

## visual art

## When art drops a bombshell

A fighter pilot with second thoughts inspired Akram Zaatari's new work, he tells Rachel Campbell-Johnston

**A**kram Zaatari was a teenager when, in 1982, Israeli tanks rolled into his southern Lebanese homeland. He came of age in an occupied territory. It's hardly surprising that this should have shaped him. What those who encounter his art may find more remarkable is how subtly perceptive and fundamentally humane it is.

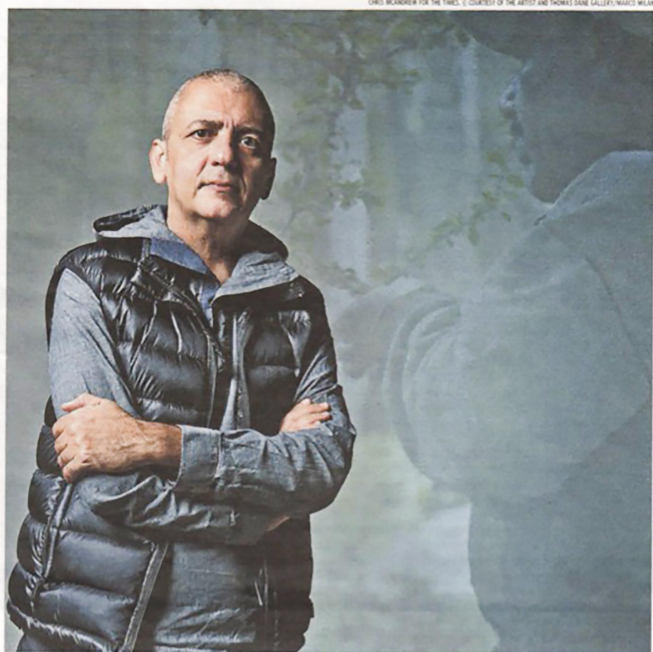
"For a teenager, living through a war can mean being deprived of going out," says Zaatari, whose solemn gaze is undercut by an affable smile. "All your entertainment must take place indoors. And you start to think of things that can help you kill time." While chaos reigned in the streets of his hometown, the port of Sidon, he found himself frequently confined to his flat. It was then that he got into the habit of keeping a diary. He recorded his everyday life on camera and endless audio cassettes.

Like many of his peers, he may have dreamt of joining the resistance and fighting bravely. However, in reality he stuck to his obsessive hobby — documenting everything from lists of films that he loved to the advance of armoured tanks, from mundane domestic events to dramatic aerial bombardments. And ironically, now that this particular conflict is over (the Israelis withdrew from south Lebanon in 2000), it is this boy's quirky chronicle, rather than any braver or more practical form of resistance, that forms its most lasting memento.

A video work by Zaatari, *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, is on show for the first time in this country at the Thomas Dane Gallery in central London. This complex but poetic and evocative piece of work was first shown in 2013 in the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It takes as its subject a story that circulated in Zaatari's native city in the first year of the occupation.

Rumour had it that an Israeli fighter pilot had been ordered to bomb a target on the outskirts of the city, but the pilot — realising when he looked down that the building was a school — refused to carry out instructions. Veering off course, he dropped his bombs into the sea instead.

This was the school at which Zaatari's father served for ten years as a director. It was a building with which Zaatari and his brother were familiar. "We spent most weekends there," he tells me. "It figures in all our birthday pictures. It is the background of many of our family snapshots." And although, a short while later, the building was destroyed by a bomb



Akram Zaatari in front of his video artwork *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* at Thomas Dane Gallery. Below: a still from the film

dropped by another fighter pilot, Zaatari became increasingly riveted by the story of the man who had decided not to unload his deadly charge, a redemptive rumour that continued, in ever more elaborate versions, to circulate among the residents of Sidon.

Zaatari began his career as an architect in Beirut, but his fascination with film could never be buried and he decided, eventually, to pursue it. He went to study in New York before

“Art is not taken seriously, so it can lead you under the radar”



returning to Lebanon in the early 1990s to work in the rapidly developing satellite television industry. His creative career began with short, experimental videos that he programmed in between more conventional shows. However, as his interest in film deepened, he left, co-founding in 1997 the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, which has collected hundreds of thousands of photographs from across the region. This archive is another important resource for Zaatari's artistic practice.

The 50-year-old artist is intrigued by the excavation of narratives, the circulation of images in times of war, the intersection of truth and legend in the stories that they tell, the idea that history is always many-layered. "History is written by systems," he says. "It must follow narrative logic, but the reality is that things don't make sense. Individuals escape the logic of the collective. They go out of sync. Their beliefs don't correspond with the societies that they are born in. And this is where it becomes interesting. Can you still belong to a country and still be in opposition to its dominant beliefs? How much margin is left for us to believe in humanity first, rather than our own country?" These are the sort of questions, he says, that Albert Camus asked in his epistolary essay *Letters to a German Friend*. Camus's essay, with its plea that "I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice," is what Zaatari draws on for *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*.

A few years ago, invited to take part in a public conversation with an Israeli

film-maker, Zaatari retold what he thought was the story of the Israeli pilot. Then a transcript of the talk was published and he discovered that the story wasn't merely a rumour, it was true and the pilot was still living.

His name was Hagai Tamir and, like Zaatari, he had trained as an architect. He knew a schoolhouse when he saw one and, in the course of a much later debate about the killing of citizens during Israeli military campaigns, he had openly admitted his decision to disobey. Zaatari got in touch with him and they met. From across a border still defined by conflict, Zaatari began what would have been considered an impossible correspondence. His *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* is the artistic result.

It takes the form of a quiet but complex video montage. White paper aeroplanes, constructed from exam manuscripts and marked in red ink, are sent swooping over urban skyline and expanses of sea. Gloved hands turn the pages of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. Children file into school at the summons of the bell. Family photographs are laid out on a table. A camera pans down empty corridors. The roar of a fighter jet, the tunes of French pop music, fragments of reportage, the wail of a siren — these are the sounds that form the audio backdrop. Buildings explode at the touch of a fingertip. "It takes a lot longer to build a city than it does to strike a target," reads a printed statement.

"I am writing fragments of history against the backdrop of the present," says Zaatari. "I wanted to look at the way that our need to adopt a position has been filtered through the many experiences that we have. My idea was to look at what could tie me to and make me share the thoughts of an officer in the Israeli army. I wanted to build upon the very little things that we share — like the fact that we were both architects — rather than looking at the divergences between us."

Zaatari does not intend to spread a specifically political message. "That's why I insert all sorts of totally apolitical stuff, like tapes of Egyptian pop stars," he says. "Banality meets the news headlines." Nor does he consider himself overtly philosophical. "Although with hindsight much of what I have done has been philosophical. It's inevitable, as soon as you start thinking," he says.

Art, he believes, has another unique role to play. "That's the power of disciplines that are marginal," he says. "Art is not taken seriously, is not significant in the same way as education or medical assistance is. That's why it can lead you under the radar. It can show you things that you didn't expect. The pilot who obeyed orders, the one who dropped his bombs on the school, it turns out is insignificant. It is the pilot who refused who is the significant one. And in making this film, it feels like I have made something happen that I could never have imagined happening. I made it possible for an Israeli fighter pilot to be welcomed into Lebanon in a metaphorical way. I wonder," says Zaatari, "if that will ever make news?"

**Akram Zaatari: Letter to a Refusing Pilot, Thomas Dane Gallery, London SW1 (020 7925 2505), to November 5**