



Partial installation view of drawings from the series "THE RIVER," 2015-16, part of the project "Under-Writing Beirut — Nahr" (2013-16), three channel installation, drawings, and video, dimensions variable.

Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy the artist.

DIAGNOSIS OF THE PRESENT LAMIA JOREIGE

FEATURES BY HG MASTERS FROM SEP/OCT 2017

The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten.

—Teju Cole, *Open City*

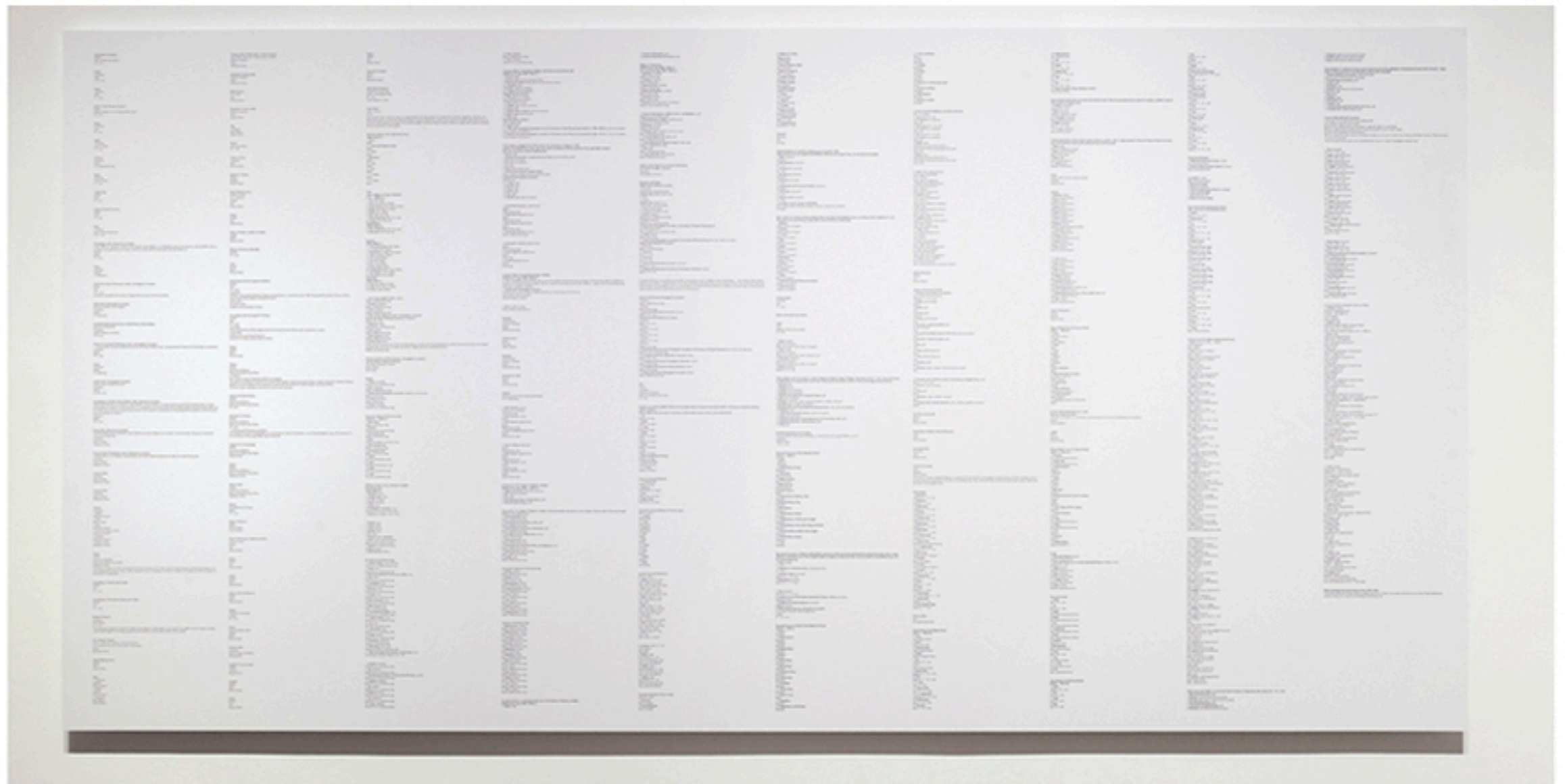
How much do we really know about the places around us, about what has made them what they are? With populations becoming increasingly urban over the 20th century—last year, the United Nations estimated that 54.5 percent of the world lives in urban areas today, compared to 33 percent in 1960—the migration to, and within, cities has shaped the built environment of neighborhoods and their social fabric, even while the forces propelling those changes remain largely unseen. Along the way, history is forgotten or obscured, even as it imparts an intangible legacy on people's daily lives. In Beirut, like many cities in the 21st century, the rapid mass-urbanization of the postwar period to more than 86 percent of Lebanon's population, has produced complex new communities, with many still living in informal settlements in neighborhoods highly stratified by religion or religious sect, social affiliation and class. More recently, refugees and migrants are reshaping the city's demographics at street level, while a speculative real-estate boom has sprouted glass-and-steel towers, as in so many cities around the world.



