

The Lost Empire

Fouad Elkoury

April 30 – May 29, 2014

The Third Line is pleased to present *The Lost Empire*, Fouad Elkoury's third solo show in Dubai, which presents the artist's photographic journey through abandoned soviet military bases.



Fouad Elkoury, *The Lost Empire, Balaton Airport*, 2010, Chromogenic Print Diasec, 50 x 75 cm

In a practice spanning more than four decades, Fouad's work has come to be associated with documentary photography through lands that have experienced strife – with the landscape and architecture pockmarked with human conflict. The current body of work explores a similar topography of war.

After having decided to document abandoned soviet military bases in 2009, Fouad visited dozens of military bases in Poland, Hungary, Estonia and East Germany between 2010 and 2011. Most were aviation fields; others served separate purposes. And despite having being told there was nothing to photograph there, Fouad found the abandoned desolation far more captivating.

Deserted and invaded by nature, a force far more primal and stronger than weapons of war, the bases have become unserviceable areas of land. The utter silence and emptiness left Fouad the only protagonist in the plot, searching for abandoned stories, and his only ally was light, without which nothing could be seen.

About Fouad Elkoury

Fouad Elkoury has been at the forefront of photographic practices in Lebanon and the wider Middle East for quite some time. In 1982, he covered the Israeli invasion of Beirut and in 1984 published *Beyrouth Aller-Retour*, a book documenting the bomb-shocked city - a prelude to his sophomore project *Beirut City Centre* in 1991, and ignited a distinguished bibliography which continues to this day.

Fouad created the Beirut-based Arab Image Foundation in 1997, and in 2001 introduced video into his repertoire with the film *Lettres à Francine* to accompany the chiaroscuro-esque photographic series *Sombre*, with *Moving Out* (2003) and *Welcome to Beirut* (2005) to follow. His *On Love and War*, a series of journal entries spanning the duration of Israel's onslaught onto Lebanon in august 2006 was shown in Lebanon's first National Pavilion in the Venice Biennale of 2007.

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Fouad has held solo exhibitions at major institutions including Maison Europeenne de la Photographie, Paris; Beirut Art Center, Beirut; Townhouse Gallery, Cairo; Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris. His work has also been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including Centre Pompidou, Paris; and 9th Gwangju, 52nd Venice and 7th Sharjah Biennials. Fouad's works are part of permanent collections as Centre Pompidou in Paris, Maison Europeenne de la Photographie in Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris and Solidere in Beirut.

About The Third Line

The Third Line is a Dubai-based art gallery that represents contemporary Middle Eastern artists locally, regionally and internationally. The Third Line also hosts non-profit, alternative programs to increase interest and dialogue in the region.

The Third Line also publishes books by associated artists from the region. Books published to date include *Presence* by photographer Lamya Gargash (2008), *In Absentia* by Tarek Al-Ghoussein (2009), *Cosmic Geometry*, an extensive monograph on Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Karen Marta (2011), and most recently the self-titled treatise Huda Lutfi about the artist's Cairo based practice.

Represented artists include: Abbas Akhavan, Ala Ebtakar, Amir H. Fallah, Arwa Abouon, Babak Golkar, Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Farhad Moshiri, Fouad Elkoury, Golnaz Fathi, Hassan Hajjaj, Hayv Kahraman, Huda Lutfi, Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, Laleh Khorramian, Lamya Gargash, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Pouran Jinchi, Rana Begum, Sahand Hesamiyan, Sara Naim, Sherin Guirguis, Shirin Aliabadi, Slavs and Tatars, Sophia Al-Maria, Tarek Al-Ghoussein, Youssef Nabil and Zineb Sedira.

