

# War, media, tourism and the traces they leave behind

***Randa Mirza presents one body of work at Espace SD and gears up to complete another***

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## ***Interview***

BEIRUT: An experiment in globalization and an exercise in gritty social realism, the latest show to open at the gallery Espace SD in Gemmayzeh is noteworthy on several fronts. At a time when political crisis is crippling cultural life in the Lebanese capital and limiting the ability of arts initiatives to attract international talent to Beirut, "Moving Walls" pulls together well-executed projects by seven accomplished photographers from all over the world.

The exhibition celebrates hard-hitting reportage and social documentary in a milieu that usually shies away from critical, penetrating explorations of real life in favor of bland fantasies in the form of paintings and sculptures that serve as design details for an oblivious bourgeoisie.

One of the strongest shows to go on view at the gallery in recent memory, "Moving Walls" is also Espace SD's penultimate exhibition. In April, gallery director Sandra Dagher is closing her space after a seven-year run and moving on to other projects, such as the creation, in collaboration with artist Lamia Joreige, of a noncommercial contemporary art venue with year-round public programming called the Beirut Art Center.

And, in addition to highlighting the work of such photographers as Gary Fabiano, Andrew Lichtenstein and Edward Grazda, "Moving Walls" marks the first substantial outing for two up-and-coming artists with great promise - Boston-based Lebanese documentarian Rania Mattar and multitalented Beirut-based photographer and video artist Randa Mirza.

Mirza, 28, has offered local audiences only two fleeting glimpses of her work before. Her series of diminutive black-and-white photographs of sun-kissed young men diving off the rocks in Raouche made an appearance in the group show "Shu Tabkha, Ya Mara?" at Art Lounge last June. Her arrestingly clever installation "Remote Control" - a "fake" image of the artist in a Red Cross apron spliced into a Reuters photograph of death and destruction during the war in Lebanon last summer - was part of Espace SD's "Nafas Beirut" show last October. The image plays like a single loop on a television screen,

vibrating ever so slightly, as the artist stares down the viewer with a remote control in hand, as if to say: "Shut off this suffering that is providing your television entertainment."

"Remote Control" marks a turning point in Mirza's career. Early in the summer of 2006, she left Beirut to participate in a residency program in Helsinki. She conceived a project based on war, media and tourism that involved jamming images of primarily pink and rotund tourists into scenes of chaos at some of the world's major flash points, such as Gaza City and Baghdad. The project touched a nerve - the schadenfreude of first-world armchair tourists temporarily touching down on third-world war zones through television news broadcasts masquerading facts as entertainment programming, or vice versa.

But then when the war broke out in Lebanon on July 12, Mirza found herself a tourist too, watching the conflict unfold from Finland.

"When the war started I stopped this project," says Mirza. "I woke up and realized I am a tourist in this war ... So I started thinking about how I could put myself in the picture."

The 88 images installed now at Espace SD, however, come from an earlier project called "Abandoned Rooms." The series, beautifully composed with a strong conceptual spine, has been exhibited in France and Niger but never, until now, in Lebanon. Seeing it here, it serves as a kind of primer on the development of an artist as an independent entity in Beirut. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb>

"I started photography at university. I had a very good teacher who, for a full year, his course was for us to take pictures and for him to tell us that they weren't good, or that they were okay, or that fine they were getting better, for a full year without anything about technique," Mirza recalls. That teacher was Gilbert Hage at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALAB).

Mirza wasn't an art student but rather an advertising major. After she graduated in 2002, she went to Paris for two years and messed around with art courses. She returned to Beirut and worked in her chosen field for exactly a day-and-a-half.

"It was a very weird atmosphere," she says, laughing about her ill-fated adventures in advertising. "I wasn't allowed to smoke in the office. The first day I left the office crying, and the second day I went into the office and told [the creative director]: 'I can't do it, I am an artist.'"

Mirza began working on "Abandoned Rooms" shortly after the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005, though her intent was to dig further into the past, into Lebanon's 1975-1990 Civil War, and to explore the traces of the past that remain etched on the surface of the present.

"When I came back from Paris, I thought I had unfinished business with the

war," she says. "When I started doing this project, I felt relieved somehow. And somehow I thought I started a process ... I realized I wanted to continue this work on what happened. I have very badly blacked out memories from my childhood. It's as if I was born when I was 10 years old.

"Here, I went through my memory," she says, gesturing to a set of images from "Abandoned Rooms." "Now I'm angry and I want to start blaming people," she smiles. "I've been reading. This has nothing to do with politics, so now I want to understand politics. Not Lebanese politics but politics in general. I don't understand Lebanese politics."

Having put her project on war, media and tourism aside, Mirza is getting ready to pick it up again. "I stopped working on it for a while because I started reading, because I really didn't want to make spectacular images. I really want to know what I'm talking about and I suddenly feel more responsible. I am starting to realize the potential of how far the work can go."

A few years after canning a career in advertising, Mirza now has an impressive number of projects completed and in progress. It is for lack of a better word heartening to see a young artist, a generation after Walid Raad or Akram Zaatari or Rabih Mroue, developing such a structured practice in the absence of gallery representation or curatorial tutelage.

At the same time, it is both tragic and comic to imagine what the contemporary art scene in Beirut would be like if artists such as Mirza were able to create in a context that afforded options other than reacting to wars, strikes, stalemates and showdowns.

*"Moving Walls" is on view at Espace SD through March 3. For more information on Randa Mirza's work, see [www.randamirza.com](http://www.randamirza.com)*