Exhibition view of the installation **UNDER-WRITING BEIRUT — MATHAF** at "Lamia Joreige: Records for Uncertain Times," Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York, 2015.

Trying to understand why places are the way they are, and how their residents gathered and formed, has been at the heart of Lamia Joreige's artistic and filmmaking practice since the mid-1990s, when she returned to Beirut after studying in France and then at the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. The Lebanon she was returning to at that time was beginning its recovery. The country had officially declared an end to the fighting that had partitioned the country into shifting warring fiefdoms and occupied territories since 1975. The infamous decision by the parliament in March 1991 to declare an official amnesty for all belligerents effectively meant that many events of the wars were not investigated, and the warlords heading the country's political factions would remain in power. (Joreige, like many others of her generation, dislikes calling the conflict the "Lebanese Civil War" because, she noted, it involved regional and international states; both Syria and Israel invaded and occupied parts of Lebanon.) In the meantime, much of the city destroyed in the fighting was slowly being rebuilt: concrete bandages on un-healed wounds.

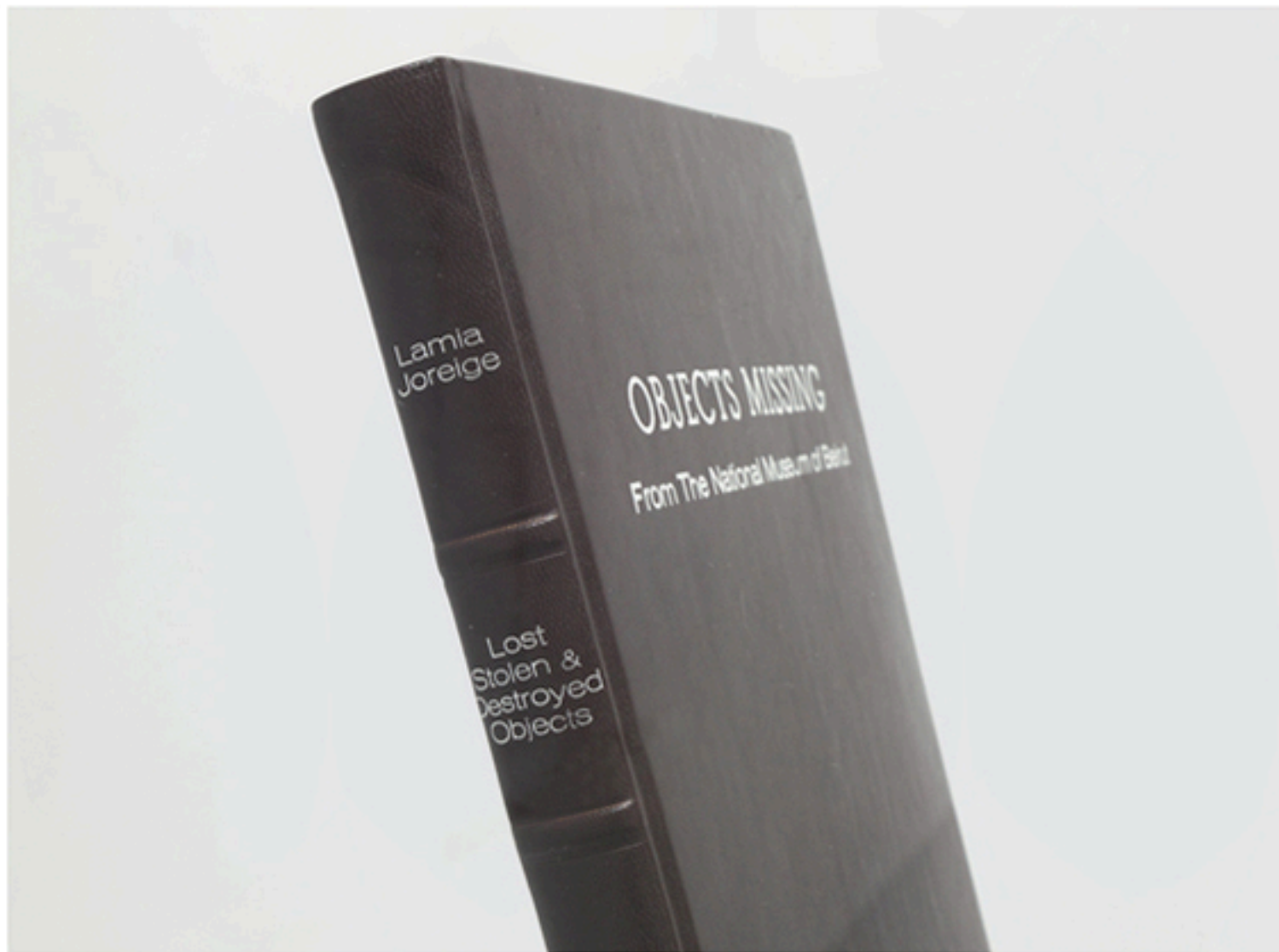
The city as a palimpsest—a surface that has been written on and erased many times—is a metaphor that Joreige likes. In 2013, the artist embarked on a three-part project about specific areas of the city that she calls "Under-Writing Beirut." She explained to me its concept when we had a conversation in February: "The idea is if you look