

# Nada Sehnaoui

## *Along These Lines*

16 May – 16 June

Lebanese artist Nada Sehnaoui repeats that it all started when she stumbled across a mention of the *Lebanese War Statistics* published in several international newspapers in 1991 – list of numbers of people wounded, disappeared and dead during the 15-year-long Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Since then, she employs painterly gestures as she repeats mundane objects and geometrical elements or materials in her installation works. Sehnaoui's labour-intensive artistic practice hinges predominantly on repetition, underlining the importance of time and process inherent to the act of remembering or forgetting. In doing so, she recalls and reiterates personal and collective acts of resilience that is symbolic of war, political instability and crisis.

This exhibition includes pieces of Sehnaoui's iconic series *Peindre L'Orient Le Jour* (1999) that are exhibited for the first time outside Lebanon. This project consists of a-posteriori interventions on the front page of a French-Lebanese daily newspaper, *L'Orient Le Jour*, every day for the full year of 1999. Haphazardly, the artist acts as a diarist, meddling with the content of the front page – crossing out, highlighting, painting over and commenting on texts and images. She also uses the front page as a surface, a materiality and a tool beyond its narrative content, silencing the news at times and creating visual spaces with strident colours instead.

This work, often referred to as an installation – for the artist's unremitting preoccupation with the expanded notion of space – consists of twelve original sets. Each set, or month, is characterised by a different visual treatment. For example – April stands out with its colours and patterns, recalling the start of the Lebanese Civil War, but also referencing T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* stating that *April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land*. November is missing; its newspapers were shredded and placed in a bowl, and the December issue is covered with white. *Peindre L'Orient Le Jour* is a time-based methodical work; on the subversive and somehow cathartic process of censoring, interpreting and re-writing the main events of Post War Lebanon. It is a project about a direct intervention on the official history in the making: a formal manipulation of an archive in the making. These palimpsests of collages, texts and paint are custodians presiding over the inter-relationships between individual narrative, collective memory and official history.

A pioneer of large-scale interventions in public spaces in Lebanon, the artist manoeuvres spaces beyond the canvas to foster debate around Post War issues through formal installations in the public sphere. Thus, her interventions on the newspaper as a form of public space in *L'Orient Le Jour*, are anticipated *Fractions of Memory*, a monumental site-specific devised in downtown Beirut in 2003. Here, the artist occupied the desolate former Martyr's Square – Beirut's prominent pre-war central public space and square par excellence obliterated during the Downtown Beirut redevelopment plan. On this empty plot in 2003 – today cluttered with skyscrapers – the artist installed 360 structures using 20 tons of newspaper. On top of plinth-like elements were written personal memories of random citizens who responded to an open call from the artist, asking: *Do you have a memory of daily life in downtown Beirut before 1975?* Like many of her latter in-situ installations, this project created an ephemeral public space in a city devastated by wars, lacking shared spaces and overrun by real-estate speculation.

Among Sehnaoui's 12 installations and urban interventions, *To Sweep* is an accumulation of hundreds of brooms, symbolising the act of sweeping away dust or rubble. The work refers to the complex, but complementary exercise of remembering and forgetting and the necessity to wipe out what is no longer needed. *To Sweep* epitomises the way the artist uses repetition, the same mundane object, the humble broom, implies both the metaphor of a 'clean sweep' and the methodical movement of the action of sweeping itself.

Sehnaoui's practice is characterised by a subtle combination of a formal approach – hence the obvious heritage of abstract painting and minimalism that she revisits in her work – and a socio-political one guided by strong standpoints hence the direct messages in her work, or titles at times.

Her evocative political installations in public spaces bear comparison with Doris Salcedo's practice, the Colombian sculptor, who also focuses on themes such as individual and collective mourning, forgetting and memory in the context of political assassinations in Columbia. This unbearable emptiness that leaves room to the exercise of memory and that materialises with strong visual elements is common to both artists with the difference that Salcedo alters the meaning of the objects she utilises, whereas Sehnaoui uses the meaning and symbol of the objects in a more literal way, focusing on the impact of her arrangements both visually and in the way they influence and transform the space.

Along the same line is her recent body of work on canvas, *How Many, How Many More*, which is a systematic, repetitive series of vertical coloured stripes achieved with a combination of paint or collaged, shredded maps of the Middle East. These regimented lines refer to statistics from wars in the region, but also blur the borders between Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, which from afar appear as abstract landscapes. The bright coloured lines enumerate victims and count time, yet they also resemble playful patterns or joyful wallpaper. They convey the paradox of dwelling on the pain and liberation inherent in mourning. There is definitely a formal conversation to explore between *How Many, How Many More* and Jasper John's newsprint collages and crosshatch prints (*Cicada*, 1979) or with more contemporary works of McArthur Binion, which includes birth certificates, address books and other personal documents in the composition's strong vertical grids in his *DNA* series (2013).

The Lebanese artist, alongside her peers who contributed to the shaping of a nascent Post War Lebanese art scene in the early 1990s – responded to the aftermath of the war with works probing memory, history, the place of the archive and questioning the consequences of amnesia without thriving on a direct post-traumatic approach. A substantial body of critical discourse has flourished about Post War Lebanese contemporary practice and these narrative, conceptual and post-conceptual endeavours have contributed to the fertile, global debate on the contemporary art field. While this discourse commonly underscored post-conceptual inquiries and the relationship between narrative and image – whether photography, video or post-documentary aesthetics – it doesn't adequately tackle those practices that shared concerns about memory, history and the archive on a more formal level, which in this exhibition is eloquently counterbalanced through Sehnaoui's works.

Text by Amanda Abi Khalil