

"Operation 9": something like coming home

Photographer Noel Nasr returns to his birthplace with an intimate war story

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HARET HREIK: "Operation 9" could be the name of a top-secret commando mission. In fact it's an exhibition enclosed in a brief maze of black curtains in Haret Hreik – a neighborhood just south of Beirut that is host to an ad hoc art space called the Hangar.

The maze encloses the first solo show of photographer Noel Nasr. He conceptualizes it in two parts but it might more accurately be divided into three – photographs, slideshow and objects. Nasr was born in this "southern suburb." Nowadays he lives in the northern suburb of Baabda.

There is something problematic in writing about "Operation 9," which strikes at the heart of this sort of "reportage." The show has a visceral effectiveness but it will only be felt if the viewer goes in blind. Reading this story will do more to compromise than to enhance it, so an interested reader should abandon this story here.

The nine colorful images that adorn the first phase of the maze capture items whose relationship (identity, in some cases) is not immediately obvious.

The objects pictured in the first few images have the aspect of apparatus. The latter ones – a stained strip of gauze, a



Noel Nasr's photographs in "Operation 9" string together a narrative about the long recovery of a wounded woman. At left is an image of her slippers. At right is an X-ray detecting a chunk of metal lodged in her chest. Below is the piece of shrapnel that caused her injury.

shard of something metal or mineral, a beaker of yellow liquid, a herniated body part that looks like a raw nipple – do not.

The photos are hung from the Hangar's usual metal cables and are enclosed in thick chrome-framed light boxes. The images are fair-sized – 80 centimeters by 120 centimeters – which, combined with their manner of presentation, makes the first part of the exhibition reminiscent of an industrial trade show in miniature.

The disparate images leave you confused but not necessarily curious as to what's going on.

The second stage of the show is a Powerpoint slideshow of 28 images that roll up individually or in pairs. They materialize unaccompanied except for the sounds of traffic, light industry and a mosque that permeate the Hangar from outside.

Viewers will likely be distracted from stage two

by stage three. Three small objects, each of which has been the subject of photographic representation in the previous two stages of the exhibition, are enclosed in glass and lit from above – much in the manner of a high-end jewelry display.

The precious items on show are a black-and-white image of a young woman standing with a child in her arms, the metal shard pictured earlier (which, it occurs to you now, is probably a piece of shrapnel) and a piece of medical apparatus photographed earlier.

The Powerpoint projection provides a crucible to discern a story from the fragments. The photo of the woman standing with her little boy is followed by mundane images of a woman – her wheelchair, various scars, a chest X-ray revealing a piece of embedded shrapnel, shots of her preparing a meal, eating, watching television.

Part of her routine involves inserting a tube through the opening in her abdomen (the "herniated body part" pictured earlier) so she can drain her urine. We immediately realize this is the yellow liquid that's the subject of an earlier photograph.

The narrative you discern from these fragments, one the 28-year-old photographer is happy to flesh out, is of a woman who was badly wounded in a round of shelling in 1982 and, 24 years later, is still living the consequences. The show's title refers to the ninth operation that she has had to undergo as a result of her war injury.

For Nasr, these invasive procedures and the daily chore that her life has become, makes

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this woman – and those in a similar predicament – far more heroic than the bereted, Kalashnikov-wielding men who caused the damage.

Wars like Lebanon's most recent conflict are usually considered in geopolitical terms, or else in terms of the narratives of tribal maneuvering that marked their oscillations.

Oral histories recount individual acts of bravery during one skirmish or another. Individual non-combatants recollect details

of shared idleness and epiphany in neighborhood bomb shelters.

This brief journey – from extreme close-ups of mundane objects, to fragmented narrative, to the trinity of small objects at the center of the story – is an inversion of the usual scale of photography exhibitions addressing the matter of war.

Rather than representing images – effectively scale reproductions of landscapes, situations and individuals – as emblematic of conflict, "Operation 9" magnifies minute objects in a manner that obscures their immediate function.

The effect is to focus attention on the minuscule, intimate details that have transformed this woman's life into a struggle.

The exhibition fails only in the artist's aspirations to address the "macroscopic" elements of war as much as it does the "microscopic."

Nasr's artist's statement – the last thing you encounter in your stroll through this blind alley of curtains – declares that the show is concerned with "global issues."

He writes: "We are driven to see what the system wants us to see. They decide for us and alter the truth in order to serve their agenda. This is what we consume; this is how we think we understand."

These words are as close as "Operation 9" ever comes to betraying a concern with the big picture of war – except insofar as the woman who is the subject of this story is emblematic of the war-wounded generally.

Nasr has, however, found a way to exhibit the human costs of war in such a manner that invites the viewer to assemble the story for itself, and which veers close to sentimentality without actually embracing it. For this he deserves commendation.

"Operation 9" runs at the Hangar in Haret Hreik through Sunday April 19. For more information, please call +961 1 553 604 or visit www.umam-dr.org.

