American University of Beirut

How Soon Is Now: A Tribute to Dreamers

by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

Exhibition Review

Name: Freddy Vartabedian

Instructor: Dr. Angela Harutyunyan

Date: March 26, 2012

FAAH229E

*How Soon is Now: A Tribute to Dreamers* is an exhibition presented at the Beirut Exhibition Center and comprises photographic images, objects, short films and installations, grouping the work of the two Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige from 1997 to 2012. It addresses the past and present history of Beirut through various strategies where science and art interact and mingle, merging dreams and imagination with reality and in the process revealing hidden or long forgotten events. It pays tribute to a stubborn city that refuses to disappear and to dreamers and pioneers who had the courage to dream and pursue their dreams, all the while questioning our presence in the temporal space created.

Presented at the Beirut Exhibition Center, which itself is a modern installation for contemporary art in the heart of the modern city of Beirut, but carries underneath and around it memories and remnants of a ruined Beirut, the exhibition addresses a period in history where past and present converge and a work that resonates with the surroundings and conveys a reality of Beirut as a city that will never stop to exist.

The works in the exhibition can be divided into two groups. The first comprises the artists’ works from 1997 to 2012 and includes images and films of the mutation of Beirut, its present and also different narratives namely, *Circle of Confusion, History of the Circle of Confusion, Equivalences, Bestiaries, Barmeh, Don’t Walk, Lasting Images, 180 Seconds of Lasting Images* and *Latent Images.* The second group is the outcome of Hadjithomas’ and Joreige’s new project, *Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument,* that combines research to photography and reveals a forgotten, yet significant event in the history of Beirut, namely The Lebanese Space Project. It includes *Cedar IV: A Reconstitution, Restaged The President’s Album, A Carpet* and *The Golden Record.*

Upon entering, the visitor is welcome by the *Circle of Confusion* (1997) which is a huge aerial picture of Beirut divided into 3000 fragments and posted on a mirror. Each visitor is invited to remove a piece. As the image of Beirut is taken apart, the viewer finds himself facing his own image in the uncovered mirror parts and in the confusion is led to question his own place in the whole process. In the *History of the Circle of Confusion* (1997-2012) on the backside of the mirrored wall, the recording of Beirut being taken apart is projected in a loop, showing a Beirut that is in constant mutation, but is always eventually reconstructed. No matter how many times destroyed, Beirut will always reemerge and thrive.

The theme of destruction is further carried on in *Equivalences* (1997), two revolutionary photographic images that reveal the chaos and ruins produced by bombs. These images convey the artists’ genius perspective that challenges norms of perception to enter the realm of abstraction. They also engage the viewer’s imagination and memory, reviving the past and its horrors and contrasting it to the almost perfect setting.

The same corner also shows *Bestiaries* (1997), a series of photos of deformed lampposts and metal that again engages memory and imagination and inspires viewers to depict animal shapes in the distorted metal. *Bestiaries* creates a state where fantasy and reality meet to create surrealistic perceptions.

The two short videos in the exhibition, *Barmeh* (2001) and *Don’t Walk* (2000-2004), though seemingly different, converge in the city of Beirut. *Barmeh* features renowned artist, Rabih Mroueh in a ride in his car roaming the streets of Beirut. The evolving and present states of Beirut are revealed only through Mroueh’s discourse, while the city of Beirut is completely invisible. The film powerfully engages the viewer’s memory and imagination, unraveling unconscious perceptions and stressing conscious ones, only to view himself as part of the picture created by Mroueh’s narrative. *Don’t Walk*, on the other hand, is a combination of Hadjithomas’ attempts to film anything within the reach of her lens during her four months stay in bed, combined with Joreige’s recordings of the world outside her room, bringing the incessant Beirut to the confined space of her room and revealing two different perspectives converging again in the reality of Beirut.

