



ALICHERRI

BEIRUT

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ALI CHERRI

INTERVIEW BY
 TAREK EL-ARISS

TE
 I've been following your work from nearly the beginning and have seen almost all your films. There is a recurring concern with the body, materiality, consciousness and knowledge, and there are questions that arise time and again: How do we know things? How do we make objects knowable? How do certain forms of embodiment, and being with an object in a certain space, alter the meaning of subject/object relations? I wonder where these ideas originated, and how you feel they've evolved in the different works?

AC
 I think the question of embodiment has been present since *Un Cercle autour du Soleil*, which I did in 2005. For me, the idea of representation, or how one might translate an experience, especially the experience of catastrophe, has always been central. How can I talk of my experience of violence as a child growing up in Lebanon during the Civil War (1975–1990)? Can this violence have a visual translation? I'm speaking from my position as a visual artist, thinking via images rather than words. When the war ended in Lebanon and I could access parts of Beirut that I had never seen—since Beirut was divided between East and West during the war—I discovered a city in ruins. In these ruins, I saw a form or representation of this violence: how it

could leave traces, the effect it could have on things. But the main question for me was, and still is, how does this violence manifest itself on our bodies? I am not necessarily talking about the literal scars, but rather about the process of scarification. How can we “speak” about it, how can we spell it out? In *Un Cercle autour du Soleil*, I start with this: when living in darkness, our world is created with words, through spelling out. When I say “bed,” a bed appears; when I say “desk,” I see a desk. Living in the city becomes like living in an idea. I do not know what Beirut means; I cannot have a physical experience of the city in its totality. I can only have the experience of the trajectory from home to school, for instance. The rest of Beirut was part of an imaginary process.

TE
 Let's stay with *Un Cercle autour du Soleil* to anchor something: when you start with the Civil War, which has occupied a very important position in the work of many artists from Lebanon, it's as if you start with genesis, with creation, like Robinson Crusoe building the womb-like shed. There is a moment when you talk about the ruined building or the bombed shell as though it is a form of shamelessness that resembles the shamelessness of being naked—a moment of radical nudity or exposure (فضح) that makes you aware of the body in relation to the nudity of the ruined building. And of course you refer to Mishima's *Sun and Steel*, which similarly speaks to the awareness of one's body in relation to a physical and material ruin. Would you say that you became aware of your body through the ruined site?

AC
 I always start with the body—my body—as an anchor point. My physical body is always present in my work; even when it's absent, its absence is highlighted.

It is a visible absence. The only experience I can have is through this physical body. My experience of a city in ruin can only reflect a body in ruin. The body becomes part of the topography of the city. How the body inhabits different spaces is a question that recurs in my work: whether it is the sleeping body in *Somniculus* (2017), the guarding body in *The Digger* (2015), or the body as seismograph in *The Disquiet* (2013). This body is a body that registers the violence, a body that registers the tectonic movement of the plates. In the opening of *The Disquiet*, the text reads, “No one feels these light tremors except me. I feel every single one.” Here, there is the idea of the body as being the receptacle of all that surrounds it. In that sense, the ruined form of the post-war city is the ruined form of the body.

TE
With Foucault in mind, bodies are the sites through which disciplinary power interpellates subjects, which is basically the 19th-century European model of the state. But in your work, we are talking about the Lebanese Civil War’s subjectivity and bodily-ness. I think *Un Cercle autour du Soleil* gives us a framework or a mode of interpellation by which we become inscribed by the physical and the material through the political. The ruined house is not just scarification—it’s also a way for us to experience the reality of war and reality beyond war. Here we can perhaps transition to thinking about the background noise in the film—what we call in Arabic ريده, or in French, bourdonnement—that escalates to become a tremblement (which translates to trembling, as well as tremblement de terre, meaning earthquake) in your more recent videos. I feel like if we think about this transition, we see a body that experiences and trembles, but also a body that registers particular experiences just like a seismograph.

AC

You are referring to the vibrating sound that comes back in different films, whether in the museum, on the excavation site, or in the seismic center. This deep bass sound has a physical effect on things: it makes things tremble. Play a high bass sound in a room and you will see how everything starts to shake; even your body starts to shiver. The same thing happens during an earthquake: all of a sudden, the entire room wakes up and becomes animated. I’m interested in this transition from sound as audio to sound as physical vibrancy. Sound has a disruptive effect on things. It’s a way to resurrect objects, unsettle their meaning, their codes in the order of knowledge. It makes things come alive.

