Jadaliyya جدليّة

The Lebanese Rocket Society: A Dream Takes Flight

by Noura Alsager

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Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige
The Lebanese Rocket Society—A Tribute to Dreamers (Parts II, III, IV, and V)
CRG Gallery, Manhattan
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[Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, The Lebanese Rocket Society: The President's Album (detail), (2011). Image courtesy of CRG Gallery, New York. Photo by Susan Aizner.]

In April 1961, students from Halgazian University along with instructor Manoug Manougian launched a rocket over Ain Saadeh, northeast of Beirut, Lebanon. They formed the school's first rocket society and by 1967, they had designed, built, and launched more than ten space rockets and gained both local and international attention. All their rockets were named "Cedar" after the national emblem of Lebanon, and for the twenty-first celebration of the nation's independence in 1964; Cedar IV was memorialised on state stamps.

Since then, however, not one Lebanese rocket has pierced the sky.

The Arab-Israeli war of 1967 put an end to the venture, and the rest of the space race was left for the United States and the Soviet Union to dominate. In *The Lebanese Rocket Society - A Tribute to Dreamers (Parts II, III, IV, and V),* Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige explore the conception of the Lebanese rockets, their effects on past and present audiences, and the disappearance of the rockets from Arab consciousness. Through sounds, recreations, and photographs, the exhibit unveils the history behind the Cedars, attempts to reconcile them to the present day, and implicitly poses the question—*where are they now?* Viewers will find that at the heart of Hadjithomas and Joreige's work lies a paradox, a collision of forces that evokes both disappointment and ambition, luring them past surface impressions and into the realms of contemplation, interaction, and even experience.

In the exhibit's largest installation, *The President's Album*, thirty-two rectangular panels of folded digital prints recreate the aerodynamic shape of Cedar IV. Each wooden panel reveals one piece of the rocket, and the whole structure unfolds in a linear fashion. The cylinder appears wider at the bottom, until it slowly thins out to form the tip. Painted in the red and white of the Lebanese flag, the rocket bears the imprint of the national Cedar, with the Arabic "Cedar IV" printed in white. On the bottom of every panel is a copy of a page from a photo album given to President Fouad Chehab, chronicling the development of Cedar IV. Leather-bound with string, the album's pages look aged and faded. Each of its black and white photographs shows a different stage in the making of the rocket, up until its launch in November 1963. Overall, the panel effect provides the rocket with a sleek, aerodynamic quality, even though the image itself remains fixed on the wall. When zooming out to view the entire installation, it gives the impression of movement and acceleration—perhaps even an explosion just before take off. For a split second, the rocket looks like it could fly.

[Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 'The Lebanese Rocket Society: The President's Album" (2011). Image courtesy of CRG Gallery. Photo by Susan Alzner]

In the *Restaged* series, Hadjithomas and Joreige re-enact a moving rocket in present day Beirut through photographs. Like the previous installation, the eight photographs merge the dynamic and the static to produce blurry images of a travelling Cedar before standstill city backgrounds. In these re-enactments however, the cylinder is no longer sleek and defined, but rather fuzzy, and too fast to be captured by camera or even the human eye. Moreover, the photographs highlight the incongruities between the speed and technology of the rocket in comparison to some of Beirut's old and rundown infrastructure. Nothing can keep up with the rocket it seems, not an individual, camera, or even the city. In *Restaged No. 7* for instance, the rocket zips through the streets like an arrow; ironically though, the traffic light in the background flashes red.

[Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "The Lebanese Rocket Soceity: Restaged No. 0" (2012). Image courtesy of CRG Gallery. Copyright the artists.]

[Installation view of "The Lebanese Rocket Society" at CRG Gallery, 2013. Photo by Susan Alzner.]

Also part of the installation is *A Carpet,* hand-woven out of wool. Many of the students involved in producing the Cedar rockets were children of Armenian orphans who came to Lebanon after the Armenian Genocide in 1915. In an

orphanage workshop in Ghazir between 1924-5, young girls spun an elaborate 5.5 by 3 metre carpet as a thank-you gift to the United States for their orphan relief efforts. President Coolidge displayed the carpet in the Blue Room of the White House, inciting a front-page headline in *The New York Times*. As a tribute to the young genocide survivors, Armenian artists wove a new carpet depicting the ceremonial stamp of Cedar IV, in the same manner as the original. The tribute portrays the bright red and white rocket firing out of a gray Earth against a blue-gradient sky, all framed within the white frill of a postage stamp. On their website, Hadjithomas and Joreige described the piece as, "…an evocation of these two stories, or two generations, representing the feats of a group to persist, aspire, and dream." The new carpet not only honours the lives and work of the genocide survivors, but also endeavours to link two narratives together, history with modernity, and tradition with technology. The orphans wove the original carpet with nothing but their hands and two looms; 35 years later, their children would go on to create the Arab world's first rocket.

[Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "The Lebanese Rocket Society: A Tribute to Dreamers (Parts II, II, IV, and V). Image courtesy of CRG Gallery, New York. Photo Susan Alzner.]

