

Lamia Joreige: Grief can be told

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A puzzle completed with pieces of this long war of fifteen years, of this information curtain, during which the innocence of a whole generation was lost and over 200,000 people were killed: the scene broadcast by international channels – of a city, on the banks of the Mediterranean, that is always burning.

The Lebanon War has been one of the tireless representations of conflict in the last third of the twentieth century. *The conflict.*

A war complicated to understand although it was repeatedly spoken about by the media in real time, a war that has symbolized the volatility of one of the most unstable areas of the planet. First, the Civil War between 1975 and 1990, with the participation of Israel and Syria. And, years later, another *express* version of a 34-day war in 2006, where the Hezbollah-Israel conflict revived the endemic violence in the Middle East.

Joreige knows that her work “*Objects of war*” (which is now part of the heritage of the Tate Modern and has a permanent exhibition) is definitely an unfinished job, the memory always incomplete. As Borges said – it is a kind of a fourth dimension. Thus, room 7 of the gallery of “Poetry and Dream” tells a fragment of that war, or rather, thirty-five fragments of the same war, as there are thirty-five testimonies that revive the different periods of the war in Lebanon.



The exhibition is divided into four parts: the first three parts telling stories of the 1975-1990 conflict (*“Objects of War I, II and III”*) and the fourth presenting the views of the 2006 war (*“Objects of War IV”*). In total, there are thirty-five testimonies of people who choose a symbolic object of their lives in wartime to build a story of war through them.

Thus, the exhibition has two related elements: four screens that recreate the testimonies of all respondents and four rooms featuring objects on which their narratives are based in the journey through their memories.

At first glance, without listening to the interviews, the objects (a battery pack, keys, a teddy bear, a guitar, among others) seem to be a quiet ode to daily life, whereas the testimonies, their emotional charge, their implication, recreate a battlefield that is still glowing.



However, when the viewer returns to the objects, once he knows their history, the entire room transforms itself into a war arena and you understand, almost worshipping, the importance of a candle or the symbolism of the plan of a house that was never built. The objects are now part of the war, because they contain the story of the war.

The objects that the respondents give are the true “archaeology of war”, according to Lamia Joreige.

In a video conference from Beirut she said: “They are the evidence that describes the conflict, the base of a narrative process to explain a conflict, because I knew it would be very difficult to show the historical perspective of the war.”

The work is based on “the desire to explain”. And Lamia Joreige chooses the memory of people who survived the war, its intimate, personal context, and weaves it into the collective memory, which encompasses many points of view, many different situations, but which sees the conflict as a border in their lives and always, as much before as afterwards, as a discovery, an everlasting frustration.

The idea arose when Lamia Joreige lost a personal item. While she was searching for it, she realized that the object (the artist keeps it a secret) largely defined her relationship with the war. It was this certainty that served as a starting point for the interviews. A journey through the memories of journalists, artists, students, housewives, workers, who tell us how the war in Lebanon has invariably marked their lives, their perception of childhood, their relationship with the exile and nostalgia, with dreams and commitment.



And in all those stories, the war serves as a backdrop, as decoration, as sound. One interviewee, Karim, a childhood friend of Lamia Joreige herself, tells of a meeting with the video artist when they were both teenagers; from his poignant evocation the final sentence stands out: “I remember discovering the opposite sex, we were together, at your grandparents’ house, on a beautiful day ... the war in front of us.”

When reminded of this interview, Lamia responded with the same tenaciousness:

“I remember that day, there was a bombing in front of us, on the other side of the hill: it was a tragic and dramatic view.” This revelation of the artist herself shows the attitude to war.

And this trend is common among many respondents: an artist who shows a drawing of a plane bombing that his son has drawn, a woman who chooses a guitar, recalling with melancholy the times of “the community” during the war, a young woman grasping her passport in 2006, resigned to staying in Lebanon and building her life there, and saying “I have learned to have dreams based on the life I have.”

Lamia Joreige has shown her videos and installations in different countries. Furthermore, she is the co-founder and manages the Beirut Art Centre. With this work, she intends to fight against “amnesia” and she criticizes the many political excesses such as the amnesty, due to which many of the senior officers responsible for causing and instigating the war were let out of prison.



She tires of thinking about future of Beirut and Lebanon, but she is aware of the historical validity of “the evidence” presented in her artwork. Grief can be told. Talking about it alleviates the pain. But the questions remain for life, as one of her interviewees recalls: “I became homeless. Without furniture. I got used to always living in fear because I was always surrounded by people with guns. But the country has not changed. Nothing has changed. Then what was the war for?”

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