

Object Lessons

LAMIA JOREIGE

HISTORY CONTINUALLY ESCAPES US; we have only its fragments, captured in words, images, and memories. My work of the past ten years has been an attempt to come to grips with this elusiveness and how our rearrangements and reinterpretations of these fragments border on fiction. I collect, erase, invent, capture, miss, and divert, always pointing to the gaps and possible losses in what is remembered—individually, collectively, officially.

Here and Perhaps Elsewhere, 2003, the fifty-four-minute video included in “Out of Beirut,” is a good example: a compilation of narratives offered by people I met along what used to be the dividing line between East and West Beirut. On each occasion, I asked if the person knew anyone who had been kidnapped near where we were standing. These people simply happened to be at the sites of former checkpoints, where many kidnappings occurred; they were there by chance when I arrived. Given that they did not necessarily have any specialized knowledge of the site, what emerges instead is a sense of individual relationships to history.

This subjectivity is also significant in a continuing series I started in 1999, called “Objects of War.” Here video interviews are paired with objects that people have chosen from their belongings—totems that serve as starting points for memory. For example, Akram, an artist and filmmaker, recalls his teenage years in Saida, in the south of Lebanon, when he refused to join the militia. The trigger for this reflection is an audiotape he made in 1982, which intermingles radio programs, songs by the Bee Gees, and the sounds of gunshots he recorded from the streets outside. Another artist, named Nesrine, chose playing cards, which remind her of the games she played in the shelter during the war; in her spoken reminiscences, she recalls the eerie quiet between shellings. By seeking out such personal stories, I give voice to those who have been ignored, to the stories that have been concealed. It is the role of the artist to testify, to raise untimely questions; it is the role of the artist to propose an alternative critical discourse on history, to supplement those produced by politicians, journalists, and historians. However, I do not hope to discover the truth. I want to point out the impossibility of such a thing.

I was in the midst of making a new video for “Objects of War” when the latest Israeli bombings began. On July 13, at about four in the morning, I was awakened by the sound of planes flying over the city. I heard the first bomb fall, and all the previous wars rose in my throat. I asked myself if I should continue a project on a war that had ended fifteen years ago, given what was happening today. Should I pursue a project on the present war instead? Caught in a bind, I put my camera down: I am not a reporter but an artist, I thought, and I need distance in order to create. But life continues during wartime, and soon I picked up my camera again. The act of filming and writing became a way for me to overcome my sense of anxiety and powerlessness. I slowly started documenting everyday life: the hum and drone of Israeli planes at night; a television broadcast interrupted by the sound of bombs; the darkness of the streets without



From top: Lamia Joreige, *A Journey*, 2006, still from a color video, 41 minutes. Lamia Joreige, *Walkman*, 2003, still from a color video, 85 minutes. From the series “Objects of War,” 1997–.



electricity; the emptiness of the avenues. And now I have begun to record more interviews for “Objects of War,” dealing with the events of last summer. These are my first works to deal with contemporary events instead of with the past.

Still, it's strange to look at my practice in light of the past few months—especially my most recent work, *A Journey*, which I completed in June, intending to give a sort of closure to my interrogations of a war I thought had become remote. The video begins with my grandmother looking at photos of Palestine: Born there in 1910, she left for Beirut in 1930 to marry; when the State of Israel was created in 1948, the rest of her family took refuge with her in Lebanon. The video continues as I drive along the coastline to the border of Lebanon and Israel, tracing her journey. In voice-over I describe the “just liberated and still-unknown south,” finally asking: *What has been left to me of this war that is fading day by day—images of boat departures, the impressive sound of repeated shelling, fear of checkpoints, my grandmother praying day and night . . . ?* Watching *A Journey* today, I can't help but talk back at my own voice. The south is no longer liberated; it has been destroyed. The similarity between the present situation and events decades ago—and the sense of one war beginning without the previous one ending—shakes my understanding of history, as well as my relationship to it. The war continues, the images and sounds have returned. But my grandmothers are dead, and there is no one to pray. □

LAMIA JOREIGE IS AN ARTIST LIVING IN BEIRUT.