HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

Two Lebanese Artists Reconstruct an Annihilated History

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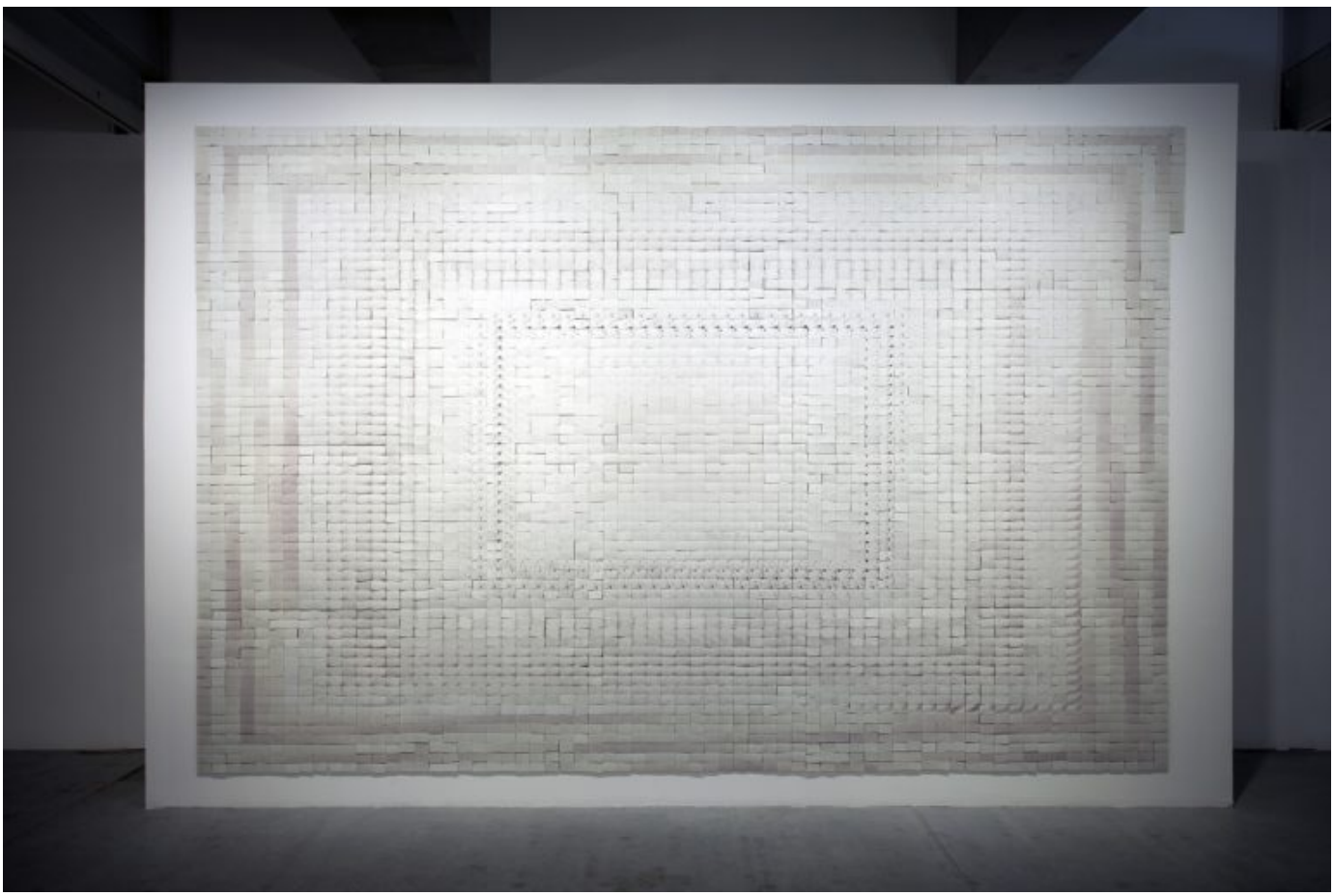
‘Two Suns in a Sunsest,’ installation view with “Circle of Confusion” (1997–2004) 3,000 photographic fragments, stamped and glued on a mirror (photo by Alfredo Rubio)

SHARJAH, United Arab Emirates — There’s always an internal contradiction between historical exhibitions and the way in which images appear to us in the present: a structure that is always changing and therefore altering the meaning of what we conceive as historical (which is perhaps not the same as merely “past”). The history of Lebanon in the second half the 20th century, with its transitions, violent civil war, and sudden transformations, is one paradigmatic example

of the difficulties in reading history through images: Under the "condition" of the lost archive, in which we have lost the temporal index to distinguish between events of the past and their reverberation in the present, we have lost the transformative power of the past. Memory transforms the past into future possibility.

Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have spent the last two decades researching and searching not only for images of war but, more specifically, for the kinds of images that "happen" in the void created by our inability to distinguish between the tenses of those images.

