

Rue du Mot Perdu – Nathalie Harb

Lethaby Gallery, Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design,
London

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Rue du Mot Perdu by Nathalie Harb depicted an unmistakably Middle Eastern residential street in miniature; facing ranks of apartment blocks, many of the windows shuttered and the streets deserted by an evening curfew. Whilst the dramaturgy of the piece suggested an interaction along the lines of a model village, the likes of which were once staple tourist attractions; this street, into which visitors could silently intrude and closely inspect was endowed with the sufferings of its parent and the violence visited on her. Housed in a darkened, covered walkway, the white fronted housing blocks were modelled after an actual street in Beirut. In the recent conflict with Israel, during which the Hizbullah controlled area of southern Lebanon was bombarded with aerial ordinance, the street and many like it were reduced to rubble. Thus the installation has assumed new significance as a trace of these demolished domiciles, the people who had existed there. The muffled and muddled lament, a call-to-prayer heard at great distance, which anchored the soundscape only served to heighten the atmosphere of mourning and loss.

A variety of media was employed to represent the visible and invisible lives, the disrupted narratives played out inside the buildings. Peering through those small windows which were not shuttered, the audience could examine tiny sets of furniture – a rumpled bed, a sitting room with a blast hole in the wall, video monitors showing, among others, the pneumatic jaws of a wrecking machine tearing into the reinforced concrete of a condemned building, and live actors imprisoned by domesticity. The shock of the latter, a sudden life-size entity in this Lebanese Lilliput caused more than one audience member to reel back from their spy hole.

That the audience outsized the cityscape inevitably conferred a voyeuristic theme and behaviours on the event. This was a Beirut we could readily recognise, so close in scale to the filtered television pictures that represent most Londoners' total engagement with the place and its peoples. But voyeurism is the act of extended and possibly inappropriate enquiry, and these models which at first glance could be any cityscape, only yielded the details of their suffering on close inspection. The audience on the night were compelled to bear witness to the pain of this Beirut, dedicating more attention than most Western audiences have afforded the real one. Our greater size also endowed the spectator with the safeness of omnipotence – that these problems were not our problems and that we could absent ourselves from the unpleasant reality, or unexpectedly uncoil a hand and make the devastation that much worse. As such, the installation could finally be read through the narrative of the doll's house –

perhaps we stood in for the cruel and capricious child who had chased the dolls away and systematically wrecked that which was left behind.

A mixture of time frames were represented in the models from current day footage from the Middle East to the ornately constructed Regency dining room, the chairs broken apart and the floor littered with glass whilst a large incongruous blancmange remained intact as the centrepiece of the dining table, having survived whatever conflagration had dispatched the dinner guests. Others of the models resembled the bedrooms of chic hotels – the implication being that the destruction was universal, non-specific to this culture and this moment, but a self-perpetuating and self-abnegating activity of mankind.

This was a depopulated street and a hollow city, leaving only the flimsiest trace of the lives that had been lived there. Monuments to existence where the existence has departed are generally found in grave yards, and the models borrowed some of the solemnity and voided nature of such places. My guest on the night commented to me that the where there were people, they were sad. One of the live actors disconsolately stacked and nibbled at biscuits, at least one model room, strewn with cans, showed the evidence of human neglect and despair alongside artillery damage. Certainly this was a picture of a city where the energy was running out, in one case literally – at least half of the tiny street lamps were dark. In the rooms destroyed by rockets and the building pierced and invaded by the growing limb of a huge tree was the evidence of a decay that could not be checked or reversed by rebuilding, even if there was any point in doing so.

If we were ultimately gods, stepping through and examining our dominions, we were selfish gods – cold, remote and dumb. We saw but we did not act, and our act of witnessing changed nothing. The situation being hopeless; we offered no reason for hope and walked on. If televised news has made us into these self-absorbed, inactive deities, to find the Beirut conflict re-depicted as a physical artefact of counter-information can only be a positive step towards reconnecting with mercy, guilt and deed. Perhaps if television could transmit the smell of cordite Rue du Mot Perdu may not have been necessary, but because it is a duplicitous medium which we have come to trust entirely, Nathalie Harb's installation is a superior alternative and a tangible success.

David Mathews
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