

Tanit in Munich—it has no name and likewise no future. It will be torn down soon and replaced with another, taller, more profitable structure.

But before that happens, Kettaneh-Kunigk and Dagher, who ran the gallery Espace SD in Gemmayzeh for seven years and co-commissioned Lebanon's first pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale, have transformed the building's lower floors into flexible and necessarily temporary exhibition spaces. Since late 2007 they have organized several shows there, all emphasizing photography and video. But they have not put forth specific aesthetic criteria or a critical direction, let alone established a niche or even much of a presence. Nor have they burdened the space with a name. This is a refreshing incongruity on the Lebanese art scene and for heterogeneous interventions.

The mirror effect of Asfar's exhibition in a space destined to disappear provided an interesting setting for the artist's research on absence and presence, material and immaterial, in relation to photographic practice. This relationship is, of course, central to many current and historical debates on the image and the politics of representation, but rather than engaging with critical discourse, Asfar's photographs played with the medium and its perceptive possibilities.

This playfulness ran throughout the show by way of several seemingly self-contained series. One could trace five discernible image groups with different styles, formats, and subject matters, from cities and streets to flowers and empty beds (reminiscent of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled*, 1991). The diversity of content paralleled experiments with technique, such as Asfar's rayograms and an all-over saturation of red titled *Portrait à 3200 ASA*, which referenced the film stock Asfar used to shoot it.

Asfar's formal innovations depart from the conventions of the medium for the purpose of evading stasis. His research is like a game of hide and seek, with the added tactics of shifting points of view and various framing devices, color treatments, and exposure times. The risk in such experimentation is to fall into an easy mode of abstraction using light, movement, and rhythm. However, Asfar, while not explicitly problematizing his relationship to the objects he sees, does fill the space between the photographer and the world with tension. "Whatever the actual nearness of my body," he said in an artist's statement, "a distant power appears and sculpts what links me to what I perceive and what separates me from it, an elastic

and sensual distance."

In *Camera Obscura*, another photograph named for technique, Asfar captured a reflection of Beirut on an empty bed. The absence of the body and the presence of the city, which materialized from nothing but light, gave form to the ephemeral sensations of loss and desire.

Asfar's immaterial world was perhaps misnamed. He constructed not a world but a universe, characterized by porous thresholds—from street to gallery, from foreground to background, from nowhere to somewhere—in which private and public were fused in an amorous relationship.

That kind of emotional charge sets Asfar's work apart from the work of his more clinical peers. And it was evidenced in the recent video work *Print (1)*, which debuted during Ashkal Alwan's Video Avril festival in 2007. In that piece, Asfar narrated the end of an affair through a succession of still images and subtitles. The narrator, the artist himself, confessed that he was no longer a photographer when he was in love. Perhaps Asfar's notion of immateriality owes something to Roland Barthes, who once wrote that only "love, extreme love ... could erase the weight of the image."

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