

"Who Remembers Lebanon? A Reading of Jayce Salloum's *Kan ya ma Kan/There was and there was not*"

Submitted by Nzery Melkonian
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'Lebanon' has been used as a metaphor, as a 'site' serving the real and imaginary for various 'visitors' throughout its history. It has been a ground for continuous claims, discursive texts and acts of re-construction. It has become an adjective for the nostalgia of our past and the fears of the future. We have come to understand so very little in spite of the massive amounts of information we have received regarding Lebanon, that for one to even mention the name all sorts of images come to mind. Salloum's installation, serves to examine the representation of Lebanon, and its history as constructed in our collective and individual psyches.

Kan ya ma Kan/There was and there was not is a transposition of a working studio and found archive, presenting the 'resources' and artifacts necessary to re-construct an understanding of the mediated process inherent in the definition and perception of a culture. By incorporating arrangements of objects collected in Lebanon (i.e. photographs, videotape loops, texts, documents, maps, light boxes, archival materials and other reproductions) the artist calls to question our notions of history and research methodology in the effacement of histories and the layers involved in depiction/representation and understanding of another culture. Here the viewer is part of the process, put in a position to make decisions and to take responsibility for re-constructing their own cultural perceptions. The installation is set up as a pseudo scientific research lab/studio paralleling, parodying and exposing the artist's own productions/projects in Lebanon while challenging and refiguring the investigations and immense history of the production of knowledge of 'Lebanon' and the 'Middle East'.

My reading of Salloum's (re)presentation of Lebanon will consider the role of Western critics, curators and mainstream art publications in their 'coverage' of contemporary art dealing with Lebanon and the Middle East. Furthermore, as someone who was born and raised in the Middle East, but has been living in the United States for the last two decades, I will argue that critical distance or theoretical framework is necessary in dealing with a topic particularly when memory is the primary operative force in re-imagining or re-imagining the contested and complex terrain of 'post-colonial' conditions. Otherwise, how can one's sense of belonging to a familiar place, people etc. ascribe new meaning without resorting to prevailing paradigms of identity constructions such as assimilation vs separation, periphery vs center, mainstream vs margin etc.? How about all those "in-between" conditions or sites where subjectivity is less vulnerable to negation by predetermined notions of the collective?

