Raed Yassin, *Playmate of the Month*, 2018, archival inkjet prints on paper, 120 x 55 centimeters each; foreground: *The Pimp*, 2017, taxidermy parrot, sound [courtesy of the artist and Marfa' Gallery]

Raed Yassin: *Yassin Haute Couture*

Marfa' Gallery, Beirut

Tucked away in Beirut's port district, within walking distance of the downtown souks selling high-end designer couture, the life of a lesser-known couturist, Samir Yassin, is on display in Marfa' gallery. The small-scale, two-part gallery, which has hosted numerous solo shows by Beirut contemporary artists, is currently home to Raed Yassin's multimedia solo show *Yassin Haute Couture* [January 17, 2018–April 7, 2018]. The exhibition offers a partial portrait of Samir Yassin—the artist's father—by focusing on his brief career as a fashion designer, which took him to Saudi Arabia for a stint in the 1970s before returning him to his native Beirut, where he was mysteriously murdered in his apartment in 1984. Piecing together narrative clues years after his father's death, Raed Yassin draws upon (supposedly) found fashion sketches and unrealized designs, which until now have remained hidden from public view. Presenting a highly performative portrait of his father—alongside overlapping narratives that include his uncle, Fayez—Raed Yassin fuses together visual references, punctuated by humorous and absurdist gestures, to reimagine a family narrative that challenges our collective assumptions about the "archival" images on display.

The world of *Yassin Haute Couture* is casually inhabited by such characters as *The Pimp*, a parrot—here, taxidermied, in sculptural form—who plays saxophone music in the sensual style of Fausto Papetti. Other regulars one might expect to encounter in this universe include 70s-era Playmates decked out in a range of outfits—from girl-next-door casual getups to dated slinky evening gowns—rendered as hand-painted design mock-ups on top of the blown-photographs that constitute Yassin's series *Playmate of the Month* (2018). Unexpected, however, is the narrative thread uniting these eclectic images: namely, one of loss. For all its tongue-in-cheek humor, its kitsch aesthetic, and its popular culture references, *Yassin Haute Couture* is nonetheless in part a son's attempt to make sense of his deceased father, the world he inhabited, and his untimely passing.

This experience of loss is where representational dissonance comes into the younger Yassin's work. In the same way that images of naked Playmates are not really intended to stand-in as models for the designer's fashion sketches, the artist's family portraits—also exhibited, in modified form—are not meant to tread close to the fantasy of his subject's pornographic obsessions or his tales of failed love and revenge. One such love story is narrated by *The Princess of Oblivion* (2018), a series of six images depicting the designer's model/muse Fadwa Harb wearing elaborate dresses designed for one of his high-profile clients—a Saudi princess, we learn from the exhibition text. We also learn that this princess fell in love with the designer, and was poisoned by her jealous husband as a result. This romance—which, we are told was never consummated—is one of several threads that guide the exhibition, tangentially. Nearby, a limited-edition artist book titled The *SY Model Collection* (2018) presents polaroid montages of additional images from *Playboy* magazines collected, according to the exhibition text, first by the elder Yassin, then by his son—evidencing certain shared or reclaimed intergenerational obsessions within the family. This notion is consolidated by one of two neon signs displayed in the gallery, where it reads *Obsessions*—a visual cue that foregrounds the role of commodified pleasures as anchors for the father/son connectivity explored in the show.

Raed Yassin is not concerned with representing the past as a stable category in his work. Another photo series, *Proposal for a Proposal* (2018), on display in Marfa's second gallery, depicts intimate family scenes from an engagement party. Images of the bride-to-be provide a canvas on which the artist uses silk embroidery to experiment with his own dress designs based upon his interpretation of his father's style–an exercise that liberates both artist and image from the constraints of staying within representational boundaries of actual past events.

Although Raed Yassin never reveals to the audience what is fact and what is fiction, the show succeeds in reminiscing upon real layers of society and culture in Beirut, where hard-to-place stories often remain hidden or get written out of the city's cultural history. The artist's semi-glamorous homage to his father invites us into a world of hyperbolic story lines reminiscent of the amped-up plots of 70s and 80s soap operas; amid intimate family portraits, images of high-fashion models and erotica, and neon-sign shop exteriors, Beirut's complex urban and cultural identity is somehow captured. More than a portrait of a man, *Yassin Haute Couture* portrays a bygone era that too often is defined solely by a narrative of conflict, through the lens of Lebanon's protracted civil war.

The interweaving of real events, rumor, and what the artist explicitly calls "lies" is a device that has been used by several Lebanese artists of the post-civil war era—a strategy that anthropologist Mark R. Westmoreland has convincingly argued "undercuts realist notions of truth and evidence." No single narrative or visual signifier is shown to be more or less reliable than any other in its ability to (re)construct the past; exaggerations and fancy and humor may in fact be more revealing than any official documentation.

In the back of the second gallery space is an old television set placed on the floor—an awkward level at which to view its screen, which shows a video, edited together from the pornographic photographs in the *SY Collection*, overwritten with subtitles transcribing fragments of conversation the artist remembers having with his uncle. The film's punchline—and title of the work—is revealed toward the end of the film, when the uncle, upon hearing that his nephew is studying theater, declares: "I hate theatre; I love pornography." This account of a trivial and perhaps somewhat mortifying incident is reflective of the show's broader aim, in which "trashy" or "low" forms of popular culture are not only celebrated but also serve as comic relief. In turn, the work is distanced from sentimentality, so as to focus on its broader inquiry into shared memories and histories.

—Reema Sahla Fadda