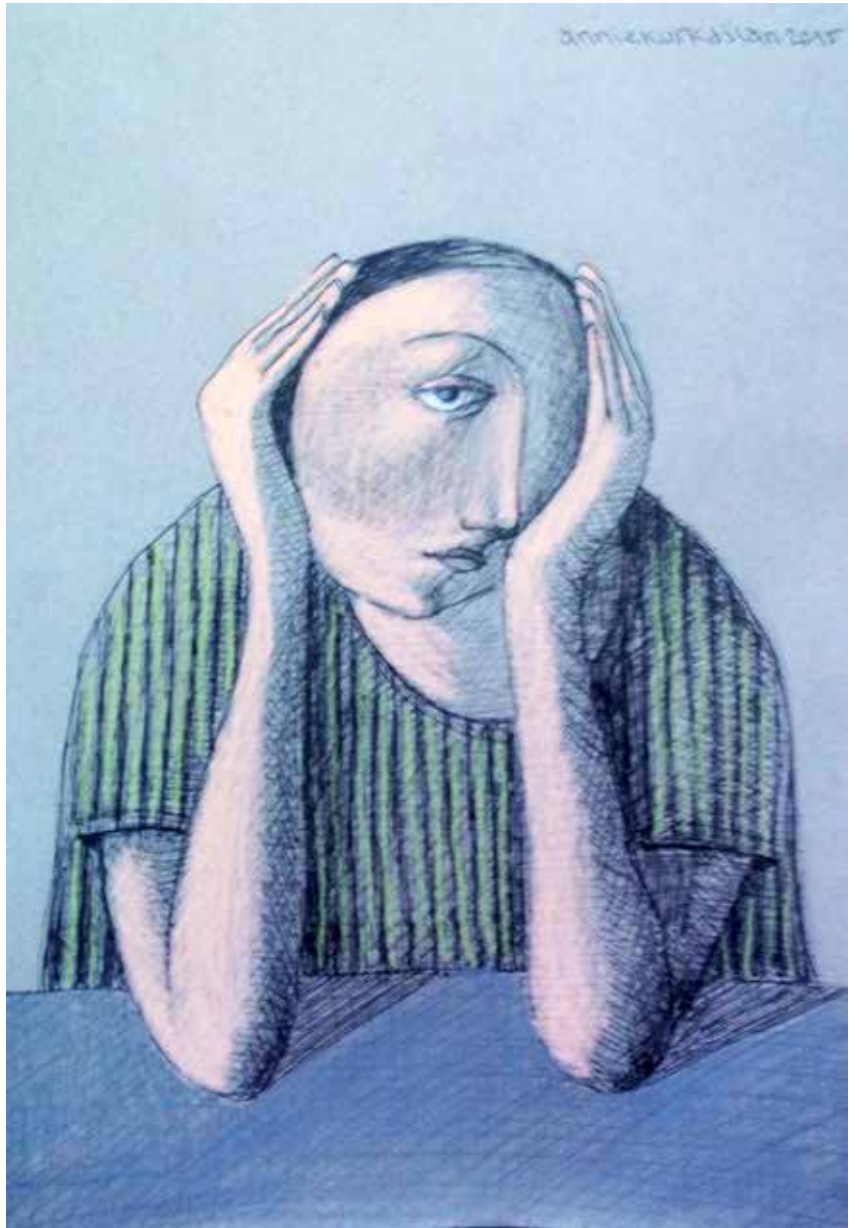
Requiem
Pastel on paper
70x75cm
2016



Requiem
Pastel on paper
94x92cm
2016



Requiem
Pastel on paper
42x30cm
2016



Requiem
Pastel on paper
30x42cm
2016

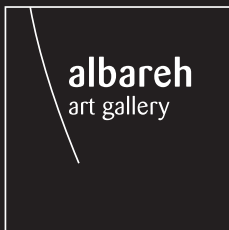


Requiem
Acrylic on canvas
65x150cm
2016

Annie Kurkdjian

Annie Kurkdjian was born in Lebanon in 1972 and continues to live and work in Beirut. Deeply affected by the Lebanese Civil War as a child, Kurkdjian's paintings reveal the profound depth of this experience and its impact on her. She describes her works as 'existential' paintings in which she explores people and their relationships with each other and the spaces they inhabit.

Kurkdjian holds a degree in fine arts from the Lebanese University and degrees in psychology and theology from the Lebanese University and St. Joseph University, respectively. Kurkdjian has been widely exhibited in the Middle East as well as France. She is the recipient of the Ville de Fontenay-sous-Bois Award (2014), the Jouhayna Badoura Prize (2012) and the Special Mention of the Jury at Sursock Salon, Beirut (2011).



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