

SAMAR Mogharbel

Without Traces



WITHOUT TRACES

Text by Arie Amaya-Akkermans

The reconstruction of Beirut after 1990, perhaps the most contested post-war reconstruction project in recent history, and to date unconcluded, has been at the heart of a controversy of what it means to re-build a urban environment fractured not only by the objective realities of violence, but also by the concomitant fissures in the social fabric. To re-build, does it mean to re-stage the past exactly as it was, or to create a radically new future of the present? Is there no viable alternative to negotiate between the instinct for preservation and the drive to destroy painful memories of the recent past? The route taken by Beirut was obviously that of wiping out the traces and creating a new city with an infinite future and a remote past, but not so much of a present. Virginia Woolf writes, "For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so closely that you can feel nothing else."

This controversy, however, which is the subject of extensive academic literature and fascinates the foreign press to this day -an article was just published on The Guardian last week about whether the reconstruction is all what it seems, is strictly limited to the area known as Beirut Central District or Solidere, which is entirely made of luxury rises catering to the global elite, having effectively erased the old thriving downtown which became a ghost town during the war, except for some landmarks. Urban specialists also discuss other projects which are either unfinished or never materialized, such as the reforestation of Horsh Beirut, the Elyssar project in the southern suburbs or the Soft Connection line that aims to connect Horsh Beirut to the Beirut Central District along the war's Green Line. But beyond the barely two squared kilometers of the central district, lie nearly two hundred squares kilometers of metropolitan area in Beirut, at one point or another, ravished by war.

It is there, in this almost anonymous formless land, where the sculptor Samar Mogharbel has turned her inquisitive gaze: With a skyline punctuated by scaffoldings, diggers and construction cranes, the city remains half re-built and half destroyed, or at the very least, derelict. In this site of transition it is difficult to tell whether things are being built or destroyed; is this building abandoned or erected? is that a ruin or a construction site? The answer is evasive. What Mogharbel found in between is not empty space but these invisible structures, spread all over the city, almost spectral, seen from the skyline as sores or orifices, but when stared at from near, they reveal the old Lebanese houses, relics of other eras, unique in their architectural details, bringing together the whole array of cultural influences present in Lebanon: Ottoman, Mediterranean, Islamic, European. While they survived the decades of war, invasion, occupation and plundering, they are struggling to outlive our own times

A good number of traditional Lebanese houses have been restored and either transformed into private homes for the wealthy or institutions, but the work to be seen in "Without Traces", focuses mostly on those that because of their lack of historical significance are slowly disappearing and with them, the actual memories of a city struggling with question of identity, covering erstwhile wounds with asphalt, glass and aluminum, drowning in this process the possibility for the Lebanese to find a common ground and a public domain which is not a promiscuous plaza of consumerism driven by neoliberal architecture.

The different houses, from the better known Barakat building in Achrafieh, to more anonymous dwellings spread through Hamra, Kantari, Basta, Sanayeh, and Manara among others, operate in the exhibition not merely as cultural objects or as relics of nostalgia, but as temporal monuments of a territory that does not stand still. How to monumentalize what is always and already in motion?

The project started five years ago when the artist, made a stop motion film with her own sculpted house in the background, attempting to write a visual biography using filmic techniques, entering an intermediate space between poetry and history. Like most of the anonymous houses in Beirut, it was torn down and newer structures, thought of as a tabula rasa, erected in their place. Mogharbel is not sculpting the houses as the paradiso mansions of the colonial era one sees in the prints of Bonfils but rather in their current state of decay. Therefore, on account of the meticulous work - the houses are very detailed, with arches and columns, artisanal doors and vaults - it cannot be executed in stone or wood; turning to traditional clay, it is the interior volume what gives the houses a realism so striking that it belongs to a fantasy world: Only the real has the ability to shock and stun; the imagination is only complementary.

