

AGENDA

LEBANON

FILM

'Nourhane, A Child's Dream'
Dar El-Nimer, Clemenceau
March 5, 6:30 p.m.
May Kassem's film tells of Nourhane, a singer and actress in the '40s-'60s, who suddenly retreated away from the stage. Her granddaughter goes into the world of filmmaking and seeks to uncover her grandmother's past.

MUSIC

'Paganini Violin Concertos Nos. 6, 3, 1'
Al-Bustan Hotel, Beit Mery
March 5, 8:30 p.m.
Al-Bustan Festival continues with a concert by Anastasiya Petryshak, Kevin Zhu and Giulio Plotino playing Paganini's violin concertos.

TALK

'Andy by Bob Cola'
Samir J. Abillama Amphitheatre, ALBA, Dekwaneh
March 13, 5:30 p.m.
The Happy Childhood Foundation presents a talk by Bob Colacello on his time working with Andy Warhol.

THEATER

'The Middle Beast'
Theatre Monnot, Monnot
Until March 24, 8:30 p.m.
Joe Kodeih's political comedy tackling all taboos revolves around three men of different religions who meet to negotiate a deal over a piece of land.

ART

'Beyzok'
SV Gallery, Saifi Village, Downtown
Opening March 5, 6 p.m.
The Lebanese Foundation for the National Library will be showing part of Serge Brunst's private collection of Ottoman-era glass antiquities.

'Multiverses'
Mark Hachem Gallery, Mina al-Hosn
Until March 15, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Bassam Kyrillos' most recent sculptures explore narratives of place through cycles of destruction and regeneration.

Emerging artists' show
CUB Gallery, Badaro
Until March 31, noon to 7 p.m.
This artists' show introduces the work of eight creatives, exploring such themes as the female body, humans, their surroundings and the collective unconscious.

'383-Armenia Street'
Artlab, Gemmayzeh
Until March 9, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Vincent Bassil's series explores Beirut, its people, streets, energy and motifs.

'Brussels Beirut, the Living Colors'
Galerie Alice Mogabgab, Ashrafieh
Until April 6, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
In her series, Leopoldine Roux has applied nail polish to "revive" a selection of vintage Lebanese postcards.

'Thief of Baghdad'
Dar El-Nimer, Clemenceau
Until May 25, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
This exhibition comprises film posters, press clippings and photographs from Abboudi Bou Jaoude's vast collection.

JUST A THOUGHT

Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)
Novelist, playwright, story writer, theater director, poet, literary translator

REVIEW

A forensic art of sweat and spittle

Vartan Avakian's latest show muses upon the scratches and stains of sentiment

By Jim Quilty
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Visitors to the Marfa Projects space these days are met with a good deal of work inspired by the published word. "Of All That Is Seen and Unseen," Vartan Avakian's second solo at Marfa, also includes a small series of works formed from copper alloy piping, whose forms are evocative of brass instruments.

These are most recent works in Avakian's "Composition with a Recurring Sound," first shown here in 2016, during "Esma" (Listen), the Beirut Art Center's sound-referencing group expo.

Resembling a segment of a cornet or trumpet, that original piece was a portal to the music of the Beirut River, which at that time of year resembled a forgotten ditch less than it sometimes does. By opening a valve in the work, the artist proposed, a listener could hear the movement of distant water, captured by discreetly placed microphones at various points along its length.

The four exhibited works, all from 2018, also evoke brass instruments but the thought behind the series has evolved a bit.

"I see these sculptures as sound fossils," Avakian told *The Daily Star* while awaiting a bowl of pork noodle soup. "The other pieces in this show are fossils of a different kind."

For each "Composition," "the understanding is that the reverberations [looping within the tubing] leave scratches. You need friction to make sound, and if there's friction you have traces. They may be now unrecognizable. You may not be able to decode them but that doesn't mean they don't exist."

Were the mechanism conveying



"I see these sculptures as sound fossils," Avakian said.

the river sound to each "Composition" to fail, he said, "the echo of the sound will reverberate until the sound waves decay. ... These scratches will remain behind for future archaeological study."

Avakian isn't the first Lebanese-born artist to ponder intangible forces like sound and their impression on media. It has been a conceptual plank in the past work of Lawrence Abu Hamdan, for instance, though the artists' discursive overlap has informed quite dissimilar bodies of work.