TE

What I really like is that I see a very clear evolution or construction of a particular body of work that is consciously evolving. With *The Disquiet*, for instance, we move not only to the registering body as one’s body feels and registers personal experiences, but also the body that registers the historical—namely, political and natural catastrophes, as you go back and forth between the words نكبة and كارثة. This is tied to your title in French, *L’intranquille* (*The Disquiet*), which I think is very powerful, and leads us also to *Somniculus*, where *L’intranquille* becomes the light sleeper. So when we think of *The Disquiet*, would you say there exists un sujet inquiet, an inquiet subject? Is there a subject emerging from the Lebanese Civil War who is scarred while having to represent scarring at the same time? One who is unsettled and has to represent the unsettlement?

AC

When I speak of light sleep, it is to distinguish it from deep sleep, where we are disconnected from the world

and go into the realm of dreams and nightmares. Light sleep is not a restful sleep; we still inhabit the world where our body is situated. In light sleep, we are receptive to whatever happens around us, such as sounds and smells. In my work, the figure of the light sleeper is linked to the figure of the guard, whether it is the guard in *The Digger* or the guard in *Somniculus* that roams the museum at night with his torchlight. The body of the guard is a different body than that of the visitor. The guard sitting at his chair in the corner of a museum brings in a different temporality, a different type of attention. It is actually the only body we are used to seeing dozing off in a museum, although his sleep is an attentive sleep: any discipline would shake him up. I like this type of receptivity, this type of attention.

TE

We come back to this notion of *intranquille*, where the prefix “in-” is the privative, the negation, because the sleeper in *Somniculus* is not only the museum guard, but also the displaced Arab refugee in Europe who goes into public places to sleep because he has no other place to sleep.

AC

I hadn’t thought of this reading, but I would definitely agree with it. My body is a political body, just like Sultan in *The Digger* is not just a guard, but a guard from Pakistan who left his family back home and who’s been living in Sharjah for twenty years. So the fact that it’s me who is sleeping inside the Parisian museums in *Somniculus* is very important. *Somniculus* is the first film I shot in Paris, although I have been living in this city for many years. Filming inside the museums is my way of sneaking in. Museums were my entry point to film the city: it’s a way to tame Paris. These empty museums are familiar and haunt-

ing at the same time. The first thing I do when I arrive in a new city is to visit its museums. I think a lot of people do the same thing. It’s a way to acquaint ourselves with new places. In museums, we play our role as tourists, we perform our multiplicity. So the body of the Arab looking for a place to sleep finds its rest amongst the sleepless artifacts. My body fits perfectly amongst all the bodies encased behind glass windows.

TE

But the museum is also about cultural difference, hierarchies, classification, the one and its other. Especially European museums, like Musée de l’Homme or Musée du Quai Branly, which encapsulate a past of colonial relations to the Arab world and Africa—a world the Europeans have been discovering and colonizing from the 18th century onward. Is your work a critique of a particular classification linked to this moment or this project? In *Somniculus*, for instance, there is a moment where you show us very clearly the sign “La classification du vivant.” Is your presence, which is an illegal presence—as you are not supposed to be there at such an hour and sleeping—also a critique of a particular political and ideological classification that has distinguished between the national and the foreign?

AC

Somniculus is haunted by Chris Marker’s film *Statues also Die*, which was shot inside an ethnographic museum and had a clear, voiced-out critique of colonial legacy of European collections. It was a powerful critique of the Western gaze. So the question is, what form of criticism is still possible, valid, and effective some fifty years later? For me, most postcolonial discourses about the legacy of Western colonial collections have failed, or at least have been neutralized by the institution of

the museum. It's like these institutions have always been one step ahead of their critique. A museum like the Louvre presents itself as a "Universal Museum," but we know the racism behind this supposed universalism. The move from the national to the universal is clearly echoed today in a place like Abu Dhabi, where the Louvre, the ultimate "universalist" project, is celebrated just next to the construction of national museums. So the universal and the national are both in the same trench.

TE
It is interesting that the mission civilisatrice, in whose name colonialism occurred, has presented itself as a universal mission. But of course we know that this declaration of universality and calling for equality is ultimately a disguise of colonial and capitalist practices, such as those that opened the Suez Canal and connected Europe to the world and to the colonies. So the "universal" is already a French and British model of expansion that is political and cultural.

AC
Yes! I just want to clarify that for me, the museum is not a threshold, a before/after in the life of artifacts. The violence that is embedded in colonial collections is not exceptional. The museum is an actant, just as the soil where the objects were found could affect the artifacts' composition and deterioration. Sometimes objects can and do resist the institution that is hosting them; we should not neglect that. There is no point of origin, or a higher authentic past to which these objects need be returned.