*Lasting Images* (2003) and *180 Seconds of Lasting Images* (2006) present the viewer with a different path to a past, a past that still reflects in the present*. Lasting Images* consists of a short film taken by Joreige’s uncle who disappeared during the civil war and reminds the viewer of the 17000 people who, like Joreige’s, uncle are still missing. Most of the film appears white because of exposure with occasional shadows of figures, confirming the reality of the recorded instants. As in *Circle of Confusion*, the film is exhibited as a huge image made of 4500 photograms posted on a wall as a puzzle of time images where the occasional shadows of figures stand out as evidence of a reality that refuses to be erased, a pleasant reality spoiled by unjustified violence.

*Latent Images* (1997-2006), on the other hand, present a queer piece of work and consist of undeveloped old film rolls from the photographer Abdallah Farah’s drawer and displayed as contact sheets with descriptions of what the images would have conveyed if developed, thus forming a diary of Beirut’s recent history and its relation to the photographer’s life. The viewer is also invited to go through the artist’s book, *Latent Images/ Diary of a Photographer*, which is exhibited at the same corner.

*Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument*, the most recent yet the most special of the artists’ works consists, as mentioned, of several parts and focuses on a significant historical moment that concerns an almost forgotten rocketry project undertaken by the Lebanese- Armenians, Professor Manoug Manougian and a group of his students at Haigazian University who formed the Haigazian College Rocket Society. In the 1960s, these scientists, together with Dr. Murad from AUB, two other engineers and an army expert in ballistics, and sponsored by president Fouad Chehab, executed and launched a series of rockets from Cedar I to Cedar IV. In an era of space exploration, these rockets were scientific achievements and evidence of Lebanon’s place in the emerging modernity, an evidence of “what can come from Lebanon” (K. Wilson-Goldie, Reviving Lebanon’s Sputnik Moment). They were achievements of dreamers who wanted to explore outer space. The project was stopped in 1967 and unfortunately the event that once made the headlines eventually disappeared from memory, only to be revived by Hadjithomas and Joreige later, inviting the Lebanese to engage in dreaming once more.

The artists’ work Cedar VI: *A Reconstitution* (2011) is, as justifiably named by K. Wilson- Goldie, “Reviving Lebanon’s Sputnik Moment” (K. Wilson-Goldie, Reviving Lebanon’s Sputnik Moment). Hadjithomas’ and Joreige’s work in the first place comprises a monumental full scale (8m) reproduction of Cedar IV in white color. The monument is displayed at Haigazian University.

Though not directly present at the exhibition except through images, the Cedar IV’s presence is ominous owing it to the artists’ clever manipulations of images and research. The photographic series *Restaged* (2012) show the Cedar IV monument during its transportation through the streets of Beirut to Haigazian University. The clear city surroundings in these photographs contrast a blurry white image of the rocket adding to the mysterious charm of the rocket and further drawing attention to the combination power of art and science in capturing the enormity of a past and its reflection in the present.

The Cedar IV is also present in the exhibition through the work entitled *The President’s Album.* *The President’s Album* (2011) consists of 32 identical photographs of the monument that are folded into pleats and each shows different fragments of the rocket. These pleated photographs hang vertically at equal distances. The combination of fragments when viewed as a whole reveals the image of Cedar IV, but this time painted in the colors of the Lebanese flag. Each piece also shows at its bottom a page from the President Fouad Chehab’s album which reproduces the launching of the rocket in the 1960s. The whole picture is perfected by a video that shows one of the researchers flipping through an album and showing the different stages of launching and the successful stages that accompanied the event and in the process reviving a moment in the history of Lebanon that should never be forgotten, as well as the potential of such a moment in the present. *The President’s Album* stands as a legacy to such great moments and pays tribute to all the great people who made those moments possible. Cedar IV with the imprinted Lebanese flag stands as evidence for Lebanon’s pioneer position in the Arab world of the 1960s and inspires every viewer to take part in recreating such moments to take Lebanon to where it belongs.

