

Art

Confronting the light



Still from 'Here and Perhaps Elsewhere' by Lania Joreige

'Out of Beirut' sees Lebanese artists addressing the psychological fallout of years of civil war, says **Sarah Kent**

When civil war broke out in Lebanon, Mona Hatoum was stranded in London. Since then, she has become internationally known for work that alludes to separation, repression and torture. What, though, of the artists who remained in Beirut where there are no museums or galleries to promote them? 'Out of Beirut' reveals that the war produced a generation of artists keen to address the psychological wounds that still fester 16 years on.

When a car bomb killed Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February last year, thousands of people poured into Martyrs' Square in protest. Armed with a video camera, Ziad Abillama recorded people's reactions to the murder. 'It goes beyond the death of a politician,' says a young man. 'It's an act of war, the symbolic equivalent of the destruction of the Twin Towers.' 'I have the feeling it was Lebanon that was assassinated,' says a woman, while another suggests that the Lebanese need collective psychotherapy. In effect, the work in this exhibition marks the beginning of that process, especially as a combination of strict censorship laws and the possibility of reprisals makes people wary of speaking openly; Abillama disguises people's identities by showing only their mouths.

During the civil war, thousands disappeared; sometimes their bodies were

returned but more often the victims were never heard of again. Lania Joreige follows the Green Line that divided East from West Beirut and was one of the main kidnap zones, asking people if they knew of anyone who was taken. Some refuse to answer ('I'd prefer not to talk; certain things aren't possible in Lebanon') or give evasive replies, such as 'Many were kidnapped'. 'Why bring up this old pain again?' asks one man. 'It's best to forget.' Frustrated by official inertia, a man in a café says bitterly, 'The government won't talk so why should we?' When people discover that the film will only be shown abroad, some are willing to share their memories. People disclose the loss of sons, brothers, nephews and neighbours. A member of a rap band whose grandfather, father and uncle were kidnapped recalls a well filled with corpses. 'Now they're forgotten,' he says, 'as if murder is normal.' Witnessing people confronting painful memories may sound voyeuristic, but when officialdom espouses amnesia and denial, the opportunity to give voice to the truth acts like a safety valve – a release.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have produced a set of postcards of Beirut's famous tourist spots taken in 1968 by Abdallah Farah, a fictitious photographer. Salvaged during the war from Farah's bombed-out studio, the damaged negatives supposedly form the basis for images whose battered appearance echoes the destruction of the places they record.

Akram Zaatari addresses the fearful excitement of war. On June 6 1982, he photographed Israeli planes bombing southern Lebanon. He was 16 at the time. 'I used

to be fascinated by the sight of air raids,' he recalls, 'and thought of them as the ultimate fireworks; real fireworks; real threats. They were shots of adrenaline.' Combined into a dramatic panorama, the images now testify to the beauty of violence and recall the 'absolute boredom' he experienced during the intervening periods of calm.

Ali Cherri accompanies beautifully framed shots of damaged buildings with extracts from his translation of Yukio Mishima's memoir 'Sun and Steel'. 'I used to be elated by the idea of a city that was eating itself,' he says. 'My biggest disappointment was the day they announced that the war had ended.' The literal and metaphoric darkness of war had given way to 'the merciless light of day. I was in an almost hallucinatory state. Everything seemed to be melting in the heat... I began to be suspicious of the light in which I had put so much trust during the war.' As a bright orb blinds you, he concludes that, by the light of the sun, 'The only reality that stares back at you is death.'

In South Africa they adopted 'truth and reconciliation' as a way of confronting the past and moving forward; in Lebanon they seem to be turning a blind eye to the truth and relying on amnesia or silence to heal the rifts. By probing their own painful memories and those of others, these artists are beginning the difficult process of confronting the light and the unpalatable truths that it reveals.

'Out of Beirut' is at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford until July 16.

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