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REVIEW

Contemporary art, ancient stage

'The Silent Echo' casts a bit of today into the ruins of old Heliopolis

By Jim Quilty
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BAALBECK, Lebanon: Archaeology used to seem a simple thing. Scientists dug into the past with shovels and brushes, uncovering the ruins of long-dead cities, providing a material complement to the text-based accounts of historians.

Then people started looking past the old stones. Archaeology's association with the imperial enterprises of certain states came to be recognized as an ideological bulwark for foreign domination.

Others examined the thought and practices that condition how artifacts are valued, exhibited and, as happens with valuable objects, faked. Then there's the matter of how archaeological restoration was absorbed into the foundational narratives of whatever state happened to police the plot of land where ruins were uncovered.

In the minds of some thoughtful commentators, the political and market complicity archaeological practice overshadows its scientific and historical worth – a theme taken up in the recent Beirut exhibitions of Ali Cherri and Yto Barada.

These days it's also reverberating through the ruins of old Heliopolis.

"The Silent Echo" is an exhibition of work by nine Lebanese and international contemporary artists, staged in Baalbeck's Roman-era ruins. Curator Karina El Helou (the Lebanese-born founder of the mobile exhibition platform STUDIOCUR/ART) conceived the show as a dialogue between contemporary art and archaeology and all but two works are set within the precincts of Baalbeck's archaeological museum.

Among these is the lone new work in the show, Paola Yacoub's "Risk," 2016.

Between 1995 and 1999 the artist was employed to sketch the archaeological excavations conducted in Downtown Beirut. Yacoub's installation is comprised of a slide projection of photos, capturing phases of city center excavation, and a vitrine containing Polaroids from the dig.

The display case's new work is a mosaic that reproduces one of the artist's late 20th-century archaeological sketches. The original sketch is a documentary resource, whose figurative "meaning" is highly contingent on knowing its historical-scientific backstory. Yacoub's self-consciously archaic mimesis – depicting the excavation process in the language of an excavated art object – embraces abstraction.

The best-known artist in this show, Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei, is represented with "Foundation," 2015. Though its media and rhetorical stance is far removed from "Risk," it takes its departure from the same forces.

Photo © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Danica Dakic, "La Grande Galerie 2," 2004, c-Print, aludibond, 100 x 129 cm.

Ibrahim Al Dirani - Dar Al Mousawir

Ai Weiwei, "Foundation," 2015, oak wood and stone, 47 x 827.5 x 622.5 cm.

Ai's piece consists of an elevated stage, from which emerge 30-odd reproductions of plinths, bereft of the pillars they conventionally support. The exhibition plaque says the platform reproduces a traditional Chinese house – which evidently has more pillars than floor space – demolished by real estate developers.

It invites the public to step onstage and sit on the plinths – to take the place of the absented pillars. The work's object is activist: to create a forum where people can discuss "how to build a harmonious future over the ruins of the past."

To the left of the stage is a rectangular thing upon which play projections of the artist's social media posts which – if extraneous to the work – forms a pleasant ensemble with a rectangular artifact of unknown provenance to the right of the installation.

A formal and conceptual counterpoint to "Foundation" is Laurent Grasso's 11'40" film "Soleil Noir," 2014, which spends much of its time tracing the excavated streets of Pompeii – the Italian city buried under volcanic ash during Vesuvius' A.D. 79 eruption. As bereft of humans as an art work can be, this attractive piece – silent but for a score evocative of a distant, Wednesday afternoon church organ – has an elegiac, even funereal, aesthetic.

Nicely shot using a drone-mounted 16mm film camera, the piece commences with a seaward approach to the nearby volcano of Stromboli (presumably Vesuvius was less photogenic that day). The drone then turns to Pompeii, carefully cleared of stray humans who might wander into the frame, where much of the camera's gliding perambulation follows a dog trotting through the streets.

These vistas of dangerous landscape and abandoned habitation – made pristine by archaeology and the promise of tourist euros – are momentarily interspersed with snatches of some of the paintings (of animals, not humans) adorning the city's plaster walls.

The other five works staged in the museum space deploy various media and formal strategies to reflect upon the hierarchy between material (and immaterial) historical artifacts and the people with whom they cohabit.

Guarding the far end of the museum stage of the show, "La Grande Galerie," 2004, samples Danica Dakic's series of family portraits of undocumented migrants. Shot in an open field, the series sets its subjects before a reproduction from Hubert Robert's "La Grande Galerie" series.

Created in the late 18th century, Robert's work imagines the central hall of the Louvre in ruins, its treasures pillaged by common folk. The original piece emulates certain 18th- and 19th-century studies of ancient ruins in the Middle East, depictions that tended to emphasize the scale and glory of the architecture at the expense of the tribal peoples lounging indolently around them.

Deliberately or not, Dakic's work yanks Robert back to a human scale.

Susan Hiller's contribution to "The Silent Echo" speaks to both the issues at the heart of this show and the obsession with archiving practices that started preoccupying many of this country's contemporary artists in the 1990s.

Hiller's deceptively simple "The Last Silent Movie," 2007/2008, is comprised of a selection of audio recordings of people sharing their languages, all of which were then on the verge of extinction.

Staged as a projection, the screen conveys nothing but the English and Arabic translations of the multiple languages sampled.

Hiller originally trained as anthropologist and her piece proves surprisingly human. Its speakers convey a strong sense of their personality, not simply in how they speak their incomprehensible languages but in how they try to share them. Some use the opportunity to tell vernacular stories or folk tales.

Others list words. Others still repeat each word multiple times, as if straining past the borders of time and medium to teach their languages to invisible audiences.

Scattered about the museum's central tunnel, a few meters from "Risk," are Marwan Rechmaoui's "Pillars," 2015. Constructed of concrete, rebar, scraps of cheap fabric and the like, this series may be the most evocative artistic condensation of "war damage" to emerge from the Beirut scene.

"Pillars" debuted at "Saltwater," the most recent Istanbul biennial, where it competed for attention within the white cube of Istanbul Modern. Here, embraced within the vaulted stone tunnel housing Baalbeck's museum, it feels more at home.

The same is true of several pieces here – both the calcified polystyrene sculptures (modeled on the tropes of archaeological artifacts) that comprise Theo Mercier's "Ghost," 2015, and Ziad Antar's "Derivable," 2014, a series of concrete statues of tarpaulin-draped statuary.

The splendidly preserved structure known as the "Bacchus Temple," is the stage for Cynthia Zaven's "Perpetuum Mobile," 2014.

This 12-channel sound installation was first devised for "This is the Time. This is the Record of the Time," a group show staged at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum and AUB museums. It's been reconceived for this less-cluttered space with the sponsorship of Baalbeck International Festival.

At base the work is a minimalist composition for piano and electronics that is by turns plaintive and experimental. Single notes sound through different speakers, its one-note counterpoint elaborating into a uniform composition diffused through 12 sources – one that collapses onto itself, then rebuilds.

The piece encircles visitors through a 12-speaker installation. Though it plays on a loop, no two versions of "Perpetuum Mobile" are quite the same, thanks to the temple's natural resonance – and the accompaniment of birdsong, a mosque's azzan, the sounds of tourists posing for photos.

"The Silent Echo" is up at the Baalbeck archaeological museum and "Temple of Bacchus" through Oct. 17.