specifically into a location, if you dig into it—you know I move from different fields, from archaeology to sociology and documentary practice—and search for its history from the present, you'll see the different layers. Some you won't see because they are no longer apparent. The trace has been erased but they exist in their absence."



Exhibition view of **ALL THE OBJECTS FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF BEIRUT**, 2013, part of the project "Under-Writing Beirut — Mathaf" (2013), at the Artes Mundi 7 prize exhibition, Cardiff National Museum, United Kingdom, 2016–17. Photo by Jamie Woodley. Copyright Artes Mundi 7.

She started with her own neighborhood. Looking out of her apartment window in Beirut, Joreige can see the National Museum of Beirut, a building and institution whose function is to collect objects and preserve history. Developed in the 1930s yet not opened until 1942, the museum is home to a significant collection of ancient sarcophagi and antiquities dating to before Phoenician times in the first millennium BCE, but it represents modern Lebanon's history in other, unintended ways too. At the outbreak of fighting, the building lay at a major checkpoint along the "Green Line" that divided east and west Beirut during the war. Combatants wrecked the museum during the conflict, using it as a barracks and sniper perch and strafing its exterior. Although the museum's director had placed part of the collection in the basement and walled it off with concrete, as well as encasing heavier objects and large mosaics in concrete shells, many objects and artifacts were still looted or damaged beyond repair—though how many, and which ones exactly, remains unknown to the public even today.

