

Mixing Fact and Fiction to Open Up Larger Reality



David Allison

An installation from Walid Raad's "Dead Weight of Quarrel Hangs: Documents From the Atlas Group Archives," at the Kitchen.

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The Lebanese artist Walid Raad operates on the premise that a familiar form can be revived by interjecting a new subject or a more urgent narrative. His first solo show in the United States, at the Kitchen in Chelsea through next Saturday, suggests that he is sometimes right. Its title is a mouthful: "The Dead Weight of Quarrel Hangs: Documents From the Atlas Group Archives."

Mr. Raad makes Late Conceptual Art. He uses the style's tired, increasingly refined image-text formula to explore the tumult of the wars that ravaged Lebanon from 1975 to 1991. He also works in video and gives lecture-performances, including one at the Kitchen on Tuesday evening.

Assiduously mixing fact and fiction, Mr. Raad doesn't so much depict as insinuate the distracting, shattering consequences of violence and its effect on time, space and memory. History is hard to fathom in the best of times; in war, so is day-to-day reality.

The ambiguity in Mr. Raad's work can be profoundly disorienting, darkly amusing or just annoyingly contrived, like a new form of spirit photography. Adding to its ambiguity is a largely fictive framework, the Atlas Group, which Mr. Raad founded in 1999. The group supposedly oversees a vast archive about the Lebanese violence, but excepting a few actual collaborators on certain projects, Atlas is Mr. Raad.

According to the exhibition checklist, this show presents work dated from 1997 to 2002, but with Raad/Atlas you never quite know. Everything is suspect but also possible, and usually peripheral to the main event.

Take, for example, the band of Lebanese historians in "Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars" who make daily trips to the racetrack. They go to bet — not on the horses, mind you, but on exactly how close to the finish line the nose of the winning mount will be when the track photographer records its victory. The work's beautiful color reproductions reflect an archivist's loving touch; they carefully annotate the messy notes that the apocryphal Dr. Fadl Fakhouri made of each race. But there is also a Beckett-like darkness: the historians refine and make a fetish of a gambling sport, waiting for the end of the war, when they can begin their work.

When Mr. Raad's art is too arch, detached or text-dependent, as in the other photo-based pieces here, it seems frivolous. It doesn't so much lack truthfulness, as gravity. Conversely, with the proper weight, veracity doesn't matter: a larger reality, made of tragedy and farce, opens up.

This happens most convincingly in a 16-minute video about a Lebanese man who was held for several months in a small room with five well-known American hostages, all of whom wrote about the experience. The man, renamed Souheil Bachar by Mr. Raad, is telling his side of the story, on tape, for the Atlas archive. He is played by a well-known Lebanese actor, so viewers in Lebanon would immediately see the artifice of the piece. But as the man explains his role as an exotic within the group and describes the homo-erotic tensions that abounded during its confinement, Americans may be struck more by an emotional realness that illuminates power relationships in Lebanon.

Even more convincing was Mr. Raad's appearance on Tuesday. Part of a larger piece called "My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair," a purported archive that documents car bombings in Lebanon, his performance focused on a single bombing in Beirut on Jan. 21, 1986. Seated calmly at a desk, reeling off information about casualties, damage and the probable cause of the bombing (a power grab among Lebanese Christians), Mr. Raad had the unruffled veneer of a government spokesman.

The audience sometimes laughed as information accumulated on a large screen behind him: photographs, maps, charts and, finally, a meditative video of the alternately intact and blown-out facades of Beirut.

But during the question-and-answer period, you would have thought Mr. Raad was a specialist on the peace process, and in a way he clearly was. Toward the end, he mentioned that the Atlas Group now struck him as no longer adequate, indicating that it would probably be phased out. Still, it was hard to know whether to believe him.

"The Dead Weight of Quarrel Hangs: Documents From the Atlas Group Archives" runs through next Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793.