

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

India Stoughton, "On objects, documentary and context", *The Daily Star*, February 4, 2014

BEIRUT: Akram Zaatari is many things: artist, documentary maker, archeologist, architect. His work traverses these territories, uncovering secret histories and exploring the changing role, dissemination and interpretation of documents. "This Day @ Ten" is Zaatari's first solo show in Lebanon since the 2009 semiretrospective "Earth of Endless Secrets: Writing for a Posterior Time." Now up at Sfeir-Semler Gallery, this meaty, multilayered exhibition assembles a decade of work – from "This Day" (2003), the artist's first feature-length film, to "Letter to a Refusing Pilot," the featured work of the Lebanese pavilion at last year's Venice biennale.

Half of Sfeir-Semler has been transformed into a miniature cinema, where a clutch of red velvet seats face a sizable screen. Here "This Day," "In This House" (2004-2012) and "Letter to a Refusing Pilot" are projected daily. Nearby, three more works – "The Making of Time Capsule Karlsruhe Park," "Ain El Mir" and "Saida, June 6, 1982" – are looped on their own screens.

Elsewhere blueprints of "Time Capsule," Zaatari's contribution to Documenta XIII, in 2012, are displayed, along with a facsimile of the piece surrounded by a number of paper airplanes – central narrative components of "Letter."

The 10th anniversary of "This Day" provided the inspiration for the show's title and the film provides a crucible within which to digest the other works.

A seminal work in Zaatari's video oeuvre, it takes up several of his work's thematic preoccupations.

Among these themes are the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, burial and disinterment, the vanished lives and traditions captured in photographs and letters and the way such documents are received and interpreted.

Set in the garden of a house in Ain al-Mir in south Lebanon, "In This House" documents the process of excavating a letter that journalist and former militant Ali Hashisho wrote to the house's owners, then buried in an airtight mortar casing.

Exhibited here for the first time, the 150-minute "Ein El Mir" is basically assembled from the rushes of "In This House."

"Now that the film has circulated a lot, I see more the necessity of showing ... the whole digging recording," Zaatari explains. "In a way I find the film less important. It's too edited, it has too much information ... whereas the narrative is very subtle in the original recording."

The gesture is elegantly inverted in "Time Capsule," which was inspired by how, during the Civil War, Lebanon's National Museum sealed some of its larger artifacts in concrete blocks for safekeeping. For Documenta XIII, Zaatari sealed 16 photographs in wooden blocks, attached to a rebar frame which was encased in cement and buried.

Most of the work on show here is not new but for those who seldom travel, "This Day @ Ten" may be the first chance to see "Letter to a Refusing Pilot." The selection of works makes this exhibition unique.

The aim, Zaatari explains, was to encourage a new reading of old works deployed in a new context. "I do believe that films are made to be seen over and over," he says. "I think documents change in the light of changes in the social or political context in which they are shown."

"This is why I work on past documents all the time and I think when they are surrounded by other works – or when they are seen in new perspectives because life has changed – they mean something else. So 'This Day @ Ten' is about 'This Day' becoming 10 years old ... in the light of what's happening in Syria, in Palestine, in Lebanon, in the light of the changing anthropology that allows us to conceive images in circulation differently."

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Like the space itself, the works on show can be divided into two categories. “This Day” and “Letter to a Refusing Pilot” – which recounts the story of an Israeli pilot who refused to bomb a school in Sidon and dropped his payload into the sea instead – are freestanding works. “In This House” and “Time Capsule,” by contrast, document long-completed performances.

Zaatari’s approach toward documents has not changed but his aesthetic approach to them has. “This Day” introduces certain visual conventions echoed in later video works, notably the artist’s penchant for shots of original documents hand-manipulated against a light table.

“Objects cannot walk alone,” Zaatari observes. “They need to be handled and I think handling is part of caring for them or not. It’s this situation that interests me. If you scan pictures ... You forget that they are objects ...

“I could not [put] something that was broadcasted and uploaded on YouTube next to a black-and-white video film originally on a Betacam tape ... and say, ‘Hey, this is how it used to be and this is how it is now.’”

“Things need to be presented in a more creative [way]. The data on the tape [is] not the only important data. The support that carries the data ... is data as well.”

Acknowledging the physical nature of historical documents is becoming ever more central in Zaatari’s work. He says it is key to “28 Nights and a Poem,” the film he is currently editing.

His second feature-length work, Zaatari says “28 Nights” is the only work that is comparable to “This Day” in vision and scope.

“It takes the Studio Scheherazade – the studio of Hashem el-Madani in Saida – as a starting point to talk about the role of photography in the life of a city, in a society,” Zaatari says. “To talk about how photography used to circulate and how it is circulated today.”

Like his other work, it blurs the lines between art and documentary.

“I do feel a strong connection to documentary film,” Zaatari says, “but I have a lot of disillusionment with the documentary institution – meaning the broadcasting institutions, the funding institutions – that [have] transformed documentary into a very limited industry. It’s really become very difficult to show your work in the documentary world today, if your work doesn’t correspond to certain formats, but I still admire the cinema interface. This is why I built a cinema in the gallery.

“I’m also sometimes unhappy in the art world,” he adds, “because people sometimes construe documents in a very shallow way ... I think both [worlds] represent me and I’m happy in both ... I like to bring my documentary precision and my interest in engaging with fact to the art world ... and I like to bring into the documentary [world] an openness ... an ease and a plasticity of working with the medium, being able to move from photography into video into film but also maybe theater and installation.”

“Documentary filmmakers very often think that at the time they lock their edits ... their role is over. For me the role is never over. Every time you show the film you have to consider the space, to consider what you are showing next to it. It’s like really reinventing the work every time you show it.”

Akram Zaatari’s “This Day @ Ten” is up at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Karantina until March 22. For more information and screening times please call 01-566-550.