Like so many other episodes of the Lebanese civil wars, the details remain undisclosed, shrouded in conflicting accounts and controversy. Joreige's artistic investigations and interventions portray the current situation of the museum. In our conversation, Joreige explained that she had visited the museum with the aim to study its collection, which supposedly holds 100,000 pieces, though it has no exact inventory, at least not one available to the public. She mentioned that the museum director was helpful at first but then refused to give her access to anything not on display; she was even denied access to the storage to see the works damaged by the war. The only object that Joreige was allowed to see before the public did was the so-called Good Shepherd mosaic and a photograph of it from after the conflict era, when a sniper had punched a hole in the wall at the mosaic's lower-left corner in order to have a view of the east-west checkpoint.



Exhibition view of **OBJECTS MISSING FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF BEIRUT**, 2013, part of the project "Under-Writing Beirut — Mathaf" (2013), at the Artes Mundi 7 prize exhibition, Cardiff National Museum, United Kingdom, 2016–17. Photo by Jamie Woodley. Copyright Artes Mundi 7.

Joreige saw this situation—in which she could only see what had already been sanctioned for the public eye—as an apt metaphor for the country's history. She documented the visual fact of this limited access by photographing the labels of every object on view on December 15, 2012, and then reproduced the captions in a large print format. She also produced a leather-bound book titled *Objects Missing from the National Museum of Beirut* (2013), which compiles stories and reports of objects that were once in the collection and whose present situation couldn't be confirmed. From the Good Shepherd mosaic, Joreige created her own concrete sculpture, *Object of War* (2013), whose tree-trunk-like form is a three-dimensional model of the hole (based on old photographs, sketches and her measurements), and encapsulates the emptiness left behind despite reconstruction. A companion piece, the video *180 Degree Garden View* (2013), shows a peaceful garden filled with large artifacts seen through the snipers's peephole, now so hard to imagine. As Joreige has written about the project:

Today, although many of the tensions and issues that led to the Lebanese wars persist unresolved and unchanged, the landscape of the country, and particularly of Beirut, has been radically altered. Following the city's large-scale reconstruction, what remains for us to consider or appropriate from the era of the wars, and how should it be handled? Even now, in its resemblance to its pre-war form, the museum continues to be haunted by lingering traces, tormented by the layers of death it carries within its folds whose ghosts must be summoned and remains must be exhumed.



Partial installation view of **OBJECTS OF WAR**, 1999–, multimedia installation, dimensions variable, from the artist's solo exhibition "Ici et peut-être ailleurs" at Nicéphore Niépce Museum, France, 2003. Courtesy the artist and Nicéphore Niépce Museum.

The project that first earned Joreige wide acclaim was her stillongoing work called *Objects of War* (1999–), which to date comprises six video interviews, each roughly 60 to 90 minutes long, made with a cast of friends and acquaintances. Many are recognizable figures from the Lebanese art community, such as artists Tarek Atoui, Lina Saneh, Akram Zaatari and Rabih Mroué, curator Rasha Salti and gallerist Saleh Barakat. For each interview, Joreige asked her subject to select an ordinary object that was important to them during the war, and which became a starting point for their reflections on the time. Whenever the work is displayed, the objects themselves are shown in vitrines along with the videos, as they were in the New Museum exhibition "Here and Elsewhere" in 2014. As Joreige explained to me, "In 1998, I had this idea that maybe the objects speak for themselves, because they were always in our conversation—the radio, the torch light, the cards. It also may have started with an object that was very dear to me, which was thrown away and which was given to me when I was a kid by my uncle who disappeared. I felt that if this loss of an object were symbolic for me, then there must be ones for others. Everyone around me had experienced the war, and I felt that the only way to have a history of the war was to have peoples' stories, to hear the human experience from as many diverse perspectives as I could."

