

The Things They Carried: Lamia Joreige's Objects of War at the New Museum

by Jessica Gallucci



Lamia Joreige, *Objects of War*, 1999-ongoing, video installation with found objects. Courtesy New Museum, New York. Photo Benoit Pailley.

"It is not a happy show," co-curator Massimiliano Gioni said at a press preview this summer of "Here and Elsewhere," a museum-wide presentation of art "from and about the Arab world" at New York's New Museum. The remark was an understatement; the exhibition (through Sept. 28) is often unsettling or even heartbreaking. Lamia Joreige's video installation *Objects of War* (1999-ongoing), which occupies a large second-floor gallery, stands out as uniquely immersive and affecting.

The installation consists of six televisions displaying filmed testimonials on the subject of violent conflict in Lebanon—primarily the civil war, with involvement from Syria and Israel (1975-1990). These accounts, which range in tone from wry to despairing, begin with the interviewee introducing a possession. They develop as the interviewee describes the object's personal significance in the context of war. These items are on display, like relics, in vitrines that line the walls of the gallery: a rumpled beige curtain, a silver perfume flask, a leather coin purse, a

portable radio.

Joreige, 42, is prominent in her native Beirut, where she co-founded—and until this year co-directed—the Beirut Art Center, a non-profit dedicated to the work of living artists. Her 20-year career has brought her work to the permanent collection of the Tate Modern and to major exhibitions worldwide, including at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Mathaf in Doha and Madrid's Reina Sofia National Museum; she has participated in biennials in Sharjah, Venice and Göteborg.

Joreige talked to *A.i.A.* by phone recently about documentation in art and human emotion in war.

JESSICA GALLUCCI Why did you ask your subjects to identify meaningful objects as a prompt? Is there something particularly revelatory or personal about the testimonies that would not have emerged without them?

LAMIA JOREIGE On one hand, objects have a mnemonic value, so here they act as a trigger for memories and personal narratives. On the other hand they are relics of these wars, as they act as traces and documents from that period. There can never be a grand, exhaustive history or account of these wars, or one truth, but rather histories.

GALLUCCI What separates your work from documentary filmmaking?

JOREIGE This is a big question. I don't think we can-or need to-always separate documentary from fiction, or documentary filmmaking from video art practice, which may involve documentary.

In *Objects of War*, and often in my work, I borrow methods used in documentary filmmaking but also in anthropology as well as in archeology and of course visual art; I prefer to blur the borders between methods, mediums and fields. This precise project [is distinct] from museology and sociology, of course, because there is no desire to have an exhaustive answer.

Even in the single-screen work that I do, I often merge different found footage or photography from archives, newspapers or foundations with contemporary content. This way of assembling [material] creates a fictional, personal narrative, even though you could call it documentary film or creative documentary. But often it's more an essayistic form.

GALLUCCI This is a series that could go on for as long as you can find war survivors who are willing to speak. At what point will you have finished?

JOREIGE. This project is an open archive, and indeed I could continue for as long as I find people who experienced these wars who would speak. There is no defined date to stop.

GALLUCCI I noticed that one of your subjects, a smiling man in a navy polo shirt named Karim Kobeissi, spoke about you in his video. He described falling in love with you as an adolescent in hiding during the Israeli occupation of 1982. How did you feel about that?

JOREIGE [Laughs] I was very surprised by this interview—I didn't think he would even remember. You know how children are when they meet when they're 10 and they discover the Other? It was very strange because his family took refuge where we were staying for the summer in the mountains, only half an hour from Beirut, at my grandparents' house. And his family [stayed with mine] because of the conflict, when Beirut was bombarded by Israel. It was in 1982 and we were both 10, I think, or I was 10 and he was 11. It was incredible that 20 years later, or more, he would remember that we discovered each other. I don't know if the notion of love could be used—I mean, he uses it, but I don't know how much little kids are aware [of love]. But it was quite a touching testimony for me. It was indeed like we were seeing that things were going really badly, but we were living something else. It was these two almost paradoxical feelings that were discovered at once.

GALLUCCI Were there any other testimonies that you found particularly striking?

JOREIGE Yes. I like very much the one by Chaza Charafeddine, the first one to speak in *Objects of War No. 2*. She described quite a horrific day, but at the end of the day she also discovered a paradoxical feeling of hatred but

humanity at the same time, in the face of the occupier. And that occupier was a soldier who was barely 20 years old.

I also like very much the incredible Palestinian woman in *Objects of War No. 2* who speaks of the death of her sister in the massacre in Tel al-Zaatar, which is often not talked about in Lebanon. There's another one that is much more banal: Bassam Kahwagi, who speaks of his father, who was a businessman, and suddenly was stuck at home because he no longer had work. So he used this radio, which was incredibly sophisticated for the time, to continue to play the role of the paterfamilias, because the radio was bringing news from the outside world. I thought it was a touching testimony because you can sense through his account a kid's perception of his parents not being able to work anymore because of the circumstances.

GALLUCCI Clearly war has left an impact on you, as well. Have you thought about how your own testimonial might sound?

JOREIGE My own testimony is this project by itself, and my artistic practice at large.