

# Walid Raad

Paula Cooper Gallery | 521 West 21st Street 521  
West 21st Street April 13–May 18, 2019

Here is evidence of history's refusal to be inscribed as mere images. Walid Raad's exhibition is the latest episode of *Sweet Talk*, n.d., a long-running body of work premised as the output of a fictional collective "commissioned" to document Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War. The group's first assignment was to photograph storefronts for a local militia. Arranged here as a typology grid, these pictures are affectless and formal, like Eugène Atget's photos of window displays in Paris or Walker Evans's images of shops across the United States. Yet, a wall text claims that the owners of the businesses Raad shot had refused the militia's protection and were consequently assaulted or forced into exile.

A looping, four-minute film—purportedly found footage—captures the controlled detonations used for Beirut's postwar reconstruction in an abstracted, geometric pattern. When the wall-length image cycles in reverse, the skyline regenerates in a tessellated representation of a site stuck between rebuilding and tearing itself down. Opposite is a series of black-and-white pictures depicting Beirut's streets, presented as spreads from a book by an imaginary photographer, Ahmed Helou, who catalogued Beirut in 1991—the year the militias dissolved. Each image is annotated, either in English or Arabic, by an unnamed person, who notes where he had his first kiss, for instance, or the street where his brother joined a right-wing militia—intimate recordings of the writer's youth set within a city in stasis.

In the final gallery, a series of prints show several Lebanese painters' work adapted as military camouflage. Uncommonly for Raad, the artists referenced are real, though Farid Sarroukh, who "published" these prints,

is a recurring fiction. By implicating actual figures in his conspiracies, fabrications, and imagistic war games, Raad extends the complicated relationship that documents have to truth, and how easily images can be co-opted. A painter's motif becomes fabric on the loom of war.

— [Will Fenstermaker](#)