

# LIFELINES

**Judith Souriau** visits Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige's retrospective *Two Suns in a Sunset* at the Jeu de Paume to learn how images are affected by violence and war.

**S**ure, Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige's solo show *Two Suns in a Sunset* can be called a retrospective. It features works by the Lebanese artists (born in 1969) from 1997 till their latest video work, *Ismyrne* (2016). Currently on view at the Jeu de Paume (Paris), the exhibition was first shown at the Sharjah Art Foundation (Sharjah, March–May 2016) and will then travel to Munich (Haus der Kunst, October 2016–

January 2017) and Valencià (Institut d'Art Modern, March–September 2017). It is a retrospective in the sense that it surveys 20 years of various projects, initiated in film, photography, installation and archive. But the display is deliberately non-chronological, and each station will show a new, distinct exhibition so that the impression is of a work in process, seized in an evolving time.

Facing page: *Dust in the Wind, Cedar 4* from *The Lebanese Rocket Society*. 2013. Chromogenic print on Plexiglas and sculptured Diasec.

This page: *Detail of Faces*. 2009. 42 photographic prints and drawings on aluminium. 35 x 50 cm each.

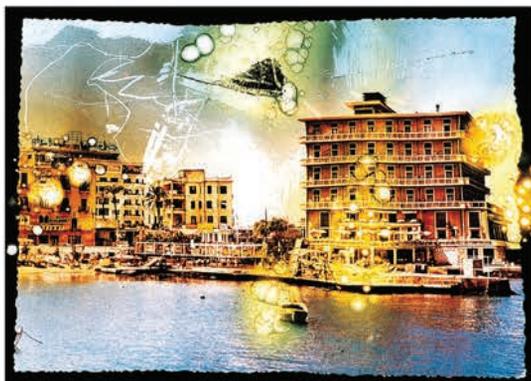
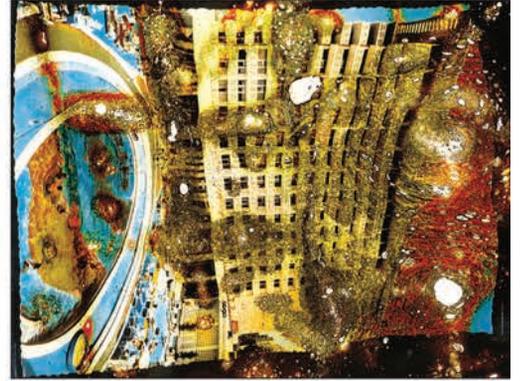
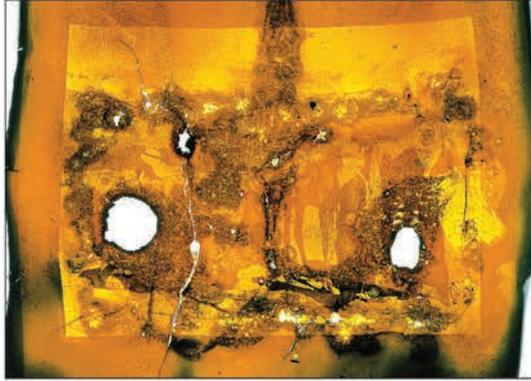
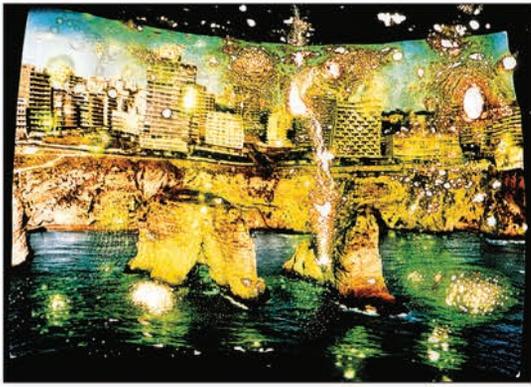