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FOUAD ELKOURY – THE LOST EMPIRE

ESSAY

Negar Azimi

MUTE WITNESSES

He always arrived with a bottle of whiskey and a smile, just in case he had any problems getting in. Some encounters were more strange than others. In Hungary, he found dozens of menus scattered around, traces of soldiers' mess halls from five decades before. In Germany, he walked into a warehouse stocked with crisp never-before-used officer fatigues. Somewhere else — he can't remember where — he found young men racing their motorbikes along ancient airplane landing grounds. More often than not, sleepy sentinels—for there were often guards standing about the derelict architectural carcasses — raised their shoulders in sulky indifference to indicate that these abandoned military bases were not of their moment, but rather, that of their parents and grandparents. This was just some job. They didn't have answers to the questions.

It is a queer thing to trace the footprints of great historical epochs. Unlike the photojournalist who yearns to be there in the moment — as the wall falls, when the dictator flees, amid the crowds heaving — the photographer of traces takes his time, thinks hard about the where, and sets out on a long walk. These walks take hours or weeks. Sometimes they take years, for if anything, they are not "timely." The photographer says he has a sort of predisposition and sympathy toward these liminal spaces (for it is not clear if these sites are in a state of becoming or unbecoming). Maybe, he says, it's a sort of a natural affinity. He has set out on journeys not unlike this one in Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Nicosia. In all of these places, the quality of the sound is the same, he says. Silence, it is thunderous, wraps around you like a blanket.

History becomes a puzzle to decipher. Sometimes, a place might unleash an avalanche of memory. When Jacques Austerlitz comes to know pieces of his occluded past in the novel of the same name by W.G. Sebald, he says of a gloomy room in London's Liverpool Street station that it seemed to hold "all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained." Sebald, the Bavarian author who passed away in 2001, may have been the last century's great writer-historian. While his immediate concern seemed to be the still-fresh ravages of the second world war in Europe, it is in and around the gaps of his narratives that this vexed history speaks. Silences are pregnant. Past traumas are subtly alluded to. Objects can be bearers of riddles. Throughout his novels, one encounters ghosts, obfuscations, retellings: the landscape is littered with them. Nothing is addressed head on. There is no clarity. Here he is again, in another novel, *Rings of Saturn*: "We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was."

We do not know how it was. Elegant understatements of past horrors, Elkoury's photographs offer themselves up as Sebaldian traces. And like Sebald's principle character in *Rings of Saturn*, who walks for the length of 300 pages in a heroic zigzag through the British countryside, Elkoury, too, walks. He finds memories jaded. People have died. The curious few are left to sift through the inscrutable wreckage of this modern life.

Sometimes, Elkoury's ruins, if you can call them that, take on the appearance of other ruins we have known. In *Kluczewo*, two bunkers sit in the back of the frame, a little like the squat Mexican pyramids of Teotihuacan. In *Furstenwalde*, pillars from a now-destroyed structure (or was it never built?) approximate long discarded Greco-Roman pillars holding up nothing but sky. And everywhere, there are strange stand-ins for the human forms that once populated these abandoned spaces. In *Gross Doln*, over-tall lamps stand out like attenuated bodies. In *Jutborg*, two ventilators on the side of a building take on the aspect of ancient eyes.

Somewhere between becoming and unbecoming. And yet, one of the defining characteristics of these remnants of a Soviet past is that they exist in spite of the world. Everywhere in these photographs, a persistent grass grows — invading concrete crevices and cracks or inching along retired walls — as if reminding us that these wars, these empires, are mere specks on the historical record. The history of humans is a small thing. Nature persists.

One final image. Two boulders lie casually on a promontory, before a lake. There is no trace of the retired military base that is surely in the surrounds. The boulders appear to us as mute witnesses, having been here for decades, if not centuries. And while they are likely to hold many answers — for we came here with questions — it seems all too evident that they are not about to reveal a thing.

Negar Azimi is a writer and senior editor at Bidoun, an arts and culture magazine based in New York.

