



Judith Souriau reviews Walid Raad's *Préface*, the Lebanese-born artist's first retrospective in a French museum.

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hen presenting his work *Let's be honest, the weather helped*, Walid Raad recounts how, at the age of 15, he used to collect bullets, as many kids did in the streets of Beirut in the 1980s. He kept precise notes and pictures of his findings, marking sites with coloured dots for every bullet found (the colour swatches corresponded to the colours used on bullets). Holes in walls, cars and trees after a shelling took the shape of colourful, childish constellations in the vintage black-and-white pictures. It took Raad 20 years to find out that each colour referred to a cartridge manufacturer and a country. Gradually, he understood that his notes and pictures documented the supply of weapons to the Lebanese militia from 17 countries and organisations. When looking closely at the pictures in the exhibition, one finds the marks surprisingly numerous, large and colourful. "They were very big bullets," says Raad. But one wonders: did Raad really document this at the age of 15? Or was the full archive brought together artificially years later? The pictures are somehow mystifying and, in the end, with such uncertainty a feeling of unease surfaces. Whether the story did really happen the way it is told is perhaps not the point: it doesn't make the piece any less valuable. On the contrary, the viewer is beguiled by this element of doubt.

This page and facing page:
Installation views of
the exhibition.



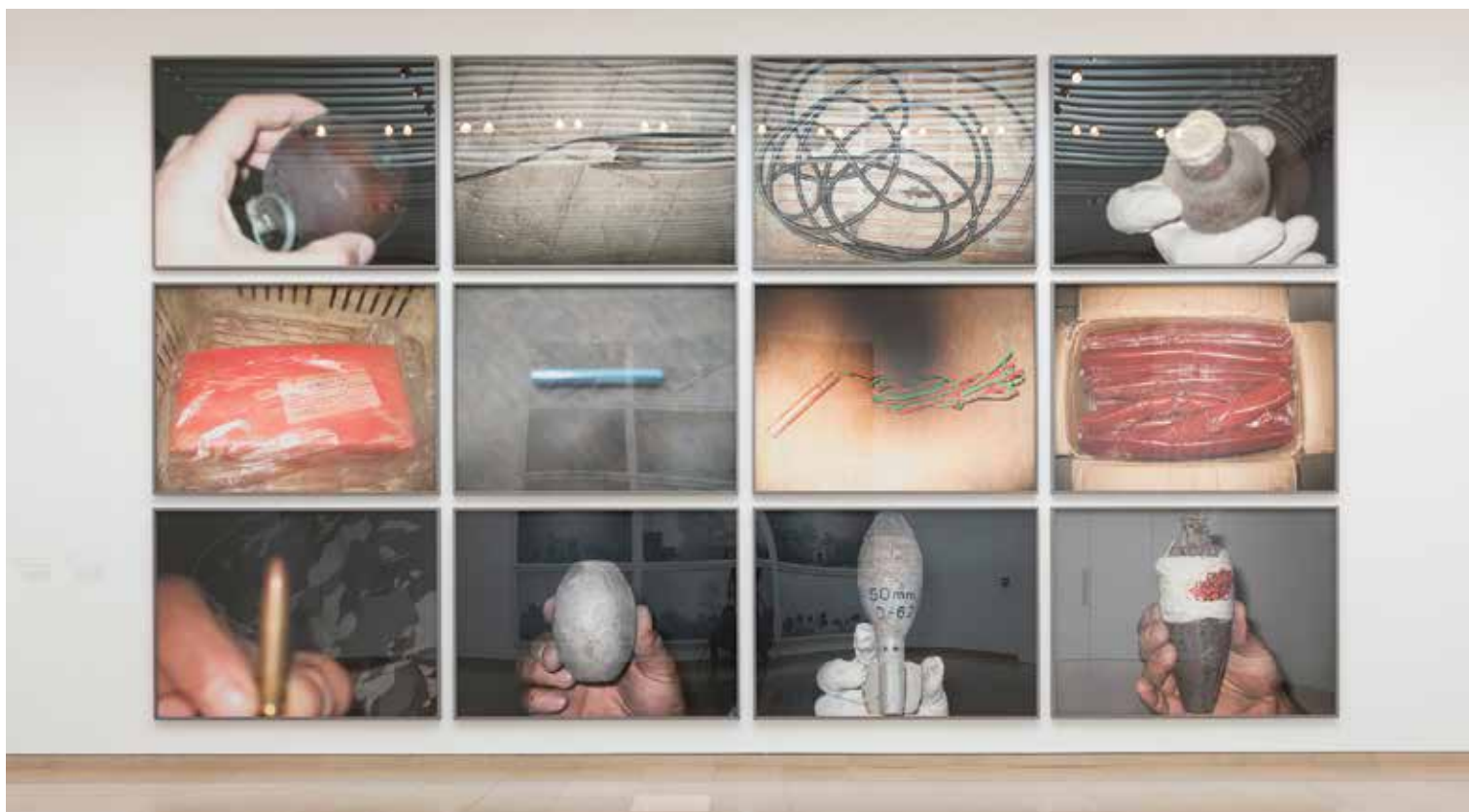
STORIES OF STORIES

Works by the Lebanese-born artist often comprise narratives. The *Préface* exhibition at the Carré d'Art in Nîmes in the South of France – Raad's first retrospective in a French museum – features several of them and is curated by Jean-Marc Prévost (Director, Carré d'Art), Andrea Vilianni and Alessandro Rabottini, from the Museo Madre, Napoli. The show skilfully puts two of Raad's main projects side by side, *The Atlas Group* (1989–2004) and *Scratching on things I could disavow* (since 2007). The first, of which the aforementioned series is a part, is a visual archive established in 1999 (or 1989, as the title

suggests) to “research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon.” War is its main topic. What is fascinating about *The Atlas Group* project is that the images and documents it gathers are each attributed to an identified source or giver, be they fictional or real. One never knows how genuine the documents are and actually, their truth does not depend on their factual accuracy. The Atlas Group never made it a secret that the documents were actually “produced” (and not just “collected”). In a Borges-like state of mind, fabricated truths are deemed just as important as proven historical sources. The Atlas Group archive makes

one question notions of truth and information, reminding us that history is never taken as such, but always delivered through a discourse.

