

Ascribing physicality to memory

By Niamh Fleming-Farrell

BEIRUT: In the opening to his novel "Love in the Time of Cholera," Gabriel Garcia Marquez's relates his character's permanently necessary association of the smell of cyanide with broken-hearted suicides: "It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love.

" Not dissimilarly, for those currently living in Beirut it is likely that the sound of a pneumatic drill at first light will always remind them of a city in the throes of change – a city both casting off and painting over the vestiges of its past, a city in the simultaneous but dichotomous processes of destruction and creation.

"No Vacancy – The Last Days of the Carlton [I]" currently up at The Hangar is artist Estefan Pe?afiel Loaiza's attempt to take one historical fragment of Beirut's urban flux and explore it, plumbing the memories it contains, before it is gone. But hotels, places of constant movement and turnover, are, more so than other institutions, remarkably difficult to recapture.

The Carlton opened in 1960 and, with its guest rooms facing the blue Mediterranean, was a popular Beirut hotel until the outbreak of the Civil War, at which point business became unsustainable and it closed. But in "No Vacancy" the Carlton is resurrected.

The vacant rooms of the structure that was the Carlton are recorded in a split-screen video installation that dominates The Hangar's exhibition space. Running as two side-by-side projections, the one on the right distorted slightly by grainy black dots, Loaiza pans the vacant, box-shaped suites of the former hotel, which is now destined for conversion to a residential compound.

As the video explores the hotel, original excerpts in both French and English from the Carlton Hotel employees' archives appear on the bottom of both frames. The initial fragments of text are job requests accompanied by earnest professions of linguistic and other requisite skills. As the film progresses – switching between shots of the abandoned hotel and an individual thumbing through the archives – the projected excerpts change. No longer are they from prospective employees; now, they are apologies and excuses for days missed and notes on staff members who have failed to turn up for their shifts.

Through a catalogue of the seemingly mundane – cover letters and absentee notes – Loaiza charts the breakdown of business during the Civil War. This is accompanied by the sound of the breeze and the distant hum of construction – the faint clang of metal girders and gentle drum of hammering, pulling the viewer from the past back to the present.

Loaiza's show is part of "The Beirut Experience," a project that brings together the work of 10

international artists selected for their artistic ideologies' relevance to the Lebanese context. Exhibiting at the Hangar and the Beirut Art Center, and working in coordination with Zico House, the project asked artists to adapt themselves to the peculiarities of the Lebanese experience though their interests in architecture, urban planning, memory, history and cultural identity. Almost all the artists have spent time in Beirut at least twice and produced new work while here.

Paris-based Loaiza spent her stints in Beirut trawling the Umam Documentation and Research archive, working, according to the exhibition sheet, to "visually transform the hotel's archive into a testimony of lived experience." But the research was also driven by the personal curiosity of someone who worked for five years in a Paris hotel. "The fact that I worked at a hotel may have influenced somehow my interest in working with the documents I found concerning the employees of the Carlton Hotel," she told The Daily Star in an email exchange.

In addition to the video installation, a series of eight photographs put the empty Carlton next to the content of the archives, showing stacks of employee headshots and other documentation – a tribute not to the opulent fittings, art collections or assorted luxuries that the hotel may have boasted, but to the day-to-day toil of those that kept the enterprise ticking.

Elsewhere in the exhibition on a low circular coffee table is a lonely cream reproduction of a 1975 letter cancelling a wedding ceremony, an elegant reminder of the devastation that befell Beirut.

It is remarkable that without resorting to the familiar images or sounds of wartime, Loaiza successfully conjures the painful loss and destruction inflicted on the city. There are no shots of bombed-out buildings, no pockmarked wall-scapes, no blood, no bodies. Instead there is just a very poignant sense of lives disrupted, deprived and left emptier – and of a building that witnessed it all.

Both in tandem with and overlapping this, another agenda plays out in the remaining installations, and is indeed subtly interspersed in the main video installation.

"During the time when I was working in this hostel in Paris, I took several video and photo images. Some of these images were also included in the split-screen video," she says.

In doing this Loaiza uses her experience to turn her attention to the idea of hotels as places of infinite transience and often perceived insignificance.

This is furthered by an untitled lone silver print of a shaft of light falling across a pristine hotel bed in Paris. "The image of a hotel bed and its pillow, cut-out with a line of light, has a mystery that can provoke a wide range of readings among the viewers ... I was always thinking about the fact that each viewer should be able to freely project in this image as much as he/she can," Loaiza explains.

In one sense hotel rooms are like blank canvases. Once put back in order, with sheets straightened and re-tucked, the rooms' histories are likewise somehow concealed. And yet hotels remain repositories of memories.

"More than working on what the Carlton Hotel represented, I was working about the concept of the kind of place (or non-place) which a hotel can be, a 'lieu de passage,' a place where people come and leave (and often leave traces), a place full of histories or stories," Loaiza says.

On four large sheets of poster paper laid out on a table top, Loaiza draws and develops the

connection further, linking the concept to the Middle East through Mahmoud Darwich's poem "A room in a hotel."

On each sheet the poem is reproduced either in gunpowder or charcoal. In the poem Darwich writes of the fleeting and homogenous nature of the hotel love affair: "We are only two of those who sleep in a public bed, a bed that belongs to all. We say only what transient lovers also said a while ago."

The fragility and transience of a hotel's secrets and affairs is mirrored in Loaiza's artwork, which could be utterly annihilated by as little as a viewer sneezing or exhaling heavily.

Thus the fragility of memory is given physicality, and we are reminded (or warned) that in the onward march of history what is so unstopably erected today could be little more than rubble tomorrow. However, the past is retrievable in sounds and glances and smells, and through artists willing to stir the archives.

"No Vacancy – The Last Days of the Carlton [I]" is up at The Hangar in Haret Hreik until Dec. 19. For more information, please call 01-553-604.

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