

Nada Sehnaoui
How Many, How Many More

GALERIE TANIT | BEYROUTH

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How Many, How Many More: a phrase that cannot help but complete itself, conjuring up a vast lexicon of wars, shattered futures, and empty promises, metamorphosing into existential questions with no definite answers. Yet, far from a rhetorical lament, Nada Sehnaoui's *How Many, How Many More* is a rebellion, a refusal of the status quo, an implicit call for action spurred by deep-seated fears. It is an ode to a wounded country, Lebanon, and to a region in a deadlock. The artist's recent paintings, sculptures, and installations reveal a universe that has simultaneously solidified and fractured, crystallizing concerns central to her reflection: the imperative to preserve Memory and the commitment to meditate on historical trajectories and historicity, as a starting point to spur collective resilience and national reconciliation.

The question *How Many, How Many More* has been haunting Sehnaoui since the early nineteen-nineties, a time when the state-sanctioned collective amnesia regarding the 1975 Lebanese war incited artists, writers, and filmmakers to take on the critical work and duty of remembrance. They investigated the war's contentious history, documenting but also fictionalizing it, seeking ways to represent the unrepresented and un-representable, in an archival impulse emerging out of necessity.¹ Such approaches reverberate in Sehnaoui's *Lebanese War Statistics* (1994), for instance, or in *War Games* (1994), which incorporated archival photographs of a divided Beirut. But the artist soon took on an idiosyncratic, and provocative, position in the postwar artistic debates, privileging emotional immediacy over ethnography, sociology, or scholarliness, and radically disrupting conceptions about what art about the war should look like: her large-scale site-specific public installations, notably staged in downtown Beirut, displaced hundreds of everyday objects, such as rolling pins, brooms, or toilet seats, appropriating a Duchampian gesture to convey the urgency of reckoning with the legacy and memory of the war, and invite national understanding.

Sehnaoui's *How Many, How Many More* is of particular relevance today, in light of the protracted war in Syria and the Middle East and North Africa's entanglement in conflicts after an ill-fated Arab Spring, while Lebanon witnessed an unsteady postwar trajectory, marked by political tensions and punctuated by military conflict. Too conscious of the illusions harbored by notions of progress, Sehnaoui presents a version of History that challenges Hegel-derived idealistic modern notions of the teleological deployment of the historical narrative. Instead, the artist calls to remember a past that's piecemeal and contested, and projects tentative visions of a nonviolent collective future, tending towards a metamodern oscillation between "hope and melancholy [...] unity and plurality, totality and

¹ In Lebanon, this "impulse" manifested itself a decade before Hal Foster theorized it in "An Archival Impulse" (*October* vol. 110 (Autumn 2004), 3-22.)

fragmentation."² Concerned with sincerity and affect, Sehnaoui seeks to re-infuse hope and optimism where irony, cynicism and despair prevailed.

How Many, How Many More's epizeuxis also alludes to Sehnaoui's characteristic recourse to repetition. Most spectacularly visible in her installations' profusion of mundane objects in the spirit of *arte povera* (epitomized by the 600 toilet seats of *Haven't 15 Years of Hiding in the Toilet Been Enough* (2008)), repetition reappears in Sehnaoui's recent paintings and sculptures, where the artist compulsively piles up, adds to, reiterates, and repeats, to amplify meaning and propel viewers into a meditative space for reflection. Repetition becomes an incantatory healing tool that slows down viewers' experience of the work, further inscribing them in different dimensions of duration, as experiential time intersects with the historical time of the archive, the labor-intensive artmaking time, and the gradual act of processing memory.

Not only does repetition occupy the space of a given work, but motifs also recur throughout the years. Hence, the tulip, originating in monotypes in the early nineties, has now pollinated vibrant canvases, where rows of stylized flowers are carved into paint. Wildflowers indigenous to Lebanon, Sehnaoui's *Tulips for a Wounded Country* (2015) are neither vanities nor do they stand for bouquets laid at tombs of Unknown Soldiers. Instead, they are fragile peace offerings to Lebanon, romantic yet unidealistic, pregnant with tentatively hopeful and celebratory, rather than mournful, symbolism. Arranged in monumental, vivid, patchworks, the paintings bring to mind the potential flourishing of the country, and the hypothetical possibility of a world stripped of violence.