The project made sense to people, Joreige told me, because the objects and memories were enmeshed and thus became a way to make physical specific stories. Zeina Arida, for instance, discussed a Miss Piggy backpack, which she always carried down into the bomb shelter; Akram Zaatari found an audiotape that contained recordings from his hometown of Saida from the election of Bachir Gemayel, with sounds of celebratory gunfire and music by the Bee Gees. Joreige's grandmother donated a pouch where she always kept her money. Over time, the process of interviewing her acquaintances itself bore traces of contemporaneous events in Lebanon. The videos produced in 2006, Joreige said, are different because the reflections were all impacted by the Israeli war on Lebanon that year. There are certain interviews that still move her to tears, even today, though she wouldn't disclose which ones. She explained in a lecture at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, where she was a fellow: "It became clear to me that the only way to approach presenting and narrating the Lebanese wars at that moment was to abandon the quest for a complete narrative or an absolute truth. I could only propose attempts, fragments of chronicles, relative truth and first-person accounts of the extraordinary and the banal, all of which underline the gaps and losses in history and in the process of remembering."



Mazen Kerbaj's drawing from video **OBJECT OF WAR NO. 4**, 2006: 72 min, from *Objects of War* (1999–).



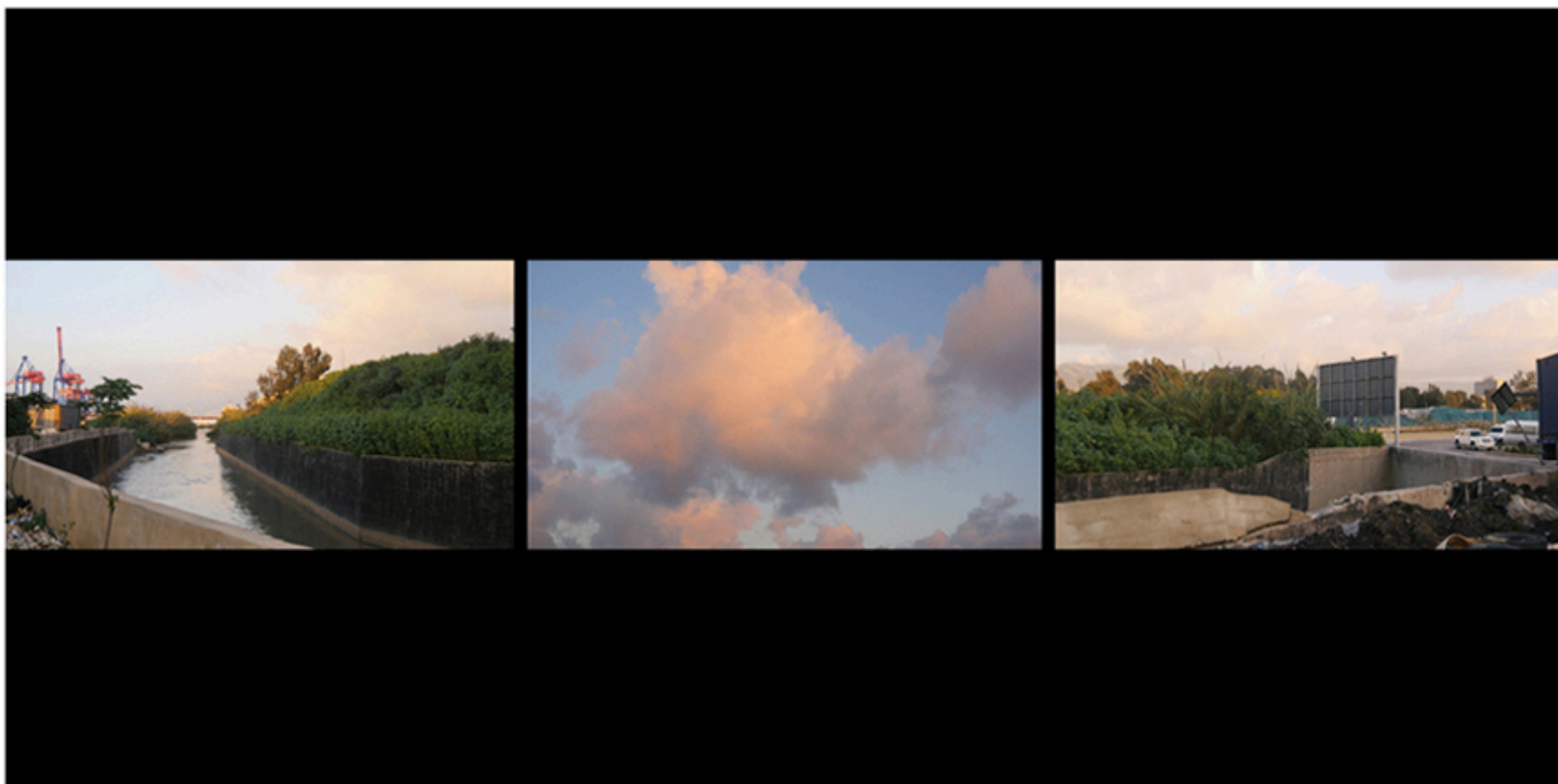
HERE AND PERHAPS ELSEWHERE, 2003, stills from video: 54 min.



