ALI CHERRI

BEIRUT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY

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I've been following your work from nearly the beginning and have seen almost all your films. There is a recurring concern with the body, materiality, consciousness and knowledge, and there are questions that arise time and again: How do we know things? How do we make objects knowable? How do certain forms of embodiment, and being with an object in a certain space, alter the meaning of subject/object relations? I wonder where these ideas originated, and how you feel they've evolved in the different works?

I think the question of embodiment has been present since Un Cercle autour du Soleil, which I did in 2005. For me, the idea of representation, or how one might translate an experience, especially the experience of catastrophe, has always been central. How can I talk of my experience of violence as a child growing up in Lebanon during the Civil War (1975–1990)? Can this violence have a visual translation? I'm speaking from my position as a visual artist, thinking via images rather than words. When the war ended in Lebanon and I could access parts of Beirut that I had never seen—since Beirut was divided between East and West during the war—I discovered a city in ruins. In these ruins, I saw a form or representation of this violence: how it could leave traces, the effect it could have on things. But the main question for me was, and still is, how does this violence manifest itself on our bodies? I am not necessarily talking about the literal scars, but rather about the process of scarification. How can we “speak” about it, how can we spell it out? In Un Cercle autour du Soleil, I start with this: when living in darkness, our world is created with words, through spelling out. When I say “bed,” a bed appears; when I say “desk,” I see a desk. Living in the city becomes like living in an idea. I do not know what Beirut means; I cannot have a physical experience of the city in its totality. I can only have the experience of the trajectory from home to school, for instance. The rest of Beirut was part of an imaginary process.

Let's stay with Un Cercle autour du Soleil to anchor something: when you start with the Civil War, which has occupied a very important position in the work of many artists from Lebanon, it's as if you start with genesis, with creation, like Robinson Crusoe building the womb-like shed. There is a moment when you talk about the ruined building or the bombed shell as though it is a form of shamelessness that resembles the shamelessness of being naked—a moment of radical nudity or exposure (فضح) that makes you aware of the body in relation to the nudity of the ruined building. And of course you refer to Mishima's Sun and Steel, which similarly speaks to the awareness of ones body in relation to a physical and material ruin. Would you say that you became aware of your body through the ruined site?

I always start with the body—my body—as an anchor point. My physical body is always present in my work; even when it's absent, its absence is highlighted.
Experiences just like a seismograph, but also a body that registers particular experiences and trembles. We think about this transition, we see it in your more recent videos. I feel like if you refer to the vibrating sound that comes back in different films, whether in the museum, on the excavation site, or in the seismic center. This deep bass sound has a physical effect on things: it makes things tremble. Play a high bass sound in a room and you will see how everything starts to shake; even your body starts to shiver. The same thing happens during an earthquake: all of a sudden, the entire room wakes up and becomes animated. I'm interested in this transition from sound as audio to sound as physical vibrancy. Sound has a disruptive effect on things. It's a way to resurrect objects, unsettle their meaning, their codes in the order of knowledge. It makes things come alive.

With Foucault in mind, bodies are the receptacle of all that surrounds it. In the 19th-century European model of the state, but in your work, we are talking about the five-century Civil War's subjectivity and bodily-ness. I think Un Cercle autour du Soleil gives us a framework or a mode of interpellation by which we become inscribed by the physical and the material through the political. The ruined house is not just a scarification—this is also a way for us to experience the reality of war and reality beyond war. Here we can perhaps transition to thinking about the background noise in the film—what we call in Arabic نكبة, or in French, bourdonnement—that escalates to become a tremblement (which translates to trembling, as well as tremblement de terre, meaning earthquake) in your more recent videos. I feel like if we think about this transition, we see a body that experiences and trembles, but also a body that registers particular experiences just like a seismograph.

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the museum. It's like these institutions have always been one step ahead of their critique. A museum like the Louvre presents itself as a "Universal Museum," but we know the racism behind this supposed universalism. The move from the national to the universal is clearly echoed today in a place like Abu Dhabi, where the Louvre, the ultimate "universalist" project, is celebrated just next to the construction of national museums. So the universal and the national are both in the same trench.

