

The long and wounding road

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Beirut blues: a still from
Lamia Joreige's
documentary *Here and
Perhaps Elsewhere*

Beirut's artistic life is still scarred by war, finds **MORGAN FALCONER**

It surely takes an insider to understand the labyrinthine complexities of the Lebanese civil war.

When Lamia Joreige set off with a film camera in search of memories of the kidnappings and walked along the former green line that divided East and West Beirut, she encountered some odd responses. Although her film reveals sorrow and hears the testimonies of relatives of the missing, she also finds amnesia, boastfulness and even nostalgia for the time of the war.

Today Beirut is a city trying to move on, yet when the curator Suzanne Cotter, from Modern Art Oxford, landed there last April, it was only three weeks after a car bomb had killed the Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri. Nevertheless, Cotter was startled by the energetic diversity of the city's rather underground art scene and has returned to mount *Out of Beirut*, an exhibition that draws on a range of the city's artists, architects, performers and writers.

The work often feels like fresh reportage: Ziad Abilama mixes interviews with those mourning Hariri with a kind of interrogation of the man shown smiling in publicity photographs before he died. In the film *Distracted Bullets* Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige record how Beirut erupts in fireworks and the sound of gunshot, when its people celebrate anniversaries.

Ali Cherrif's film montage combines the words of Yukio Mishima with images of ruins, reflecting on lives lived among them. And in the architect Bernard Khoury's night-time documentary tour around his nightclub BO18, he reveals a bizarre construction impacted into the ground like a bunker. At night cars arrive to encircle it with headlights, the mirrored roof lifts off, and the city's young sit at purple velvet chairs that open like coffins.

Out of Beirut is a new take on a city that was once a byword for conflict, yet it isn't alone in its attempts to get to grips with the culture of the Middle East. Catherine David, a leading French cura-



tor, has been mounting a series of exhibitions in recent years called *Contemporary Arab Representations* (Iraqi artists are currently exhibiting at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona). The region even has its own glamorous art magazine, *Bidoun*, albeit published in New York. And in a sure sign that roots are being set down, Christie's opened its first office in the region last year. The first sale of modern and contemporary art offered works by the likes of Damien Hirst.

The artists in the Oxford show, however, work far from these pockets of wealth. While some of the pieces have the whiff of post-graduate seminar rooms – intellectual posing and political posturing – much of it is also vivid. Typical of the best current work is another project by Hadjithomas and Joreige, in which they have created in a series of postcards, supposedly from an archive of mottled and torn prewar tourist cards, a reflection on the

strange way the city has made contact with its prewar past in the attempt to forget.

For many of these artists, traditional media such as paint-

One film-maker finds amnesia, boastfulness and even nostalgia for the war

ing only serve the wrong ends. Tony Chakar suggests this in the exhibition's catalogue, in which he recalls his own father's murder along the green line in 1975, when he had gone out to buy young Tony some underwear. Reflecting later on the bathos and pointlessness of this killing, Chakar commissioned an heroic portrait of him from one of Hezbollah's official painters, transforming him into an unlikely martyr.

In some sense the Oxford show is part of the increasing visibility of the region, and it is no surprise that it includes the work of Walid Raad, who is surely Lebanon's most critically acclaimed contemporary artist. For several years Raad worked on an ingenious project called *The Atlas Group*, in which he assembled various documents, some real and some fantastical, into a kind of alternative personal-political history of his country.

For the Oxford show he has distilled a typically enormous wealth of detail about a real event, a single car bomb that detonated in Beirut in January 1986. He draws on photographs, notebooks, even the diagrams of an explosives expert. The kind of event that we once heard of on the radio, and maybe just blanked through fatigue, comes back at us again.

Out of Beirut is at Modern Art Oxford (01865 722733), from May 13 to July 16.