Most of the work in "Seen and Unseen" is interested not in sound traces upon fabricated objects but scratches and stains we imprint upon books while using them, following from his 2015 solo debut at Marfa, "Collapsing Clouds of Gas

and Dust." The media are different but the show's two species of work are unified by a common narrative.

Like many good stories, this one begins with a flood. The only precious objects the water endangered were books. "I wasn't happy about having a commodity fetish," Avakian laughed. "I like my fetishes to be different."

He divided the water-damaged books into two piles — ruined objects and salvageable ones.

It later occurred to him that a book's sentimental value doesn't reside in its contents, which may be replaced and so are hardly unique.

"These books carry things other than text — symbols of the story of the book itself. It's usually the story of how the book came to my library, which is completely differ-

ent from the story in the book.

"When I narrated why the books are special to me, I noticed how stupid and banal the stories were — a book given by a lover, another by a friend, a totally outdated and unnecessary encyclopedia, gifted by your grandfather. This is a common experience, I think."

He rearranged the flood survivors into two alternative stacks — one for the books whose value could easily be replaced, another for those that couldn't.

The origin of his scratches and stains project, Avakian said, lay in determining how the generic, reproducible features of a book can be separated from what's unique about it.

Most of the works in "Seen and Unseen" are concerned with showing that layer of incidental inscription that makes individual books unique alongside other copies of the same book. Like some recent treatments of archival photography, the works in "Seen and Unseen" are interested in the materiality of cultural artifacts.

Marfa's first gallery has been turned over to the 2018 series "All That Is Seen and Unseen: Iconography," whose standalone works reproduce individual pages from an amusing array of books.

These "icons" sample titles like "The Last Temptation of Christ," "Petit Dictionnaire Francais-Arabe," "Das Kapital: A Novel of Love and Money Markets," "The Essential Frankfurt School Reader" and "Armenians in Lebanon: Volume V," among others.

The icons aren't simple photos or Xerox copies. The creativity lies in the details.

To make each icon, Avakian "used very simple early photography techniques. A surface was treated with silver solution and salts, which interact to different shades of light to create black-and-white images."

Before photography perfected chemical fixers to stabilize prints, he noted, images might persist for a couple of minutes, maybe a couple

of hours, then disappear.

"I'm interested in this moment," Avakian said, "because, though photographs have been used as documents, they're actually very ephemeral. If early photos stayed for 30 seconds, photos today remain for 100-150 years before darkening."

"Very early photos that held your impression briefly before going black, they still hold your presence," he said, "but in a different way. An overexposed photo may have lost representational value, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have proof of presence."

"Some of these images directly taken from books [for 'Seen and Unseen'] have changed. Some will darken totally, others will remain stable. Even when all representation value disappears from it, they will remain icons of these presences."

While the pieces in "Iconography" are affected by the silver solution applied to them, the human traces — palm prints and fingerprints, left by the salty sweat and fats on our hands, and sneeze patterns — are most evident in the 2018 video "Your Skin Shall Bear Witness Against You," which films individual pages beneath ultraviolet light.

"Every time I watch one of these forensic investigation stories, it occurs to me that in the 1980s we didn't know about DNA in blood, let alone skin."

"If you told someone then that, by swabbing the inside of his mouth, you now know everything about him — his disease history, what he'd been eating, everything — they'd burn you at the stake."

"Now we realize that a microscopic piece of skin has so much data we can only decode 5 per cent of it. Imagine what's on the 90-95 percent we can't decode. This isn't the future. This is now."

"I don't know what kind of data can be retrieved," Avakian added.

"That's not my point."

"Of All that is Seen and Unseen" is up at Marfa though March 30. For more, see marfaprojects.com.

Spielberg's push against Netflix at Oscars hit a nerve

By Lindsey Bahr
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES: When Steven Spielberg talks about the business of Hollywood, most listen and few dissent. Reports that he intends to support rule changes that could block Netflix from Oscars-eligibility have provoked a heated, and unwieldy, debate online this weekend.

It has found the legendary filmmaker at odds with some industry heavyweights, who have pointed out that Netflix has been an important supporter of minority filmmakers and stories, especially in awards campaigns, while also reigniting the ongoing streaming versus theatre debate.

Spielberg has weighed in before on whether streaming movies should compete for the film industry's most prestigious award. TV movies, he said last year, should compete for Emmys.

That was before Netflix nearly succeeded in getting its first best picture Oscar for Alfonso Cuaron's "Roma" at last week's Academy Awards. Netflix did not win the top award. "Green Book," which was produced partially by Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment, did.

