

Breathing New Life into Memory

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In June 2017, in the setting of the PhotoESPAÑA Festival, the Casa Árabe's offices in Madrid inaugurated the exhibition *Un impulso extraño. Colección Mohsen Yammine en la Fundación Árabe para la Imagen de Beirut* (A Strange Impulse. Mohsen Yammine Collection in the Arab Foundation for the Image of Beirut), where one of the most important parts of the collection owned by the aforesaid Lebanese institution was put on public display for the first time. It was there that one of the recent projects from the of the artist Clara Carvajal also began: *Dioses de la frontera* (Gods of the Frontier), which forms part of the magnificent exhibition in the CGAC.

The use made of photographic resources, such as that mentioned, transcends mere collection and recovery on the basis of family archives, or of commercial studios about to go out of business. Contemporary artists, such as Akram Zaatari, Walid Raad, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige or Rabih Mroué incorporate those photographs as the object of their work, decades after they were taken. In the case of the Lebanon, the reading of images taken in the early twentieth century is inevitably conditioned by the fifteen years of civil war, the post-war period, the political crises between religious factions and even the brutal explosion of 4 August 2020. Their collective work shows us how art can address issues relating to the memory, forgetfulness, amnesia, disappearance, etc. An entire far-reaching semantic field offering infinite possibilities for combining thought, artistic activity and political action. Clara Carvajal uses three historical photographic archives in the Lebanon, thus underscoring the relevance of endeavouring to collect and preserve memory. From them, she extracts photographs of different types, but all taken prior to the country's civil war. On the one hand, studio portraits in which the subjects pose, pretending to be other characters or portraying themselves in imaginary situations with invented costumes and settings. These fictitious, dramatised studio photographs end up being transformed into what never was, and they remain in people's memory even when they never happened. Alongside these are other images, possibly from family archives, taken as souvenirs of moments enjoyed together as a family, with partners or with friends. Situations as real for those who were there as they are intriguing for those of us who look at them from the here and now.

And in this space of ambivalence, the reality is revealed in the imagination, as if a text written in invisible ink were emerging from the paper due to the effect of heat. The artist literally digs into the image with her tool, in an exercise of hollowing out the wood. With the creation of new versions of the same image, she frees them of the representative function that by definition photographs possess, and endows them with new possibilities through the written text, sculpture and printing. The wooden boards function as X-rays which, by revealing the interior of the images, allow them to detach themselves from everything contingent in order to take on new life. The spectator is invited to fabricate new narratives, as does Teo Millán in the texts that accompany the works, taking advantage of the freedom bestowed on the image by the sculpturing hands of Clara Carvajal.