

Recollections of an aborted mission

By Jim Quilty

BEIRUT: "Letter to a Refusing Pilot," the latest work by Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari, is a whimsical piece of recollection. The piece embraces several of the more prominent thematic concerns that have marked his work over the years, with an affectionate nod to the media that have been the tools of his trade.

The delicately assembled "plot" of this 35-minute video work collects elements of a story that were scattered over the landscape of south Lebanon in the summer of 1982. Tentatively assembled as conjecture, this tale went unheard, drowned out by the partisan narratives of invasion resistance and collaboration thrown up by the 1982 Israeli invasion and the grimy civil war epic that framed it.

The video is the central component of Zaatari's video installation of the same name, the sole work occupying the Lebanese pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennial.

"Letter to a Refusing Pilot" is curated by Sam Bardaouil and Til Fellrath. The work was commissioned by the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon.

Woven throughout the film alongside Zaatari's historical remembering of the video's core narrative are strands of autobiography, a poem to flight – spiritual and physical – and a visual caress of various media that have been the stuff of recollection, but equally that of fiction.

True to its title, "Letter to a Refusing Pilot" is riddled with aircraft motifs.

The work's opening sequence commences with a concrete floor tile in extreme close-up, accompanied by the high-pitched whine of a motor. The barely discernable subject is soon left behind as the camera retreats skyward. The men on the rooftop below clarify that the camera is attached to a remote-controlled airplane.

Early on, the artist's hands – whose handling of significant objects is itself a motif of the work – open a copy of "Le Petit Prince," the famed fiction work by aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. The early pages are turned one after the other to remind viewers of Saint-Exupéry's sketches – is this a hat drawn in profile, say, or one of the snake that's swallowed an elephant whole?

It is only when Saint-Exupéry has been shut again – and the onlookers' mind opened to its unique blend of recollected childhood and whimsy – that the title "Letter To A Refusing Pilot" materializes on screen.

Subsequently there are sequences of a pair of students casting paper airplanes off the roof of their school – mirrored by the exertions of another young fellow some ways off, pitching his own paper planes back at the school from his parents' balcony.

The camera returns to these boys again and again, later focusing on the minutiae of their expert

paper-folding – part of their homework assignments, it turns out.

As Zaatari's work unfolds, the boys' engineering improves remarkably. Rather than spiraling to the ground, as they tend to do in life, the leaves of folded paper perform the sort of airborne acrobatics that cinema has taught audiences to expect from warplanes.

At one point, in fact, a boy's paper plane hangs still in the air for a spell before a gust of wind animates it, sending it jetting off, with an appropriate sound of jet exhaust issuing from the soundtrack.

Leaves of paper are (or rather were) also used in letter writing, of course. Anyone who has followed Zaatari's practice will find echoes of older work in "Letter to a Refusing Pilot," not least the close documentation of minutely folded notes on paper.

The delicacy of that medium, and the messages it could be used to convey, have been contemplated in several video works. Best known, perhaps is Zaatari's "In This House" (2005, 30 mins), in which the artist went to the southern town of Ain al-Mir to excavate a buried letter, placed inside the empty case of a B-10, 82mm mortar shell.

Here it more closely echoes messages composed by and for detainees that have been secreted within the body. This practice was referenced by "Letter to Samir" (2008, 32 mins), in which a former political prisoner writes a letter to a fellow detainee, carefully wraps the message and seals it inside a plastic capsule.

The work's principal setting is the anonymous school whose roof serves as the launch pad for the boys' airplanes. Black-and-white stills of the structure's exterior are complemented by video images – as the camera drifts down the interior corridors of the structure and moves laterally across the grounds.

Outside, the images eventually settle upon a crag of rock emerging from the ground. A stone sculpture slowly materializes on the rock, like an apparition. Its modernist lines are unmistakably those of a Michel Basbous work – though they also echo the lines of an allusive figure the artist sketches earlier in the piece.

The camera circles the work carefully, giving the onlooker an opportunity to read the symmetry of movement, collision and separation chiseled into it.

More figurative than some of Basbous' works, the sculpture appears to depict a pair of figures embracing at the shoulder, heads pressed together so intensely as to form a unit. Though the figure is unified by the plinth that's integral to the work, the absence in the midst of the sculpture suggests an invisible barrier that separates the two forms, preventing a more intimate physical contact.

Eventually the visual and thematic allusions reach a point where the absented tale at the center of the work, that of "Saida June 6, 1982," can be disclosed.

A text fills the screen, telling the story of Hagai Tamir, an Israeli pilot flying a sortie over south Lebanon during his country's 1982 invasion. It seems he was ordered to bomb a Sidon school (Zaatari's). Since he had training in civil engineering, he immediately identified the structure as a school, and so disobeyed his orders, dropping his payload in the sea instead.

While the soundtrack plays narration from an Israeli doc on the 1982 invasion, the artist's hands

remove their white specimen gloves to reveal an iPad image of a landscape. The hands touch the screen a few times, to signify explosions.

Zaatari's work is projected in tandem with a brief 16mm film loop of explosions in the hills above Sidon. This film will be familiar to anyone who has followed the artist's work, being derived from a series of photos he took in 1982. These were later assembled into a composite to form the piece "Saida, June 6, 1982," which was subsequently reproduced as a faux video before being reformatted here to 16mm film.

The installation sees the central video projected upon one wall while the film is projected against a dais that reproduces the effect of a television set. Facing the 16mm projection, back to the main work, a lone old-fashioned cinema seat, sits in a spotlight. This seat has been set aside for the absent audience member, the pilot who inspired this work.

This is the stuff of recollection.

"Letter to a Refusing Pilot" is up at the Venice Arsenale until Nov. 24. For more information, see www.labiennale.org.

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