HERE AND PERHAPS ELSEWHERE, 2003, stills from video: 54 min.

If *Objects of War* is rooted in the voluntary testimonies of people Joreige knew, *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003) is a more audacious foray into public spaces and into the lives of strangers. In 2002, Joreige spent three weeks filming at locations along the former “Green Line” boundary between east and west Beirut, interviewing people nearby with the question: “Do you know of anyone who was kidnapped here during the war?” More than 17,000 people had gone missing during the wars and never returned, including her maternal uncle who was kidnapped near the Green Line. She used archival photographs of the old checkpoints, including the one in Mathaf, the area near the National Museum, and tried to find them again in the post-millennium city amid its redevelopment. The resulting 54-minute video shows a spectrum of uncomfortable reactions, with people often initially saying they didn’t know anyone but then telling a story that sounds personal nonetheless. Only toward the end of the film does it become clear that Joreige is also looking for someone, in an interview with an elderly couple who reference the disappearance of her maternal uncle. While embarking on this quest to reconstruct the past even in its willfully or naturally forgotten state—by using old photographs and asking people for their stories, Joreige observes that the film would be completely different if she made it today. The politics and populations of the city have changed, memories have faded, and there are new struggles now. “So in that sense, it is also really a diagnosis of the present,” she said.

That tension, or relation, between the historical and the present, animates the second chapter of “Under-Writing Beirut,” which is called *Nahr* (“river” in Arabic). Here, Joreige looks at the eastern neighborhood of Jisr el-Wati along the Beirut River, which is the former peripheral area that became home to the Beirut Art Center (BAC) that Joreige co-founded with Sandra Dagher in 2009, and directed for five years. Shown in Cardiff where Joreige had been nominated for the Artes Mundi 7 prize, in 2016, and then at Radcliffe in February, the three-channel video captures a drive along the dry, concrete-lined riverbed, as well as images of the construction workers (many of whom are Syrians who escaped the war) who are building the new glass-walled high-rises in the district. Joreige also interviews a man whose family used to own land in the area, and the BAC’s janitor who also came from Syria. While the river was used as a trash-dumping ground by the government during a recent political crisis and as a focal point of the “You Stink” protests, Jisr el-Wati is now being aggressively gentrified. “I wanted to go more into the social history of the river,” Joreige tells me, “but also I was very interested in the transformation because I was witnessing it. I wanted the possibility of having a different understanding of the geography. Where you could render a geography that is more ‘sensorial’; and at the same time would give you the various perspectives on different points of view.” In addition to the film, Joreige created a series of drawings with wax, pastels and dry pigments, starting with the topography of the river, which becomes more organic and abstract, recalling flowers, microscopic cells and bodily organs.



AFTER THE RIVER, 2016, part of the project “Under-Writing Beirut — Nahr” (2013-16), three-channel video: 20 min.