Yet, when juxtaposed to Sehnaoui's sculptural wood map of Lebanon, *In Pieces* (2019), the tulips' salutary ambitions seem to have miserably failed. The Lebanese map, carved by France and Great Britain at the onset of the Mandate era, has been recurrently reclaimed as a tool of national affirmation since the late nineteen-thirties. Sehnaoui blew it up and painted it funereal black, figuring a country fragmented too many ways to count. The pieces of Lebanon's puzzle could be torn further apart as easily as they could be reassembled: if *In Pieces* represents a conception of Lebanon's present, and the consequences of its past, it also contains its possible futures. In that sense, Sehnaoui gestures towards a metamodern spirit of reconstruction, one conscious that, however doubtful such prospects, shattered pieces' constructive potential remains – notions also manifest in *Broken* (2018-19), a tower of sixty punched-in ping pong balls, painted glossy white, signifying Lebanon's, or the Middle East's, damaged parts, which, once erected on a pole, are able coalesce into an entity that stands tall.

Still, hopeful futures are warped in a present-time impasse. *Les Mauvaises Nouvelles du Monde* (2018), a wiggly 350-kg tower of pages from the Lebanese Arabic-language newspaper *Annahar*, glued together and painted black, imposes its vortex of negativity. Newspapers are ripe for artistic reuses, from Picasso and Braque's collages, to pop artists' criticism of mass media, to Sehnaoui's own irreverent treatment of the Lebanese Francophone daily *L'Orient le Jour*, whose front pages she cut up, painted over, reorganized,

²Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2: 2010, issue 1.

and even shredded throughout 1999, to her installation *Fractions of Memory* (2003), whose towers of newspaper pages contained individuals' memories of the war. But in an era of fake news and post-truths, of information saturation, Sehnaoui shifts the focus away from newspapers' content, and negates their archival truth and History-writing potential, to consider them a monolithic harbinger of bad omen. By rendering information illegible and static, the artist radically interrupts the passage of time inherent to the concept of the 24-hour news cycle, and, on a broader level, problematizes the temporal premise of classical modernity.

One awaits societal catharsis, and the ways to achieve it. The installation *Lungs* (2019), an ensemble of thirty tailpipes cleaned up and painted pristine white, transforms agents of pollution into vehicles to evacuate society's frustrations – although their metallic ends remain, testifying to their former environmental impact. Lebanon and the Middle East likewise might have burnt out, but still harbor the potential to transmute exhaustion into a society-wide breath of relief.

Sehnaoui's exploration of temporal dimensions recurs throughout the painting series *How Many, How Many More* (2016-19), a renewed interrogation spurred by the war in Syria. Merging the inheritance of abstract painting and that of collage, the abstract landscapes underscore the labor- and time-intensiveness of Sehnaoui's process, with their tightly-structured rows of short stripes built with multiple layers of paint. Simultaneously, *How Many More* highlights the multiple nature of memory – protean and fragmentary, collective or individual, experienced or told. The paintings find Sehnaoui at her most self-referential, as the artist opens up tiny windows to her life, through myriad glued-in or painted elements, as many references to time, memory, and mortality: there are pictures of herself as a child, alone or with her grandmother, alongside watch faces, buttons, African beads, and open medication capsules she's collected. But the paintings also allude to the interconnection between personal and collective experience, through images of Sehnaoui's installation *Rubble* (2006), a meditation of mankind's destructiveness, and thin strips of newspapers, a symbol of the collective archive, again rendered illegible, suggesting the impossibility of writing History. Ultimately, *How Many, How Many More's* musical dynamism cannot fully conceal a fragmentary story that can be told neither linearly nor with certainty, and whose unsure future depends on the collective will to go forward.

How Many, How Many More points to a universal story bent on repeating itself – the Middle East being no exception – and that goes beyond wars' immediate aftermaths: close to thirty years after the end of the 1975 war, Lebanon no longer only has to contend with the conflict's memory, but also with its postmemory, as an entire generation, raised in the culture of collective amnesia, has now come of age, and has to grapple with historical events they never experienced themselves, but whose legacy they must cope with.³ Faced with the Sisyphean task of negotiating a burdensome past, an unsettling present, and a speculative future, they are the ones who will answer *How Many, How Many More*.

Text by Mary Tomb

³ Hirsch, Marianne, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)