

The human-less war
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In 2011, Tagreed Darghouth presented *Canticle of Death*¹. This solo exhibition at Agial Art Gallery in Beirut, consisted of two series of paintings, apparently independent and ultimately linked by the idea of death: nuclear weapons and skulls. Skulls are not something especially new in art history. In the 17th century, French, Spanish, Flemish and Dutch still life masters applied their virtuosity to depict these anatomical shapes inside compositions that included a multiplicity of objects related to arts, science and wealth. These were the vanities, symbolic artworks taking their name from a verse in the Ecclesiastes:

Vanitas vanitatum dixit Ecclesiastes vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas

The *Vanitas* allege that everything, except the love of God, is futile. In opposition with these sophisticated accumulations, Darghouth's skulls do not cohabit with anything. They float over an abstract pattern composed of flowers, stars, leaves or dots. Their sinister and frightening presences convey a fundamental menace towards humanity and should be seen in accordance with what (or who) the young artist previously painted. In 2010, Darghouth showed *Fair and Lovely*, a series of portraits of domestic maids. *Fair and Lovely* also included pictures of women having been subject to plastic surgery. These were already the main topic of *Mirror, Mirror!*, in 2008. From *Mirror, Mirror!* to *Fair and Lovely*, Darghouth was revealing the Lebanese society through its extremes: foreign workers – let's not say slaves – who only exist to serve their masters, and plastic surgery, very popular among the same masters of these workers. We have a confrontation between the inexistent body and the transformed body that attempted to defy time and death. In this perspective, the *Vanitas* is an absolute and definitive response.

The skull is also in dialogue with earlier paintings, the *Broken Dolls*. These disturbing creatures, somehow reminiscent from the Surrealist movement and from Marwan Kassab Bach, who exerted an important influence on Darghouth, were exhibited at Beirut's Goethe Institute after the 33 days war Israel ran against Lebanon in the summer of 2006. Between the *Broken Dolls* and the skulls, spreads is a direct lineage of annihilation materialized by the dismantled body. "My subjects come from a personnel anxiety", says the artist². "This anxiety,

¹ Tagreed Darghouth, *Canticle of Death* (Beirut: Agial Art Gallery), 2011. Essays by Joe Tarrab and Myrna Ayad.

² Tagreed Darghouth, interview with the author, 13 May 2016.

overshadowed by the question of death, is related to my personal experience of war”³. Born in 1979, Darghouth grew up in Saida, near the Palestinian camp of Ain el-Hilweh. “Our house was a little paradise, with a garden, but this paradise was under permanent threat: There was a luggage near the door, filled of necessities, always ready, in case we had to escape”⁴. Interestingly, at least two other major Lebanese artists shared a disquiet youth in the same neighborhood. Hanibal Srouji spent his childhood in Ain el-Hilweh. During the late 1960s and early and mid 1970s, he witnessed the increase of military activities: “this part of the country became a regular target of random Israeli raids. Nobody, or very few, cared about the fate of the locals and the refugees living in a world of fear and misery completely alienated from the seeming normalcy of the capital city”⁵. Saida, also home of Akram Zaatari, is largely present in his work. *Saida, June 6 1982* (2009) is a large composite picture depicting a landscape of hills under the bombs of the Israeli air force, on the first day of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Tagreed Darghouth, who is younger than Srouji and Zaatari, needed more time to become fully conscious of her unease. “The 2006 war made these ghosts emerge”, she explains⁶.

So, back to *Canticle of Death*, the skulls unfold a double reading: death in general, and death within war. Nevertheless, there is something very significant in this series. Contrarily to most of the Lebanese artists who evoked the theme of war (including Srouji and Zaatari, and also Ayman Baalbaki, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige or Walid Raad), nothing has any visual or narrative link with the territory. It could be anytime, anywhere. This also fetches a distance with Holbein’s *Ambassadors*, a double portrait including the anamorphosis of a skull that relates to the idea of vanity but is moreover a poignant representation of political and confessional unrest in 16th century France and Great Britain.

