



**Ingredients:** Caroban ice cream, hazelnut sea salt, milk, buttermilk, coconut oil, blue food coloring etc. R.



\$10.00 (US)  
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issue 16 / the sea

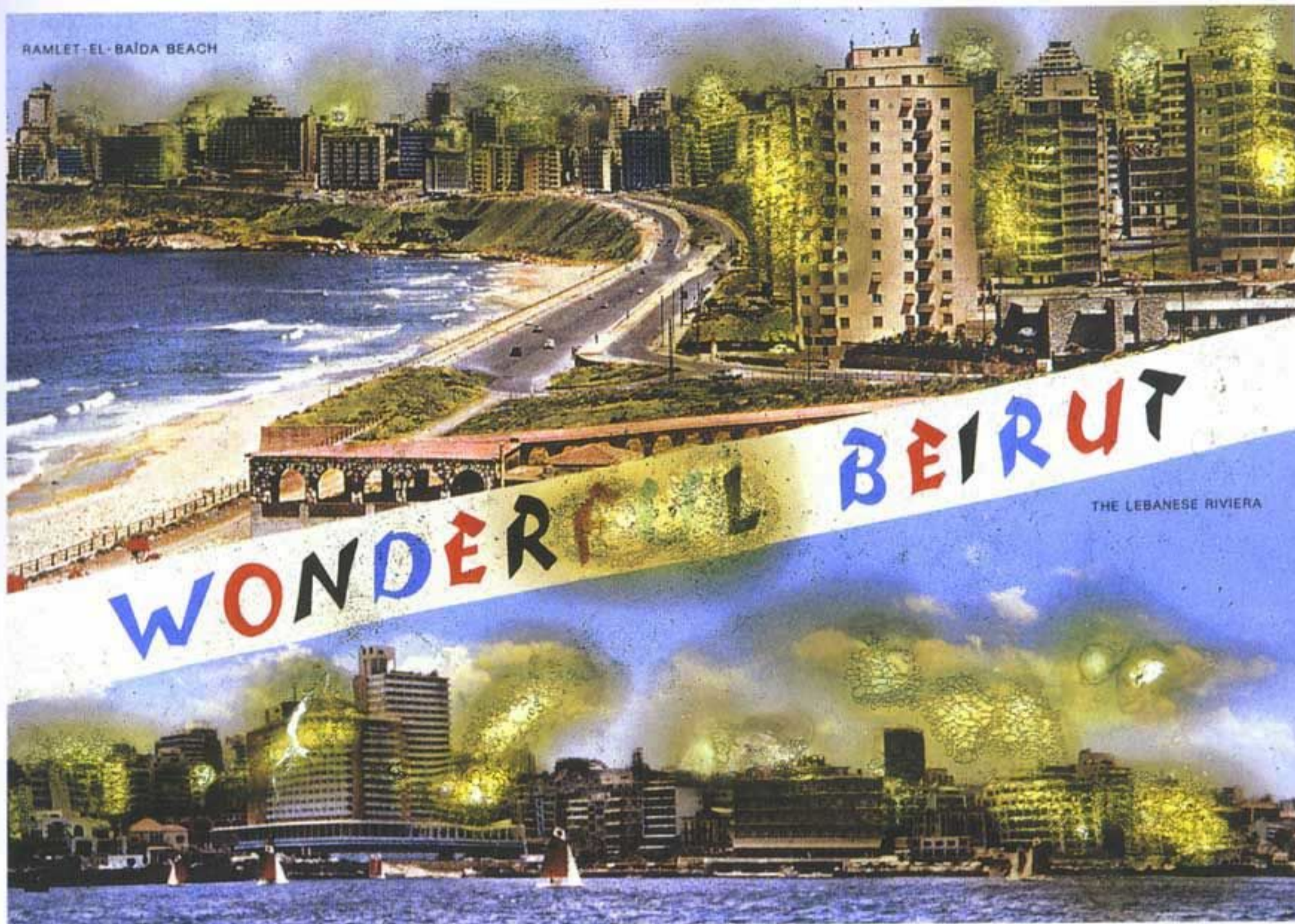
# cabinet

A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE  
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## THE STORY OF A PYROMANIAC PHOTOGRAPHER

JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE

*The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer* is the first part of *Wonder Beirut*, an ongoing project begun in 1998 and based on the work of Lebanese photographer Abdallah Farah. In 1968 and 1969, Farah published a series of postcards of Beirut showing the city's most outstanding and modern tourist spots: the cinemas, the souks, hotels and beaches, local monuments, and main thoroughfares such as Banks' Street. These postcards are still on sale in Beirut bookshops, even though most of the monuments and sites they represent have been destroyed.

Shortly after the official beginning of the Lebanese civil war in the spring of 1975, the Wahed Studio, where Farah worked, came under attack and was destroyed in a fire. He managed to salvage some photography equipment and a few of his positives, including the ones for the postcards. Two months later, Farah started damaging the positives of his postcards himself, burning them little by little in imitation of the destruction of the buildings he saw gradually disappearing in all the bombing and street fighting.

At first he worked in a very organized way, following the trajectory of the shelling and defacing the images to parallel the events of the day. He always dated the shell impacts, tried to find their origin, and noted it all in

a little book. Farah re-photographed the positive after each new burn he inflicted on it, producing a series of evolving images; this we call the "historical process." Later, however, he went further and began inflicting additional damage on the buildings in the postcards, either accidentally or deliberately. This is what we call the "plastic process."

The images presented here represent only part of *The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer*—a selection of photos Farah burned during what is known as the "Battle of the Hotels," a conflict which began a few months after the Lebanese civil war broke out officially on April 13, 1975 and continued into 1976. On one side were the Christian rightist militiamen known as *Kataeb*; on the other, a pro-Palestinian leftist and pan-Arab coalition. They fought to control various areas of Beirut, including sector IV, which was home to the main luxury hotels of the city and constituted one of the most important tourist areas in the Middle East. Opposite the hotels were the Kantari residential area, the outskirts of the city center, and the 32-story Murr Tower, a strategic point dominating the seashore—all within one square kilometer.

Farah's damaged images often look like new photographs. They have now been published at our initiative, but with his agreement. By publishing and distributing these images, we are trying not only to publicize his work but also counter the trend in Lebanon of idealizing the past and projecting a future fantasy by bracketing off the civil war and including it only marginally in our contemporary history.



This postcard of "Beirut: The Great Hotels Quarter" was taken by Abdallah Farah in August 1989 as a slide photograph and printed in an edition of 15,000. The slide was burned by Farah following the battle that took place between 16 March and 30 March 1976 when the hotels were again occupied by armed elements. The Holiday Inn and the Hilton and the Normandy hotels, which had been controlled by the Christian Kataeb, were taken over by the leftist fighters. The battlescape then shifted to the city center.



This part of "The Great Hotels of the Lebanese Riviera: The Saint Georges," was taken by Abdelhak Farah in June 1969 as a slide photograph and printed in an edition of 15,000. Five thousand copies of the card were reprinted in November 1974. The slide was buried by Farah in step with the destruction of the hotels after December 1975 when a new phase of the battle began with the Christian Kataeb in the Holiday Inn and the Phoenix fighting the pan-Arab leftist coalition who took over the Saint Georges Hotel (facing the Holiday Inn) while still also at the Munt Tower. On the first day of this battle, more than 60 people were killed in Serru. The slide was burnt again on Wednesday 21 January 1976, after a battle involving tanks, armored cars, and heavy artillery in sector IV.