TE
Speaking of this idea of the museum, my association now goes to *The Digger*, which in some way represents a different kind of museum, inhabited or embodied by a different kind of subject

who goes and guards it, interacts with it. Is what you're showing us in *The Digger* also a kind of exhibition space?

AC
If the necropolis is a form of display, or a form of a museum, it would be the Museum of Absence. These holes, these tombs that were dug up and emptied from their content represent a form of violent ripping. This gesture of unburying is a transgressive gesture. Burying is what we naturally do; digging up runs the risk of awakening the uncanny. Sultan, who is faced every day with the sight of the empty grave, must be haunted by the image of the resurrected.

TE
In *The Digger* I see a ritual, a burial that modernity interfered with. The film seems to be calling attention to a certain breakdown, of a certain relation to the dead and guarding the dead, and being with the dead. Of course we think of the City of the Dead, outside of Cairo, where people actually have a house in the cemetery, and they go on Sunday and picnic with their dead ancestors. So what you're showing in *The Digger* is the collapse of a particular continuity or presence with the dead, or a way of in fact outsourcing, in regards to what you think of South Asian labor. You draw attention to that as having done something to us, to our subjectivity, and that is also linked to a form of displacement. Where are we? Where are the Arabs who abandoned their grave sites for someone else to guard?

AC
Constructing national identity on the relics of the dead must be a haunting experience. What does Sultan do when he takes care of empty tombs, keeping them from falling into ruin? He seems to live on the margins of the modern

city that appears as a spectre in the desert haze. But he plays an essential role in holding together the construct of this modernity. He is also the ghost that is haunting these graves, repeating gestures that are reminiscent of forgotten rituals. His body performs rituals that seem to have lost their meaning a long time ago.

TE
In *The Digger*, the only thing that links us to our past, to our ancestors, is also what keeps the world going. I'm thinking of Native American rituals, of movement that allowed the sun to move past the sky, and how, once they stopped those rituals, the world reached a social and a political collapse.

AC
In the opening of *Somnificus*, a sentence reads: "If dreamless sleep is a form of death, then light sleep is a form of resurrection." So if the guard is the ultimate figure of the light sleeper, then he is the only one able to resurrect or to honor the dead. In one of my discussions with Sultan, I asked him how he feels about living in a cemetery, and his answer was he is not afraid of living with the dead; being a good faithful Muslim, only the good jinn would visit him. Sultan's perception of his job is not that of a guard on some archaeological site. He is sensitive to the haunting spectres of the place.

TE
So performing the ritual only brings out the good jinn, and by not performing the ritual, we have the bad jinn and the ones that are haunting us as modern subjects. We see the haze from that space you shoot in *The Digger*, absolutely. But what I find really fascinating, both visually and intellectually, is that you're always trying to question the limits between wakefulness and sleep,

between subject and object, the good jinn and the bad jinn. Your work, I feel, interrogates how these limits are established, and how porous and disquieted (intraquilles) they are.

AC
What I propose through my work are realities presented in their complexities. The categories that we have created to produce knowledge and to help us understand the world we live in leave out lots of forms and figures of existence. I am interested in these objects or bodies that do not fall into any of the categories. Taxidermy, for instance, is something that comes back in my work. I find in the taxidermied animal a haunting figure: it is a form of life, a resemblance to some ghostly living turned into object. I have been working recently with animal bones dating from the 10th and 12th centuries. These bones have undergone numerous biological and categorical transformations, each time demoted into new classifications. From vital living tissues to animal carcasses rotting in riverbeds, and then picked clean of all flesh after centuries of decomposition and biodegradation. These forms are like cracks in our knowledge systems; they are slits from where other forms of knowledge are brought to light.

TE
While your work raises larger philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge, the systems of classification and so on, it's still very much anchored in the personal and regional experience of being from the Arab World and having survived the Lebanese Civil War. It doesn't come from this purely universal, intellectual place; it's anchored in the body of the sujet intranquille that came out of post-war Lebanon in the 1990s. What does it mean to have survived this war? Do we