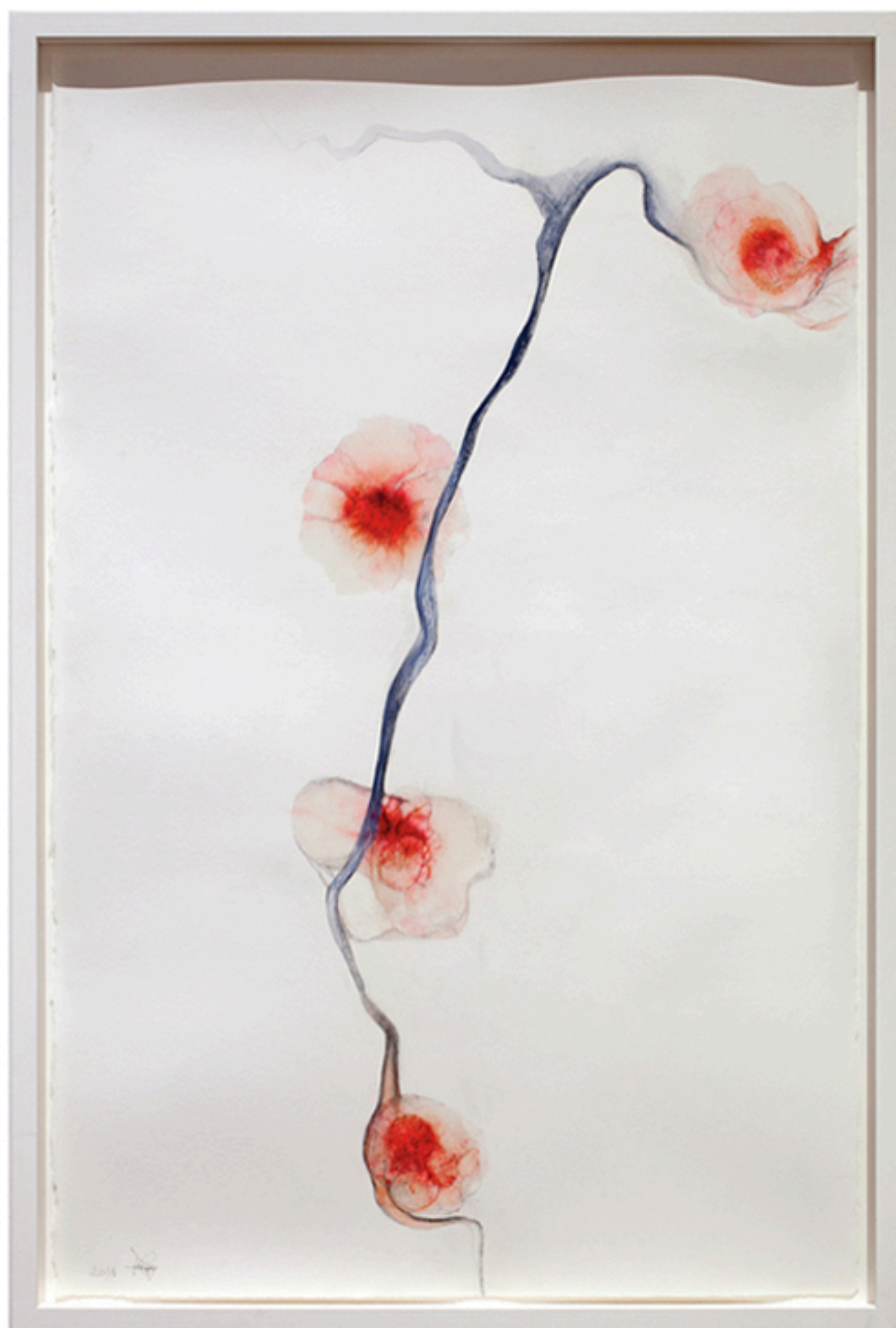


BEIRUT, 1001 VIEWS, 2010, chapter two, from the project "Beirut, Autopsy of a City" (2010), still from silent black-and-white video: 16 min (looped).