What strikes the viewer who already knows the work of Joreige & Hadjithomas (or some of it, at least) is that their two notable series, each of which occupied the duo for several years (*Wonder Beirut* and *Latent Images*, 1997–2006; *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, 2010–13) and make sense as very constructed wholes, find themselves broken and disseminated in various thematic rooms through this exhibition. While you might expect that the meaning escapes, instead the works combine to nurture other, new significations. For example, the first gallery of the Paris exhibition bears the scars of war, with works made in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) and which question Beirut both before and after the conflict. The photographic work *Equivalence* (1997, from the series *Archeology of our Gaze*) consists of large-scale pictures shot in the debris of a Beirut building. But the construction of the images results in a loss of bearings, the viewer hardly recognising the original architecture and struggling to position top and bottom, north and south. “Photography affects the real in the same way as war affects buildings,” affirms Joreige. “It’s an effect of distortion.” Indeed, the artworks here are not about war: the topic is actually the image. “How the war affects images. These are not pictures of war but other pictures, that happen to

have been damaged in the war,” Joreige explains about *Wonder Beirut* (1997), a collection of leisure postcards of Beirut in its heyday that were republished after the conflict.

The exhibition goes from one medium to another, and mixes the series in a very natural and coherent way. Joreige & Hadjithomas have been working together since the 1990s and also have careers as directors, with several feature films already produced. Though they see the fields of art and film as independent, the concerns of both naturally echo each other. “Art and cinema have two distinct temporalities,” Joreige clarifies. “We start from a reflection, an experience that may feed a scenario. Both influence and nurture each other reciprocally, it’s an exchange. And it’s our choice to be able to go from one to the other: we want to have this freedom, to keep things undefined.”

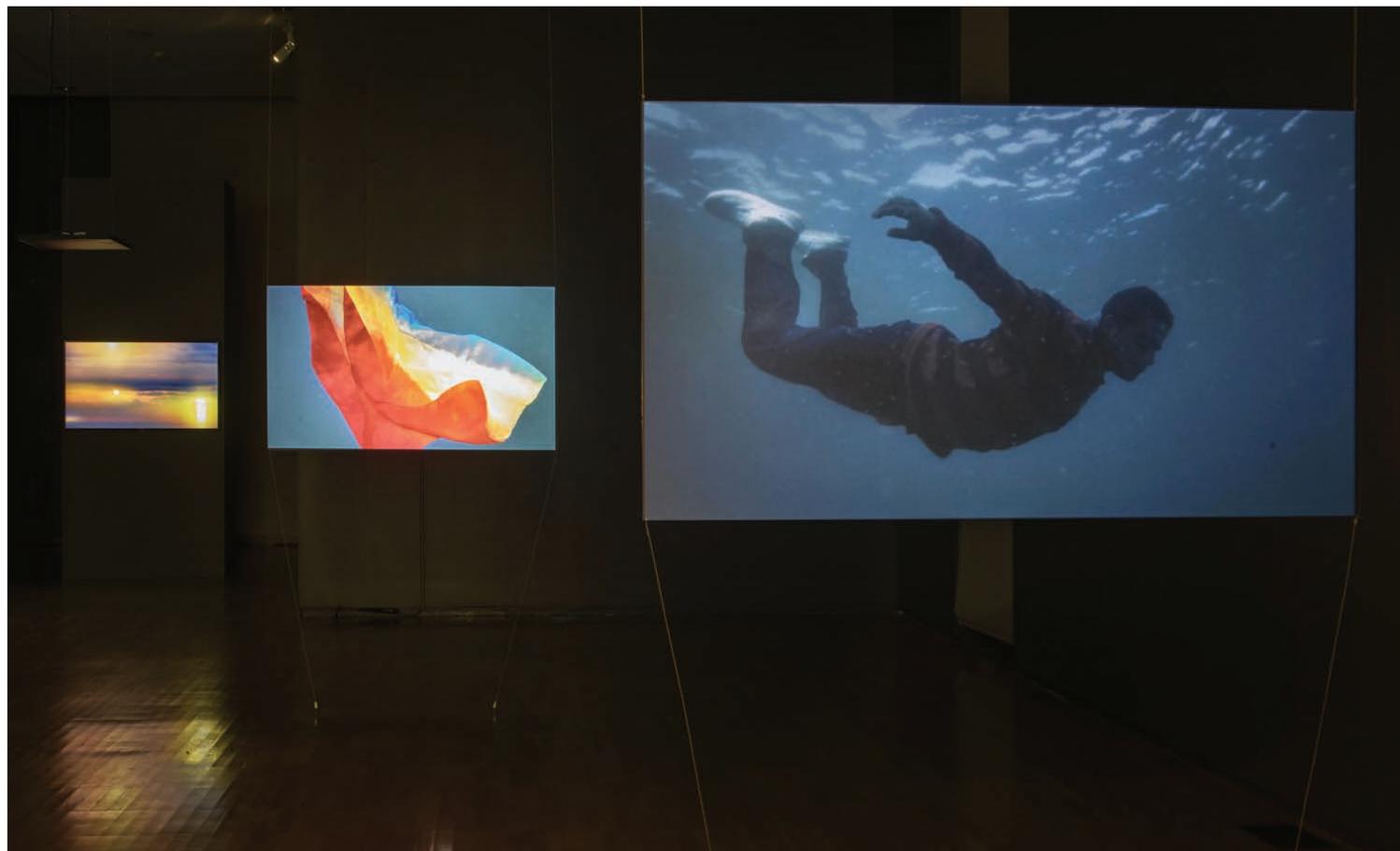
Their most recent video work, *Ismyrne* (2016, produced by the Jeu de Paume and Sharjah Art Foundation), is a film about memory, history and how the memory of our forefathers shapes us, unconsciously moulding our link to the world and, therefore, our present. Hadjithomas and the Lebanese-born painter and poet Etel Adnan (born in 1925) both have Greek family roots in Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey), but neither of them