Strangely enough, the drawbacks of the clay material have only come to her aid: When the clay is baked in the kiln, it is shrunk through the fire, which could translate into cracks and warps; following the behavior of the clay meant for the artist to expose these otherwise aesthetic objects to decay by fire. Wasn't it fire as well what warped them in reality in the first place? But Mogharbel goes one step beyond: The terminated structures are then intervened, when the artist further warps them by hand, letting the desolation emerge, and asking, isn't it also us, the same people who warped these houses by shell, by fire, by digger, by crane? She speaks with sorrow about her process in a larger context: "Walking in Beirut and watching the bulldozers snipping memories at every corner is also as painful! Often times we try to ignore this reality, because of our impossibility of retaliating." Yet through the cracks and the warps, the traces become remnants, if only, for a fleeting moment.







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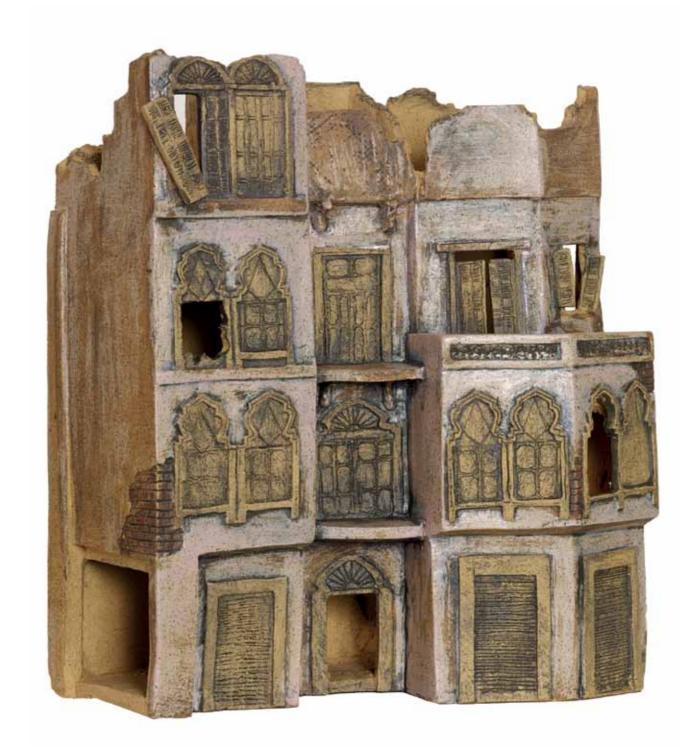
























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About the artist

Samar Mogharbel was born in Beirut in 1958 and was first trained in ceramics in Lebanon by the pioneering Dorothy Salhab Kazemi, and then pursued a postgraduate diploma in ceramics at Goldsmith's College, London, before moving on to become an apprentice with Michael O'Brien, the student of a pioneer potter in the UK. Since 1983 Mogharbel has taught ceramics at the Lebanese American University and in 1995 she took part in archaeological excavations and restoration in downtown Beirut under American University of Beirut's professor Leila Badr, which has largely influenced her work. Her practice extends into video art since 2004, with a number of collaborations with the artist Greta Naufal and the stop motion video with her own house in the background, which led the project currently on show at the gallery.

In 2005 after the assassination of a number of major political figures in Lebanon, she created six booby trapped cars using ceramics which were awarded the first prize of the Sursock Museum. They were later cast in bronze and exhibited in London in 2011. Mogharbel was also awarded a special mention at the Salon d'Automne of the Sursock Museum in 1998 and the silver plaque at the Zabreb Clay Fest in Croatia in 2014. She has been widely exhibited in solo exhibitions in Beirut in "Interception" at Agial (2011), Galerie Janine Rubeiz (1999, 1996) and the exhibition "Beirut Blues" (1998) at the Millesgarden Museum in Stockholm, Sweden. The artist has taken part in several group exhibitions worldwide, in Lebanon, Croatia, France and the United Arab Emirates. Mogharbel's work is held in private collections in Malaysia, the Dominican Republic, Croatia, Sweden and at the Sursock Museum in Beirut.

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