

Akram Zaatari

Clockwise

Father and Son: A Mother's Voice, 2024

Father and Son: A Mother's Voice reunites, metaphorically, the anthropoid sarcophagi of two Phoenician kings: the Tabnit Sarcophagus, currently at the Istanbul Archaeological Museums, and the Eshmunazor II Sarcophagus, currently at the Louvre. The two sarcophagi were originally brought from Egypt to Sidon before 549 BCE and repurposed by a Canaanite royal family for the burial of a father and his son. Once in Sidon, King Tabnit's sarcophagus, which retained its Egyptian funerary inscription, was inscribed with a short Phoenician text at its foot. The cover of the sarcophagus of Eshmunazor II, was scraped, erasing what had originally been an Egyptian funerary inscription before it was reinscribed with twenty-two lines in Phoenician.

The installation brings the two sarcophagi together in a configuration reflecting their present-day displays in Paris and Istanbul, reuniting them through a single shadow cast onto the floor in the foreground. Beyond functioning as a unifying element, the shadow carries the inscriptions found on both sarcophagi and becomes the voice of Eshmunazor's mother, Emashtart, priestess of Astarte and wife of Tabnit. Through the funerary inscription of her son, she emerges as a central political figure rather than a marginal royal presence, transforming the father-son lineage into a trinity.

The sarcophagus of Eshmunazor II is represented standing, as it has been displayed at the Louvre since 1997, 3212 km away from Sidon. The object is rendered schematically, emphasizing the scratch beneath the lower eyelid that gives the carved face a tearful expression. Its silhouette is produced as a reflective stained mirror allowing viewers to photograph themselves merged with the object

they face while also enabling them to read the inverted Phoenician inscription embedded within the shadow. To the right, the sarcophagus of Tabnit—discovered thirty-two years after that of his son—lies horizontally, 969 km away from Sidon.

I Tabnit, 2024

This is a photograph taken by Osman Hamdi Bey showing the Phoenician inscription carved at the foot of the sarcophagus in which the mummy of King Tabnit was found, immediately after its excavation at the Sidon Necropolis in Ayaa, Sidon in 1887. The inscription was later sent to French historian Ernest Renan for translation. The photograph was included in one of the Sultan Abdelhamid albums, numbered 91533, dedicated entirely to the excavation of the Sidon Necropolis. The page included a single caption in Ottoman script.

I Tabnit is a recreation of that album page, where the inscription has been edited down to its strict intention; as an identification of the person buried and as a curse of whoever disturbs his sleep. Zaatari translated the edited version of this inscription into three languages that correspond to the key players of that story, Lebanon, France and Turkey, and burnt the English translation into the image itself along with the names of the protagonists of this archaeological discovery, namely, Mehmet Sherif, the mason who found the necropolis, Hamdi Bey, who excavated it and Ernest Renan, who translated the Phoenician text.

An Extraordinary Event, 2018

Osman Hamdi Bey was able to extract 17 sarcophagi out of the Sidon Necropolis in Ayaa, Sidon in 1887. These were displayed in the neighbouring citrus grove of Chibli Abela. The citrus garden became a temporary open-air museum for the display of archaeological finds,

before they were transported to Constantinople by sea. Hamdi Bey had a camera with him and took photographs that finally ended up being part of the Sultan Abdulhamid collection of albums, showing aspects of modern life in the empire, including archeology. These eight photographs were based on eight pages of that album, given the number 91533. In these photographs appear workers, peasants, and members of the wilayet authorities. Hamdi Bey did not travel with his bulky camera to photograph people. He was interested in taking photographs of finds, but did not mind people's presence, which often gave photographs scale. It's why *An Extraordinary Event* plays with two presences: on one hand are the finds, unearthed after two thousand years spent in the dark and which now glow to an extent they are barely visible anymore; on the other hand are the people, the citrus trees, the earth and all that is around archeological objects, all witnessing probably for the first time, the presence of a camera.

