

BEIRUT

“Home Works 6”

Ashkal Alwan // May 14–May 26

FOR THE EXHIBITION component of Beirut’s Home Works 6 project, curator Tarek Abou El Fetouh juxtaposes the seemingly disparate first Arab Art Biennial in Baghdad in 1974, the first Alexandria Biennial in 1955, and the “China/Avant-Garde” show in Beijing in 1989. His untitled show proposes to reenact these three exhibitions, each of which reacted to a period of political transformation, and draw out parallels and disjunctions between the then-and-there and the now-and-here.

No works from the original exhibitions are included, and there are no direct connections between them and the pieces on view. Keeping with the archival tendency prevalent in Lebanese artistic practice, only the catalogues are present as evidence of those events. Instead, the invocation of those little-known cultural occurrences catalyzes speculative convergences and kinships among the different social and political contexts that these four projects, diverging in date and location, present.

Although El Fetouh sets out three distinct paths for viewers, where each of three doorways is marked

with spell-conjuring symbols, round out the section with a feverish futuristic tone.

The first Alexandria Biennial was organized around a theme of regionalism, focusing on the countries on the shores of the Mediterranean at a time when the release from colonialism and monarchy was still freshly reaped. This section begins with a pair of works that challenge the logic of the museum: Walid Raad’s digitally collaged photographs with mixed-and-matched textures and shapes, based on pieces from the Islamic collection that the Louvre is loaning its Abu Dhabi branch, and Iman Issa’s *Lexicon*, 2012—ongoing, a series of model-like studies of what she calls “remakes” of existing artworks.

The most somber of the narratives, the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, refers to the first instance of recognition by the National Art Gallery of non-state-sponsored artists. A pivotal moment in the Beijing show—artist Xiao Lu firing bullets

BELOW LEFT:
Walid Raad
Detail of
*Preface to
the Third
Edition*, 2013.
Sixteen color
photographs,
each 6 x 8 in.



with the title and date of one of the historical exhibitions, his endeavor functions as a single project. Imaginative thinking, expressions of ideological distrust, and confrontations of impasse recur throughout the disorienting mazelike installation, where artists may show different works in divergent sections of the exhibition.

The journey weaving the now through the threads of the past begins with the first Arab Biennial, a cultural expression of Pan-Arabism, which dissolved after its second iteration in Rabat. This grouping delivers images of distorted utopian thinking and absurd prospective futures. Ali Cherri's *Pipe Dreams*, 2011, projects footage of the 2011 removal of a public monument to former Syrian president Hafez El-Assad over a TV monitor playing a video of a 1985 space call to the astronaut Mohammad Fares. Basim Magdy's slide projection of acid-colored postapocalyptic landscapes and Roy Samaha's video of the film *A Secret of Secrets*, 2013, etched

into her installation *Dialogue*, 1989, leading to the

exhibition's closure (later reversed)—is folded into a painting by Samaha of an occult creature periodically blasted with sounds of gunfire. This story ends with a last sting of sorrow: Song Ta's notebook lists of names he called his parents as a second child born under China's one-child policy.

El Fetouh's three-in-one exhibition reflects the purpose of the Home Works multiplatform cultural forum at large: a subtle and complex articulation of the current cultural discourse and practice in Beirut. His project achieves this with the understanding that genealogies that inform and enhance the present may be better approached abstractly than concretely. It's easy to imagine an alternative form of this exhibition presenting the same constellation of times and places with a heavier use of the archive. Instead El Fetouh avoids fixing the past and uses it as a line of flight to explore the present and anticipate a future. —**Jess Wilcox**

FROM LEFT: JOE NAMY; KIMSOOJA STUDIO