

An Open Interview Responding to Self-Addressed Questions

Gilbert Hage and Jalal Toufic

[Gilbert Hage:] Why have you started with Gilbert Hage the publishing house Underexposed Books?

Jalal Toufic: Underexposed Books complements my project Forthcoming Books, which publishes books that are yet to become available for reading or viewing even after their publication; it presents a *different* sort of works whose reception is minimal. And it presents them in the same size in which they would (otherwise) be exhibited, thus if not completely skipping exhibition then at least minimizing it—wall exhibition of photographs should for the most part be limited to the ones that are too large to be feasibly placed in a book. The photographs that appear in Gilbert Hage's *Toufican Ruins?* were originally exhibited in December 2006 (at the University of Balamand under the title *Homeland I*) in a size (43 x 52 cm) that is basically the same as (actually slightly smaller than) the one in which they were published as spreads in the book (47 x 60 cm). From this perspective, a second edition of *Toufican Ruins?* by Underexposed Books seems out of the question, since, following the book's publication in March 2010, Hage has recently exhibited (at the French Cultural Center in Beirut) six of the photographs in a much larger format, one that makes it ostensibly unfeasible to publish them in a book: 220 x 285 cm.

[Gilbert Hage:] What do you think of photographic practice in Lebanon?

Gilbert Hage: As Jules Renard so aptly put it: "Know that you will have made real progress only when you've lost the wish to prove that you have talent." While there have been many photographers in Lebanon who have been deemed to be talented, there haven't been many who have gone beyond that wish. Moreover, the impact of photography as an artistic practice on Lebanese society remains weak. But, not to sound pessimistic, I should mention that a number of my students have managed to make a breakthrough, including in overcoming the sidetracking wish to be recognized as talented, and are tracing their own paths.

[Gilbert Hage:] Your *Eleven Views of Mount Ararat* will be shown in the 10th Sharjah Biennial, 2011; what led you to Mount Ararat?

Gilbert Hage: Ghada Waked, who was working on art project in relation to the Burj Hammoud neighborhood of Beirut, asked me to do a work for the exhibition, which she titled: "Badguèr I: An Event around the Image." What concerned me personally was to explore what, ever since they were forced to leave Anatolia, is transmitted across generations of Armenians. My investigation began with my Armenian friends in Lebanon and around the world. That led me to Mount Ararat. My aim in this project: to explore the relationship between loss, absence, and the image through this mountain rooted in Armenians' [uprooted] individual and collective memory.

[Gilbert Hage:] How did you choose the homes you've photographed?

Gilbert Hage: I chose to photograph the interiors of the homes of writers, artists, theater people, etc.,

because I am convinced that these are the people who transmit collective memory best.

[Gilbert Hage:] Why *Eleven Views of Mount Ararat*?

Gilbert Hage: The title was proposed, indeed insisted upon by Jalal Toufic.

Jalal Toufic: Once Gilbert approved the title, I could write the following: “Referring in its title to the famous series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* by the Japanese artist Hokusai, which was later augmented to forty-six prints and which was produced between 1826 and 1833, Gilbert Hage’s *Eleven Views of Mount Ararat* (2009) depicts another preeminent mountain, one also viewed by many as sacred, this time as it representationally appears in the context of various houses of members of the Armenian community of Lebanon. Could Hage have made a book with thirty-six views, if not forty-six views, of Mount Ararat? Not at this historical point; Hage’s book implies, intertextually and symptomatically, an absence, one that cannot be alleviated simply by photographing additional representational appearances of the mountain (in paintings, drawings, postcards, etc.) by visiting more interiors (in fact, Hage did photograph more than eleven such instances, as is indicated on the acknowledgements page of his book, but he justly did not include them in the book).” I hope that soon enough breakthroughs in the relations between Turkey and Armenia (and Azerbaijan) will make it possible for Hage as a photographer and Underexposed Books as a publisher to do a second, expanded edition of the book, to be re-titled *Thirty-six Views of Mount Ararat* if not *Forty-six Views of Mount Ararat*. I am sure that at least ten of these additional views would show Mount Ararat as it appears not in paintings, drawings or postcards but in physical reality.