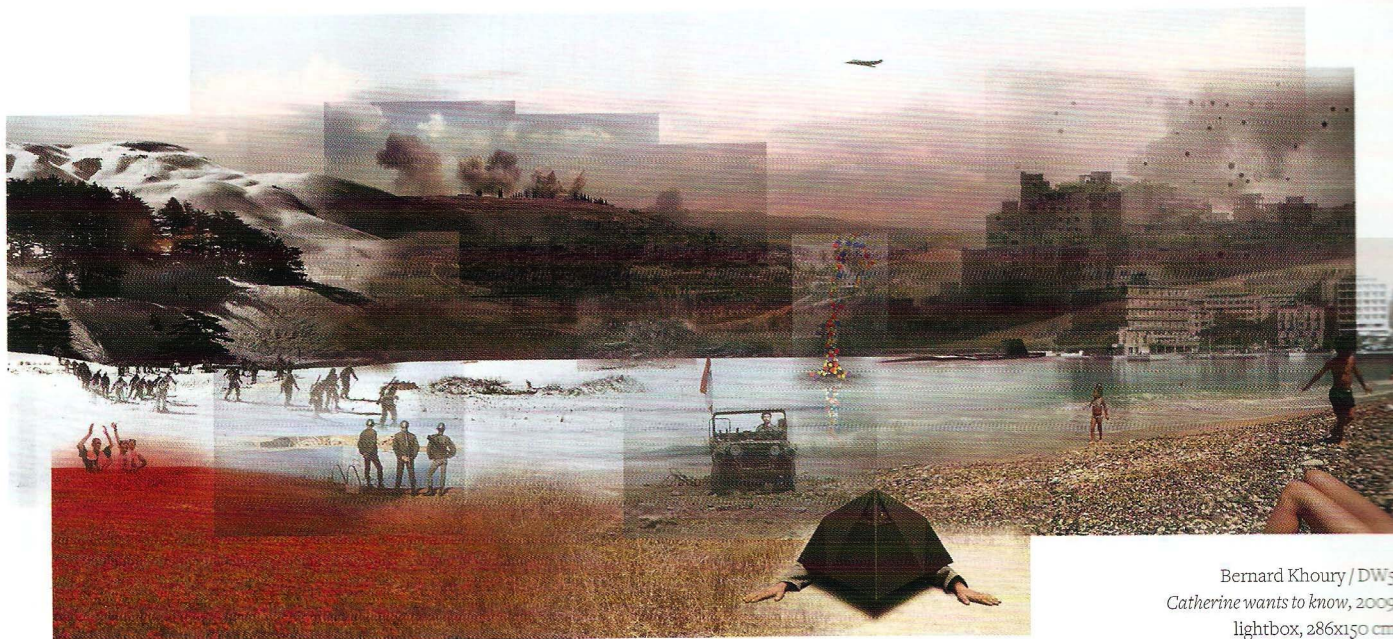


BEIRUT, A FACELESS PRESENT

BY BERNARD KHOURY



Bernard Khoury / DW5
Catherine wants to know, 2009
lightbox, 286x150 cm

ALEXANDRE MEDAWAR: It is the year 2010 and 20 years have passed since the end of the Lebanese Civil War. You recently produced a luminous fresco entitled *Catherine Wants to Know* (2009) for an exhibition entitled "Prisoner of War" at the Beirut Art Center. This photomontage blithely mixes views of an idyllic and fantasized prewar Lebanon — "Switzerland of the Middle East" — with photographs depicting the violence of war and the destroyed city of Beirut. Most of these images are "borrowed" from other contemporary Lebanese artists who base their discourse on the problematic of war. The two stereotyped visions that you clearly confront raise the issue of Beirut's representation and history.

