

Out of sight



Julia Kasar as Claudia in Hadjithomas and Joreige's 2005 feature film, *A Perfect Day*. Courtesy of the artists

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie considers the work of the Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, whose new film 'Je Veux Voir', starring Catherine Deneuve, roams the ruins of Lebanon's latest war

The conceit of *Je Veux Voir*, the latest feature film by the Lebanese artists and directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, is this: the filmmakers invite the French film icon Catherine Deneuve to a gala dinner in Beirut. Much to their surprise, she says yes, and soon after arrives in Lebanon. On the day of the dinner, the filmmakers propose a rather dramatic diversion from traditional tourism. Some months have passed since the war with Israel in the summer of 2006, and so Hadjithomas and Joreige offer to take Deneuve on a tour of the devastation, a southbound journey to the Lebanese-Israeli border with their favourite local actor, the artist and performer Rabi Mroué, in tow. Along the way, they will visit the southern suburbs of Beirut and a string of villages such as Bint Jbeil, which bore the brunt of the 34-day bombing campaign. Hadjithomas and Joreige, along with a small crew, will accompany them on their journey, cameras rolling. They promise to bring Deneuve back to Beirut by sundown.

As the film opens, various handers vigorously protest the plan from somewhere just off screen. Disembodied voices reel off a list of dangers and complications – land mines, UNIFIL troops, Israeli soldiers, Hizbollah – like bullet points from a security briefing. Deneuve, standing with her back to the camera before an enormous glass window overlooking downtown Beirut, straightens her spine, turns her head just so and says: "Je veux voir." "I want to see." And so the journey begins.

Hadjithomas and Joreige originally conceived of the film (which premiered at Cannes in May and is among the 12 films screening in the features competition of the Dubai International Film Festival, running from December 11-18) as a short – a continuation, perhaps, of a projected trilogy that began with *Ramad* (*Ashes*), a 26-minute work they made in collaboration

with Mroué in 2003. That film told a spare yet powerful story of a son returning to Lebanon with the ashes of his father and dealing with the rituals of grief and bereavement in a society that refuses to recognise cremation. Such acts – of putting the dead to rest, both literally and metaphorically – recur throughout the many films, videos, documentaries, photographic series and multimedia installations that Hadjithomas and Joreige have produced over the past decade.

Their 2005 feature film *A Perfect Day*, follows a day in the life of a young man as his mother agonises over the decision to declare his father, her husband, legally dead some 20 years after his disappearance during Lebanon's civil war. Their installation *Lasting Images*, from 2003, delved into the discovery of an unexposed Super 8 film that Joreige found among the personal affects of his uncle, who was kidnapped in 1985. After much hesitation, Hadjithomas and Joreige sent the film to a lab, then created a sombre display that combined haunting stills from the found film, theoretical writings and legal texts concerning the thousands of missing persons' files still open in Lebanon.

The easiest – and perhaps laziest – criticism of the contemporary art scene in Beirut is that it is overwhelmingly preoccupied with the civil war, that every clever video and cluttered installation is somehow stuck in a conflict that ended almost 20 years ago. Some argue that Lebanese artists emphasise their country's violent history because all works on Middle Eastern wars are an easy sell for international audiences who know little and care less about a tiny speck of a state that only makes headlines when it is tearing itself apart. Others contend that artists in Lebanon keep raking over old coals because the civil war of a projected trilogy that began with *Ramad* (*Ashes*), a 26-minute work they made in collaboration

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Whatever the case, if a critical history of contemporary art practices in Beirut is ever written, it will have to consider 2006 a major turning point. If tough-minded, conceptually-driven and politically-inclined Lebanese art had previously been about wars of the past, the sudden eruption and shocking severity of the war that broke out that summer challenged artists to respond to a conflict decisively of the present. The months during and after the war witnessed an explosion of creative activity in Beirut; hundreds of short films and experimental videos were made and shown. Most were visceral bursts of rage, vitriol, anxiety and fear. *Je Veux Voir* may endure as the most poignant and carefully considered encapsulation of the moment. The film signals a shift in focus from the past to the present and perhaps even to the future. It also marks a turn toward the possibility of post-nationalist artistic expression, for the territory that Hadjithomas and Joreige explore is, more than a country called Lebanon, cinema itself.

Hadjithomas and Joreige have described the war in 2006 as "a war that crushes that hopes of peace and dynamism of our generation. We no longer know what to write, what stories to recount, what images to show. We ask ourselves: 'What can cinema do?'" In this context, *Je Veux Voir* is a serious reassessment of all the work the pair has done before and an occasion to repose all of the questions they have been grappling with since 1999. Heavy intellectual concepts concerning ruins and reintegration of conflict are gracefully integrated into a narrative.

Je Veux Voir slips between fiction and documentary, cinema and reality, and slides through subtle references to other films, such as

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Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and Luis Buñuel's *Belle du Jour*. When Deneuve was in Lebanon two weeks ago for *Ayam Beirut al Cinema'ya* (Beirut Cinema Days), she described the film as a situation in search of a story. In that regard, it echoes another film, Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, which Hadjithomas and Joreige say they hated as teenagers but have since come to treasure. Its enigmatic opening line – "You saw nothing in Hiroshima, nothing" – inspired the title of *Je Veux Voir*, with its emphasis on the will, desire and intention to see something instead of nothing.