Facing page: *Cartes postales de guerre* from *Wonder Beirut*. 1997-2006. 18 post cards. 10 x 15 cm each.

This page: *Se souvenir de la Lumière*. 2016. Two HD videos, colour, sound. 8 minutes. Co-production Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah.

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had ever visited the city before this project. They both grew up with mental images of the regretted Greek-Ottoman city that their parents or grandparents had been forced to flee. "What is imagination without images? These cities inhabit us through our history, through our parents' words, but the images are not ours," Hadjithomas says. Surprisingly enough, the shifting borders and notions of belonging that their forefathers linked to Smyrna now refer equally to the recent history of Lebanon, endured personally by Hadjithomas and Adnan; the two women of different generations now mix up images of their own childhood with that of their ancestors in the 1920s, of Beirut before the civil war and of Ottoman Turkey. Both of them created an imaginary "Ismyrne" containing their own past and family discourse, a place suddenly confronted with the actual modern city for this project.

History, memory and the connection between discourse and images are recurring, structural notions in the work of Hadjithomas & Joreige. These were already apparent in their project *Lasting Images* (2004–06), in which the artists found and developed an archive super-8 film from the remains of a missing uncle kidnapped during the 1985 civil war. Blank first, the found film revealed yellowish lines and, eventually, ghostly figures of Joreige's relatives. The photograms printed out from the strip of film have the same properties as memory, in that they are blurred, fragile, evanescent; you do

not know why some remain and others have vanished, and they may also prompt tears. Hadjithomas's & Joreige's work may be accused of being conceptual, but it is actually troubling to see how sensitive, simple and personally relevant some works are in this exhibition. In the gallery featuring *Faces* (2009), *The President's Album* (2011) and *Lasting Images* (2006), the visitor is struck by the actual materiality of the image, used to the limit of its physical properties (*Lasting Images*) and for its plastic, visual abilities. "Our reflection about latency is not about the past," explains Joreige. "It's about what exists and is not visible. It is political, in a way."

Seeing how a given display of older and recent works articulates renewed purposes, you understand how dramatically different each version of the travelling exhibition can be. It is of course an exercise that questions the exhibition as a discursive tool ("the exhibition experience was crucial," Joreige admits), but at some point it almost feels vertiginous to imagine all the possibilities offered to the mind, all the combinations of thinking, of time and space, of emotions that a same corpus of work is able to propose. An unlimited thinking, one might say, that would definitely find itself too restricted by the word 'retrospective'. 📺

*Two Suns in a Sunset* runs until 25 September 2016 at the Jeu de Paume, Paris. For more information, visit [www.jeudepaume.org](http://www.jeudepaume.org)