FOUAD ELKOURY

BORN

- 1952 Paris, France
Lives and works between Paris, Beirut and Istanbul

EDUCATION

- 1979 Architecture, Architectural Association, London, UK

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Destructions*, Gilles Peyroulet & Cie, Paris, France
Le plus beau jour, Maison Europeenne de la Photographie, Paris, France
- 2011 *Be...longing*, Beirut Art Center, Beirut, Lebanon
- 2010 *What Happened to my Dreams?*, Galerie Gilles Peyroulet, Paris, France
- 2009 *What Happened to my Dreams?*, The Third Line, Dubai, UAE
- 2008 *Roads Were Open / Roads Were Closed*, The Third Line, Dubai, UAE
- 2007 *Istanbul, on the Road*, Galerie Francoise Heitsch, Munich, Germany
On war and love, Galerie Tanit, Munich, Germany
- 2006 *Civilisation (fake = real?)*, The Third Line, Dubai, UAE
- 2005 *Sombres*, LenbachHaus, Munich, Germany
- 2004 *Sombres*, La Crypte, Beirut, Lebanon
- 2003 *Sombres*, Townhouse Gallery, Cairo, Egypt
- 2002 *Sombres*, Maison Européenne de la Photo, Paris, France
Suite Egyptienne, Blue Sky Gallery, Oregon, USA
- 2000 *Liban Provisoire*, Blue Sky Gallery, Oregon USA
- 1998 Beiteddine, Lebanon
Un si proche Orient, Le Capitole, Arles, France
- 1996 *Palestine, l'envers du miroir*, Centre de la Photographie, Geneva, Switzerland
- 1993 Théâtre de Beyrouth, Lebanon
- 1991 *Sur les traces de Flaubert et Maxime du Camp*, Le Monde, Paris, France
- 1988 *Djibouti*, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, France
- 1986 *Photographs*, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Rouen, France
- 1985 *Poste restante*, Galerie Samy Kinge, Paris, France

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *MR1*, Photomed 2013, Mediterranean Photography Festival, Atelier des artistes, Sanary-sur-Mer, France
- 2012 *Roundtable*, 9th Gwangju Biennial, Gwangju, South Korea.
- 2007 *On war and love*, 52nd Venice Biennale (Lebanese Pavilion), Venice, Italy
- 2006 *Les peintres de la vie moderne*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
En français sous l'image, Espace EDF Electra, Paris, France

- 1982, *Melina Merkouri Foundation*, Athens, Greece
- 2005 *Civilisation, fake = real ?*, Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, UAE
Entre 2 Allemagnes, entre 2 Irlandes, FNAC, Paris, France
- 2004 *Present absent*, Galerie Tanit, Munich, Germany
- 1996 *Les trois grandes Egyptiennes*, Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi, Brussels and Paris, France
- 1994 *Europe rurale*, FNAC, Paris, France
- 1993 *Mediterranea V*, Biennale Internazionale di Fotografia, Torino, Italy
Petra; le dit des pierres, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, France
Beyrouth Centre Ville, National Centre of Photography, Coimbra, Portugal and Paris, France
- 1991 Festival of photography, Aix en Provence, France
Its collection 1968-91, FNAC, Galerie du Château d'eau, Toulouse, France
- 1988 *Deserts*, FNAC, Paris, France
Entrevues citadines, Musée de la Vieille Charité, Marseille, France

VIDEOGRAPHY

- 2013 *Revisiting Tarab*, (85'), Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE
- 2009 *Around Closer, video program I*, Beirut Art Center, Beirut, Lebanon
- 2005 *Welcome to Beirut*, (50'), Et Alors Productions, Paris, France
- 2004 *Moving Out*, (20'), Et Alors Productions, Paris, France
- 2002 *Lettres à Francine*, (43'), Et Alors Productions/MEP, Paris, France
- 2001 *The Wandering Myth*, (15')
- 1998 *Jours tranquilles en Palestine*, (13') with S.Roumette, On Line Productions, Paris, France

