

Timeless matters of life and death

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“Untitled 1, 2, 3, 4,” 1999, pencil, wax, and pastel drawings, 40x30 cm each.

BEIRUT: Lamia Joreige hasn't had a solo show in Lebanon for six long years. Nearly a decade has passed since she last shared her paintings with the world. None of the galleries she previously worked with (Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Espace Kettaneh-Kunigk) exist today in precisely the same form as when she was there.

How perfect, then, that Joreige has chosen a very new space to tackle age-old ideas about time, death, love, desire, creativity and destruction.

With a tumble of works cascading down two levels of exhibition space – including videos, photographs, photograms, etchings, sculptures and drawings in wax, pencil and pastel – Joreige's “Records for Uncertain Times” is on view through the end of May at Art Factum, which opened 18 months ago in Karantina.

Here, Joreige covers all of her usual bases, such as nonlinear narratives, the fragmentation of time, fallible histories and recovering from one war while waiting for the next. What is unusual about this exhibition, her first since opening the Beirut Art Center with Sandra Dagher, is the remarkable degree of conceptual

coherence Joreige has achieved by balancing the crisp, clinical aesthetic of her multimedia installations with the wonderful emotional excess of her handmade works.

Because she is best known for videos such as “Here and Perhaps Elsewhere,” about checkpoints and kidnappings during Lebanon’s 15 years of fratricidal fighting, and for ongoing series such as “Objects of War,” about the routines and behaviors that take hold in times of extended violence and political crisis, it is tempting to forget that Joreige began her career as a painter.

Goosey, enigmatic and strangely cellular, her early works were primarily concerned with evocations of sexuality and the body. Even such early videos as “Replay” and “Sleep,” the latter of which has been revived for the Art Factum show, were painterly excursions into a land of lost lovers and other impressions of intimacy.

In the five or six years since she made a technically exquisite installation of videos, texts and experimental scores, titled “Je d’histoires” and featured in the group show “Foreword,” which constituted Lebanon’s first-ever national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Joreige has been honing a style of art that basically looks like research neatly tacked to a wall.

The two major works in “Records for Uncertain Times” represent the epitome of that style.

“Beirut, Autopsy of a City” plots 3,000 years of history on a splintering timeline, replete with archival images and excerpts from scholarly texts. In dry lists and diagrams, “Under-Writing Beirut: Mathaf” explores the dramatic history of Beirut’s National Museum, and marks the first chapter in a series that is meant to tether memories and anecdotes to specific sites in the city.

By placing those works in such close proximity to surprising new sculptures of slippery black hearts and spindly etchings of silkworm cocoons – redolent as they are of transformation, death and decay – Joreige pulls off something special. She returns us to her sometimes joyless and overly analytical installations to find them more deeply layered and affective than we might have initially thought (and judged accordingly).

The material richness of her drawings and sculptures, the haphazard tactility of her experiments with pinhole photography and restless, full-bodied, shadow-limbed photograms – these qualities of work give Joreige’s show a fine sense of vulnerability.

They also amplify her interests in impressions and palimpsests. All of this helps to pull her work away from certain contextual pitfalls – such as repeating work about the Civil War forever – while maintaining focus on the urban fabric and lived experience of Beirut.

Stitching all of these disparate media together sends us back to installations such as “Beirut, Autopsy of a City” to find that Joreige’s account of the city’s epic cycles of destruction and reconstruction are seeded with illusions, fictions, faked historical entrees, ruminative quotations from Mahmoud Darwish’s “Memory for Forgetfulness” and Wim Wenders’ “Wings of Desire,” and some lovely filmed footage of Beirut’s most unloved topographical asset, the sickly trickle of Nahr al-Mot.

In this context, Joreige’s work on the National Museum seems less a showy staging of research than the tentative inquiries of an artist feeling her way through questions of life and death, entombment and transparent display, the museum as mausoleum and the radical disconnect between Beirut’s only serious, state-sponsored cultural and educational institution and the contemporary art practices that have brought the city a measure of international renown.

“I have a strong interest in exploring certain aspects of Beirut, but even if I go through the history, I’m not a historian, I’m not an archaeologist,” Joreige says. “I’m not Walid Raad.” One of her more famous peers, Raad has been making work from feigned histories of Lebanon’s wars and sociopolitical intrigues in the Arab world for years.

"I'm not a good investigator. I'm really a bad investigator. I easily surrender to the conditions," she says, which serve to limit or stave off trajectories of research.

When she was unable to access the thousands of artifacts in the collection of the National Museum that are still hidden away in storage, when she was unable to obtain an inventory of the thousands more relics that were looted and stolen, she didn't push. Instead, she made a great wall text listing all of the objects that are currently on display, as if to say, "This is all there is."

It works, and it makes a brutal point.

Still, the sense of loss that Joreige conveys in her work remains elusive. It aspires to some kind of national consciousness but the scale is intimate. "The museum that should have been a place of national identity," she says, "became one of the most dangerous crossings during the Civil War."

This is essentially a work about the rapidly changing neighborhood where Joreige lives and works.

Likewise the autopsy, and her study of the many times Beirut has nearly disappeared. The museum's history of entombment (encasing its collection in concrete to protect it during the war) and the city's various close calls with extinction led Joreige to silkworms, Egyptian amulets and other such funerary practices.

"I really wanted to put something about death in the show," she says simply, "because it's the only question that really matters to us as artists."

Lamia Joreige's "Records for Uncertain Times" remains on view at Art Factum in Karantina through May 30. For more information, please call 01-443-263 or visit www.artfactumgallery.com.