

# Photography show relives the Civil War

'Missing' and 'In a Sea of Oblivion' aim to reverse denial about the Lebanese period of conflict

Matthew Mosley  
Daily Star staff

**B**EIRUT: As Lebanese politicians played football on Tuesday in a show of unity to mark the 35th anniversary of the outbreak of Civil War in Lebanon, a very different kind of commemoration was unfolding across town in the battered relic of the City Center Cinema, now more often referred to as the Dome.

The pitted concrete husk of the cinema, mostly disused aside from the odd exhibition or party, has itself become something of a reminder of the war. Like the Martyrs Square statue, its survival throughout the vicious battles that raged along the Green Line has invested it with symbolic value.

This symbolism makes it a highly appropriate venue for two exhibitions that opened there on Wednesday: "In a Sea of Oblivion" and "Missing."

Whereas the football match was a public show of unity and an attempt to demonstrate that Lebanon has moved on, the exhibitions at the Dome are a call to remember.

"Missing" is an ongoing project initiated by UMAM Documentation and Research to collect and compile photographs of people who disappeared during the civil war. Today "Missing" comprises more than 650 portraits, contributed by relatives and friends who still don't know what happened to their loved ones.

Arrayed at ground level underneath the belly of the concrete shell, the mass of faces include people of all ages, sexes and political persuasions, although predominantly young men. According to UMAM, the photographs collected so far

represent a mere fraction of the disappeared. "In the absence of truth or justice, those who are left behind are also locked into a purgatory of endless waiting," says the accompanying blurb, "waiting for good news or bad, waiting for the return of their sons or their bodies, waiting for the reports of commissions, for official responses, waiting for recognition, action and closure."

These pictures have already travelled throughout Lebanon, from Tripoli to Baalbek to Deir al-Qamar and Sidon. Each time, there is an inevitable growth of the collection, as more become aware of the project. UMAM works alongside various committees of families of the disappeared to campaign for excavation of mass graves and other sites to find what became of these people.

Unfortunately "Missing" occupies a smaller space than at previous venues, for example the exhibition space at Unesco Palace. As a result the series of photographs was somewhat compressed, laid in a grid rather than strung out in a line. Still, the confrontation between the spectator and the sheer number of faces, many in the bloom of youth, gives "Missing" an undeniable effect.

The rest of the street-level area is occupied by a series of murals, forming part of the installation "In a Sea of Oblivion" from the Feel Collective.

A wall text at the exhibition describes the Feel Collective as "a multi-disciplinary group of cultural activists ... working to infuse their social environment with new thinking patterns."

"In a Sea of Oblivion" has a slightly different emphasis than "Missing." Taking into account the more than 200,000 people who lost their lives as a result of conflict in Lebanon, the exhibi-



Sobhie Hijazi holds a framed picture of her brother who has went missing during the war.

tion aims to raise the question, "Why is there no memorial to commemorate their death?"

Comprising artists, architects, lawyers and musicians, the Feel Collective is loosely headed by the artist and designer Alfred Tarazi, who has exhibited a number of times in Beirut in recent months – including the group shows "Blank to Basics" at The Running Horse Contemporary Art Space and the recent Lebanese Diaspora show at the Dome.

The murals on show at the installation, designed by Tarazi along with Maxime Hourani and Taha Ali Mohamad, fit an aesthetic that will be familiar to followers of Tarazi. Figures from photographs taken during the Civil War have been cut out, in a similar way to his earlier series "The Sky Ever So Blue,"

but this time placed against a grid punctuated by red crosses.

These frequently harrowing images display all the horror of the conflicts that scarred Lebanon. A woman in a blood-stained T-shirt stands screaming with her arms outstretched, piles of dead children behind her. Gun-toting youths stare out nonchalantly at visitors.

Some montages have a surreal quality that brings to mind the hallucinogenic portrayal of war in Francis Ford Coppola's film "Apocalypse Now." A phalanx of men pose with a Ferris wheel and other fairground rides in the background – perhaps those of Lunar Park – while a donkey stands nonchalantly to one side.

In one dreamlike panel a group of men appear to be floating in space. There is a serene

beauty to their prone bodies and poses of abandon. On closer inspection, they are splayed corpses that have been cut out and turned upside down, turning the brutal reality into something ethereal and confusing.

Visitors to "In a Sea of Oblivion" are invited to write the names of friends or relatives who died in the various stages of conflict onto the grid of that forms the background of these murals, making this a temporary memorial in lieu of the permanent structure that the Feel Collective are aiming for.

Upstairs in the cavern of the old cinema there is a proposal, of sorts, for one possibility of a permanent memorial. Projected onto the huge, curving concrete screen is a video made by Nadim Chartouni, Krystel Kouyoumdjis and Pedros Temizian.

In the distance the Dome itself is visible but, through the use of computer trickery, it has been transported into the ocean, propped just above the water. In the foreground, swags of black fabric that appear to be hooded figures stare out over the waves.

Swaying slightly in an eerie light, these figures could be heralds of the apocalypse, or supernatural witnesses. A droning, rumbling, almost unbearable soundscape – another group effort, this one from Tarek Atoui, Stephane Rives and Pedros Temizian – makes the video oddly compelling but also somewhat discomfiting.

Sitting as it does in a prime spot in Downtown Beirut, the eye catching structure of the Dome is continually under threat of destruction by real estate developers. Placing the structure in the sea outside Beirut, as suggested in the video, sounds a madcap idea.

However, the symbolism that makes the Dome such an appropriate venue for these exhibitions makes it equally appropriate as a Civil War memorial. At any rate, the power of the Feel Collective's video is increased immensely by seeing it from inside the structure it portrays.

Ultimately, "In a Sea of Oblivion" doesn't aim to present concrete plans for a memorial. Rather, this is a cry for attention, a demand that the authorities and citizens of Lebanon face up to what the Feel Collective see as an unavoidable task: "[T]he duty to map and re-write the war through the names of the victims and to imagine a memorial to pay them a last tribute."

"In the Sea of Oblivion" and "Missing" continue showing at the Dome until May 9. For further details, call +961 1 553 604.



Visitors look at the murals of "In the Sea of Oblivion."



A visitor stands in front of a mural of "In a Sea of Oblivion."