*A Carpet* (2012), also a part of the *Lebanese Rocket Society* project, is another evidence of the artists’ innovative methods to combine the art of photography with archival documents and research to reproduce a period in history absent from collective memory. It features a carpet with the pattern of a stamp of Cedar IV, a stamp produced in 1964 to celebrate Lebanon’s 21st independence. *A Carpet*, being a replicate of the original carpet made in the 1920s, lies majestically in the middle and is surrounded by pictures and documents that take us to an orphanage in Ghazir, Syria in the 1920s. The documents speak of Armenian orphans, survivors of the 1915 genocide, the American aid they received, the difficult life conditions then and the carpets they wove.

One of the largest carpets was woven by these orphan girls and sent to the White House in recognition to American help. This carpet was displayed for a short time and then disappeared. The carpet showing at the exhibition was woven in Armenia in memory of the original and in the same dimensions and it celebrates the space program of the 1960s. As implied by the pictures surrounding *A Carpet,* the carpet weavers, the first generation of dreamers were the predecessors of the second generation of dreamers whose work was to change Lebanon’s place in the 1960s modernity and scientific progress. “We really want to do something on this possibility of dreaming. Today it has special echoes, but for me these people were dreamers. I want to dream with them in the present” says Hadjithomas (K. Wilson-Goldie, Reviving Lebanon’s Sputnik Moment). In their refusal to surrender dreams and give up hope, these dreamers touch every viewer’s soul and invite him to believe in his role to make a difference in history. The extensive documentation provided by the artists stands as concrete evidence for the truth and reality of the carpet, making *A Carpet* a witness of history, as well as an invitation to plunge once more into dreams.

*The Golden Record* (2011), the last component of Lebanese Rocket Project, presents the artists’ alternative technique of taking the viewer back in time to the 1960s. It is a turning golden disk set on the ground and echoes diverse sounds from the environment then, sounds ranging from everyday life to reminders of Pan-Arabism and space exploration. It was inspired by the American Voyager golden records that were made to carry sounds from planet Earth to outer space in messages of peace. *The Golden Record*, through recreating the environment of the 1960s is an acoustic legacy that revives the past and engages every visitor’s imagination and memory, all the while questioning his knowledge or his awareness of such memories and his position in such history.

The *Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument*, through its various component works, combines art and science with photography and research and creates a monumental work that challenges and changes our self-perceptions as Lebanese and as Arabs. As Hadjithomas herself explains, its aim is not to evoke nostalgia, but rather to recreate a forgotten moment in history in order to question our relation to it. In her words, “We are more interested in how we perceived ourselves as Arabs in the 1960s. What were our notions of modernity, science and knowledge? What was our faith in all that and why did it disappear?” (K. Wilson-Goldie, Reviving Lebanon’s Sputnik Moment). Among all the other images and states of Beirut presented in the exhibition, and that range from destruction to reconstruction, this project fits like a missing link and takes the exhibition from a mere representation of Beirut to every Lebanese citizen’s reality or in Hadjithomas’ words to “ what we are”.

*How Soon is Now: A Tribute to Dreamers* is a work of international scope. It is a work that confirms the place of photography in contemporary art and its ability to manipulate complex issues and scenes. Apart from being a tribute to dreamers, it is a tribute to the power of the image in creating a floating temporal space that merges reality with imagination, only to awaken the unconscious and inspire new perspectives and new levels of consciousness.

A briefing about the artists:

**Joana Hadjithomas** and **Khalil Joreige** collaborate as filmmakers and artists, producing intertwining cinematic and visual artwork. They have directed documentaries such as *Khiam 2000–2007* (2008) and *El Film el Mafkoud* (The Lost Film, 2003), and feature films including *Al Bayt el Zaher* (The Pink House, 1999), *A Perfect Day* (2005), and *Je veux voir* (I want to see, 2008). Their artwork has been shown in many museums, biennials and art centers around the world, most recently at the 10th Sharjah Biennial (2011), 11th Biennale de Lyon (2011) and 12th Istanbul Biennial (2011). They are recipients of the 2012 Abraaj Capital Prize.

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