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Restaging 3. All images courtesy of Khalil Joreige, Joana Hadjithomas and The Third Line

Lebanese Rocket Society reaches for the stars

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One-page article

A Dubai taxi driver recently laid out his vision of the future to me, as he nosed his way through one of the city's routine traffic jams: "We live in a world that's overcrowded," he said. "Resources are running out, everyone is forced into cities. Our only hope is to abandon nations, join together as one world and explore other planets."

Artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have spent the last three years piecing together similarly distant dreams and their latest exhibition *Lebanese Rocket Society: Part III, IV, V* is currently at The Third Line gallery in Dubai.

It is a continuation of a project first presented at last year's Sharjah Biennial when they wheeled a ghostly white rocket into the city's heritage quarter. The rocket, a reproduction of a forgotten moment in Arab idealism, represented the zenith of Lebanon's short-lived space programme.

The original missile, Cedar 4, had been the product of six years of hard work and hazardous launches by The Lebanese Rocket Society, which evolved out of a science club at Beirut's Hagazian College.

The society was started by Manoug Manougian, an Armenian-Palestinian refugee and professor at the college, and it sent seven rockets into the sky between 1960 and 1966. The final four rockets - the Cedar series - were emblazoned with the Lebanese flag. Cedar 4, which was capable of reaching 200 kilometres into the air, became a symbol of national pride and a postage stamp was released to coincide with its launch.

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In 2009, Hadjithomas and Joreige found a commemorative stamp - a hand-drawn image of a red and white rocket forcing its way out of the Earth's orbit - in a collection of archive photographs. Since then the artists have been working on a film, due for completion next month, that introduces that era's dreamers to a new audience and incorporates several of this exhibition's art pieces.

One such piece is A Carpet, in which the drawing on the old Cedar 4 stamp has been woven into a patterned rug.

Through works like this, *Lebanese Rocket Society: Part III, IV, V* traces a circle around 1960s idealism, complete with its dreams of pan-Arabism and hopes for an interstellar future.

"When we started this project, it was 2009 and the region was in a depression. We needed dreamers, people like Manoug Manougian," Hadjithomas explains.

"The film opens with a question: Why does no one remember this space programme?" says Joreige. "At first, we thought it was because there were not enough images, but we managed to find so many."

The artists believed that memories of the programme had been unconsciously repressed by the rockets of warfare that would arrive in later years.

To challenge this notion, they went so far as to re-enact the transportation of the Cedar 4 through the streets of Beirut using their white reproduction, which had been erected as a monument in Hagazian College before being taken to Sharjah temporarily. The hollow rocket had to be accompanied by a police escort.

A series of photographs entitled *Restaging* recording that tense afternoon are included in this latest exhibition. We see the landmark in Beirut (like Martyr's Square and the blue dome of the Al Omari Mosque), while in the foreground a white streak of the passing rocket bursts across the image. These photographs do not directly document that day, rather they are multiple images stitched together to recreate the split-second glimpse of Cedar 4 that Beirutis would have seen as it made its way through the city to the launch site in 1963. *Restaging* is an attempt to project traces of this event back into the present. The artists talk about their work as 'kind of situationism' - inserting images into contemporary life to see if they can tease out latent memories.

The centrepiece of *Lebanese Rocket Society* is a video work projected onto the gallery floor. A golden record spins, the stylus painstakingly removed from each frame. From the corners of the room, we hear a patchwork soundtrack of helicopter rotary blades, Oum Kalthoum singing, excerpts from a French documentary about Le Liban and the sounds of 1960s industry.

It's a homage to the gilded disc that was fixed to Voyager 1, a 1977 US space probe that in the next three years will become the first man-made object to leave the confines of our solar system. The original record contained the sound of running streams, the wind at altitude, greetings in 99 different languages, a celestial mixtape described as the "Murmurs of Earth" and a message in a bottle.

Herein lies the crux of the artists' hypothesis about the end of the 1960s dream. Their "Golden Record" is a four-track aural story culminating in the mournful resignation speech of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War - one that would exert huge influence over regional politics.

"The war of 1967 was something that disorientated and disenchanting our parents' generation," says Hadjithomas. "We were the inheritors of this because we sought political engagement in places that no longer worked. We were suddenly very far from the modernity and scientific possibility of that time."

The *Lebanese Rocket Society* closed operations in 1966, amid tensions with Israel and a growing interest from the military in the projectiles' potential. Manougian subsequently moved permanently to Florida, while the Lebanese Civil War was only eight years away.

The dreams of an era died as bombs fell and Nasser's vision of pan-Arabism dissolved. Technology that would otherwise be used for space flight was turned on civilians and perhaps modernity itself became bound to warfare.

Yet in the course of producing their film about the *Lebanese Rocket Society*, Hadjithomas and Joreige have also acknowledged the region's seismic shifts in the past 12 months. "We were working on dreams and dreamers, and then you have this Arab Spring," say Hadjithomas. "There are people risking their lives because dignity became very important at this moment. Politically, yes it's dangerous. But the capacity to dream seemed to have come back."

The success of their three-year project will be clearer once the film is complete. But *Lebanese Rocket Society: Part III, IV, V* does offer insight into how the pair are able to articulate both extended research and a reading of history into a series of objects. Together the works chart a constellation of a moment in history and project it into a contemporary context.



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Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas were recipients of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize at this year's Art Dubai. Their exhibition at The Third Line gallery, Al Quoz, Dubai, continues until April 19.

Christopher Lord is The National's arts writer.

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