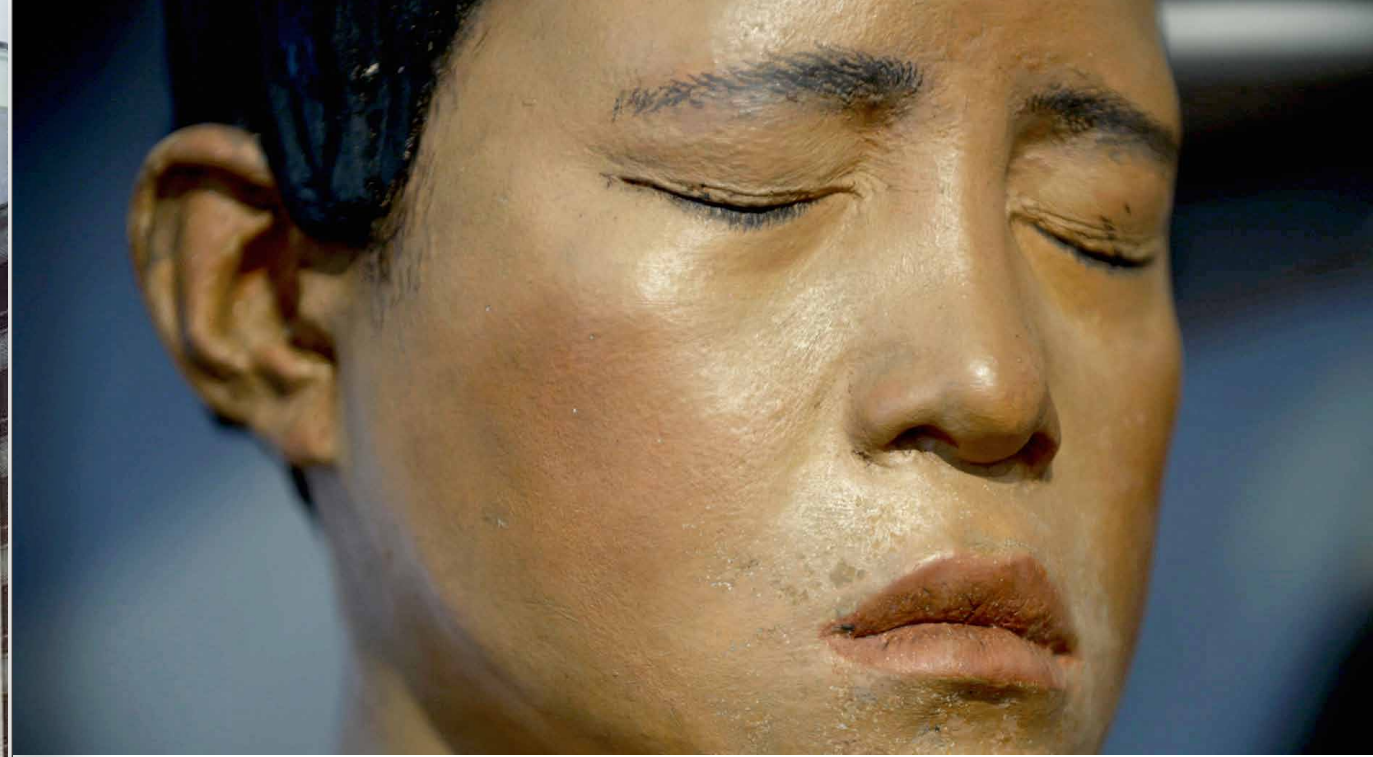
really survive, and what survives? Or limits of our systems..
have we not survived?

AC: This is the exact reason I was interested in excavation sites. The excavation site is a place where things survive the catastrophe. We excavate forms of survival. If we want to learn about what forms do survive, the excavation site would be the place to start. The necropolis where Sultan is living is above all a site of “post-apocalyptic” survival.

TE: It seems to me that your work is always questioning the engineering environment of building as requiring stable, fixed foundations and cornerstones. The earthquake is not so much the exception; the earthquake is the ongoing reality that you as an artist, you as a body, encapsulated in the particular history of Lebanon and so on, are able to feel, register and capture visually. You’re always looking to the potential breakdown, the rupture, in a way that reminds me of the Dionysian in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is about feeling the pain of the world (as opposed to the Apollonian, which is aesthetics, which is meant to cover it up). Your art practice is about giving voice, embodying this bourdonnement that most of us don’t hear, and that’s why we experience the tremblement de terre as the catastrophic, as divine punishment, as Sodom and Gomorrah.

AC: The catastrophe is not the accident. We are used to considering accidents as system malfunction, but accidents are actually constitutive parts of the system. Science promises us that everything has a function, that everything is connected, and that everything is fluid. And then we have incidents happening like the Malaysia Airlines Flight that disappeared, and we are unable to explain it. What this type of incident ultimately shows are the inherent

























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من أماكن أخرى

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