

SINCE THE END by Christian Carle-Catafago

“In reality, every mutable thing has within itself the measure of its time.” –Johann Gottfried Herder

The interpretation of signs, namely, the objects or events whose presence indicates the probable presence of something else, is the central activity that defines our ability to communicate meaning, always imbued in a temporal sequence. This meaning, however temporal, is the only humanly available promise of truthfulness of the factual in relation to the real. The tissue of the real, as an aggregate of the entirety of phenomena and human relationships, is not available to description, but only to intuition, and under extraordinary circumstances, to perception. Facts on the other hand, are organized chronologically: When, then, and the end. But what happens to the faculty of judgment when the system of signs that travel between fact and reality becomes obscured and muted? Is it possible to speak of reliable memories when the apparatus of perception is barred from access to the data that make the signs communicable?

In the work of Christian Carle-Catafago, the artist is addressing the spatial history of Lebanon through the breakdown of the narrative order that expands the horizon of an event from its loose temporality into concrete historical content. The years since the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and its aftermath --reconstruction, revolution, and combustion--, have left countless physical traces in the tangible architectural space. When these traces --we speak here of bullet traces and derelict structures, are read as signs that indicate the invasive presence of time, of a certain specific time frame and duration, the value of the sign is demoted to a mere trace. A spectral history, void from the continuity of a historical time bound up with our concrete acting and suffering, comes to the surface as a series of dispersed particles. Yet, one can think of the ancient world, where the early philosophers imagined the universe as consisting of a multitude of irreducible particles.

‘Since The End’ is this universe of chaos and contingency formed by irreducible units of visual memory that cannot be assembled into the linear flow of the tenses, and remain intensely suspended in the present as they are a presence in the urban tissue of Beirut. Most of these scars have been covered up, built and painted over, made invisible, but many are still there, frozen in time, on corroded metal doors and burnt bricks, lamps and electric posts, all reminiscent of the events. It is then an uproarious paradox that the ‘event’, denoting a sign or an object in time, was for long the term preferred by many of the Lebanese to refer to the nefarious events of the war, termed then ‘the events’. How precarious and ungraspable could have been the years in between, that they could not be referred to within the Enlightenment’s notion of ‘history in general’ with its temporal perspective to relocate past and future with respect to each other. They are merely objects of pure, irredeemable, lost time.

The forty panels in the exhibition, each panel representing the memory of one year in the period 1975-2015, are conceived as surface paintings in the tradition of post-war abstraction (referring here to the modernist period in the Western world between the two world wars and recently resurrected by American painters). The casted bronze sheets operate as a tabula rasa for time-objects, and are then punctured with real ammunition in order to excavate time-specific memory in a two-fold manner: The artist is resorting to the act of violence as both inscribing and re-enacting. How to inscribe material with durable memory in the absence of streamlined referents? Solid materials, by nature, are already troubled by their internal composition, which Carle-Catafago, as an alchemist of sorts, wants to deflect and inflict with that acting and suffering characteristic of a lived history. The indifferent surface, monumental and timeless, is ought to absorb the sounds of experienced time.

Three different types of punctures are found on the panels, corresponding to the familiar sounds of ammunition: Bulbous traces, not penetrating the metal but leaving a mark, deemed a proof of good luck or protection but yet reminiscent of a skin disease. On the panels, a certain glow of light forms an arch on the contours, splitting the sign from the surface. The spinning bullets, leaving angular traces, penetrate metal at an angle tangential to the surface. These were usually the marks of stray bullets and of an unfortunate, unlucky day. Lastly, spraying bullets, to use the street slang, penetrate the metal perpendicularly and were considered the most dangerous; the obvious sign of active combat. The geography of this twisted geometric logic, spread throughout four decades of observation, do not tell a story as much as they aim to represent the grammar of moment, its isolation from the larger thread of reality and the necessity to restore haphazardness and sheer luck as consciousness.

Carle-Catafago's practice, however, is not circumscribed to the episodic: On the edges of memory and counter-memory, lies a larger thread that contains more than nature's measurement of cycles and eras. The acute temporalization of something so internally complex and inherently contradictory as a mnemographic system without coordinates on the Cartesian plane, means at the very essence, to remove oneself from direct experience. This, in order to re-articulate personal –albeit traumatic, memory, in a continuum that integrates all these infinitesimal particles into the tissue of the real – and physical, and not only on the fringes, as vague uncertainties. Why 'Since The End' and not since the beginning or since then? Historical reconstruction, with a political dimension of possibility beyond the merely documentary, entails a future imaginary with a vantage point from which the past is to be looked at, as if it had shed light on the future, with ourselves positioned as denizens of that future.

The aesthetic sign, omnipresent in these works, is not understood independently of the mechanical abrasion, which as in the notion of history, interrupts a natural cycle in order to scalp a marker, a sculptural form; the permanent making of a trace. Since the events of these forty years –by no means a terminated cycle, do not in themselves provide a pointer of destination, they ought to be distilled individually, maneuvered and interpreted. Accordingly, Carle-Catafago does not limit himself to the traces themselves, but inscribes into his work parallel systems of signification in different semantic orders, emphasizing the multipolar universe that the circumstances of war have created, both for himself and collectively. While the legibility of the primeval symbol remains obscure, and the artist abandons referentiality altogether, the space of representation is pristine and accessible: A journey from uncertainty to language.

Moving across a very personal topography, the artist deploys in this series a simultaneity of horizons through which the physical effect of now-time filters in and out, corroding the spatial memory as soon as it is being created, holding it in abeyance. The signs of this private language, spoken inside a hermetic vault, remain nevertheless forever latent, they may awake any time. For the unsuspecting viewer, the immersion in the surfaces does not reveal the stories or the phased moments, but strikes the conscious mind as pure, unmediated perception. The process of oblivion that is released here is not due to a faulty memory, but to a smooth saturation that grips the spectator in the instant. The instant of the bullet. It is the moment of delirious suspension between life and death. The self is trying in vain to recompose himself, to re-insert himself in the continuity of nature. But he is already exiled: He stands at a threshold where the end has already passed.