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Snaps from oblivion

Chris Lord talks to artists **Joana Hadjithomas** and **Khalil Joreige** about their work featured in The Third Line's new show



Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige; *Wonder Beirut, Battle of the Hotels 1 (detail)*. Image layout altered for print.

Abdallah Farah was a photographer in Beirut during the 60s. At 20 he took a job for the Lebanese government to shoot postcards that would attract tourists. He took shots of bleached-white hotels along the corniche. He asked grinning locals to pose with waterpots on their head. He took shots of the waterfront – the 'Lebanese Riviera' – dramatic enough to be exotic, international enough to pull in rich globetrotters.

Then the civil war happened. Abdallah, like many in Beirut, spent the war housebound or confined to the refuge of bomb shelters. Unable to come out and take photographs but still hungry to create images, he began to burn his negatives to reflect the changing Beirut skyline.

Abdallah worked from media reports. Under his eye, hotels evaporate in a puff of celluloid,

windows explode into the street and cheery subjects stand before a savage inferno. Then he started to write, describing every image in detail. He wrote a progressively changing visual and literary history of the war. He became obsessive. So obsessive that endless rolls of film piled up waiting for the day when he could go out and get them developed. But when the war ended, the habit continued. He still has boxes of undeveloped film all around him. His sunshine 60s postcards are occasionally seen in Beirut shops. They are, for many, a fiction.

The problem is Abdallah is also a fiction. He's the invention of Lebanese artist film-makers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige for their *Wonder Beirut* installation, featured in the Third Line's forthcoming group show, *Roads Were Open, Roads Were Closed*, about conflict and memory.

'After the war, you still found the same postcards in bookstores and libraries,' explains Hadjithomas. 'It felt like this was putting the war into brackets and reflected a society where amnesia prevails.'

Both admit from the start that Abdallah is a creation. Yet they insist he is a fundamental lens to work through. 'When we make this installation, the character exists for us,' Hadjithomas explains. 'When we take a picture, we set them up in his way of taking pictures, to his way of looking. He has an approach to photography that's not ours.' Joreige and Hadjithomas recreate the imagined life of Abdallah, from meticulously burning negatives from photographs of 60s postcards through to hoarding limitless rolls of the undeveloped film that they regard as intrinsic to the project.

They write detailed descriptions of each roll, again from the perspective of Abdallah, including these in the show.

Wonder Beirut has an intensity that would be lost had they presented the work as their own. 'It's the state of what we were feeling in Lebanon after the war' says Joreige. 'There's a sense of difference between artists who started to work during the war and those who worked after.'

They explain that Abdallah is almost an idealised figure. As Hadjithomas remarks, 'He's a reflection of something we are always thinking about – what would I be doing during the war?'

Like Abdallah's own project, *Wonder Beirut* reflects their desire

When we take a picture, we set them up in his way of taking pictures, to his way of looking

to understand what has happened to their city. Joreige explains that as much as Abdallah's photograph burning was about 'trying to conform his images to the present', *Wonder Beirut* is also a way of situating the city within a contemporary history.

'Everybody was working on memories because Beirut was rebuilding. Little by little we realised that those memories were dealing with the subjective and not the collective experience.' Hadjithomas quickly interjects: 'How can you get a sense of causality that is necessary to all stories when you live in a country where there is no real causality? You have to invent a new relationship to story, to image, to narration. Also to the visibility and invisibility of these stories.'

The artists refer to these invisible stories as 'latent'. They are 'what exist but are not revealed' says Joreige. They are the underlying potential of every story, the invisible humanising truths that are lost when trying to make sense of change, trauma and loss. 'Latent images are like a diary,' he explains. 'Don't see these as images, but read them as a story.'

The Third Line (04 341 1367), September 6-October 2.