

Subverting the tourist image to make art

Photos at Hmara exhibition deal with the memory of pre-Civil War Lebanon

By Matthew Mosley

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Review

BEIRUT: In a country where traces of the recent past can be erased by the twin forces of wartime destruction and rampant real estate development, the entangling of memory, reality and photographic representation becomes particularly poignant.

Lebanese 's pre=Civil War past is often called using postcard images from 1950's and 60s. Sometimes hand-tinted from black-and-white photographs, these pictures present saccharine, hyper-real version of Lebanon's glory days.

By contrast the iconic images of the Civil War present apocalyptic visions of horror and pain. The frequency with which the same pictures are encountered, however, dulls their impact over time as they become unsettlingly familiar. (...)

Randa Mirza's series "Parallel Universes" builds up strata of imagery with the intention not to display the layering process but to conceal it as far as possible.

Using photographs from Lebanon's Civil War, as well as Israel's 2006 air and sea bombardment, Mirza has overlaid snapshots from holidays in Barcelona, Helsinki and France during 2005 and 2006.

One image shows a fresh-faced blonde turning with a grin towards the camera, making the peace=sign with her fingers. Behind her is a tank flanked by men in fatigues and an old woman collecting water with a jerry can.

Another shows a group of orange-wigged revelers, sporting heart-shaped sunglasses and matching outfits, distributed amid the drifting smoke and chaotic crowds of an inner-city explosion.

The technical skill of Mirza's images leaves the viewer unsure as to where the original image ends and the superposition begins, bringing into sharp relief questions of the crossover between suffering and entertainment.

In an era when Western youths incorporate Cambodia's killing field into their Southeast Asian travel itineraries, or visit the Middle East to see real-life conflict zones, these questions are incredibly pertinent. Mirza's images have wider applications, with death and suffering forming the backbone of popular entertainment worldwide.

There is something nicely subversive about Mirza's exhibition venue. The Tourism Ministry works hard to promote Lebanon as the ultimate leisure destination at the expense of images of the type used in "Parallel Universes". Mirza was offered the space as part of the ongoing Francophone Games: She won the award of best photographer in the games' 2005 edition in Niger. Mirza believes that her pictures tap into the "binary choice" that is offered to the Lebanese: Their country is either a warzone or a holiday destination. In posing these options side by side, Mirza questions the interdependence of the options and also the authenticity of the images that are used in disseminating these facets of Lebanon to its citizens and the world.

"Parallel Universes" can be seen at the Ministry of Tourism. For more information on Randa Mirza's work, see www.randamirza.com