

Allegorical Ruins

Raed Yassin

7 May - 27 June, 2024

Text by Nat Muller

"In every photograph," French theorist Roland Barthes wrote in his book *Camera Lucida* (1980), there is "the return of the dead." If photography always captures a moment in the past, then every time we look at a photograph, that specific moment it captures in time is continued in the present, even if those in the photo are long gone. This makes photography a memorial medium, spurring us to remember those depicted, but equally, as Barthes' return of the dead suggests, a ghostly one. In his project *The Company of Silver Spectres* (2021-ongoing), Lebanese artist Raed Yassin, underwrites this tension. Moreover, he sharpens the ghostly to the extent that haunting itself becomes an act of remembrance.

For many years now Yassin has been collecting old black and white photographs that he finds at flea markets, antique shops, or auctions. Originally, he limited his search to Lebanon and the Arab world but has since widened his geographical scope. What unifies these photos is their focus on the actual people whose lives are recorded, rather than on the events, settings, or landscapes that might have been of importance for them to commemorate. Whether showing births, weddings, birthday parties, holiday trips, or portraits of loved ones, these typical but intimate keepsakes of family life tell stories we, as strangers, will never be privy to. Taken in times before images became digital, ubiquitous and disposable, these photos are cherished signifiers of family narratives, belonging and lives past. And yet, Yassin has found them discarded and no longer precious.



Rendering of the installation *City Mirage* (2024)

If these photos are an attempt to trick time and have the people in them, perhaps long deceased, accompany us into the present, then Yassin, strangely, suspends time. By spray-painting the photos in monochromatic colours, he blots out their specificity and summons ghosts. The image only faintly shimmers through the layers of paint. What seems like a radical act of erasure becomes, paradoxically, a gesture of preservation: these images are never laid to rest and will forever continue to haunt. Ghosts are elusive and therefore preclude full comprehension. The viewer is faced with a series of framed colourful rectangles that are equally challenging to make sense of. Only close inspection reveals the absent presence of the photographs. If anything, these vibrant colours stand in stark contrast with the sense of loss the “return of the dead” elicits. Yassin came of age during Lebanon’s Civil War (1975-1990) and lost most of his own family photographs. Personal photographic archives extend a sense of belonging, family, and community. They can serve as aspirational expressions of a time before disaster, while at the same time, as is the case in Lebanon and other places where the end of the war has failed to bring political and social reconciliation, invite ghosts to linger.

In *The Company of Silver Spectres*, the personal is spectrally reconstituted into the universal. It is a poignant reminder that working through trauma, be it individual or as is the case in so many conflict zones, collective, is always a communion with ghosts. To compile an archive, or anti-archive as the artist calls it, of the ghostly, demonstrates a compulsion to compute loss, make absences count and fight forgetfulness. A similar method can be discerned in the wall piece *City Mirage* (2024), a installation of vintage letters culled from shop signs in Beirut. Together these letters have no semantic meaning, it is just chaotic gibberish. However, given they are relics of a bygone era — the signs are from the 1970s till the early 2000s — they spell out a topography of disappearance. Beirut, the city of Yassin’s birth, has radically changed over the past half century. The Civil War ravaged the city and divided it into an eastern (predominantly Christian) and western (predominantly Muslim) part, while post-war reconstruction, particularly in the Central District, produced its own ruins, privileging demolition, privatisation and gentrification over restoration

and the pre-war heterogeneous use of public space. The devastating port explosion of 4 August 2020 destroyed large parts of the city and is another example of the accumulated ruination that has beset Beirut. To this date no one has been held accountable for the tragedy. By collecting these neon signs and breaking them apart in singular letters, Yassin not only draws attention to the continuous tearing up of the urban fabric, but he also preserves — letter by letter — memories of a disappearing place.

While loss and ruin set the tone of this exhibition, Yassin, against all geo-political odds, offers a glimmer of hope in his work *Mirage* (2024). The artist, who is righthanded, wrote the word “mirage” in capitals with his left hand and then produced a neon sign from it. The result is eerie and clumsy, as if written by a child or a message from beyond. This sign flickers intermittently, a nod to Beirut’s incessant electricity cuts and to the prospect of positive change being extremely dim. A mirage indeed. Still, ironically, the neon sign is potentially operative: its cathode tubes are filled with gas, its electrodes intact. The spectre of possibility, then, also haunts this work, turning it into one of the most speculative pieces on display in the show. *Mirage* perforates, albeit very subtly, the allegorical and ruinous qualities of the exhibition. It leads us to the preposterous but imperative proposition; another world just might be imaginable.



Series of *The Company of Silver Spectres* (2021)

Artist's Biography

Raed Yassin (born 1979, Beirut) is an artist and musician. He graduated from the theater department at the Institute of Fine Arts in Beirut in 2003, and since then has developed his conceptual practice through multiple mediums such as video, sound, photography, text, sculpture and performance. Yassin’s work often originates from an examination of his personal narratives and their position within a collective history, through the lens of consumer culture and mass production. He was a resident artist at De Ateliers, Amsterdam (2008-2010), the Delfina Foundation, London (2010 & 2014), Akademie der Künste der Welt, Cologne (2015), and is a recipient of the Abraaj Group Art Prize (2012). He recently participated in the Lyon Biennial (2022), Taipei Biennial (2023) and is currently having his first seminal exhibition at the Beirut Art Center (2024). As a musician, he is one of the organizers of the Irtijal Festival for Experimental Music (Beirut), and has released several solo music albums, as well as part of groups such as “A” Trio and PRAED. In 2009, he founded his independent music label Annihaya. Raed currently lives between Berlin and Beirut.

For any additional information or press-related inquiries, feel free to reach out to Jad Karam at jad@ivde.net. Images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle, Dubai.

Kindly use the below link to find further images and information:
[Allegorical Ruins by Raed Yassin](#)