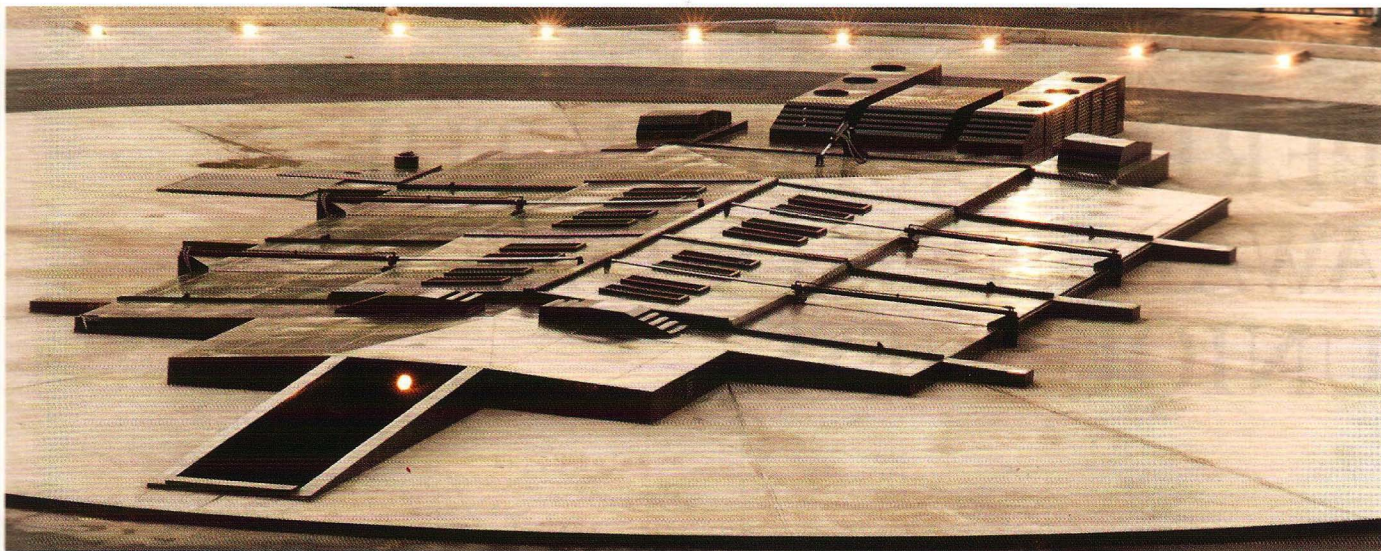
BERNARD KHOURY: When considering contemporary representations of Beirut, I notice two things. On the one hand, there is the predominant hoax of the so-called "Glorious Thirty," that of Lebanon depicted in its development after the independence of 1943, that of the merchants who marketed the country with sugarcoated images of the Cedar mountains, a romanticized Lebanon celebrated by Western Orientalists in which churches, mosques and Roman ruins peacefully coexist. This corpus has been completed with idyllic images of the Casino du Liban, the cabaret dancers and the pretty girls in bikinis at the Saint Georges beach.

On the other hand, there is a second representation, dominant and equally consensual, which has been coexisting with the former for several years. It is that of the Lebanese artists who constantly bombard us with images of the war that hit Beirut and Lebanon. This other major tendency regarding Beirut's representations makes me reflect on the mechanisms that construct the city's image, as well as on the prevailing

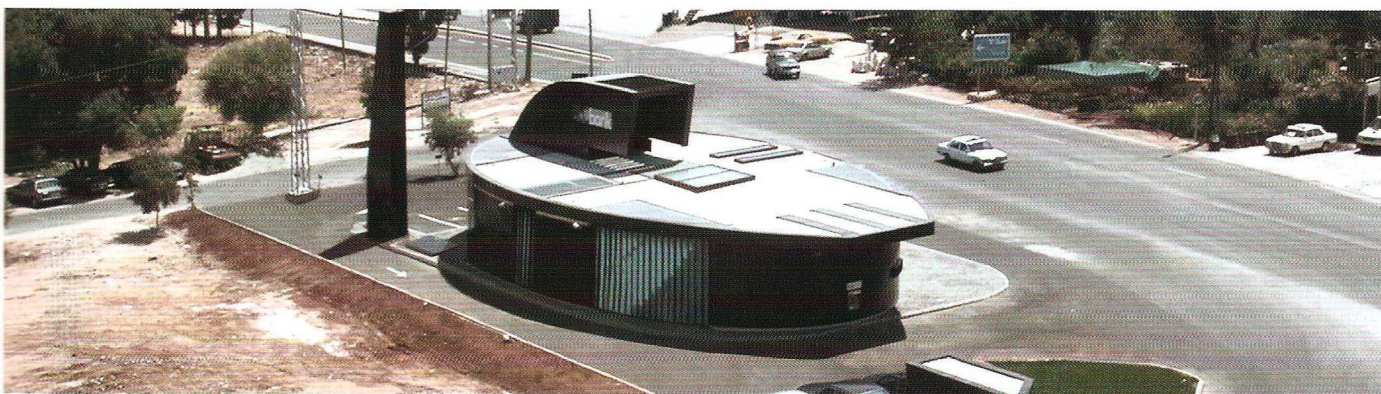
obsession among contemporary artists to portray Beirut almost exclusively through the prism of war.

