



# Jocelyne Saab, Historian of Her Own Work: The Case of Her Ultimate Work, The Book of Photographs Zones de Guerre (2018)

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Mathilde Rouxel, « Jocelyne Saab, Historian of Her Own Work: The Case of Her Ultimate Work, The Book of Photographs *Zones de Guerre* (2018) »

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Jocelyne Saab, *Historian of Her Own Work: The Case of Her Ultimate Work, The Book of Photographs Zones de Guerre* (2018)

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Jocelyne Saab was born in Beirut in 1948. In that year, 700,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes and forced into exile in countries bordering Palestine. Huge refugee camps sprang up in Lebanon, particularly on the outskirts of Beirut. Brought up in the cult of pan-Arabism and Nasserism by her father, Jocelyne Saab was inspired by the great independentist figures who fought against the injustice suffered by peoples, such as Gandhi in India. However, it wasn't until she entered the economics faculty at the Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut that she discovered the reality of the Palestinian camps and became truly politicized. Following the speeches of the most radical groups, fascinated by the charisma of her friend Elias Sanbar, who was very committed to the Palestinians in struggle, she nevertheless distinguished herself by refusing to belong to a political movement. This freedom was to characterize her throughout her life.

After completing her studies in economics in Paris, she began working as a journalist, both on the radio, where she hosted a program entitled *Les Marsupilamis ont les yeux bleus* (« Marsupilamis have blue eyes »), and in the printed press at the daily Al-Safa, where the Lebanese poet Etel Adnan employed her as an intern. Writing was not what suited her best. An avid spectator of Lebanese and Parisian film clubs, she dreamed of making images. In 1973, Jocelyne Saab was hired by France 3 as an Arabic translator, and thanks to a problem with a visa that had not been granted to the journalist who was supposed to shoot a portrait of Gaddafi, she became a war reporter at a very young age. She was sent to the front lines of the October War, to the Egyptian Sinai and Syrian Golan, then to Iraqi Kurdistan, bombed by Saddam Hussein in 1974. The same year, she decided to film *Palestinian women* fighting in Lebanon through education and arms. Her documentary *Les Femmes Palestiniennes* was censored by the channel and remained invisible until her death in 2019. At that point, she decided to work on her own.

*Palestinian Women* has resurfaced since the artist's death. Digitized and restored, the film is now freely accessible. It is considered a fundamental milestone in Jocelyne Saab's career, the first violent moment of censorship that led her to take the radical decision to leave security and document, without directive, the reality she wanted to denounce.

Yet the film is absent from *Zones de guerre*, the book-testament produced in 2018 to look back in images on a prolific career.

This book is at the heart of my presentation today, freezes in a few scrupulously selected photograms the 35 documentaries she made during the Lebanese civil war, alongside the Polisario Front in the Western Sahara, in Iran in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution and in the Egypt of Sadat and Mubarak. She also unveils scouting photographs, and unpublished photographic works. In this way, she offers, in this book of images, fifty years of history of the Middle East.

In light of her entire career as an artist and filmmaker, I wish to return to the methodology adopted by Jocelyne Saab in the conception of this work, which magnifies the present of the history of the films she shot by crystallising them in symbolic images, and which brings to life stories that she was never able to tell, by revealing series of photographs and fragments of unfinished projects. I want to show that her choice of the still image poses a challenge to the viewer who sees her films as archives or heritage: because they were taken from the original films at the end of the artist's life, the images in *Zones de guerre* must be said to date from 2018. It is this dialogue between the past and a present without tomorrow established by Jocelyne Saab that I wish to discuss in her personal relationship to the history of Arab countries.

## **I. Saab, a prolific and polymorphous career.**

In the first part, which I'll call "Jocelyne Saab, a prolific and polymorphous career", I'll take a quick look back at Jocelyne Saab's career and her ability to perpetually transform her work so as to always remain able to express herself. After starting her career as a freelance reporter, Jocelyne Saab, thanks to the trust of various Palestinian organizations, produced the first report on suicide commando training camps. The film that resulted, called *The Rejection Front* (1976), was seen as a scoop by the French press. She filmed the training of young fighters destined to die for Palestine, with a critical eye that would later be criticized. The filming took place before the attack of April 13, 1975, which marked the start of the Lebanon war: a busload of Palestinians was shot by far-right Christian militiamen. Alarmed by the escalating violence, Saab made *Le Liban dans la tourmente*, the first film ever made about the Lebanese civil war. She interviewed representatives of all the political parties. After this film, she stayed in Lebanon to document the war,

summoning poetry in her images and in the texts of her commentaries, which she entrusted to the poet Etel Adnan and the Lebanese playwright Roger Assaf. She was in Lebanon during the siege of Beirut, and witnessed the departure of the Palestinians from Lebanon, driven to capitulate by the Israeli army's occupation and relentless bombardment. She was on the boat that took Arafat to Greece, and collected exceptional accounts of the history of Palestinian resistance in Lebanon.

After the Palestinians left Beirut in 1982, Jocelyne Saab once again transformed her relationship with images. From then on, the only images she could make of Beirut were fictional ones. She shot her first feature-length film, *Une vie suspendue*, in the heart of the conflict in 1984.