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- 2011 *Be...longing*, 2011, Steidl & Partners, Göttingen, Germany
- 2010 *What Happened to My Dreams*, 2010, Co-published by Espace Kettaneh-Kunigk, Beirut and Galerie Tanit
- 2007 *On war and love*, Editions Intervalles, Paris
- 2004 *La Sagesse du Photographe*, L'oeil neuf, Paris, France
- 2002 *Sombres*, Marval, Paris, France
- 1999 *Suite Egyptienne*, Actes Sud, Arles, France
- 1998 *Liban Provisoire*, Editions Hazan, Paris, France
- 1996 *Palestine, l'envers du miroir*, Editions Hazan, Paris, France
- 1984 *Beyrouth Aller-Retour*, Editions de l'Etoile, Paris, France

COLLECTIVE PUBLICATIONS

- 2000 *I tempi di Roma*, Editions Adam Biro, Paris, France
- 1999 *l'Olivier, le don de la Méditerranée*, Editions du Bottin Gourmand/Oliviers & Co, France
Autour du monde, un autre voyage, Filigranes Editions, Trézélan, France
Le cœur demeure, texts by Andrée and Louis Chedid, Stock, Paris, France
- 1997 *Agenda 98, Les petits frères des Pauvres*, Ideodis Création, Paris, France
- 1996 *Les trois grandes Egyptiennes, les pyramides de Gizeh*, Ed. Marval, Paris, France
- 1994 *Europe Rurale*, Filigranes Editions, Bégard, France

- 1993 *Petra, le dit des pierres*, Actes Sud, Arles, France
Catalogue *Mediterranea*, Fondazione Italiana per la Fotografia & Ed. Mar.co, Italy
100 photos pour la Liberté de la Presse, Reporters sans frontières, Paris, France
- 1992 *Baby, baby, sweet baby*, Pomegranate Artbooks, San Fransisco, CA, USA
Beyrouth Centre Ville, Editions du Cyprès, Paris, France
- 1991 *Identités Méditerranéennes*, La Fontaine Obscure/Voir, Aix en Provence, France
Catalogue *FNAC, its collection 1968-91*, Toulouse, France

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2011 Nazhand, Nazy, Artnet, *Art Dubai Wrap Up*, May 2011, Online
- 2010 Arabian Man, *Artist of the Month: What Happened to my Dreams?*, pg 22, November 2010
- 2009 Kalsi, Jyoti, *Shattered dreams and lost hope*, Gulf News Weekend Review, November 20, 2009, pg. 16 - 17
Sheikh, Raziqueh, *Killing fields*, Khaleej Times, Diversions, November 13, 2009, pg 13
Abu Jabar, Husm, *Fouad Elkoury*, L'Officiel Hommes, November 2009, pg. 22
- 2008 What's On, *Roads to Somewhere*, September 2008, pg. 47
Lord, Christopher, Time Out, *After the Disaster*, September 25, 2008, pg. 57
Mohammed, Arsalan, The National, *The Roads Less Travelled*, September 1, 2008, pg. 5
Yusuf, Muhamed, Gulf Today, *Burning Cedars*, September 11, 2008, pg. 3
Haroon, Layla, Gulf News, Weekend Review, *Exposed Negatives*, September 19, 2008, pg. 18 - 19
- 2007 *Foreward: Lebanese Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale*, Canvas Guide, May / June 2007, pg. 18 - 19
- 2006 Reinl, James, *In Focus: Dreams Become Reality in the Land of Possibility*, Emirates Business, pg. 20 - 22
Kendall, Hynam, *Dubai Deconstructed*, Inside Out, June 2007, pg. 117 - 119
Lawrence, Jeremy, *The Rising*, Time Out, December 2006, pg 7 - 9

AWARDS

- 2003 *Les écrans documentaires*, Gentilly, France, Special Mention by the Jury
- 2004 Centre National du Cinéma, Paris, France, First Prize for Quality

ACQUISITIONS

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
FNAC Gallery, Paris, France
Maison Européenne de la Photo, Paris, France
Solidere, Beirut, Lebanon
Caisse des dépôts et des consignations, Paris, France
Centre Pompidou, Paris, France