



THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2006 The Daily Star

Friday, September 01, 2006

Filming past the war, through a struggle

Lamia Joreige discusses the challenges of positioning herself during - and after - 34 days of Israeli bombardment

By Jim Quilty

Daily Star staff

Interview

BEIRUT: "My work is related to distance. Time must pass in order to create." Filmmaker and video artist Lamia Joreige glances into the truce-induced bustle of a Gemmayzeh cafe.

"In the first two weeks I was unable to work, or watch anything but news on television, or read the newspaper.

"Then I decided to document my life - the sound of warplanes passing overhead, the electricity cuts. My perspective isn't that of one being bombed in South Lebanon," says Joreige. "Mine is in Beirut, in Gemmayzeh. I have 12 hours of electricity a day. I'm not being bombed.

"I'm not used to working with such speed, that's the second thing. First I need distance from the object. Then I need time to process it. Sometimes years.

"Now I'm working on something I shot two weeks ago. It's called 'Nights and Days.' Sometimes there are shots of the same scene by day and by night. There are shots of natural landscapes, seascapes, cityscapes, a full moon, which seem beautiful as always, then you realize it's war."

Joreige speaks quickly, as if she needs to describe the situation before it changes. It's a nice metaphor for the unease artists here share with all Lebanese these days. "These days" drift between peace and war, between the two-week-old Israeli-Hizbullah cease-fire and the ultimate goal of addressing the complex of issues at the root of this conflict.

Like so many of her colleagues, Joreige found producing to be a challenge during this 34-day war. Returning to work, she says, "began slowly. You can't film a bomb because that means you're waiting for it, expecting it. Searching for a dropping bomb puts you in an unethical position.

"I was filming my bathroom and a bomb exploded. I was filming a television program and a bomb exploded. This way of filming the conflict is possible to me."

She says that in the final edit of the work, she may have to separate sound from image, at least the shots that include bombing.

"But it may never see the light of day, this work."

Joreige was in the midst of several projects on July 12. One of these is an interactive installation work she's creating with electronic improvisational musician Tarek Atoui called "Je d'Histoires."

The project involves four distinct elements. First there are different video sequences - cityscape, seascape, a found print of shots from a wedding - combined with four non-narrative texts concerning love and war and a selection of music by composers Charbel Haber (lead singer of the Beirut-based punk rock band Scambled Eggs and a free improv enthusiast) and Joseph Ghosn (an ambient, minimalist musician who lives in Paris and records under the name Discipline).

Finally, the viewer's interaction with the text, video and music is itself imprinted on the installation. The sounds produced by one viewer, for instance, may be recorded to become part of what's experienced by the next viewer.

"This experience has given me the impetus to complete the project. The texts are finished now," she smiles ruefully. "There will be one love letter and three war letters."

Another project is a video series called "Objects of War." For parts one and two of the project (from 1999 and 2003) Joreige has filmed people as they tell her about specific mementos - an old cassette, a child's change purse - that bring back memories of Lebanon's Civil War. Her subjects repeat their accounts more than once, but they never tell the same story twice. Joreige has exhibited "Objects of War" both as a single-channel video and an installation incorporating both the video footage and the objects themselves. It's in this form that they're on display at Copenhagen's Roskilde Museum now.

"There are two or three people who I've filmed from 2003 to just before July 12," says Joreige. "They will be the subject of 'Objects of War, Part Three.' There will be an 'Objects of War, Part Four.' I plan to interview various people - artists, journalists, advertisers. Some lived the previous war. Some were too young. These will be shown at the Seville Biennale in October.

"I was afraid it wouldn't be as interesting as a work composed from greater distance, but so far it has proven very moving," she laughs. "I didn't want to do something so close, but it isn't within my power, it seems."

Joreige has also just finished a film. "A Journey" is a documentary about the filmmaker, her mother and grandmother and how they have positioned themselves vis-a-vis the Palestinian cause and the Lebanese war. "It begins with photos of Jerusalem and Palestine and ends in Naqoura at the border of ... Should we say Israel or Palestine? When this war started, I thought for a moment I should now revise the end of the film. But no. I'll run it as is with a prologue. Art, I think, is always a diagnosis of its time. Even if we hope it becomes more."

Wars are, perhaps, the antithesis of civil society. During this Israeli war on Lebanon, many Lebanese were disgusted with Israel and those international actors complicit in the attack but simultaneously remained critical of Hizbullah. Any middle ground where such ambivalence could be aired, though, seemed to disappear.

As it was, the outrageous atrocities perpetrated by the Israeli military drove many to be active, regardless of their opinions of Hizbullah. For others, their anger and sense of betrayal expressed itself in silence. It's hardly a surprise that this pattern should replicate itself within Lebanon's artistic community.

"I talk with friends of mine that are March 14 and I sound pro-Hizbullah to them. When I talk to Hizbullah supporters they drive me mad ... A friend of mine and I decided that art is the only means we have to express an alternative political perspective - not that it's expressed in terms of political rhetoric.

"[During this war], we felt trapped, felt betrayed, then suddenly it stopped and everything was supposed to be normal again. But you can't really go back to normalcy because you can't trust that this peace will last.

"For me, something has been broken by this war. The saddest time was a few days after the cease-fire. The bars were open in Gemmayzeh, the displaced people were back in the South, the banners were up in Dahiyeh - 'Divine Victory,' 'Made in the USA.' You're supposed to be working, but all you feel is the fragility of this time.

"I don't want to leave this country, to be forced to leave. [Not] the way some people are - out of fear of war or want of work. I mean ... because the cultural life we've built up here, and the artistic scene may vanish or become isolated.

"And there are so many people leaving. I'm afraid for the economic and cultural life of the country, that people will leave and not come back. You don't get 3,000 chances in life."

Joreige opens an SMS on her mobile, informing her that the war is over and beckoning her to "join us" at some swank nightclub. "F*** you," she mumbles.

"It's insoluble," she continues. "When this war started, we thought if we behave as if everything's normal and work normally - as opposed to going about your life at a hysterical pace, which is what

most of us were doing - you felt as if you're adapting to the situation, a sort of betrayal. Not working, not accepting the situation and the fact that it could become normal, seemed the best way of resisting.

"On the other hand, it may be that working is also an act of resistance. Since week three of this conflict, work has been my way of being grounded."

THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2006 The Daily Star