

# Gazing back on a war, its recollection

Exhibition looks in on stories of Mleeta and Haret Hreik's reconstruction

By Jim Quilty  
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**H**ARET HREIK, Lebanon: “(Re)constructed Uncertainties,” the three-piece exhibition currently up at The Hangar, the exhibition hall of UMAM Documentation and Research, looks back at Israel’s 2006 war against this country.

Sandra Schafer’s two documentary-inflected installations and found photo series aren’t concerned with the 34-day conflict as such. Rather they examine how Hezbollah – the Israeli state’s principal adversary in 2006 – has managed the reproduction of its narrative of the conflict.

Two spaces preoccupy the artist in these works. One is Mleeta, Hezbollah’s Resistance Museum, officially known as the “Tourist Landmark of the Resistance.” The other is Haret Hreik, one of three municipalities south of Beirut (Dahiyeh, “the suburbs,” in local parlance). More than anywhere else, Haret Hreik is seen as Hezbollah central, so it sustained the heaviest air and sea bombardment in the summer of 2006 and was the focus of the most assertive reconstruction program, implemented not by the Lebanese state but by Hezbollah.

“Mleeta,” 2016, is comprised of a pair of adjoining screens and a pair of speakers. The looped two-channel video commences with a Google Earth-style satellite map of the globe that zooms on the site in Iqlim al-Tuffah that titles the work.

The right screen shows a cluster of young hijab-garbed girls watching one of the films that’s part of the Mleeta experience. The left screen seems to show what they’re watching, a documentary – told from the resistance’s perspective – on the recent history of this hilltop location, which had been a Hezbollah outpost since before the 2006 war.



An installation shot of Schafer’s “Constructed Futures: Haret Hreik,” 2017, at The Hangar, UMAM’s space in Haret Hreik.

At one point the left screen shows a cluster of men in the darkened terraces, as if the two audiences (one all-female, the other all-male) were watching one another.

Mleeta’s introductory video is stridently high concept. Schafer effectively juxtaposes the work’s early sequences – Hasan Nasrallah’s welcome speech followed by file footage of combat, accompanied by musical bombast – with hushed, fixed frame shots from the museum exhibition, taken on a day when there were few visitors to obstruct the exhibited objects.

A circular viewing deck looks down upon carefully arrayed shards of concrete, festooned with wrecks of various types of materiel. Most prominent is an armored personnel carrier and a tank – its cannon (or some cannon-like protuberance) amusingly tied into a knot. Later, after a handheld camera navigates a dim subterranean corridor, there’s a 50-calibre gun emplacement.

The spent weapons and the past

war it evokes seem incongruous alongside the quiet of the museum’s location (cicadas, birds and a prop plane flying overhead dominate the sound design) and the natural beauty of the surroundings.

“Mleeta” and “Constructed Futures: Haret Hreik,” the second installation in “(Re)constructed Uncertainties,” debuted in the Forum Expanded section of the Berlin International Film Festival, in 2016 and 2017 respectively. The Forum’s website describes Schafer’s research-based practice as addressing “urban and transregional spaces, history and visual politics.”

As the exhibition materials inform you, the artist was in Lebanon for a couple of years (2014-16) researching what she terms the intersections of “architecture, geopolitical spaces and propaganda.”

A four screen, four channel work, “Constructed Futures: Haret Hreik” is preoccupied with voices reflecting upon Haret Hreik’s post-2006 reconstruction. Formally, this piece

evinces the same fondness for silent fixed frame photography, sometimes accompanied by ambient sound, or else by off-frame voiceover.

As in “Mleeta,” it’s obvious that the artist’s posture is a critical one, though here too she makes no voiceover remarks herself, preferring to let the camera do the talking. One of the first screens a visitor finds after leaving “Mleeta” begins by sampling a promotional video produced for Waad, the project that rebuilt Haret Hreik after 2006. Like “Mleeta,” Schafer juxtaposes the ad’s jump cuts and bluster with fixed-framed silence as she and her translator prepare to interview a Waad official, who describes the projects goals.

The other segment observers are likely to encounter after “Mleeta” assumes a fly-on-the-wall perspective. The artist’s camera is trained on a hall full of people gathered before a stage. After an emcee-style introduction, one of Nasrallah’s video addresses is projected upon a large screen, his remarks met with a

standing ovation.

The other two segments are quieter and more successful cinematically. In one case, a man involved in the Haret Hreik reconstruction, he describes himself as “a resistant architect” and “an anti-globalist,” discusses Waad in terms of a broader movement among international modernists on the periphery. Only the architect’s hands enter the frame as he speaks, showing the reconstruction project’s limited size.

In the most affecting of the four segments, Schafer’s camera alights upon still lifelike scenes of a woman’s house, rebuilt after 2006. She expresses her support for Waad and the party generally and how the culture of the resistance is built upon sacrifice. Prominent among interior decor are portraits of her eldest son, whom, it’s revealed, was killed while fighting in Syria.

Schafer’s study of the intersections of architecture and geopolitical propaganda confirms what was probably already known locally, that this shard of Lebanese political culture is worthy of study and artful documentation.

The incongruities the artist finds in “Mleeta” and “Haret Hreik” are informative. No doubt this would be the case were she to train her camera on one of the other architectures (and attendant propaganda narratives) in the vicinity of Hezbollah central. Take the embassy of the United States in Awkar, say, the former Ottoman casino now known as La Residence des Pins or, for that matter, the post-2000 construction works erected on the far side of Lebanon’s southern border.

For some, museums and reconstructed postwar neighborhoods are less evocative of transregional architectures devoted to geopolitical propaganda than a more mundane space – the shopping mall. The mall may be less alien to Western audiences than Mleeta, but it’s an architecture whose proliferation – and the patterns of consumption and sociability they promote – are likely of more global weight.

“(Re)constructed Uncertainties” is up at The Hangar, Haret Hreik, through Oct. 24.

Photos by Wael Hamzeh