

Walid Raad at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

A one-person exhibition of work by Walid Raad will open at Paula Cooper Gallery on April 13th, 2019. The presentation will include a number of recent photographic, video and print works from the artist's ongoing project titled Sweet Talk—a set of self-assigned documentary commissions that study the city of Beirut. The exhibition will be on view through May 18th, 2019 at 521 West 21st Street. There will be an opening reception on Saturday, April 13th from 6 to 8pm.

Capturing a composite truth that stretches beyond historical fact, the works on view explore Beirut's constant physical transformation during the protracted wars. In the early 1990s, Beirut's ravaged downtown embarked on vast reconstruction, launching the largest urban redevelopment project of the city's history with the establishment of the Beirut Central District. Examining the persistent effects of the war, as well as the use of photography and video as an index for archiving a violent past that lingers, the works in this exhibition cast a quizzical, mediated eye onto images of the city from this time.

In a large-scale video work consisting of kaleidoscopically mirrored loops, dilapidated buildings silently crumble into clouds of debris. As the playback reverses, the buildings reemerge from their ruins, only to crumble again. The footage is derived from video documentation of hundreds of buildings being demolished to make way for the new, glittering postwar city center. As the video plays forward and backward in a seamless and infinite loop, the dust billows dissolve into abstract blooms, confronting the viewer with the horror and beauty that history exerts onto living spaces. The iterative rise and fall, doubling and rebroadcasting, evokes the contingent nature of power relations, urban communities, and the body politic.

In a series of black and white photographs, ostensibly derived from a book found in a flea market, Raad explores the texture of the Mediterranean city through the eyes of an acolyte he identifies as the “unsung Lebanese photographer Ahmed Helou.” The photographs have—seemingly—been annotated by an anonymous third party with personal recollections ascribed to each of the depicted locations. Re-photographing the found book, Raad collapses authorship to mine the space in which parallel pasts exist simultaneously. In another series, Raad presents his own photographs of shuttered commercial facades taken in 1984: “I was thrilled to be hired by a cousin active in the local militia, to photograph various storefronts” he writes in the wall text. The images act as preserved referents of a city that is haunted both materially and psychologically.