

Il était une fois un tout petit pois



Sara Badr Schmidt or the Determined Allegory by *Pascal Bruckner*

Take two worlds that are completely different from one another, the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales and the wars that are tearing apart the Middle East, and look for possible connections between the two. Seemingly there are none. But Sara Badr Schmidt is an artist who forms connections where the common mortal only sees walls and borders. Very affected by the wars in Lebanon which tore apart her childhood, she is even more so disturbed to see the phantom of such conflicts catch up to Europe and burden our streets with a terrifying threat. It is the child in her and the mother of two children that inspired this installation. In choosing the Princess and the pea, her impact is twofold: she evokes a wonderful story and distorts it to feed into our fears of today. For the little girl perched on a pile of mattresses is lying beneath a bombshell green like a pea that lies on the bed frame. The mattress, symbol of a refugee or a homeless person – in the absence of a roof, you need to at least have something to lie on, a meager means to protect oneself from the bombs coming from the sky or canons. Nothing depicts the vulnerability of child more than the mannequin sitting up high threatened by a suspended lethal weapon

When we no longer have a home, a dwelling to protect us from the madness of mankind, the only escape left is to look towards the sky. These five light boxes are photos of

Beirut taken at the same time in five different neighborhoods in the city. Men kill each other even though they share the same planet, the same nature, the same climate. When the killings start and degenerate into a civil war, we need to begin by reminding ourselves of what is essential – what people have in common, their sense of belonging to the living world, to the elements. And the wonderful carpet that supports the mattresses, an essential feature in Lebanese homes, reflects the sky, the clouds, the cosmos like a mirror image. Here, blue is a soothing image of peace where the green of the cannonball embodies madness, hate and murder. War always comes to this blue sky in a little cloud, initially inoffensive and invisible, and darkens and then soon spits out its shrapnel. The ferments of division that Sara seems to remind us of, are initially minor then the seeds of hostility are sowed throughout all societies. This is why the term, “together” has become one of the most difficult words to understand in all languages.

This installation gives us a sense of profound peace and almost of serenity. The mattresses, the carpet prompt relaxation, especially with a little girl immersed in the deep sleep that only children know how to attain. But neither sleep or meditation are possible when threatened by war. Beneath our closed eyelids roams the phantom of mass murders, the madness of fanaticism, forced conversion, hostile com-

munities ready to massacre their neighbors to calm their rage. Sara Badr Schmidt’s aesthetic choice here is paradoxical: she depicts violence with gentleness, the red of blood with the blue of the sky, the rain of bombshells with the flight of birds. She is not trying to contend with what so many other artists have done, piling up corpses, showing ruins, and photographing mutilated and injured bodies. She avoids bloody expressionism and adopts subdued symbolism. She recreates the war with an image of conceivable happiness. It is this intention that makes her work so powerful: the eye is at first unarmed. Believing that it is entering a world familiar to it, little by little the eye discovers realities hidden by this environment, and understands that the two can coexist peacefully together. Somewhat like the towns situated a few hundred meters from the war front and where life continues, unshakably, while fighters are cutting each other’s throats not far away. But this gentleness is all the more troublesome. It does not calm us, it shows two worlds contaminated by the same virus of aversion and killing. We all become, through the magic of this representation, princesses on the pea, powerless and vulnerable faced with the crime that is approaching. And regardless of the height of the mattresses we pile up to protect us, death creeps in, atrocious, ready to strike its prey, insatiable and greedy.

Pascal Bruckner, June 2017

Explanatory Note

“Once upon a time there was a pea” is an installation that associates several places, periods and socio-political contexts around one question – how can different religious communities and ethnicities live together?

More than just a simple theoretical question, above all it echoes a deep concern: “living together” is a fundamental notion that can generate immeasurable violence when it fails. This is why the installation displays human vulnerability faced with the threat of conflicts beyond comprehension, which, at any given time, can have dramatic consequences on one’s existence.

Sara Badr Schmidt has never addressed the Lebanon War so purposefully before in her work. She thought that the feeling of insecurity she experienced as a child had no reason to exist. But today violence has taken another form, and terrorist attacks in Western countries are multiplying. This project actually started the day after the attacks against Charlie Hebdo, after writing the following text:

"Nausea. A feeling of disgust that puts down deep roots, in childhood.