The precariousness of life in Beirut has been a persistent subject for Joreige, and appears most prominently in an earlier three-part project "Beirut, Autopsy of a City" (2010) that prefigured "Under-Writing Beirut." The first chapter, *A History of Beirut's Possible Disappearance*, comprises found photographs and videos related to moments from history when the city came close to devastation. The second part is an animated video, *Beirut, 1001 Views*, made up of collaged images from throughout history, that show the steady transformation of the city from a vantage point overlooking the nearly unchanging Mediterranean. The third, another video, titled *Beirut, 2058*, depicts a calm, empty coastline resembling Beirut's— though the city is gone—accompanied by a post-apocalyptic, first-person narrative. What has happened to the city, whether its demise was natural or unnatural, is unexplained.

Perhaps the piece in which Joreige most effectively captures the mood of her home city is the 74-minute feature film *And the Living Is Easy* (2014), set in 2011 when many Arab countries in the region were going through various upheavals while Lebanon remained, as Joreige says, "strangely quiet." Joreige imagined five characters—a sales executive, a musician, an artist, an actress and a singer inhabiting a listless Beirut, showing the pleasures and pains of their lives, and their conflicted sentiments about the city. She cast mainly non-actors to restage, or re-create, actual events from their own lives over the course of eight months of filming. The characters themselves often reflect on issues relating to the city's history. For instance, singer Mireille (Mireille Kassar) and her friend, electronic musician Tarek (Tarek Atoui), engage in a debate about whether memorial sites should be created in Beirut, with Tarek saying they are pointlessly abstract and that, in that case, one-third of the city should be designated a sacred area, while Mireille argues that in a relentlessly developing city, some places should be protected from change. Firas (Firas Beydoun) is filmed sharing coffee with an old friend at a coastal café in the southern suburb of Ouzaï, lamenting the decline of the area and watching flights landing at the nearby Beirut International Airport. "I had this idea: how could I capture this specific moment in Beirut history and life that appeared to me as a suspended moment because Beirut was really stagnating," said Joreige. "There was no script because I wanted the 'now' to come from the actors themselves."

Filming Firas's story took Joreige to Ouzaï, which became the subject of the third part of "Under-Writing Beirut," which she was working on over the past year while at Radcliffe. The area is named after an 8th-century Sunni imam and prolific lawmaker, Abdirahman Ouzaï, and was largely composed of sand dunes until the 1950s, but is now a densely populated



RIVER 9, 2016, from the series "The River" (2015-16), wax, pigments, pastels and crayons on Vellin d'Arche paper, 100 × 65 cm. Photo by Jamie Woodley. Copyright Artes Mundi 7.

area of quasi-legal settlements for many of Lebanon's migrant populations, including Palestinians who fled or were forced out when the state of Israel was founded in 1948 and in subsequent conflicts. It is home to several traditionally marginalized groups, including once-rural Shiite communities from the south, and is known as the base of Hezbollah's political power in the country. While still compiling her research and materials, Joreige admitted in her lecture at Radcliffe that, "This third chapter might be the most challenging one because the history is intensely charged with sociopolitical complications and tensions at the heart of the situation of Lebanon. Indeed, when researching Ouzaï's history, one sees its uniqueness. Yet many parallels with the country as a whole can be made. And the feeling of being in a dead-end situation with no solutions prevails."



AND THE LIVING IS EASY, 2014, still from video: 74 min.

For as long as she has been an artist, Joreige has had a primary instinct to make a diagnosis about her surroundings, regardless of whether or not her subject—that is, Lebanon—is living, dead, or in a halfway state like a zombie. As she said, "For me it was like an obsession. I was three when the war started, so the only thing I wanted to do as an artist was talk about what happened and the experience of it." But this thinking about the war, and the city as it survived and was recovering from the war, also quickly became a way of reflecting on representation itself. "Maybe in the early years of my work, I was interested in rendering a portrait of the city, with the idea that I could possibly represent it in both fragmented narratives and portraits, but it was always more about the idea of representation itself," she said to me. "There's no contradiction, for me, between a portrait of a place and a narrative that comes from a place," she continued, although she emphasized a slight shift in her approach while filming *And the Living Is Easy*, where the city itself—rather than Joreige's own designs—triggers the stories and memories. Perhaps, as Lamia Joreige has realized through her projects, our objects, our cities, our environs, have been speaking all the time, and we are just learning how to listen to them.