A moving image along with a conglomeration of sounds entitled, *The Golden Record* concludes the exhibit. A projection of an enlarged record spins on the floor, repeating sounds captured to mirror life in 1960s Lebanon, as well as snippets of human experience. Based on the 1977 Golden Record carried by Voyager 1 and 2 that featured multilingual greetings, music, and speeches from world leaders, Hadjithomas and Joreige's installation takes a more local twist, including famous voices such as Oum Kalthoum and Wadih El-Safi, a speech by President Chehab, a call to prayer, the Arabic alphabet, and sounds from Hamra Street. The record also contains more common sounds like heartbeats, rain, children playing football, and sea waves. The artistic duo has compared the record to a time capsule, but the record not only plays meaningful sounds, it also partially represents Lebanon as a microcosm of life on Earth. Besides, the sounds—now artefacts of human civilisation—serve as bridges between the 1960s and the present. The sounds of wind and rain are universal, but who in this generation can recognise the voice of Yuri Gagarin?

[Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "The Lebanese Rocket Society: The Golden Record" (2011). Image courtesy of CRG Gallery, New York. Photo by Susan Alzner.]

Each of the exhibit's installations displays an irony manifested through a collision between two clashing ideas or realities. In *The President's Album* for example, photographs of the original Cedar IV as well as images of the new recreation share the same panels. Except that, the recreation gives a false impression of movement and momentarily deceives viewers into thinking that it is the real thing, whereas the photographs that capture the true moving rocket

stand still in time. In an installation where artists have recreated everything, viewers begin to question the reality that surrounds them. Which of the two is more real, a photograph of the rocket or its artistic recreation? The artists have created an illusion: viewers have forgotten the real rocket and can only experience it through its artistic recreation. Although it looks real, it can never fly, thus conveying another irony of the present generation: they can dream of rockets, perhaps build one, but they could never launch it. Unlike the Halgazian's Cedars, their dreams do not take flight.

Similarly, the *Restaged* series reveal the contradictions between today's Lebanon and the rocket in motion. The Cedar can surpass the fastest speed of any motor vehicle, and makes no use of the traffic signals, street signs, or even the road's direction that it travels through. While the Cedar zips across Beirut at remarkable speed and leaves nothing but a blurred mass behind, the rest of the cars, cranes, and motorcycles appear more in focus and follow their own pace. Not only do they look slow in comparison, but they also seem to linger in time and space—giving way to the next irony: a rocket produced almost 50 years ago appears sleeker, faster, and more advanced than the surroundings of present-day Beirut.

[Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige "The Lebanese Rocket Society: Restaged No. 6" (2012). Image courtesy of CRG Gallery. Copyright the artists.]

Restaged certainly provokes the two most important questions generated by the exhibit: where are the rockets now? And, why was it possible for university students to build a rocket in the 1960s, but not anymore? Figuratively, the rocket that reappears in each installation serves as a metaphor for what happened in Ain Saadeh in 1961: dreams of flight and discovery materialised into a journey past clouds, into the heavens, and into the unknown. When a rocket defies gravity, it breaks free from the law that once constrained it; it can no longer be pulled down, or forced back into place. The launch becomes an act of liberation, making it an ideal symbol of Lebanese independence. Moreover, the young men who created the Cedars were not physicists, engineers, or scientists; they were "*dreamers*." Their imaginations defied gravity and prompted experiments and inventions that drew them closer to their goals. The proper question then becomes—not where are the rockets—but where are the *dreams* of rockets. Where are these inventors and innovators today? Though the space race has long since ended, we have more powerful technology at this point in time more than we ever did in the 1960s, yet in the past 46 years, not one Arab state has launched a rocket for space exploration or developed a space program.

However, it would not be fair to say that Arabs do not dream of rockets. It is the rocket itself that has been made forbidden, or denied access, and all evidence relating to its existence either hidden or forgotten. After President Chehab died in 1964, the Cedar IV photo album was given to General Youssef Wehbe, and was never seen since. In 1968, Professor Manougian left Halgazian University to teach in the University of South Florida, in the United States, where he still teaches. The Armenian Weekly says that the carpet gifted to President Coolidge remains in a storage room in the White House, where it has been for the past thirty years. And according to Hadjithomas and Joreige, all films, documents, and photos of the rockets have disappeared. It is no surprise that the current generation has never heard of the event.

Although Hajithomas and Joreige have uncovered the mysteries surrounding the rockets in the aim of reviving the Cedar legacy and imbuing it with the attention it deserves as a scientific experiment, *The Lebanese Rocket Society - A Tribute to Dreamers (Parts II, III, IV, and V)* provokes feelings of disappointment and even frustration at the perhaps untimely end of the Lebanese space race. The artists' use of irony and collision make it possible to form mixed, or even opposing views on the subject of space exploration in the Arab world, leaving viewers with a final paradox that interprets the 1960s event as both a failure and a success. Yet these sentiments do not undermine the exhibit's underlying concepts portrayed through a rocket's journey upwards—of dreams, flight, liberation, and even independence.