The nausea of knowing that this vermin continues to spread, with its sour smell, its mindlessness and its dehumanization.

This gangrene - an insult to blue sky and singing birds. As a child, I saw this vermin enter the world and spread. I couldn't bear its nearness. I left. It has grabbed hold of me, with its slimy paws and barbaric glance. It sickens me. They sicken me.

These humans who are barely human. They are monsters.

I would have liked to offer my own children streets that are clean, streets free from their lurking shadows. I would have rather that they never felt the fear of encountering the wolves from their fairy tales in real life. Now I must teach them the courage to confront and live among them so that one day, perhaps, we will be done with this blade that hangs over our heads, the blade of barbarism and savagery."

Even if fairy tales sometimes have disquieting aspects, the element of dream and poetry that goes with them can help us get through ordeals. It's this resilience that she wanted to display, this manner of finding solutions to reenchant the world despite an awareness of horror.

“Once upon a time there was a pea” is a new phase of “Borderless”, a work on frontiers that she undertook ten years ago and which brings into question the notion of geographical and transitory frontiers. The photo which initiated the project was taken in Southern Lebanon, on the Lebanon-Israel border, and then photographs taken of the sky in different parts of the world were added, sometimes with along with a soundtrack or video installations. The only clues of where the photos were taken are words reflecting a unique characteristic of the location.

This project is a continuation of Borderless.

Description

In the middle of the installation, a little girl is sleeping on a pile of mattresses. She lies beneath the frame of her bed, on top of which there is an enormous pea in the form of a cannonball.

It is a variation of the fairy tale, the Princess and the Pea. Except in this case, it is not about a wedding engagement, but about survival, to keep dreaming. Contrary to the princess in the fairy tale, the little girl, well aware of the threat, decided to make a shelter out of her bed frame, by placing her mattresses underneath it. The pea is in full view and is a green coated cannonball.

Everything is placed on a carpet on which appears this sentence: “A city with a blue sky and a blue sea, a lost cloud ended up in the blue sky, it started to rain, iron rain.”

Surrounding this strange bed are five photos of the sky mounted on lightboxes. The photos of the sky resemble each other apart from a few slight differences, as they were each taken at the same time in five different representative sites in Beirut. The same word, “sawa” (“together”) is inscribed on each of them.

As background noise, the sound of the video projected nearby. The video immerses the viewer into a meditative state, with images of blue sky in which birds appear and disappear. Occasionally, this blue sky is replaced by the storm of war. In the sound track composed specifically for this video, a voice recites the text written on the carpet.

This installation is a reminder that beauty endures despite the absurdity and horror in the world.

Lightboxes “sawa”

