

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

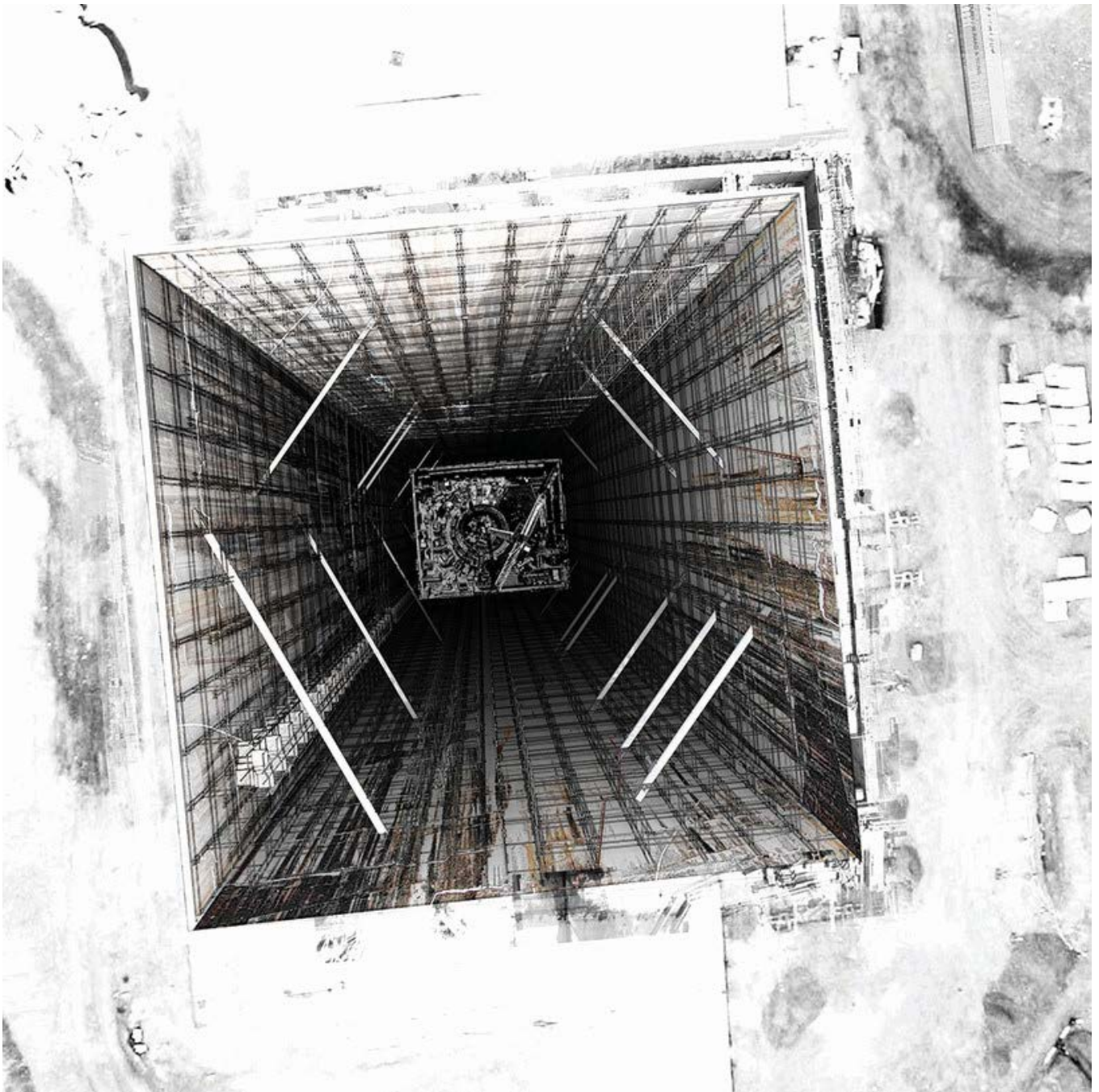


Walid Raad in collaboration with Bernard Khoury, *A Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum: Preface* (2016–2026), 2017, wood, stone, paint. Installation view.

