

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Juliet Hightet "A Theater of Limitless Possibilities Building a picture of war: Lebanese-born artist Akraam Zaatari", *The Majalla Magazine*, February 1, 2014

Lebanese archival artist, filmmaker and photographer Akram Zaatari takes his inspiration from his experiences of war and post-war daily life in Lebanon and the Middle East

In the video *Nature Morte* (Dead Nature), 2009, by artist Akram Zaatari, two men silently prepare for military action in the cold light of dawn. The older man, in reality a former member of the Lebanese resistance, had featured in an earlier video by Zaatari ironically titled *All is Well on the Border*, 1997. While the older man prepares a bomb, the younger one carefully mends his jacket. At the end, the older man leaves with his weapon, the younger one stays behind.

Zaatari says of the film: "I wanted to portray the men's silent anxiety while preparing for the job; and the hesitation, the division regarding the right of arms in Lebanon today . . . I loved the Palestinian *feda'i* who used to give me bullets as a child. I loved how they lived on the streets, slept in fields or vacant buildings. I loved how they smelled. I envied them for fighting for justice." *Nature Morte* was shot in southern Lebanon, only a few miles (kilometers) away from the Israeli-occupied Shebaa farms, where the *feda'i* (Palestinian resistance fighters) were based in the late 1960s.

Born in Lebanon in 1966, Zaatari's sensibility was formed by living through fifteen years of war in the country, watching it unfold and recording it as a teenager. Frequently confined at home, he began taking notes and photographs, recording events from the radio of both personal and public significance. Since then, in a complex body of work, including more than forty videos, he has been exploring issues pertinent to the Lebanese post-war condition, especially the state of image-making today and the role of media in covering geographical divisions, territorial conflicts and war in the Middle East in general.

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In 2003, now working in a multi-disciplinary way as archivist, curator, critical theorist as well as photographer and film-maker, Zaatari shot a full-length video, entitled *This Day*, in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, in which he explores the movement of people and transport in the historically charged, divided and perpetually war-torn Middle East. Specifically, *This Day* analyzes the use of media and technological modes of disseminating information in the region, and their effect on the local population during the Israeli invasion of the West Bank between 2000 and 2002. Zaatari interweaves television commercials, internet news reports and emails supporting the Palestinian cause with photographs synched to a soundtrack of militaristic anthems. "During war, songs change and images transform," he says.

A version of this video, *This Day at Ten*, was shown in France in 2012, and again at the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013. Zaatari's work is shown and collected all over the world, and he is considered one of the most influential and groundbreaking artists of his generation. He plays a critical role in developing the intellectual and institutional infrastructure of Beirut's contemporary art scene, where until very recently, in post-civil war Lebanon, there was very little formal support for contemporary art. Zaatari and his fellow Middle-Eastern artists have developed creative practices that demand that we rethink what it means to witness, document or indeed survive a war. These artists' critical success prompts debate about the ability of art to affect sectarian violence or social unrest. Zaatari's work,

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crucially, refrains from speaking on behalf of the oppressed; it is a distanced, non-empathetic viewpoint, far from moving the viewer to protest or to tears. Furthermore, it could be argued that such development of media technologies facilitates government surveillance, or at least gets employed in the service of power. And does such an unemotional approach aid resistance?

Following a degree in architecture from the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, Zaatari gained a Master's degree in media studies from the New School for Social Research, New York. At this time he was exploring the documentary possibilities of video, which has become his preferred medium. Then he became one of the founding members of the groundbreaking Arab Image Foundation (AIF), established in Beirut in 1997. It houses an expanding collection of more than 600,000 images, and has a mission to track down, preserve, exhibit and study vernacular and studio photography from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab Diaspora, in effect, to record the recent history of the Arab world.

As part of his role at the AIF, Zaatari has undertaken numerous curatorial initiatives centering on the development of amateur and commercial photography in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. While researching his 1999 AIF project entitled *The Vehicle: Printing Moments of Transition in a Modernising Society*, Zaatari discovered the work of the Lebanese photographer Hashem El-Madani, whom he believed was the first person to own a 35mm camera in Saïda, his own birthplace. During the late 1940s and 1950s Madani captured the daily lives of his photographic subjects, which to a historian are a record of significant chapters of pre-civil war south Lebanese history, such as the influx of Palestinian refugees. More mundane subjects such as traditional local fishing techniques and the public passion for the first radios fascinated Madani equally.

In 2007 Zaatari presented his Madani Project in Hamburg, with the entire archive of Madani's Studio Scheherazade, established in 1953, with the aim of exploring the complex dialogue between photography and Madani's clients, his town and society in general. Zaatari reprised the Studio Scheherazade theme at his last exhibition held in London last month. It contained two installations examining the Studio and other archival material held by the AIF. *28 Nights & a Poem 2010* uses an arsenal of media to engage the viewer with Zaatari's evocation of Studio Scheherazade and Madani's universe. These include endless commonplace items of photographic equipment such as lenses, celluloid reels, and retouching tools, as well as more inspirational postcards of 1950s film stars, and finally in *Her + Him VAN LEO*, he once again presents a portrait of a studio photographer, this time in Egypt. His apparent aim is to contrast traditional portrait photography and video as a dialogue between two media, comparing sensitively printed black and white portraits with electronically colored and manipulated screen images. The aim is to evoke transformations in Egypt over the past fifty years. The result, because Zaatari appears more concerned with technique than content, is a commentary on the evolution of art practices in the region.

In his first UK solo show, at the Liverpool Biennial 2012, Zaatari again moved from the intimacy of an Egyptian photo studio to YouTube videos from across the Middle East. Once again a master of recycling, he featured his 2011 installation *Dance to the End of Love*, which included footage of men riding motorbikes, singing, dancing, as well as scoring as body-builders, all uploaded onto YouTube on the eve of the Arab Awakening.

Zaatari's videos *In This House* (2005) and *Earth of Endless Secrets* (2009) are far more hard-hitting in terms of inference and even meaning. Following the Israeli withdrawal from Ain el Mir in 1985, a specific village featured in *In This House* became the front line, in which a family was displaced from their home, which was then occupied for years by a radical resistance group. A member of this group, stationed in the family home, wrote a letter to them, justifying their occupation there. It was placed in an empty

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mortar case, and buried in the garden. In 2003 Akram Zaatari headed there to excavate the letter, meeting with considerable resistance from the family. Nevertheless, he managed to film the process.

Another video, developing *Earth of Endless Secret* into *Writing for a Posterior Time*, is based on the letters from and photos of a former Lebanese prisoner in Israel. In 1998, aged only sixteen, Nabih Awada was arrested by the Israelis as a member of the Lebanese resistance, and only released ten years later. It's an example of how Zaatari's work is employed in the service of "the theater of limitless opportunities" as he calls it, probing the nature of time, media coverage, and the permeability of memory. How do "the strangers from different worlds," as Zaatari puts it, contribute to human and specifically Middle-Eastern rights to happiness?

Akram Zaatari is currently exhibiting in Lebanon and the US. His solo show Akram Zaatari: This Day @ Ten at Galerie Sfeir-Semier, Beirut, will run until March 22, 2014. Archive State a group show the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago will run until April 6, 2014.