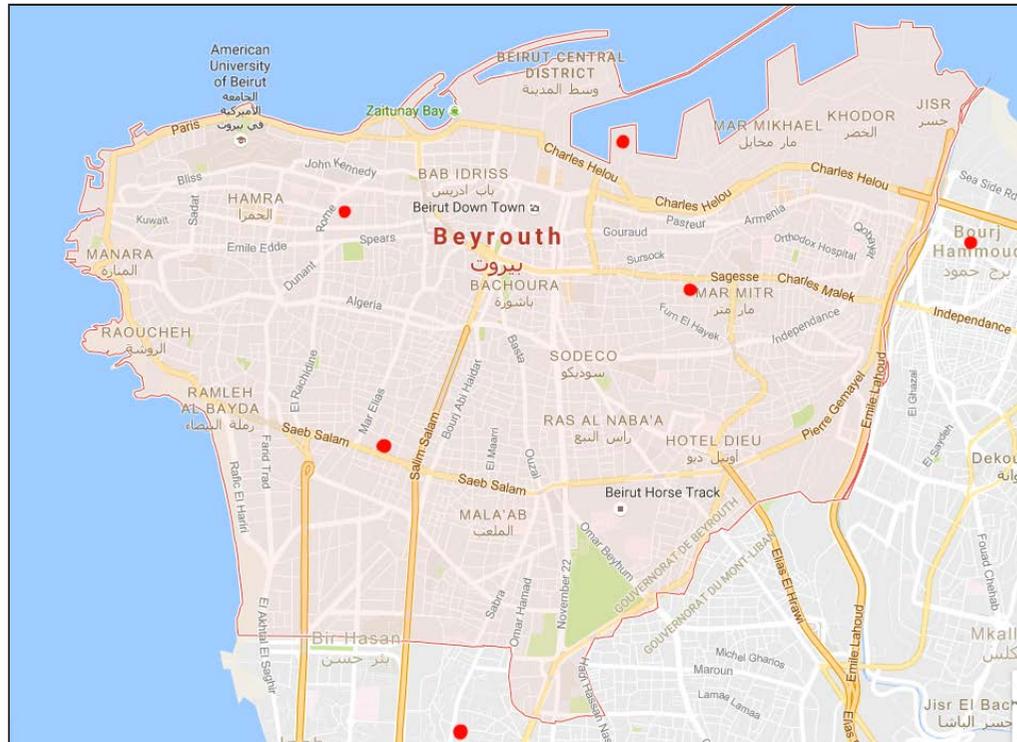


The pictures of the sky were taken in five strategic locations in Beirut. Geographically, the places are very close to each other, but have very different religious and community identities. The names of these five representative locations were frequently cited in the press during the war. With just the date and location recorded on each photo, the images underscore the geographic similarity and yet the differences in identity between each place.

Each sky image is printed on a box illuminated by Leds.

- 1- Mazraa street: Beirut's traditional Sunnite neighborhood.
- 2- Clemenceau street: A well-known mixed residential neighborhood in the center of West Beirut.
- 3- Saint-Nicolas street: A well-known Christian neighborhood in the center of East Beirut.
- 4- Beirut Harbour: A strategic point in Beirut, symbolic of the Maronite Christian forces during the war.
- 5- Dahyeh: a suburb south of Beirut, Shiite Muslim neighborhood.
- 6- Bourj-Hammoud: a suburb east of Beirut, Armenian neighborhood.

The word that appears on each image of the sky is the same, “sawa”, which means “together” in Arabic. In Beirut, the cohabitation of different communities is a problem that is far from being resolved. And with the increasing rise of sectarianism throughout the world, this issue is no longer confined to countries in the Middle East. Yet the peaceful presence of the sky brings a comforting element, because despite the tensions, you just need to look up to find it. And despite the boundaries drawn in the soil, the sky is clearly the same in these five different points in the city.



The carpet

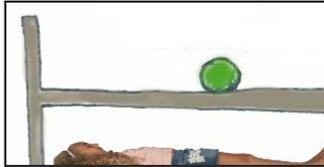


The carpet is a nomadic object that you can easily take with you. It is also a very important feature in Lebanese homes – they appear and disappear on the floor with the seasons. The carpet is made of wool. Like a page in a book, it has verses that specifically allude to the sky in Beirut during the war. More generally it evokes the dramatic events that can darken our daily lives, violent uprisings when we least expect them.

A city with a blue sky and a blue sea
A lost cloud ended up in the blue sky
It started to rain
Iron rain



The bed



The ball the size of a cannonball is green like a pea. It sits on the bed frame which becomes the base of danger, but also acts as a shelter. Because beneath it lies a pile of several mattresses. Mattresses are part of the ambiance in Beirut, because they are made by craftsmen in shops that can be seen from the street. During the war, people brought these mattresses to their shelters. Used by refugees, once again they are an essential part of the city's ambiance. The mattresses and the way they are handmade embody the continuity of a tradition. Like the sky, the mattresses will always be there; like the sky, their unchanging presence brings a feeling of precarious comfort. On the side of the mattresses, words are embroidered: «Once upon a time there was a pea.» A mannequin lies on the mattress under the bed frame.