Venus of Beirut, 2022

Farid Haddad was a medical doctor who practiced painting as a hobby. Some of his paintings still decorate homes of his descendants in Lebanon. While working on a research on nudity in 1998, Akram Zaatari came across a few transparencies on which were printed photographs of nude overweight women. These were given to him by George Haddad, a grandnephew of Farid. Painting nudes was considered one of the Beaux-Arts traditions, respected in Lebanon even though one could barely find models to do it. But when found willing, models could get away with posing nude for painters, because no one would recognize their features and, thus, their identities would remain undisclosed. But posing nude in photographs was not common and would have been considered a disgrace for sitters. Some nudes of female subjects produced by photography studios in the Middle East have either

been kept in portfolios shown to distinguished and open-minded clients as a practice of a “forbidden art” and possibly sold to them under the table. And they remained in the bottom of a photographer's archive (namely in the case of Alban from Egypt) or burnt like the case of Van Leo (Egypt). Farid Haddad must have taken his photographs in the 1930s, at times when there was no photographic nude in the public sphere anywhere in the Arab world. It would have been seen vulgar and possibly derogatory, but would not be the case in painting. Painting nudes was considered an accepted form of art.

The photographs of nude overweight women remain anxious documents that need reflection, care and contextualisation when used especially when exposed to general public in distant time and geography. There might be an ethical issue in the such a request to a sex worker by her medical examiner here, which could have been accepted in the Beirut of 1920s and 1930s, but not today. Besides, there might have been terms for an agreement between them; Haddad might have paid her as a model, and might have promised her never to use or exhibit her picture, but only to use it to make a painting. In other terms, these photographs were not made to be shown, but to be used as a reference in the realization of a painting.

In 2018, Zaatari used this transparency as part of his work entitled *The Fold*, where the transparency was placed on an overhead projector, alluding to the fact that it might have been intended to be projected. In 2022 Zaatari finally decided to use this photograph as a reference to make an artwork that captures that story and tells it through a bas-relief that would not reveal the sex worker's identity, and that would give her a name.

Photographic Currency, 2019

Using photographs as a means to reproduce traditional quilt patterns, Photographic Currency revives a local economy and a disappearing

tradition. While working on the archive of photographer Hashem el Madani, Zaatari put aside photographs of quilt makers standing in front of their hand made productions in the old souks of Saida, in the early 1950's. Very often, makers of traditional quilts, and sometimes their friends, would be photographed standing next to quilts they just finished, as a celebration of accomplishment, but also as a way to keep record of quilt stitch patterns before the quilts were sold. The quilts were stuffed with cotton and the stitching designs were such that the cotton would stay evenly spread across the quilt surface, meaning a fabrication necessity turned into a creative design. Photographs were kept by quilt makers and shown to clients looking to order new quilts in a relatively small market. During his search to identify the names of quiltmakers posing for Madani, Mustafa Al-Qady recognized his father in many of the quilt photographs, and is why Zaatari decided to commission him to make all the quilts on display here.

The project was produced for La Vitrine, a window setup dedicated for the presentation of artworks in Beirut. The idea was to use that space for what a showcase is typically used for: i.e. the display and promotion of commercial goods. Photographic Currency engages in a performative act that is based on existing photographs. Not only does it revive designs and a tradition, but it also promotes makers' work to a larger public, connecting makers directly to a potential new market.

Archeology, 2017

The work *Archeology* evokes, at once, the excitement and disappointment of an archeologist upon the excavation of an artifact, which carried a deteriorated photographic portrait, missing essential parts. This work reproduces a glass plate from Studio Anouchian in Tripoli (Lebanon). The original glass plate was exposed in the 1940s and represents a nude athlete photographed by Antranick Anouchian (1908–1991). The plate was rescued from the

photographer's flooded studio in the 1990s by a photography collector named Mohsen Yamine. Zaatari recreated this object far beyond its original size (11.9 × 8.9 cm) to match the excitement at his first encounter with it, while looking through Yamine's collection in 1998, and right before this item joined the collection of the Arab Image Foundation on loan until this day. Archeology, is meant as a subjective and augmented presentation of a photographic object. With the added layers of broken glass, metal, sand and acrylic medium, it was made to look like a freshly unearthed artifact.

Archeology is an integral part of Zaatari's larger body of work: *Against Photography: An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation*.