This is where the other part of *Canticle of Death* should be looked at: it explores the history of nuclear bombs. There are portraits of scientists and politicians who were involved in the development of the program: Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Katherine Puening Harrison and Robert J. Oppenheimer. These portraits bare titles such as *Fat Man*, *Thin Man* and *Katie*, in reference to the fact that the first nuclear bombs were named after these people, so that one could perhaps humanize killing devices⁷. There are also pictures – we could even say portraits – of the bombs themselves, executed after the official photographs, baring their respective names: *Polaris*, *Conifer*, *Green Flag*. There are finally spectacular and apocalyptic views of explosions. Always based on archive photographs, these end of the world images have very poetic titles such as *Rainbow*, the codename given by the British government to its post Second World War development project⁸. Later on, Darghouth will add craters, in other words, the physical consequences of these impacts on the landscape. What is intriguing, in our eyes, is the fact, that instead of interrogating the history of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gregory Buchakjian and Sary Tadros, *Hanibal Srouji. Painting fire, water, earth and air* (Beirut: Galerie Janine Rubeiz and Les éditions de L’Orient-Le Jour, 2013), p. 53.

⁶ Darghouth, interview with the author, 13 May 2016.

⁷ Myrna Ayad, “Ad mortem festinamus (To death we are hastening)”, in *Canticle of Death*.

⁸ Ibid.

Lebanon and the Arab World, Tagreed Darghouth was reexamining the quest for mass destruction and the equilibrium of terror in the 1940s and 50s, a not specially contemporary theme that had been the subject of many interpretations including Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964) and Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976).

On another hand, when we viewed this series for the first time, we were completing the writing of *War and other (Impossible) Possibilities*, a book questioning the relation between Arab contemporary art and the historical and political events that shake the region since the mid 20th century. Here, transpired a strong resonance between these paintings and our particularly pessimistic sixth and last chapter, entitled "The collapse of the stellar universe will occur like creation – in grandiose splendor". We borrowed this sentence, a quote by Blaise Pascal, from Werner Herzog who used it to introduce *Lessons of Darkness*, a documentary film shot in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of Kuwait (1992). The first part of the film (Ein Hauptstadt) consists of high-angle shots of Kuwait city, still alive and intact, "that will soon be laid waste by war". Part II (Der Krieg) is based on green-tinted media images of the airborne bombings of Iraq. Part III (Nach der Schlakht) features landscapes of post-war desolation and wrecked oil and telecommunication facilities⁹. Then, during three quarters of an hour, Herzog's camera depicts the apocalyptic views of Kuwaiti oil wells on fire. Both these shots and Darghouth's nuclear explosions paintings are hallucinating. They remind us the terrible specter of extermination that floats over our civilization and led us to end our book by these words: "it is terrifying and sublime"¹⁰.

Two years after *Canticle of Death*, Tagreed Darghouth disclosed *Vision Machines, Shall You See Me Better Now?*¹¹. This solo show was articulated on cameras, drones and satellites. The mood had apparently shifted from the fear of mass destruction into post September 11 era obsessed by civilian and military surveillance. While satellites have been scrutinizing and documenting the whole world, from agricultural lands to government buildings, CCTV's have multiplied everywhere, from supermarkets to automated cash machines. Then, drones, taking shapes of airplanes, helicopters or Zeppelins, have been infesting the air, spying over the enemy but also on political demonstrations, and even threatening civilian air traffic. There might be something ironic about this compulsive surveillance. In the late 1990s, Walid Raad and his imaginary Atlas Group produced *I Only Wish That I Could Weep*, a short video of sunsets over the sea with the following statement:

This 'document' is attributed to a Lebanese Army intelligence officer, Operator #17, who was assigned to monitor the Corniche, a seaside boardwalk in Beirut. From 1996 onwards, and for some unknown

⁹ An extensive image library of the destructions that occurred in Kuwait from August 1990 to February 1991 is provided by Kuwait Invasion: The Evidence. Online [[http:// www.evidence.org.kw](http://www.evidence.org.kw)], accessed 25 May 2016.

¹⁰ Gregory Buchakjian, *War and Other (Impossible) Possibilities. Thoughts on Arab History and Contemporary Art* (Beirut: Alarm, 2012), p. 115.

¹¹ Tagreed Darghouth, *Vision Machines, Shall You See Me Better Now?* (Beirut: Agial Art Gallery), 2011. Essay by Aya Alameddine.

reasons, the officer decided to videotape the sunset instead of his assigned targets. The videotape was donated by Operator #17 to The Atlas Group in 1998¹².