Two Suns in a Sunset, on view at the Sharjah Art Foundation, is one of the largest and most comprehensive surveys of Hadjithomas and Joreige's work to date. It brings together many of their earlier iconic works, complemented by new commissions, and give us a sense of the way in which the Lebanese duo have carried out their mission to find referents where none exist. The show looks to answer the questions: How can we produce memory out of situations in which history has been annihilated? How can archeologists reconstruct sites in-situ where all the elements have gone missing? Khalil Joreige remarks, in the catalog interview with curator Hoor Al Qassemi, "People always think there is a lack of memory and lack of images, and for us we feel the opposite. Sometimes there is too much memory and too many images but we don't know how to read them."



"180 Seconds of Lasting Images" (2006), 4,500 photograms encapsulated, lamba photo prints on paper, wood, velcro strips, 268 x 408 cm (photo by Alfredo Rubio)

In "Circle of Confusion" (1997–2016), a gigantic aerial image of Beirut is cut into 3,000 numbered fragments glued to a mirror, which the viewers are invited to take, one piece at a time, thus revealing the mirror and, on it, the image of the viewer. What is Beirut? On the back of each fragment are the words "Beirut does not exist," throwing us into a speculative geography. This make-do map of a city, constructed through far vision rather than deep perception, contains an eerie message: Beirut is disappearing.

As a fault line of history and a site of conflict, the city is a battleground for identities that are fluid and soluble, often violently crashing into each other and devastating the physical structure of the city itself, leaving it unrecognizable. In the early series "Archaeology of our Gaze" (1997), Hadjithomas and Joreige documented the effects of war on buildings and the derelict structures of a fading Beirut, the result of which is a series of abstract images, lacking focus and context. The artists' gaze emphasizes how, in a situation of extreme violence, documentary photography (and film) becomes not a tool to investigate or clarify past events, but rather a victim of reality, magnifying our sense of confusion and estrangement and also psychologically normalizing it as reality and inuring us to it.

Hadjithomas and Joreige have long shared a preoccupation with whether the endless production of war images (not only in the media but also in contemporary art and culture) has led us to legitimize violence and produce an entire psycho-visual code around it. It is precisely because of this concern that their later work took on different aspects of Lebanese history and history in general, attempting to grasp the conflict in Lebanon not only from the particular details of the personal stories that they narrated, but also by looking at it from the outside, through the grand structures that have formed this post-colonial history.

First there is "The Lebanese Rocket Society" (2011–13), an extended project investigating the forgotten story of Armenian scientist Manoug Manougian, who began what was to be the only space program in the Arab world. The program was started at Haigazian University during the last years of Arab optimism about modernity and before the 1967 war with Israel, after which the arms race and the apocalyptic imagination took over Arab history. The program culminated in the launch of the *Cedar 4* rocket, emblazoned with the Lebanese flag and officially reaching the limit of space known as the Karman line, 200 km above the earth. "The Lebanese Rocket Society" comprises two large exhibitions and a feature-length film (2013) that was screened in commercial cinemas in Beirut and also presented in various museums. This project is not driven by nostalgia but instead focuses on a shift in the paradigm of the Arab future: Can we still become what we once were — researchers, utopians, dreamers?

Later on, mapping out the visual culture of the post-war period, in which the Arabs as postcolonial subjects refuse to simply accept their fate as depoliticized and helpless, there are works from the 2014 exhibition *I Must First Apologize*, the result of research Hadjithomas and Joreige have undertaken since the 1990s into email scams and the way they reflect our modern world. The scams come from countries where online corruption is highly plausible (Russia, the Arab world, Africa), and the pieces interweave a general lack of trustworthiness in the public domain with recent political events from those regions: coups, revolutions, massacres. *Geometry of Space* (2014) is a series of sculptures tracing the itineraries of hundreds of emails presented in scam atlases. In "The Rumor of the World" (2014), non-professional actors read selected scam emails, addressing the viewer directly from multiple screens so that one has to come closer to hear, or else the words of these "rumors" fade into a sort of cosmic background in which it is impossible to hear what each speaker is trying to say.

Personal narratives, however, are still at the very heart of the way in which Hadjithomas and Joreige address the condition of modern history. Some of their iconic earlier works are constructed out of very personal stories from the artists' lives. The video "Lasting Images" (2003) and the photographic installation "180 Seconds of Lasting Images" (2006), made of 4,500 photograms, both use film from Alfred Jr. Kettaneh, an uncle of Joreige's, who was kidnapped in 1985 during the civil war and is still missing today, along with other 17,000 Lebanese. In 2001 the artists stumbled across Kettaneh's undeveloped film and, though uncertain, decided to develop it. The images came out veiled, difficult to discern, at best vague presences. In the context of the work of these artists, however, latency plays a significant role; images that are dormant might awake at any time, reconfiguring (or destroying) meanings, or lingering for extended periods in this latent stage.