WALID RAAD'S LATEST EXHIBITION at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut features three solid bodies of work spanning the artist's two well-established long-term projects, the Atlas Group, 1989–2004, and *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, 2007–, and including material from the lesser-known but equally clever series "Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)," 1987–, a repository of sorts for Raad's creative, off-kilter thinking about photography in relation to the endless cycles of destruction and construction afflicting his hometown of Beirut. It is a perfectly interesting and accomplished show, even if audiences both local and international are by now abundantly familiar with his forms (dislodged walls, fractured artifacts, borrowed artworks) and concepts (that fiction can be more truthful than fact, that war has tangible and intangible consequences, that art history is often as violent and complicit

as everyday politics). The thing that pushes the exhibition into the realm of the unexpected, uproarious, and urgent is a work sequestered in a darkened room at the far end of the gallery—Raad’s collaboration with the architect Bernard Khoury, Beirut’s persistent enfant terrible of the reconstruction era.

If you’ve read anything about Beirut’s cultural life in the past few years, then you’ve probably heard that the city is in the midst of a magnificent boom in museum building. This is news to anyone who actually lives in the city, where no new museums have in fact opened or even broken ground, and where residents are being held in the white-knuckled grip of some of the most severe economic anxieties and environmental catastrophes since Lebanon’s civil war, confronted every day with the horrific fallout from Syria’s ongoing conflict. It’s true that there are museum projects in the works—the most visible is the Beirut Museum of Art, or bema, an idea taken up by the patrons of the philanthropic association known as APEAL (Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon). A number of foundations associated with fortunes both great and occasionally suspect—in banking, real estate, consulting, and retail fashion—have also built collections, showcased them in shopping malls, and announced the construction of private museums bigger than anything in the public or nonprofit sectors. The strength of Raad and Khoury’s project is that it calls all of this into question and says, quite forcefully, that no museum proposal is innocent, that few of them in Lebanon are civic or even beneficent in nature, and that many may actually do more harm than good, especially to the precarious on-the-ground ecosystem of artistic production that made them conceivable in the first place.



Walid Raad in collaboration with Bernard Khoury, *A Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum: Preface (2016–2026)_6 Plates (detail)*, 2017, six ink-jet prints, each 46 7/8 × 33 1/8".

A Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum: Preface (2016–2026), 2017, is the realization as art, and as sculpture, of Raad and Khoury's actual submission to the architectural competition for BeMA. Khoury was one of thirteen architects short-listed by a jury from a pool of sixty-six (one of the rules of the competition was that all entrants be of Lebanese origin, making this something of an ur-nationalist endeavor from the start). He teamed up with Raad to propose a theoretically brilliant, conceptually

crystalline justification for what is essentially a hole in the ground. In a way, their submission is a joke, and one grasps immediately why it failed. OUR PROPOSAL PROCEEDS FROM AND BEGINS TO ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION: HOW CAN WE DESERVE LEBANON'S MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ARTS? ARE WE AND HAVE WE BEEN ATTENTIVE TO THE IDEAS, FORMS, LINES, VOLUMES, TEMPORALITIES, COLORS MADE AVAILABLE TO US BY MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND ARTISTS IN LEBANON? OUR ANSWER IS: NOT YET. So reads a block of white text introducing, along with five other ink-jet print renderings, a sizable maquette of an underground institution, a museum lodged in Beirut's archaeologically rich striations of earth, rock, schist, and soil. No museum director or board of trustees would go for this, of course, but then again, few of the museum projects currently on deck in Lebanon have so much as assembled a board, hired any staff, or given a single thought to programming. A joke, a shovel tunneling down into the mess and muck of a place that has buried so much—this may be the best response imaginable, the highest level of politically engaged artistic and intellectual critique, to the seductions of so much vanity on display.

"A Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum: Preface (2016–2026)" is on view through December 30.

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