Is Raad's work by essence political? The artist grew up in a war-torn city and subsequently fled in 1985 for the USA. And although Raad does not take a political position nor does he stake any claims – he is a very discreet, polite man – his background has unavoidably fed into his work, from the 1990s to the present day. “Speaking of political art is risky if you do not want to reduce the work to that aspect,” says exhibition curator Jean-Marc Prévost. “In the case of Raad it is much more complex, but yes, in a way it is a politi-



cal work." His discourse on war is a rather critical approach of so-called historical accounts, which he deconstructs in intriguing, sensitive pastiches. The series *I might die before I get a rifle* (1989) puts together images of weapons (bullets, homemade bombs) that a young soldier was supposed to identify in a militia entrance exam. He could not recall the names, missed the exam and donated the pictures to The Atlas Group as a testimony of his failure.

HINTS AND SHADOWS

In 2007, Raad parted ways with the topic of war and immersed himself in new art economies and museums in the Arab world. The setting up of major Western museum brands (the Louvre and Guggenheim) in Abu Dhabi, correlated with the rapid increase in Arab artists, patrons and collectors. Although these topics seem to have little in common, the fiction/truth ambivalence is still present. "The two projects speak of reality through fiction. *The Atlas Group* considers individuals during war, be it in Lebanon or elsewhere. *Scratching* treats art history and new geopolitical aspects, where culture gets economically and politically exploited. In both the series, Raad discreetly remains behind the scene, as having experienced war or as a subject of the art world with a growing interest in the Middle East," adds Prévost. The first

room in the exhibition stages artefacts sent from the Louvre to Abu Dhabi that "exchanged" shapes and skins, while the second room features canvases with dark shapes: Raad explains that when visiting a major private collection in Abu Dhabi, he was irresistibly led to taking pictures of shadows, instead of the artworks themselves. Can this be understood as a comment on the elusiveness of art? Works of art are no longer defined by their materiality, but become moveable and malleable in today's cultural marketing.

The exhibition at the Carré d'art is the first to juxtapose Raad's two projects, *The Atlas Group* and *Scratching on things I could disavow*, and it does it well. People, like me, who were not as impressed by Raad's works after 2007 as they had been fascinated with The Atlas Group project may reconsider their opinion, because one understands here how the two are linked and how they emanate from the same inventive, cunning, brilliant mind. It would be a lie to pretend that Raad's work is easy to grasp. Yet, the show gives a comprehensive glimpse (with notably more text and subtleties than previous exhibitions at the Whitechapel or the Louvre), but without forgoing its mystery. That was certainly the challenge. 

Préface runs until 14 September. For more information visit www.carreartmusee.com

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This page:
Installation view of the
exhibition.

Photography by David
Huguenin. Image courtesy
Carré d'Art, Nîmes.