“Geometry of Space” (2008), stretched oxidised steel diameter sculpture, murals, chronologic drawings of 2008, Scams Atlas and publications (photo by Alfredo Rubio) (click to enlarge)

Videostills from “Lasting Images” (2003), Super 8mm film transferred to DVD, 3 minutes (photo by the artists)

Hadjithomas, the granddaughter of a Greek immigrant from the late Ottoman Smyrna to Beirut, shares this immigration background with the writer and painter Etel Adnan, whose parents also came from Smyrna to Beirut in the early 1920s. A conversation between these two artists forms the core of “Smyrna” (2016), one of the new pieces seen for the first time in this exhibition. This film chronicles what it means to inhabit a place that’s more imaginary than real, and the condition of speculative territories that are no longer geographical.

Fifteen years after meeting Adnan, Hadjithomas decided to travel to Smyrna (the modern Izmir in Turkey) without any letters, archives, or photos, and attempted to locate herself in the new city only through orally transmitted stories. “The only thing that remains is oral transmission,” Adnan says to Hadjithomas in the film. “So recounting for us practically meant surviving.” Yet how can you reconstruct a geography that is partly mythological? “You have to believe in

encounters," Hadjithomas told Hyperallergic, a statement that sums up these artists' two decades of practice. In the dislocation of language, geography, aesthetic sensibility, and political reality, art is one of the few territories left that we can share, where such encounters remain possible.

'Two Suns in a Sunset,' installation view, with "Waiting for the Barbarians," "Remember the Light," and "ISMYRNA" (photo by the artists)

Two Suns in a Sunset, ultimately, is not a retrospective that traces what the artists have done or shown in the past; the real question is what we see today through these older works. Indeed, the exhibition could be viewed as a prospective on the artists' specific relationship to images: as Hadjithomas remarked to Al Qassemi, related in the exhibition catalog: "We didn't want to show them in a retrospective way, but more to think about the present; why do we do images? What images should we do today? And why is it important for us to show these images here and at that moment?"

The exhibit's titular two suns in a sunset can be seen in the video work "Waiting for the Barbarians" (2014), which is based on a poem of Greek poet Kavafy and shot in the artists' hometown of Beit Mari in the Lebanese mountains, looking into a sea of chaos and chance. These suns are actually a reference to both a Pink Floyd song and to Shakespeare's 33rd sonnet, which ends with the line: "Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth."

What has happened to the sun? As Hadjithomas told us: “When you superimpose so many temporalities, so many images, little by little there is a kind of duplicity, so you have many suns appearing. Things were happening to some people; this idea of multiple suns when you feel this chaotic time. It’s not only what’s happening to men; it’s affecting nature, it’s affecting the universe, and it’s affecting everything.”

In the film “Smyrna,” people can be seen as shadows, superimposed onto one another, strolling along the port of Izmir becoming almost spectral. Not far from this place, thousands of refugees have braved the rough sea in recent years, crossing in makeshift rafts toward Europe, fleeing indescribable wars. While telling many simultaneous stories, both visual and narrative, of disaster, Hadjithomas and Joreige are not at the service of reality to tell us what things are; rather they are desperately attempting to encode those realities with different orientations: a belief in the world, the necessity of the present, the necessity of poetry.

Videostills from “ISMYRNA” (2016), HD video, French with English subtitles, 50 minutes (photo by the artists)

Accordingly, the most striking piece in the show is the new work “Remembering the Light” (2016), a two-channel video in which the artists experiment with light underwater. Strange things happen to the spectrum of color in the depth of the water: It narrows to the point of disappearance. In this video, the artists sank five actors deeper and deeper into the sea. As the catalogue reads: “Those men, this woman seems then an echo of all those persons travelling through the sea without knowing their fate.”

How do we inhabit the abyss? The waters of the Mediterranean, once a glorious image of ancient civilizations, have become one of the most dangerous territories in the world for human life, for those fleeing endless dangers as the present dissolves in front of their eyes. It is impossible to look away from the facts: A breach has taken place in our long century so that we are trapped between an impossible past and uncertain future.

"Remember the Light" (2016), two-channel video, 8 minutes (photo by Alfredo Rubio)

At the end of the video, something resurfaces, floating toward the light. This colorful scarf, moving from the pitch dark of the underwater toward the magnified spectrum of light on the surface in broad daylight, is a metaphor for poetry not as poems or aesthetics, but as poetic thinking: an act of reconciliation rather than acceptance, both belief and skepticism in the possibilities of the world, images that oppose poetry to present times and an infinite hope in the human encounters that art enables. As Hadjithomas told us: "You can't escape your reality. How are we going to live in this present? I'm not saying that art is the solution, but poetry can help."

Two Suns in a Sunset *continues at the Sharjah Art Foundation (Al Mareija, Al Shuwaihean Area, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates) through May 9.*