

## Fighting to realize the dreams of Gaïa Fodoulian

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*Candlelit Memorial Placard to Gaïa Fodoulian, featuring a message from the AD Leb Team. (Image: Robert McKelvey)*

In early 2020, Gaïa Fodoulian first envisioned Art Design Lebanon (AD Leb), a digital platform supporting cultural and artistic productions in Lebanon and the MENA region.

The Lebanese-Armenian designer believed strongly in showcasing the work of local and international artists. Tragically, her work was cut short on 4 August 2020, when she lost her life in the Beirut port explosion. She was 29 years old.

Since her death, her mother – co-founder of Beirut’s Letitia Gallery and arts patron Annie Vartivarian – has been fighting to realize her late daughter’s dream.

“I took the decision to continue Gaïa’s project three days after she was killed; I couldn’t let anything get in the way,” Vartivarian told Al Arabiya English. “The trauma of the port explosion is something that will stay with us for a long time to come. For many of us, it’s something we may never fully overcome but must simply learn to live with. None of it was easy but I didn’t let that deter me.”

AD Leb's goal is to promote dialogue between local and international practitioners, art enthusiasts and collectors, while also operating as a non-profit gallery. The proceeds will instead go to the Gaïa Fodoulian Foundation, an organization that provides care for animals, a cause close to Fodoulian's heart.

AD Leb's inaugural exhibition, titled "Everyone Is The Creator Of One's Own Faith," is a direct reference to Fodoulian's final words, posted on Facebook hours before the explosive blast that claimed over 200 lives. The post showed a photo of Fodoulian, taken during a visit the Dambulla Cave Temple in Sri Lanka. Each artist's pieces uniquely respond to the caption.



*Vies Intérieures, Antérieures (Inner Lives Previous Lives), Caroline Tabet. (Image: Robert McKelvey)*

Hosted across two floors of the Tabbal Building, each artwork has a room to itself, encouraging visitors to explore the 19th-century heritage house, which itself has endured multiple wars, uprisings and more.

"The Tabbal building, with its unique architecture and story, was perfect for this project," explained Vartivarian. "It dates back to the late 1800s and is an important architectural and historical landmark. Being so close to the port, it was also damaged in the [August 4] explosion, and I wanted the exhibition to take place in a location that mirrored the city's most recent trauma."

The result is a range of different styles and disciplines, including pieces by Karen Chekerdjian, Sirine Fattouh, Paul Kaloustian, as well as Fodoulian herself.

Fattouh is a multidisciplinary visual artist who explores representations of personal and collective histories through various mediums. She also knew Fodoulian and Vartivarian.

“It’s really important to have this now in Lebanon, in Beirut,” says Fattouh. “In times of crisis, we forget art. We say it’s not important. We have to live. We have to eat. We have to find a way of sustaining, but art is always important. It’s like oxygen.”

Kaloustian is an award-winning Beirut-based architect, where he also has his studio.

“I decided to show a part that – in the architect’s world – usually you don’t show, which is the laboratory kitchen ideas and sketches,” explained Kaloustian. “I’m very connected to these works on a personal level because, through my career, I had a lapse of time where we didn’t have work, so these kinds of things kept me going, kept me having faith in my imagination. These are fruits of my fight to keep on going.”

In addition to the physical show, the exhibition features a series of panel discussions on AD Leb’s website. Vartivarian hopes to operate on a schedule of four exhibitions per year, offering a combination of individual and ensemble projects.

“There are two main reasons that I wanted to continue working on AD Leb,” Vartivarian said. “The first and most important reason was to keep Gaïa’s memory alive. The second reason was that I genuinely believe in the platform’s mission. I have faith in this venture that she had embarked on and wanted it to be realized; not just in her memory, but because there is a real need for it.”

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