

## New Beirut river exhibition, Under-Writing Beirut is flooded with insight

A lost waterway in the Lebanese capital is the starting point for an artistic exploration of the city's complex history, writes India Stoughton



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The Beirut River no longer lives up to its name. Where water once flowed, attracting families who would cool off with a swim in summer, a filthy trickle of sludge now oozes down the middle of the wide concrete canal separating Beirut's wealthy Achrafieh neighbourhood from the city's eastern suburbs.

In *Under-Writing Beirut*, Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige takes the river and its urban surroundings as the starting point for an in-depth exploration of the area's complex history, its development as an industrial sector and its current, rapid gentrification.

Joreige's work seeks to find a point of encounter between personal experience and collective memory, often weaving together documentary and fictive elements. In *Under-Writing Beirut*, a multi-year ongoing project, she delves back into the past, uncovering the events and narratives that have shaped the contemporary urban fabric and identity of different neighbourhoods.

"The word 'under-writing' means under the writing," she says. "It evokes the idea of a palimpsest, of digging different layers in specific locations in the city to propose poetic forms, and what stories and narratives come out, based on the different locations, that I can investigate."

The artist began the project in 2013 with *Under-Writing Beirut: Mathaf*, a project exploring the history of her own neighbourhood, named for the National Museum of Beirut. The sculptures, installation and video she produced reflected on the museum's location on the demarcation line that divided Beirut during the 1975-1990 civil war and the material damage done by snipers who occupied the building.

The second and third chapters of the series, *Under-Writing Beirut: Nahr* and *Under-Writing Beirut: Ouzai* are currently on show for the first time in the Lebanese capital, at the Marfa' gallery. Like her exploration of the Mathaf area, Joreige's works inspired by the Beirut River are infused with personal experience. In 2009, Joreige and curator Sandra Dagher founded the Beirut Art Centre in Jisr El-Wati, an industrial neighbourhood explored in a three-channel video installation, *After the River*.

"The installation speaks of the social history of the river through different waves of migrants that started in 1915, and the Armenians, Kurds, Palestinians and later Syrians who settled along the river banks," she says. "Then it focuses on the small area adjacent to the river, around Beirut Art Centre, which is currently being gentrified."

The 20-minute film tracks how the area has changed, via interviews with an elderly industrialist whose family used to own a metalworking factory beside the river and the Syrian janitor of the Beirut Art Centre. Much of the film focuses on the thousands of Syrian labourers who work on the construction sites, slowly transforming the fabric of the neighbourhood from derelict factories into prime residential real estate.

As in cities all over the world, pioneering art venues – including Beirut Art Centre, Ashkal Alwan and Station – have helped to attract visitors and transform perceptions of the neighbourhood. Now, they are becoming the victims of gentrification. "I see it with sadness. Unfortunately, without knowing, we probably contributed to the gentrification of the area," Joreige says. "The Beirut Art Centre will have to leave and relocate because of the costs, because it's becoming a residential area; because the land is worth much more now."

Accompanying the installation is a series of delicate drawings in wax, pencil, pastel and crayon, based on the topography of the river in different maps of the city. Meandering lines bloom suddenly into patches of colour that evoke flowers or the interior of the human body – an inflated lung, the meandering patterns of blood vessels or the curves and bulges of a brain.

In the next room, the *Ouzai* chapter of her work takes a different direction. With no personal link to *Ouzai*, Joreige spent many hours interviewing local residents. The stories they told her, along with information gleaned from legal and historical documents, is conveyed through a series of 15 pencil drawings accompanied by typed blocks of text, entitled *A Brief History of Ouzai*.

Joreige delves into legal battles over the ownership of the land as far back as 1856. In the 1950s, when settlers from the Bekaa Valley and south Lebanon began to build on Ouzai's pristine sand dunes, a court ruled that the land was private, triggering a spate of illegal building. Massive expansion occurred in the 1970s, when thousands of villagers from south Lebanon were driven from their homes by Israeli incursions, many eventually settling in Beirut's southern suburbs.

Joreige shares the stories of several members of the prominent Nasser family, among the earliest settlers of Ouzai. Salah Nasser recalls how as a child in 1973, he witnessed an Israeli attack in which two of his uncles were killed and his brother was shot in the leg. The attack destroyed their family home, which had been used as a base by Palestinian fighters.

The headmaster of a local school says that people from surrounding areas used to come to Ouzai to eat in its fish restaurants and swim in the sea, before over-population led to sewage being dumped into the water. "I haven't swam in Ouzai for 30 years," he says.

Joreige was drawn to study Ouzai in part because of its hazy legal status. "It's a very complex place that has transformed so much over the years, from sand dunes to almost a slum," she says. "It's a microcosm of the problems we deal with in Lebanon, such as the urban fabric and density of population, construction, displacement, sectarianism, infrastructure, the relationship between the state and the community, the limits of the state and the complex relationships between public and private."

A series of four digital collages entitled Ouzai: Cartography of a Transformation, is based on aerial photographs of the neighbourhood taken between 1956 and this year. Joreige has stitched together overlapping photos to convey the gradual transformation of Ouzai.

Under-Writing Beirut is an eye-opening exhibition. Through a mixture of personal experience, archival research, oral testimony and imagination, Joreige reveals the hidden histories that have shaped the modern city and the memories and narratives that underpin its contemporary identity.

Under-Writing Beirut continues at Marfa' in Beirut until December 29

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