The video projection

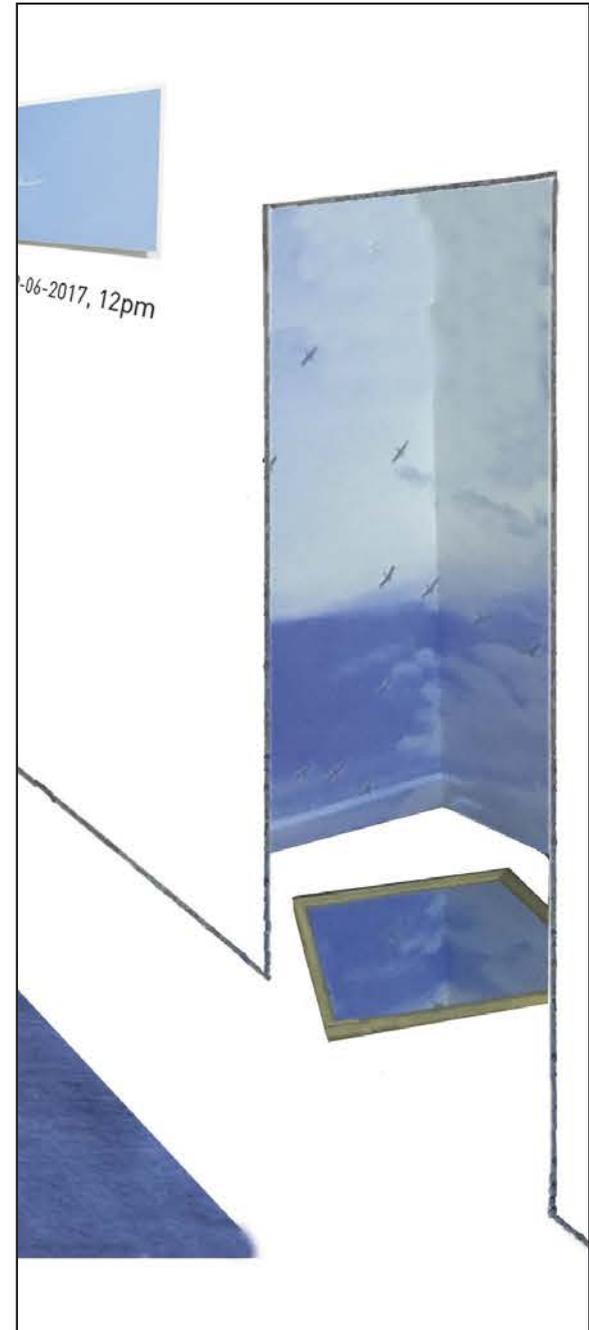
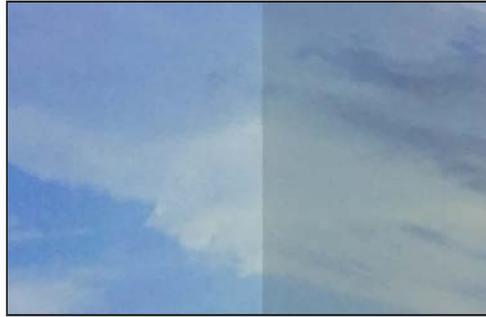


Adjacent to the installation, a video is projected and reflected in a mirror on the floor.

The video, "Skyprint", 4 mins., sound track by Jean-Daniel Consoloni

– Images: birds appear like drops of paint on the canvas of the sky and disappear only to come back, creating an image as fleeting as the sky is permanent and unchanging. This is the sky of Lebanon; the birds are migrating birds that cross the neutral sky, the sky in Switzerland. As a counterpoint, fragments of the Chagall fresco from the Paris Garnier Opera house appear, randomly shown like fictitious flashes. In this manner, for someone who does not know this fresco, only the fragments seen here exist, and its entirety has no reality.

– Sound track: a composition by Jean-Daniel Consoloni made specifically for the installation. The piano notes echo the spots formed by the birds appearing in the sky. Accompanying the flashes from the Paris Garnier Opera house, are sounds of thunder, reminiscent of the war, that interrupt the calm of the piano. At the same time, a woman's voice repeats in a hauntingly way the sentence written on the carpet, "A city with a blue sky and a blue sea, a lost cloud ended up in the blue sky, it started to rain, iron rain."



Toile de maître au mètre



“Toile de maître au mètre” (master painting by the meter), canvas roll (5 m x 45 cm) that has a pattern of a grid printed on it (in block printing). At the intersections of the vertical and horizontal lines, bursts of green peas are superimposed. This motif represents the effects of transcendental meditation on the body, whereby a person’s brain is like a grid on which you find stress points that are more or less significant depending on their intensity or when they occurred. Through meditation these stress points can be alleviated until they disappear. Here the green points are an allegory to the pea, the danger scattered on the grid, in varying tints of green that break up the pattern.

The “Toile de maître au mètre” are sold by the meter like at the market: here is this an allusion to a practical innovation for interior decoration or an ironic criticism of the art market?

