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ART; The Fine Art of Car Bombings

By AMEI WALLACH JUNE 20, 2004

WALID RAAD was 15 in 1983 when his family shipped him out of Beirut to Boston, just ahead of the militias that were targeting teenage men for enlistment during one of the most violent periods of the Lebanese wars. Now, in his art, he explores the inner life of hostages, the aftereffects of car bombings and the disconnect between official promises and how secure people feel.

If all that seems newly relevant to us in the age of terror, Mr. Raad would not disagree. "Why wouldn't you ask somebody from Lebanon about these experiences?" he asks. "We've lived through so many of these events, we can prefigure some of the possible scenarios."

Don't expect straight answers, however. Mr. Raad, whose day job is as assistant professor of art at Cooper Union in Manhattan, wields every contemporary medium at hand -- computer imaging, animation, search engine minutia, photography, film, video and performance -- in an effort to comprehend the disorienting, obliterating effects of extreme physical and psychological violence. His art seldom depicts violence head on. He is more interested in visualizing the new structures and new ways of living that violent destruction creates. With humor and erudition he ponders the stories that people tell themselves so that they can go on from there.

The political artists who were celebrated in the 1980's, from Leon Golub to Barbara Kruger, were enraged and on-message. Their spirit is very much alive in "Terrorvision," an exhibition on view at Exit Art through July

31, in which 59 international artists confront the politics and experience of terror, with images that range from photographs of blood-splattered streets to declassified film of nuclear weapons tests in the Nevada desert.

But Mr. Raad belongs to a generation of artists who don't want us to see them fulminate as they confront the big contemporary questions. Some of these artists, including Mr. Raad, are in another politically engaged exhibition, "The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere," on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Mass., through next spring. Such artists tend to go where people are -- to universities, theaters, stores and the streets -- in an effort to intervene in the processes by which ideas about hot-button issues like globalism, race and war become accepted fact.

Mr. Raad's attitude toward any fact is that it is suspect and inadequate. Newspapers, he says, are distracting in form and content. With ads sprinkled through columns of print, they are too fragmented to transmit the complexity of violence -- particularly that of the Lebanese wars, which virtually destroyed Beirut and involved Israel, Syria, Christian and Muslim militias and the United States and the Soviet Union.

Historians, he contends, tend to see events through the filter of their own histories and memories. He adds that, more confounding still, "Today everything is data based, everything is searched, so the artist's job is to become an editor, to establish relationships to all this data that permits others to enter in."

Mr. Raad approaches carnage from an oblique angle. He mixes fiction with fact and arranges it in what are meant to resemble archives. For example, he has created something he calls a foundation, the Atlas Group, whose artistic projects can be seen on the Web at www.theatlasgroup.org.

Until this year, the Atlas Group consisted of Mr. Raad. "It is a foundation in that it imagines the structure of a foundation," he explained, with laughter and intensity, one recent morning in his Cooper Union office. "So the idea is, let's call it a foundation and if we imagine it enough and work on it maybe it will become an actual think tank with collaborators and

a building."

This year, the growing scope and fame of his car-bomb project, "My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars, Volume 1 (21 January 1986)," has attracted two collaborators in Lebanon -- Tony Chakar, an architect, and Bilal Khbeiz, a journalist and commentator for *The Annahar*, a daily newspaper -- as well as three of Mr. Raad's Cooper Union students.

The seeds of the car-bombing project are on view at Mass MoCA, as part of Mr. Raad's "Fadl Fakhouri File." The apocryphal Dr. Fakhouri, according to Mr. Raad's written description, was "the foremost historian of the Lebanese wars," whose 226 notebooks and 26 short films were bequeathed upon his death in 1993 to the Atlas Group archives "for analysis, preservation and exhibition."

"Already Been in a Lake of Fire, Notebook No. 38," purports to be one of the only two surviving notebooks, handwritten "in Arabic and/or English, and/or French, and/or German, and/or Latin." In it, Dr. Fakhouri had cut out and pasted photographs of 145 cars that corresponded in make, model and color to every car linked to a bomb during the Lebanese wars. (The number of bombing incidents keeps growing in the Lebanese press, and in Mr. Raad's titles -- he is currently up to 3,641.) Mr. Raad creates fictional characters who speak with great authority to persuade their audience that what they report is true.

In Notebook No. 38, each car cutout is pasted to a sheet torn from a spiral stenographic notebook. The cars lean and list at every possible angle and are surrounded with Arabic writing that arcs and swerves like lines in a particularly handsome drawing. Mr. Raad has never shied from the pleasures of aesthetic display, which contributes to his work's emotional impact.

When the Atlas Group surfaced at the New York Armory Show last winter, it created something of a stir at the Galerie Sfeir-Semler's booth, where Mr. Raad was showing new works from "My Neck Is Thinner Than a

Hair." These consisted of on-the-spot photographs of the engines, which are all that survive in a car bombing, together with text describing them.

"Even though we knew with precision when the bombings happened, we knew the number of people who were killed and the hospitals they were taken to, there would always be a complete paragraph in the Lebanese news reports about the make, model and color of the car, including engine number and axle number," Mr. Raad explained. "In a way it was a form of fetish. You don't want to ask who did it and why and the consequences; you want to know about the car. In 99 percent of the cases the car was stolen and the information was useless, and people knew this. But they still insisted."

Also at the Armory Show was a large, beautiful photograph of a white Fiat, its engine flying high above it in a field of blue, as in an advertisement for the joys of car bombing. "Clearly if the engine is flying the car must be destroyed," Mr. Raad pointed out. The only time car and flying engine can actually exist together is in the dislocated time that, he has observed, victims of car bombings construct for themselves, in which there is no past, and there can be no certain future but only the present experience of trauma and its inescapable aftermath.

That sense of a continuously dangerous present, which destroys the fabric of a city for years after the event, is the subject of the Atlas Group's current project, another chapter in "My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair."

"You might say: these car bombings happen at rush hour, so I'm no longer going to cross Beirut, or the Queensboro Bridge, then," Mr. Raad said. "If everybody decides to no longer work 9 to 5 and starts working 5 to 10, that's going to be a different city. What you end up with is a system of rural kinship that invades the urban. All of a sudden you start living in a village."

In Beirut during the wars, he said, people in a building, or within the perimeter where the glass would fall in a bombing, made sure they knew their neighbors, as well as the makes and models of their neighbors' cars.

They ceased to trust their government, let alone any bridge that crossed into another neighborhood. To illuminate the process, Mr. Raad has created an animated photographic panorama in which cars appear from nowhere and disappear in an inexplicable disconnect, where destroyed and rebuilt buildings live side by side in impossible time.

He has presented this project in a performance masquerading as a lecture in New York, at the Museum of Modern Art outpost at the Gramercy Theater, and in Beirut, London and Paris. In Beirut, he continues photographing every building and every neighborhood, in one of those prodigious, obsessive enterprises that surface sporadically in art history, like August Sander's documentation of the German people or Atget's commemoration of Paris. The difference is in the stories Mr. Raad tells about what his camera records.

In one of his six-minute animations, a hazy sky resolves itself into clusters of "stars" that become identifiable as fragments of a car. "What I like about this piece is that it is literally creating a cosmology," he said. "It's not like people were idiots when they looked at the stars and told stories about them 2,000 years ago. Now there are other stories. Now is the fetish moment of the car engine."

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