TE
It is interesting that the mission civilisatrice, in whose name colonialism occurred, has presented itself as a universal mission. But of course we know that this declaration of universality and calling for equality is ultimately a disguise of colonial and capitalist practices, such as those that opened the Suez Canal and connected Europe to the world and to the colonies. So the "universal" is already a French and British model of expansion that is political and cultural.

AC
Yes! I just want to clarify that for me, the museum is not a threshold, a before/after in the life of artifacts. The violence that is embedded in colonial collections is not exceptional. The museum is an actant, just as the soil where the objects were found could affect the artifacts' composition and deterioration. Sometimes objects can and do resist the institution that is hosting them; we should not neglect that. There is no point of origin, or a higher authentic past to which these objects need be returned.

TE
Speaking of this idea of the museum, my association now goes to The Digger, which in some way represents a different kind of museum, inhabited or embodied by a different kind of subject who goes and guards it, interacts with it. Is what you're showing us in The Digger also a kind of exhibition space?

AC
If the necropolis is a form of display, or a form of a museum, it would be the Museum of Absence. These holes, these tombs that were dug up and emptied from their content represent a form of violent ripping. This gesture of unburying is a transgressive gesture. Burying is what we naturally do; digging up runs the risk of awakening the uncanny. Sultan, who is faced every day with the sight of the empty grave, must be haunted by the image of the resurrected.

AC
In the opening of Somniculus, a sentence reads: "If dreamless sleep is a form of death, then light sleep is a form of resurrection." So if the guard is the ultimate figure of the light sleeper, then he is the only one able to resurrect or to honor the dead. In one of my discussions with Sultan, I asked him how he feels about living in a cemetery, and his answer was he is not afraid of living with the dead; being a good faithful Muslim, only the good jinn would visit him. Sultan's perception of his job is not that of a guard on some archaeological site. He is sensitive to the haunting spectres of the place.

TE
So performing the ritual only brings out the good jinn, and by not performing the ritual, we have the bad jinn and the ones that are haunting us as modern subjects. We see the hazy from that space you shoot in The Digger, absolutely. But what I find really fascinating, both visually and intellectually, is that you're always trying to question the limits between subject and object, the good jinn and the bad jinn. Your work, I feel, interrogates how these limits are established, and how porous and disquieted (intraquilles) they are.

AC
What I propose through my work are realities presented in their complexities. The categories that we have created to produce knowledge and to help us understand the world we live in leave out lots of forms and figures of existence. I am interested in these objects or bodies that do not fall into any of the categories. Taxidermy, for instance, is something that comes back in my work. I find in the taxidermied animal a haunting figure: it is a form of life, a resemblance to some ghostly living turned into object. I have been working recently with animal bones dating from the 10th and 12th centuries. These bones have undergone numerous biological and categorical transformations, each time demoted into new classifications. From vital living tissues to animal carcasses rottin in riverbeds, and then picked clean of all flesh after centuries of decomposition and biodegradation. These forms are like cracks in our knowledge systems; they are slits from where other forms of knowledge are brought to light.
really survive, and what survives? Or have we not survived?

AC: This is the exact reason I was interested in excavation sites. The excavation site is a place where things survive the catastrophe. We excavate forms of survival. If we want to learn about what forms do survive, the excavation site would be the place to start. The necropolis where Sultan is living is above all a site of “post-apocalyptic” survival.

TE: It seems to me that your work is always questioning the engineering environment of building as requiring stable, fixed foundations and cornerstones. The earthquake is not so much the exception; the earthquake is the ongoing reality that you as an artist, you as a body, encapsulated in the particular history of Lebanon and so on, are able to feel, register and capture visually. You’re always looking to the potential breakdown, the rupture, in a way that reminds me of the Dionysian in Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy, which is about feeling the pain of the world (as opposed to the Apollonian, which is aesthetics, which is meant to cover it up). Your art practice is about giving voice, embodying this bourdonnement that most of us don’t hear, and that’s why we experience the tremblement de terre as the catastrophic, as divine punishment, as Sodom and Gomorrah.

AC: The catastrophe is not the accident. We are used to considering accidents as system malfunction, but accidents are actually constitutive parts of the system. Science promises us that everything has a function, that everything is connected, and that everything is fluid. And then we have incidents happening like the Malaysia Airlines Flight that disappeared, and we are unable to explain it. What this type of incident ultimately shows are the inherent
من أمكان أخرى

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