

Lamia Joreige on “Records for Uncertain Times” at Taymour Grahne

BY MOSTAFA HEDDAYA | FEBRUARY 27, 2015



Lamia Joreige's "Museum Crossing," 2013.

A warped cylinder of cast concrete reposes on a plinth near the epicenter of Lamia Joreige’s [“Records for Uncertain Times,”](#) the Lebanese artist and filmmaker’s first solo exhibition in the United States, which opened last night at Taymour Grahne Gallery (through April 9). Titled “Object of War,” 2013, this eminence of grey is the approximate negative of a hole in a 5th-century mosaic within the National Museum of Beirut that was used by a sniper during Lebanon’s tumultuous civil war, which divided the capital and raged from 1975 to 1990.

“It’s not an exact replica, because I’m not scientific enough — I wish I was — so I call it a poetic reformulation,” Joreige said of the work’s semi-apocryphal form on a recent evening, installers buzzing around her. “Object of War” is in many ways the show’s lodestar, encapsulating the Beirut-based artist’s meticulous blending of fact and fiction into what the Harvard art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty has [termed](#) “parafiction.” Behind “Object of War,” a small sequence of two photographs and a sketch offer more context for the sculpture: most jarring is the leftmost image, an old shot of the sniper’s perch taken after the war, a lair of tires and oil drums. And the choice of the sculpture’s medium — the artist’s first three-dimensional object — suggests her dexterity with the past: the museum’s director during the war had used the same material to entomb the artifacts in the building, protecting many works from looters under sarcophagi of poured concrete

The piece is a component of the first chapter, “Mathaf,” of the main project on view, Joreige’s ongoing “Under-Writing Beirut,” a multi-media exploration of her native city’s past, present, and future. First commissioned for the 11th Sharjah Biennial in 2013, the “Mathaf” component has also shown at Beirut’s Art Factum gallery, then at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, before appearing here for the first time in New York. “Mathaf is the neighborhood where I live — it means ‘museum’ in Arabic but it also gives its name to a neighborhood, and where the National Museum of Beirut stands,” Joreige said. She described the museum’s collection as “quite small,” as diminutive as the institution itself, and focused primarily on Phoenician artifacts. The collection forms the basis of the show’s largest work, “All the objects from the national museum, visible on December 15, 2012,” 2013, a textual listing of its viewable holdings in “an image that is actually a text that could convey literally the museum in one single shot,” the artist said.

But as with the rest of Joreige’s practice, what is rendered in this textual piece bears latent tensions. “Lebanon is for me more of an experience than a nation-state that is established. It is a beautiful experience, which could possibly become a state, but for now, since we’ve existed, there have always been national identity issues, in terms of sectarianism, communities, et cetera. So for me it was interesting not to do a direct [statement] — the piece is not about controversy, criticism, or the impossibility of having a nation but more about what a ‘national museum’ represents,” she explained. “You can see the politics of the museum through it, the kind of objects that they have acquired, which are mainly Phoenician — and even the idea of Phoenicians as ancestors is controversial.”

“Mathaf” comprises further works: a 14-and-a-half-minute-long video in which, Joreige said, “nothing happens,” but is meant to give a sense of the sniper’s vantage point through the mosaic, shot as it is with a camera approximating that location; a cluster of diminutive pinhole photographs shot from her apartment in the same neighborhood; a double-exposure silkscreen layering two exterior photographs of the museum in wartime and the present day. This “excess of visibility,” as the artist calls it, is laden with symbolic meaning, as the area itself was home to the Mathaf-Barbir crossing between East and West Beirut, sited along the Green Line that divided the city for the duration of the civil war.

Occupying the length of the gallery opposite “Mathaf” are seven large-scale photograms, imprints of the artist’s body at rest. Conceptually grounded in a 2004 video by Joreige called “Sleep,” in which the artist captured in timelapse her nightly repose with a former partner (a work that will, along with further photograms from the same series, be on view at the Armory show next week), the strength of the images lies in their spellbinding anthropomorphic abstraction, a technically sophisticated update to Yves Klein’s “Anthropométries,” his imprints of bodies as “living brushes” which Joreige cites as a reference for the project. “It really is the imprint of the movement of the body during the night — the differences [in forms] come from the movement, and the time of sleep,” she said. “The more I oversleep, it becomes abstract, the less I sleep, the less I move, it becomes figurative... I was looking for this place between the fixed image and the moving image.”

Downstairs, the second chapter of “Under-Writing Beirut” unfolds: a four-minute video, “The River,” 2013, shot in Beirut’s erstwhile “belt of misery,” the paved and mostly arid bed of the river that runs through Beirut. On the walls, two groupings of drawings on paper chart the river’s course in graphite, watercolor, and ironed wax. The video pairs Joreige’s narration with point-of-view footage through the windshield of a car driving at low speed along the once-blighted riverbed, which is distantly reminiscent of the Los Angeles River. “This river is subject to many utopian projects of gentrification, there are towers being built, residential developments, there is the Ashkal Alwan arts school next to the Beirut Art Center, and architectural firms,” said Joreige, who works at the Beirut Art Center, which she co-founded with arts activist Sandra Dagher in 2009. “They have plans for the river,” she continued, “some are green plans and have really nice ecological interest in them, and some are driven by more capitalistic terms.” As with the work on view in the gallery’s upper level, the future and the past converge in an unstable present. And Joreige’s speculative excavations are far from over: a third chapter of the “Under-Writing Beirut” project is imminent — “one day,” she said with a laugh.