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## Art as a memorial to Civil War victims



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India Stoughton | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Galerie Janine Rubeiz is not Beirut's biggest exhibition space. This month it's significantly more cramped than normal. Half the room is taken up by a bristling forest of rebar – kinked, rusted metal poles rising drunkenly toward the skylights in the ceiling, their bases encased in mounds of concrete. Standing amid a thick scattering of gravel, each of these constructions represents an individual, one of an estimated 200,000 killed during the Lebanese Civil War. The installation is part of a solo show by Alfred Tarazi, who has spent the past 10 years dwelling on the same problem: how to construct a monument to the dead that conveys the reality of the number of people killed and engages everyone in Lebanon, regardless of political or sectarian loyalties.

In "An Empty Plot of Land," which opened just after the 40th anniversary of the start of the war, Tarazi is showcasing a collection of works from various series, all of which relate to the idea of remembrance. "Of course there's an effort that's been made by the families of the disappeared," he says.

"There's also an effort which has been made by the militias themselves, to commemorate the people from their camps which have been killed, but there's little or nothing at all that has been done to commemorate the civilian victims. Of course it's a staggering figure, like 200,000 dead, which is an abstraction. So how do you go from the abstraction back to a concrete reality?"

Tarazi wasn't yet working as an artist in 2005, when he first had the idea for a memorial.

"After the assassination of Rafik Hariri, I was very much under the impression that Lebanon was heading toward a war, and that the divisions were really becoming acute," he recalls. "I had this very strong intuition that a contemporary memorial for the victims of the Civil War could intervene in those types of very acute political touchiness. So I started throwing ideas at people, meeting cultural figures, politicians, stuff like that, to try to intervene on the ground."

“The idea back then, which is still somehow in play, is that a physical manifestation of the number 200,000 – of the victims – would be a slap in the face.”

The problem was that everyone he approached wanted to know where the money would come from. Suddenly the number 200,000 took on a new perspective. If each individual memorial object cost \$1, Tarazi needed to find \$200,000. If each cost \$5, he needed to find \$1 million.

“Those are metal rods that come from ruins and old buildings that have been torn down,” he says, gesturing to his installation. “The idea was basically ‘What can we do at the cheapest cost?’ So here we have a concrete base and a metal rod. The whole thing can be recuperated and recycled, so I’m playing around with the idea, trying to see what can be done.”

In a sense, the installation is a blueprint for a much larger project. This quality is echoed in the other pieces on show, some of which are literal blueprints – cyanotypes where the sunlight has turned exposed areas of the paper blue – all of which suggest ways of remembering the war dead that go beyond binaries like east and west, Christian and Muslim, hero and villain.

Tarazi has created long, panoramic multimedia works, some paintings, other digital collages of old black-and-white photographs, still others mixtures of the two. Displayed alone or in pairs in elaborate glass display cases, they are wound around two spools that can be turned with a small handle, causing the work to scroll inside the case.

“This is the ancestor of cinema,” Tarazi explains. “It’s called a [moving] panorama and they used to use it for two things. One is for landscapes, to show the transition from day to night. What they mostly used it for is battle scenes.”

In one work, entitled “Vessels,” Tarazi quotes a man who recalls how during the war he and his fellow militiaman were ordered to lock captured enemies inside metal shipping containers.

They’d sail out into the Mediterranean with their living cargo and then throw the containers overboard, listening to the screams from within as the metal coffins slowly sank beneath the waves.

This horror story slowly unfolds in a single line of text as viewers turn the handle, accompanied by black-and-white photos published in newspaper during the war, showing Beirut’s port, fishing boats at sea, families sunbathing on the sandy beach and men being marched at gunpoint toward the waves.

“I took those images and I rebuilt those stories in a way to try to understand the nature of the violence,” Tarazi says. The way he sees it, those buried shipping containers are memorials in their own right.

A second set of works juxtaposes two moving images side-by-side.

In “East and West,” part of an experimental series featuring the artist’s own memories of the war, he has created a single large panoramic painting, consisting of multiple related frames, and then cut it in half vertically.

Viewers can scroll through the work matching up the two sides to create a series of pictures – a map of Beirut divided down the center, the original martyr’s statue depicting a Muslim and a Christian woman with linked hands – or they can turn them at different speeds, creating surprising juxtapositions.

“We cannot have ‘a history’ of the Civil War,” Tarazi says. “We can have ‘histories’ of the Civil War and, more than histories, because most of the things are not factually driven, we can have stories of the Civil War.”

“Of course you can scroll through it and always have the images [aligned],” he says

gesturing at "East and West," "but the most interesting things you get are when the images are not matching, which is also this idea of parallel histories that ... conflict and contradict each other."

Beside "East and West" hangs "Left and Right," a collage of portraits of the men and women killed fighting in the service of the Amal Movement and the Lebanese Forces, respectively. By placing a personal narrative next to a public one, Tarazi explores individual and collective modes of remembrance.

"It's a way of understanding what happened," he says. "Not in order for it not to happen again. It's not like you show what the effect of war is and then suddenly war doesn't happen again. It's much more of a higher level of awareness ... Most importantly, the idea is that if the Lebanese have lost people from all communities ... can you produce one monument for all of the survivors to commemorate the people they've lost? A kind of reunion where people meet and share what they have in common?"

Alfred Tarazi's "An Empty Plot of Land" is on show at Galerie Janine Rubeiz until May 23. For more information, please call 01-868-290.

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