While Raad's piece was based on the supposition that we were under surveillance, fifteen years later surveillance became evidence. Although there may be something casual in his document, as social media or even voyeurism might be considered as casual, surveillance is silently and ineluctably taking over contemporary societies.

Everything from mobile phones to passports is fitted with microchip radio frequency tags that have the potential to turn their hosts into tracking devices. (...) Citizens and subjects are thus mobilized for militarized control and conscripted into neoliberal consumption systems which encourage them to consume for the good of the economy (...) while at the same offering up their 'data selves' for continuous, pre-emptive analysis, tracking, profiling, targeting and threat assessment.¹³

Moreover, systematic surveillance of people, places and goods - whatever are the official reasons of civic or economic security - is definitely in dialectic of war.

War has long fed the drive for new surveillance technologies, to gain advantage over one's enemies. (...) Attempts to take surveillance photographs of the enemy during the war from that vantage met with no success, however, until it became clear that airborne photography could be achieved more safely and effectively without the photographer's presence - whether by balloon, kite, or even carrier pigeon¹⁴.

Drones, satellites and electronic spying are accomplishing the dream of empires, as enounced by a US Air Force officer: "projecting power without projecting vulnerability". What is specific to drones is that these are not only observers, but also weapons. As Grégoire Chamayou points out:

For a very long period of time in the history of military empires, projecting power meant sending troops. This equation was to be broken. Preservation through the drone proceeds through the retreat of the vulnerable body (...). We can see here the accomplishment of an ancient desire that animates ballistic weapons: increasing one's length in a way to attain the enemy in a distance, before this latter has the possibility of doing it. But the specificity of the drone is that it plays on another segment of distance. Between the leverage, on which one's finger is pushing, and the gun, out of which the bullet will get out, lie thousands of kilometers¹⁵.

¹² The Atlas Group / Walid Raad, I Only Wish That I Could Weep, Darat al Funun. Online [http://thekhalidshomanfoundation.org/main/activit/curentl/art_lebanon/8.htm], accessed 25 May 2016.

¹³ Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (New York: Verso, 2011), pp. 66-7.

¹⁴ Sandra S Phillips, « Surveillance », in *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera* (London: Tate, 2010), p. 141.

¹⁵ Grégoire Chamayou, *Théorie du drone* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2013), p. 23.

In this prospect, *Vision Machines, Shall You See Me Better Now?* is the continuation of *Canticle of Death*. The realm of mass destruction weapon is completed by the human-less weapon, that doesn't require sending troops on the ground, in the air or by the seas. The soldier stays home and pilots, across oceans, a flying device (the drone) or a robot fighting in the streets of a besieged city. As announced in the videos of Harun Farocki, the art of war is a video game. There will be no body, no corpse, except the one of the enemy, who only exists to be suppressed. One day, the soldier piloting from a distance will, himself, be replaced by an application and "it is only logical that decisions over life and death will increasingly be transferred to the machine - just as soon as engineers have figured out how to overcome the problem of distinguishing between friends and foes"¹⁶. During the 20th century, from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968), the human like machine was a dream and a nightmare that belonged to science fiction. Nowadays, science fiction became reality, leading to a series of moral and philosophical questions such as: "Who should we try for a war crime in such a case? 'The robot itself? The person(s) who programmed it? The officer who ordered its use? No one at all?"¹⁷.

Once we are definitively removed from the realm of direct or indirect observation of synthetic images created by the machine for the machine, instrumental virtual images will be for us the equivalent of what a foreigner's mental pictures already represent: an enigma. Having no graphic or videographic outputs, the automatic-perception prosthesis will function like a kind of mechanized imaginary from which, this time, we would be totally excluded¹⁸.

From Antiquity to September 11, depiction of war included bodies: Heroes, warriors, and victims. The paintings of Tagreed Darghouth display the new order: a war of sophisticated machines and their devastating consequences, without human beings.

¹⁶ Jörg Blech, "Attack of the Killer Robots", *Der Spiegel*, 15 August 2007. Online [<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-future-of-war-attack-of-the-killer-robots-a-500140-2.html>], accessed 25 May 2016.

¹⁷ Robert Sparrow, "Killer Robots", *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 24: 1, 2007, p. 67. Online [<http://staffwww.dcs.shef.ac.uk/people/A.Sharkey/Sparrow.pdf>], accessed 25 May 2016.

¹⁸ Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington ; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 60.