There are a few trees left in Beirut, but their branches are no longer to be seen. Large pictures of men are hanging on them. There are many grey concrete buildings in Lebanon that they pose for. They are now quite colourful thanks to the multitude of men’s portraits covering their facades. There is a wonderful old building on Sodeco square: a magnificent skeleton reminding us incessantly of the civil war and its destructive power. It is no longer proudly defying the developers who want to erase it to plague Beirut with another concrete box. It stands there like a desolate past looking helplessly at the ridicule it has to endure: its ornate old columns have been turned into portraits covering their facades. There is a wonderful old building on Sodeco square: a magnificent skeleton reminding us incessantly of the civil war and its destructive power. It is no longer proudly defying the developers who want to erase it to plague Beirut with another concrete box. It stands there like a desolate past looking helplessly at the ridicule it has to endure: its ornate old columns have been turned into portraits covering their facades.

Sodeco Square, Beirut, Lebanon.

Walking through the streets of Beirut, driving through the ‘autobrassé’ that takes you to the north of the country or going south of the capital, you cannot avoid looking up towards these large portraits. You are looking up, but they do not seem to be looking down towards you. For despite their thick moustaches and their desperate efforts, they fail to emanate a sense of authority, of traditional notability and status, a tool essential to any zam, or leader of men. Perhaps this failure is caused by the multitude of juxtaposed and competing pictures. A notable or a leader should, after all, be easily distinguishable from ‘all the others’. But with so many pictures of candidates exhibited and so many candidates wishing to be selected, are the individual and his message downsize the context behind the candidacy not totally lost and submerged? These candidates seem to be projecting their image more than they project their candidacy or express any ontological concern. According to Freud, ‘the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego… the projection of a surface’. Are we not witnessing here a festival of bodily egos, a clumsy and adolescent projection of faces? – face (as in façade) as in wajhi and wajhi (wajhi = notable or man of status, the root of the word

In Arabic is the same as face). Could we be looking at an exuberant, Mediterranean expression of male self-presentation? Are these thousands of faces telling us something about Lebanese politics today and the state of democracy in post-war Lebanon?

Elections are not always about politics

‘Whenever something is about masculinity, it isn’t always about men’ wrote Eve SEDGWICK in Constructing Masculinity. ‘Looking at the pictures of these male candidates hanging above and around the city, trying to convince us to vote for them in the parliaments, it is tempting to say: ‘In Lebanon, when something is about parliaments, it is not always about politics’. What are these pictures, which look so macho, telling us? Are they the pictures of these men candidates hanging around the Beirut streets, roads and public places, telling us about the state of the country, its real or imagined identities, the anxieties of its citizens and the responsibilities of its leaders and representatives? Do they reflect the changing patterns of power and domination after the trauma of war or are they merely caricatures of its old traditions and uncertain modernity? On the surface, one is tempted to believe that these portraits are often carrying no written message except for the name of the candidate, seem to be saying: ‘Look at me, I am here, I am the candidate. Thus I exist. I am not a nobody’. But this simple message is very revealing and essential to the assessment of the place of the individual in Lebanese society today. This visual message is an outcry for prestige and social status in a small Mediterranean society, where concepts like reputation and social status are the anterior and posterior sides of the coin, where social media, the advent Ð just above a large smile are definitely aiming at projecting a cool, brotherly atmosphere. The candidate may be the son of an old boy, he may have just a rich owner or an emigrant, but he is still like us. He seems to be so easy-going that we could even say that he looks after himself doing fitness exercises in his garage. Paternalism is definitely present in some faces that are projecting a secure middle-aged man behind re-

The photo-portraits present a large array of masculine traits, from the wise intellectu-


Ma Ghoussoub is a Lebanese writer and artist who has written widely on Regional Issues. Her latest publications include Lebanon Beirut and Imagined Masculinities (co-edited with Emma Sinclair Webb).