



RECLAIMING *THE PAST*

D Marina Iordan uncovers the political message beneath the aesthetic surface of Nada Sehnaoui's works at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde.

Does the theatricality of an activist work defeat its inherent purpose of addressing social or political incorrectness? Or does it, on the contrary, widen the reach of its message by popularising it through aesthetics? Answering such questions begins with ridding a work of art of its visual attributes to solely focus on its conceptual ambition.

In Nada Sehnaoui's case, that ambition is the prevention of popular memory's erosion, and not just for the sake of historic preservation. What the Lebanese artist aims for is to provoke introspective reflection on a civil war that no one has ever been officially held accountable for after a 1991 amnesty law passed by the Lebanese parliament absolved all political crimes perpetrated prior to its enactment. In a situation that offers

no room for claims or injunctions, what Sehnaoui does is to recuperate war-stolen emotional anchors through a physical reclamation of space.

At the white cube space of Dubai-based Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde (IVDE), her intentions are first illustrated through a making-of video in which Sehnaoui is seen arranging rolling pins head-to-head in concentric circles on the floor until they surround her, at which point she proceeds to extricate herself from the self-made labyrinth, tiptoeing inside the narrow corridors she has created. Its title, borrowed from the old adage "This Too Shall Pass", demonstrates Sehnaoui's faith in the ephemerality of all conditions and displays a text in which she voices her hopes for the threat of "another idiotic and deadly civil war" to ultimately evanesce. The tone is



Installation view of *Along These Lines*.

Image courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.

set: engaged, fearless and borderline impertinent, but justifiably so, because Sehnaoui works for the sake of entire communities. Her public installations populate their symbolic locations and thereby return those territories and the memories they represent.

Imagine that IVDE was Beirut's Martyr's Square – an urban space that has been the scene of some of the most tormenting episodes in Lebanon's history, from public hangings during WWI to a total destruction come the civil war. What would it mean to come across *To Sweep* – an installation of myriad brooms (750 to be exact) coalescing into a harmonious, undulating floor structure – in such a conflict-laden environment? In this context, the encounter would certainly evoke more than the brushing away of the political past. Even more so knowing that Sehnaoui recently ran for a municipality position at Beirut Madinati ("Beirut is My City") – an electoral list of politically unaffiliated members whose aim is to improve the livability of the Lebanese capital through a focus on urban and social planning.

Further down the gallery walls, the initial chromatic sobriety shifts to sanguine colours in the form of palimpsestically annotated front pages of the French-Lebanese daily *L'Orient Le Jour*. For all of 1999, Sehnaoui played with the notion of post-war memory by brightly highlighting certain pieces of information while obliterating others; a subjective selection, or omission, process aimed at erasing the weight of history.

Her abstract series *How Many, How Many More* is equally vibrant, albeit in a more painterly manner. Picking up on the strategy of repetition, which runs across much of Sehnaoui's work, it consists of shredded maps and newspapers repurposed as tangy-hued vertical lines bearing resemblance to tally marks that in fact serve as counting tools of war casualties. It presents the starkest contrast between a colourful and eye-catching surface and a challenging underlying significance and is the work that offers the most ready response to the question of whether a striking aesthetic can counter an activist message. The work reminds us that a painting's aesthetic appearance can sweeten the pill of Sehnaoui's gruesome statement and ease the digestibility of its implications.

In sum, *Along These Lines* substantiates Sehnaoui's politically-inflected artistic practice while nuancing the notion of activist art: although it evokes past political transgressions, it does not serve to condemn them, embody public discontent or steer some sort of protest. What it does is activate reflection through a wide range of media that please the eye instead of assaulting it. *Along These Lines* lingers in the mind like a vivid dream that one cannot escape the urge to dissect.

Along These Lines ran from 16 May–16 June 2016 at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai. For more information visit www.ivde.net