Resnais' film, based on a screenplay by Marguerite Duras, concerns an illicit love affair between a for-



"The territory that Hadjithomas and Joreige explore is, more than a country called Lebanon, cinema itself": Catherine Deneuve and Rabi Mroué walk among the ruins of the 2006 war in *Je Veux Voir*. Photograph by Patrick Zwick / Courtesy of the artists



Images from the series *Postcards of War*, part of an ongoing project titled *Wonder Beirut*, in which Hadjithomas and Joreige imagine the life and work of an invented photographer named Abdallah Farah, who took postcard pictures of Beirut in the 1960s but then burned his negatives during the civil war to make his photographs of the past reflect the realities of the present. The holes burned into the prints above are meant to correspond to bomb sites in Beirut. Courtesy of the artists



eign woman, an actress, and a local man. Resnais was originally commissioned to make a documentary about Hiroshima, but he decided to "refract" the impact of Hiroshima's destruction, 14 years after the fact, through the experiences of his characters, for whom, he once said, "the present and past coexist." As an outsider who did not experience the bombing firsthand, the actress never truly sees it. But she begins to understand it by falling in love with a man who grew up in the city. In *Je Veux Voir*, Hadjithomas and Joreige arrange a similar set-up: the detritus of the war periodically gives way to the possibility of a shared story unfolding between Deneuve and Mroué.

"Together, they will drive through the regions devastated by the conflict," Hadjithomas and Joreige write in their synopsis of the film. "Through their presence, their meeting, we hope to find the beauty which our eyes no longer perceive."

So what do Deneuve and Mroué actually see in *Je Veux Voir*? First – after an awkward introduction and a few forced conversational exchanges – they see Burj al Murr, on the road south from central Beirut. Burj al Murr, which Hadjithomas and Joreige do not show the viewer, is an enormous slab of reinforced concrete that anchors Beirut's skyline. Originally planned as an office tower, it was never finished and has since been deemed structur-

ally unsound. Because of its absurd height and close proximity to other buildings, it can't be imploded or knocked down, so it sits dumb and useless. During the civil war, it became a sniper's nest and the site of ferocious fighting. Since the end of the conflict, numerous artists – including Hadjithomas and Joreige, Mroué, Ghassan Salhab, Lamia Joreige and Marwan Rechmaoui – have made works elaborating on the building's status as an unofficial monument to the idiosyncrasy of war. When Deneuve asks Mroué about it, he offers a reductive, oversimplified explanation, and seems frustrated by his inability to do better. It is as if the work he and his peers have done suddenly seem insufficient.

Later Deneuve and Mroué arrive in Bint Jbeil, the village where Mroué is from, though he never goes there and has no real desire to return. He only agrees to go because of Deneuve, because of the film, and perhaps because of the possibilities posed by cinema. When they arrive, however, they find the village so totally obliterated that Mroué cannot find his grandmother's house. He staggers through the wreckage, expressive in every movement of his body, until he finally admits: "I don't know. I don't know where the house is anymore. I don't know. Everything has changed. I spent my childhood here but I don't recognise anything."

Later still Deneuve and Mroué head in their cart toward a green, gorgeous-

ly lush landscape – the kind that is characteristic of South Lebanon when the region is not making headline news. The screen goes black.

Mroué recites one of Deneuve's internal monologues from *Belle du Jour*. "I recognise that," she says. Then Mroué, whose French is relatively weak, explains that he also knows the lines in Arabic from a subtitled version of the film he saw on television. Deneuve asks him for a recitation, Mroué complies, and instantly the film is charged with an unexpected intimacy and the suggestion of a new story taking off toward an unknown destination. Just as suddenly, the image snaps back. Mroué has taken a wrong turn. The film crew erupts in panic, chaos en-

ters, and when Mroué and Deneuve finally clamber out of the car they learn that they've driven up a dirt road that is probably mined. The most substantial element of the scene – the landmines buried beneath the surface – is never shown, just as Mroué's childhood house was never shown: much of *Je Veux Voir* deals with things palpably felt but undetectable by the eye.

Another invisible scare comes later courtesy of the sonic booms caused by unseen Israeli fighter jets crossing the sound barrier at low altitudes. This is a common sound in Lebanon, but it nearly sends Deneuve through the windshield.

Eventually, Deneuve and Mroué make it to the Israeli border. Even-

tually, negotiations befitting an international summit meeting secure the two actors safe passage along a small pathway toward the actual borderline. Again, the road is opened because of Deneuve, because of the film, because of cinema.

In this way, Hadjithomas and Joreige suggest that art, not politics or politicians, might be able to move things, to open territories not necessarily on land but of the mind. "It's not, oh, what did she see, she saw nothing," explains Hadjithomas. "It's not about that. Because after a catastrophe, you cannot see enough. You will never see enough."

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reports for *The National* from Beirut.