Netflix was a legitimate contender and this year the streaming service is likely to step up its awards game even more with Martin Scorsese's "The Irishman," which *The Hollywood Reporter* said may also be gunning for a wide-theatrical release. A teaser ad aired during the 91st Oscars for the gangster drama said "in theaters next fall," instead of the "in select theaters" phrasing that was used for "Roma."

Netflix also isn't playing by the same rules as other studios. The company doesn't report theatrical grosses, for one, and it's been vexing some more traditional Hollywood executives throughout this award season and there have been whispers in recent weeks that a reckoning is coming.

Now, Spielberg and others are planning to do something about it by supporting a revised film academy regulation at an upcoming meeting of the organization's board of governors that would disqualify Netflix from the Oscars, or at least how the streaming giant currently operates during awards season.

This year "Roma" got a limited theatrical qualifying run and an expensive campaign with one of the industry's most successful awards publicists, Lisa Taback, leading the charge. Netflix, operates somewhat outside of the industry while also

infiltrating its most important institutions, like the Oscars and the Motion Picture Association of America. Some like Spielberg, are worried about what that will mean for the future of movies.

"Steven feels strongly about the difference between the streaming and theatrical situation," an Amblin spokesperson told *IndieWire's* Anne Thompson late last week. "He'll be happy if the others will join [his campaign] when that comes up. He will see what happens."

An Amblin representative said Sunday there was nothing to add.

Some see Spielberg's position as wrong-minded, especially when it comes to the Academy Awards, which requires a theatrical run to be eligible for an award. Many online have pointed out the hypocrisy that the organization allows members to watch films on DVD screeners before voting.

Filmmaker Ava DuVernay tweeted at the film academy's handle in response to the news that the topic

would be discussed at a board of governors meeting, which is comprised of only 54 people out of over 8,000 members.

"I hope if this is true, that you'll have filmmakers in the room," DuVernay wrote, "or read statements from directors like me who feel differently."

Some took a more direct approach, questioning whether Spielberg understands how important Netflix has been to minority filmmakers in recent years.

Franklin Leonard, who founded *The BlackList*, which surveys the best unproduced scripts in Hollywood, noted that Netflix's first four major Oscar campaigns were all by and about people of color — "Beasts of No Nation," "The 13th," "Mudbound" and "Roma."

"It's possible that Steven Spielberg doesn't know how difficult it is to get movies made in the legacy system as a woman or a person of color," Leonard tweeted Saturday. "In his extraordinary career, he hasn't exactly produced or executive

produced many films directed by them. By my count, Spielberg does one roughly every two decades."

It's important to note that Netflix acquired "Beasts of No Nation," "Mudbound" and "Roma" for distribution and didn't produce. If Oscar campaigns are no part of the equation in a Netflix-partnership, top-tier filmmakers are likely to take their talents and films elsewhere.

Others, like "First Reformed" filmmaker Paul Schrader, had a slightly different take.

"The notion of squeezing 200+ people into a dark unventilated space to see a flickering image was created by exhibition economics not any notion of the 'theatrical experience,'" Schrader wrote in a Facebook post. "Netflix allows many financially marginal films to have a platform and that's a good thing."

His Academy Award-nominated film, he thinks, would have got lost on Netflix and possibly, "relegated to film esoterica." Netflix had the option to purchase the film out of

the Toronto International Film Festival and didn't. A24 did and stuck with the provocative film through awards season.

"Distribution models are in flux," Schrader concluded. "It's not as simple as theatrical versus streaming."

Netflix is not going away any time soon and how it integrates with the traditional structures of Hollywood, like the Oscars, is a story that's still being written.

Sean Baker, who directed "The Florida Project," suggested a compromise. Netflix could offer a "theatrical tier" to pricing plans, which would allow members to see its films in theaters for free.

"I know I'd spend an extra 2 dollars a month to see films like 'Roma' or 'Buster Scruggs' on the big screen," Baker tweeted. "Just an idea with no details ironed out but we need to find solutions like this in which everybody bends a bit in order to keep the film community [which includes theater owners, film festivals and competitive distributors] alive and kicking."

Hollywood comes to Beirut Celebrity A-listers attend the premiere of the documentary 'Soufra'



American A-listers Susan Sarandon and Ben Stiller appeared at Beirut Digital District Monday evening for the Beirut premiere of Thomas A. Morgan's documentary "Soufra," about Mariam Shaar's struggle to build a restaurant in Burj al-Barajneh camp.