

ADVERTISEMENT

[12 Arabic TV Channels](#)Arabic channels on Sky from £17 p/m Sky
- your UK home for Arabic TV**[Buy A Property In Dubai](#)**Dubai Property Investment with 15% return
& 50% growth. Free Brochure Print**THE DAILY STAR****Copyright (c) 2008 The Daily Star****Friday, November 21, 2008****Exploring the possibilities - mundane to prurient - of a spatial cinema*****'A Place in Between' seeks out the poetry of stored objects*****By Jim Quilty**

Daily Star staff

Review

HARET HREIK: It is only when you decide to leave a place that you realize how many objects it has left with you. When choosing what to take, and what to leave behind, you recall some of the meaning lying latent within them. Since early November, a corner of UMAM D&R's Hangar appears to have been lent out as storage space for someone who's left town.

A wooden packing crate propped open to reveal an antique chair swamped in styrofoam, several cardboard boxes, a few small bookshelves - absentmindedly strewn with left over books, papers, photos and the like - are stacked against two walls. A dresser, its doors removed, rests next to a kitchen table and a couch.

To one side, the trunk of a floor-length white dress stands - as though a bride's headless, limbless torso were propped up, awaiting collection. Ambient sound and conversation burble from different locations.

Lebanese artist Nathalie Harb and the UK's Alys Williams collaborated in creating this multi-media installation, "My Place in Between." The show is winding up the second stage of its exhibition Friday at the Hangar - the first stage having run from July 3-23 at London's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA).

The installation evolved, the artists say in their notes to the show, "from ideas of their home cities, London and Beirut, and communicates uneasiness with the concept of home and its fragility."

Arrayed in this fashion, the furniture, boxes and bric-a-brac provoke the spectator's inner voyeur to step beyond the passive gaze and scavenge for meaning. The hunt is soon rewarded.

The bodice of the cast-like wedding dress is empty, its neckline opening like the maw of a creature from the filmic imagination of horromeister John Carpenter. There is a torso in the dress but you must squat to see it.

On the right side of the dress' chest is a hole, about the size of a gunshot's exit wound. The hole frames a video loop, looking upon a woman's naked back. Her back expands and contracts in time with her breathing before starting to heave feverishly, contorting as if struggling to escape an invisible straightjacket, or the flesh and bone itself.

While on your haunches, you notice to your right another video image projected upon the dresser door. It follows a woman as she prepares to go outside, where images of the sea, the beach and a graffiti-smearred seaside wall (in Arabic and Latin script) dominate.

Standing, you encounter three drawers stacked in the manner of a spiral staircase, each carefully carpeted with architectural plans for a house. In the bottom drawer, on another miniature screen, a woman in a party dress, her shoes off, sits upon a white couch. She sits as if waiting for something to happen, or else gazes off-frame, and eventually lays down, assuming nap position. Above her, the second and third "floors" hold a miniature lamp glowing with light and a miniature chair.

Elsewhere in the installation, thumb-sized holes have been poked into some of the cardboard boxes (a not uncommon practice when searching for that thing you packed months before and hope to find) to

create improvised peep shows - looking upon miniature household interiors, furniture and all - accompanied by the sounds of domestic clatter.

On the glass-covered kitchen table, a teacup reveals itself to contain a video loop of a horizonless sea. From the couch behind you, the sounds of ghostly conversation lure your attention downward. There, a hole gouged out of the couch cushion bears the still image of a youngster sleeping, her bedclothes animated to suggest the rising and falling of breathing.

The reiterated metaphor is a simple but effective one. Not only memories, but elements of identity - like so many sloughed-off layers of skin - reside within the objects with which you live. The installation's elements, whether videos, stills or objects, are embedded within its fictional character's belongings as motifs. Video and still images of the fictive resident reiterate the sitting/doing nothing/sleeping of connectedness to a place, while the sea can suggest either residence or departure.

The trail of the white dress, for instance, is strewn across the floor in a gesture mirrored by a strip of cloth flowing from a book-sized packet (itself wrapped in white cloth) which is mounted on a miniature pallet. Between the two, draped over the sofa, a third white sheet has been torn back to reveal the child sleeping within. The images - wedding dress, wedding bed and their issue, if you like - complete one another.

This is Harb's second show at the Hangar. In July 2005 it was host to her installation "Rue du Mot Perdu," which invited visitors to walk down a scale model of a Beirut street and peer into the windows of its buildings - where you found miniatures, videos and actors staring back. "My Place in Between" contains many of the same elements as the earlier show, though she stressed that it blends her "language and practices" with those of her collaborator, Alys Williams.

"We were both interested in space," Harb says. "Alys was somehow trying to recreate a character and I was trying to talk about an absence.

"The starting point was 'Let's create an image of a woman - we named her Vera - attached to a [miniature] bed.' ... It became a wedding dress though we didn't really want it to be a wedding dress. I wanted to give the dress the texture of buildings, so it became this cast ... It's all about containment and boxes. It is somehow the image of the mother, the container of the child."

"We created this third character and together began to look for objects, images that would be relevant to her ... but up until two days before the show opened at the ICA, we didn't know what the narrative would be, the character, how she would come alive. That was an interesting process. We were both creating the narrative, curious to know where it would lead."

Harb has a day job in commercial photography and she came to art from film studies. She says that medium still inspires her.

"The one thing I was not satisfied with in cinema was that the dimension of space is missing ... In a sense I want to create a rhythm with the objects you see, either with video or text. There are different ways of reading video and text and objects, so we've created this physical space to create a spatial dynamic. But [the space] also follows a certain rhythm, according to the objects or images in place.

"I think I have always been fascinated with the city and the way it works. You walk into the city and you edit your story, because of the rhythm or the path you take ... Nothing is imposed. You create your stories.

"[In cinema,] you create a story and then a character and obstacles. This is less interesting than the little, daily gestures. I find that that much more poetic. What you can see from the window. That's what I can do here."

THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2008 The Daily Star