Local artists are undeniably "prisoners of war." Or of the picture they make of it. Not that I question the legitimacy of their own reflections on war, but I'm surprised at this thematic predominance. A generational phenomenon definitely plays a role: many of today's established Lebanese artists have known the Civil War in their youth, which has left traces. And many of them have studied abroad, in the West. Beirut has been portrayed for half a century in the Western world through images of war and chaos, for which it (the Western world) is partly responsible. The sense of distancing and simplification that emerged from within Lebanon's process of recording history enabled the West to perpetuate a fantasized vision of Beirut through the prism of war. Contemporary Lebanese artists are also prisoners of this skewed vision of reality, since their audience, whether they know it or not, makes sense of their production through this reductive prism. In the end, Beirut's image is a prisoner of the Other's gaze.

AM This appears to me as an obvious schizophrenia. Not only in the fantasy of Beirut, but in our daily life in the city as well. On the one hand, a mixture of images turns Beirut into a Western city with an Oriental flavor (in the eyes of Westerners) or an Oriental city with a Western flavor (in the eyes of Arabs), attributes that are often associated with pleasure, desire, money and seduction. On the other hand, at the opposite end, another mixture of very dated images is brought to the surface, visible on street corners and in our recent history, composed of armed men, violence, heavily bombarded walls, militiamen, Israeli planes hovering



Bernard Khoury / DW5, BO18 nightclub in Beirut, Lebanon, 1998



Bernard Khoury / DW5, BLC Bank in Chtaura, Lebanon, 2004

above our heads and the sounds of shelling. Nothing exists between these two visions, except perhaps former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's attempt at Beirut's reconstruction... which was a reiterated pasteboard of the image promulgated by the Ministry of Tourism, portraying a false modernity intended for wealthy Gulf clients.

BK I don't believe this is specific to Beirut today. Dubai, and to a certain extent emerging Gulf cities, also play on this traditional *trompe-l'oeil* image. What I find interesting in the case of Beirut, and more par-

enclave outside of the present.

AM Bearing in mind that "Future" is the name of the party, the television channel and the daily newspaper owned by the Hariri family, it is also a form of semantic appropriation, as if Beirut's yesteryear and its outdated past belong to it.

BK Beside the fact that our former city center was stripped away from us, we were above all dispossessed of our history, of the way it is recorded and of our own representations of Beirut. There is an official, "eternal" Beirut and Solidere's "past and future" Beirut. But I do not see the present tense in any of the disseminated representations. This city should exist in the present. History stops in 1975 in school textbooks, i.e. at the beginning of the Civil War. There is no History afterwards, only a futureless "future" and a so-called promised modernity, which is completely sterile and whose visual references are a frightening collection of clichés and stereotypes.

If we take, for example, my first six realized buildings — which were commissioned by six different clients — all were futile programs (entertainment and commercial venues) and temporary structures that had a limited and predetermined lifespan: between 5 and 10 years. They are deeply rooted in the present, as if they are somehow free from the constraints and references of the past and the future that Beirut is burdened with.

After all, Beirut is a city rich in extremes and changing situations. It's a very stimulating environment for an architect because the scenarios brought forth by the present can always be unpacked in interesting ways.

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ticularly in Solidere's project — the private real estate development company launched by Rafic Hariri which manages the historical and commercial center of Beirut — is their slogan: "Madina 'ariqa lil mustaqbal" (Ancient city for the future). It completely bypasses the present. It evokes and links the past and the future, but shrugs off any notion of the present. Hariri's project for the reconstruction of the city center, which was supposed to be the country's showcase, is being built in an