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Lebanese Artist Explores 'Human Face' of Conflict

'Letter to a Refusing Pilot' by Akram Zaatari



A screenshot from the film "Letter to a Refusing Pilot," made by Akram Zaatari in 2013.

By NINA SIEGAL
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During the Israeli invasion of southern [Lebanon](#) in 1982, a rumor circulated throughout Akram Zaatari's hometown, Saida. It was said that an Israeli fighter pilot was ordered to bomb a school there but refused and instead dumped his bombs into the sea.

Mr. Zaatari, 47, an artist who now lives in Beirut, first heard this story when he was 16 years old. His father was the founder of the school, which was eventually bombed by another pilot and severely damaged.

Over the years, Mr. Zaatari heard versions of the same tale, with varying explanations for the actions of the pilot, and he came to regard it as a legend of sorts. He once referred to the story during a lecture that was transcribed and published in a book, and came to discover that it was no rumor and that the pilot did exist. His name was Hagai Tamir.

When Mr. Zaatari was selected to represent Lebanon at the 55th [Venice Biennale](#), which runs until Nov. 24, he chose to focus on this Israeli pilot's act of conscientious objection with a quiet, evocative, film, "Letter to a Refusing Pilot."

"The importance of the story is that it gives the pilot a human face," Mr. Zaatari said. "It gives what he is about to bomb, which is considered terrorist ground; it also gives that a human face. I think it's important to remember in times of war that everyone is a human being. Taking it to this level humanizes it completely, and we're not used to this at all."

The film was shot in the neighborhood around the school, which has been rebuilt, and incorporates aerial photographs, drawings, computer imaging and some personal documents from Mr. Zaatari's own life to tell the story from the perspective of a teenage

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boy. In the Lebanese Pavilion at the Biennale, it is part of an installation that includes a reel film projector, a single movie theater chair and a number of cylindrical stools.

Mr. Zaatari has built a career on exploring historical narratives through documentary materials including old photographs, audiotape and film, and he also uses contemporary materials like smartphone videos and YouTube clips. In 1997, he was a founder of the [Arab Image Foundation](#), a conservation and research institute that has preserved about half a million professional and amateur photos from the Middle East and North Africa, chronicling personal and public histories.

He has curated these images in London, Beirut, Damascus and Brussels, and has used many of the works as a starting point for his own videos and installations; they are among the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Pompidou Center, in Paris; and the Tate Modern, in London.

Mr. Zaatari says one of his interests is exploring the nuances between official versions of events — how wars are represented in the news media, for example — and how the same events might be told on a personal scale. That was part of what attracted him to the story of Mr. Tamir.

“This comes at a really important time; a time when we need it,” Mr. Zaatari said. “It’s the story that perfectly represents a conflict between an individual’s ethics and the orders that he’s getting.”

Although Mr. Zaatari has been recognized as a major artist in Lebanon and beyond for several years, he is receiving particularly avid attention in the West today. This year marks only the second time that Lebanon has organized a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and Mr. Zaatari alone was chosen to represent the country this year. He is also the subject of an exhibition on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York through Sept. 23, “[Projects 100: Akram Zaatari](#),” featuring two of his video installations.

One of the works in that show, “Dance to the End of Love,” (2011) is a four-channel video installation of YouTube videos made by young people in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and other Middle Eastern nations, representing themselves as superheroes, bodybuilders, dancers and musicians. The other work, “On Photography, People and Modern Times,” (2010) a two-channel installation, tells the story of the Arab Image Foundation, with images and recorded oral histories by those who contributed photos to the archives.

“He has this very personal approach, very poetic,” said Eva Respini, associate curator of photography for the Museum of Modern Art and one of the curators of the exhibition there. “He’s an excellent storyteller. So while he’s out questioning how images work in public society, how they circulate, there’s also something very personal, very filmic in how they express themselves in his work.”

In November, Mr. Zaatari will have his first solo exhibition at the [Thomas Dane Gallery](#) in London, which began representing him less than a year ago, and a separate exhibition of his work will open at Kurimanzutto Gallery in Mexico City on June 27. He is also represented by the [Sfeir-Semler Gallery](#) in Beirut and in Hamburg.

“He’s a very quietly powerful artist,” said Martine d’Anglejan-Chatillon, a partner at Thomas Dane. “He is a very particular kind of individual who has the courage to engage very profoundly with some of the questions he finds around him in Beirut and that region. And he’s able, more than any other artist I’ve seen, to deploy very different kinds of mediums to convey a certain kind of universality, so that they touch a much, much broader group of people than one might imagine.”

Mr. Zaatari uses the term “excavation” a lot when he talks about his work, perhaps because his first field of study was archeology. The term, he says, refers to treating ordinary locations as archeological sites, where meaning is discovered within the ruins.

The site might only be a photography studio in Beirut, or a public school, as in “Letter to a Refusing Pilot.”

The intersection of truth and legend continues to intrigue him.

“What still interests me in the story is that he didn’t tell anyone except his friends and his family, for many years,” Mr. Zaatari said. “How did the news leak into Lebanon? I don’t know. How did the story circulate in my neighborhood? I don’t know. He didn’t come out

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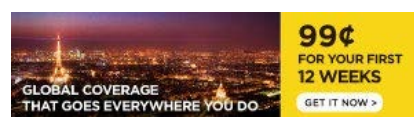
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A version of this article appeared in print on June 20, 2013, in The International Herald Tribune.

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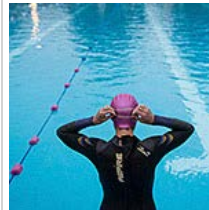
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