She continued her career as a director, making *Il était une fois Beyrouth : histoire d'une star* in 1994, which was also the occasion for a vast project for a Lebanese film library that earned her the honorary distinction of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres; the film library never saw the light of day, but thirty films found by Saab in this great work of collecting images shot in Lebanon that were the basis of her film project toured the world. After this film, she turned her attention to Asia, writing a large number of projects, few of which saw the light of day. At the end of the 1990s, she began work on her major feature: *Dunia*, released in 2005.

The film, which played at the Sundance and Toronto Film Festivals, is the filmmaker's best-known work. It denounces religious fundamentalism and the practice of excision, a tradition that affects over 90% of women in Egypt. The film was censored in Egypt, and considerably weakened Jocelyne Saab, both economically and psychologically.

Here comes the third transformation. In 2006, war broke out in Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israel. Jocelyne Saab films the infrastructure (bridges, cornices) freshly rebuilt after the civil war to reunify the city, and destroyed by Israeli bombing. She created a mixed-media installation at Singapore's National Museum, combining these images with snippets from her past documentaries. This is her first work as a visual artist.

But, bereft of resources and damaged by the tragedy surrounding her film *Dunia*, she decided to turn to photography. She produced her first two series of photographs, *The reverse of orientalism*, which criticizes the way Arabs themselves look at Arab women, and *Dual architecture*, a more abstract project capturing the poetry of Bedouin tent knots. Apart from an experimental feature

film, *What's Going On*, released in 2009, Saab's work from the mid-2000s onwards has been mainly video or photographic. She works for museums, while continuing to dream of cinema. Her photography series *One Dollar a Day* (2016) is accompanied by a short video on the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

But illness caught up with her in 2016. Very immobilized, the woman who travels constantly between Paris, Beirut and Cairo, invited to the four corners of the world – in Asia, in particular – as a festival jury or to show her work, can no longer travel. From now on, she has to think statically. She has to look back. Work on *Zones de guerre* came to the fore in 2018, when a vast feature-length docu-fiction project on Mei Shigenobu, daughter of the founder of the Japanese Red Army in Lebanon, Fusako Shigenobu, who came to support the Palestinian struggle and was forced to flee the country with the Palestinians in 1982, was at a standstill. The siege, again, as the mark and trace of a historic failure.

## **II. *Zones de guerre*: retracing personal history and giving an intimate meaning to images from the past**

*Zones de Guerre* (« War Zone », 2018) came about at the end of Jocelyne Saab's life. Struggling for three years with a violent illness, this work of collecting her archives and the elements that made up her career enabled an initial inventory, which became sadly precious after her death.

When I did my monographic work on Saab in 2013, she found it difficult to return to her images of the past. As she herself writes in the preface to what became my book, "the only space I had to store my films was a large wooden bed, under which I slid heavy metal trunks full of my memories. (...) It took me months to find the courage – psychological rather than physical – to lie down on the floor in this cramped space and crawl under the bed to pull out one by one the video cassettes of my films, the reels of film, the DVDs, to entrust them to Mathilde". Once this difficulty had been overcome, the need to transmit became Saab's new obsession.

Immobilized, unable to make the film of her dreams, it is in the immobilization of the images she has made of war and the world throughout her career that she will find her creative salvation. *Zones de guerre* had two aims: to retrace her career in a common unity, transfiguring the evolution of forms and motifs in her work to be published all under the same cover; and to bring to the fore a part of the hidden work, some of the unrealized projects from the last years of Saab's life, as if to overcome the remorse of not having been able to complete them.

The book includes photograms from Saab's early films, as well as stills from the shoot and previously unpublished photographs, in response to Saab's well-known photographic series. What's interesting about this picture book is that it's not illustrative at all: it's narrative, telling the story of a region, that of the Arab countries and an Asia in which Lebanon, a country of the Orient, is anchored. This book reveals things, because it brings into existence projects that never saw the light of day in their completed form: the project for a major exhibition of Egyptian cinema posters, series of photographs never finalized and exhibited. But beyond the actual enrichment in terms of material, this book also reveals a certain point of view on almost 50 years of Middle Eastern history, what a pacifist and humanist filmmaker decides to preserve from the history of these images.

Indeed, it's striking to note that of all the Lebanese political figures she interviewed in her films, almost none appear in Saab's choices. There are, however, images of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who is the subject of her film *Le Bateau de l'exil*, and of Bani Sadr, president of Iran before his overthrow. There are also images of Khamenei, who faces up to all the hypocrisy of his theocratic politics, but who still only appears represented in images, like an icon.

Indeed, Saab's cinema deconstructs political figures, focusing more on the people who populate her world, civilians or militiamen, who fight because they have no other choice. Her favorite character remains Beirut, damaged and ravaged, but for her still the garden of her childhood.

In this interplay of frozen images, certain archives become Saab's own work. The choice of vignettes is reminiscent of cinema: the book itself is a narrative. It exists as an object; even if Saab wanted to print these images for an exhibition, the original work is the book and its layout. In this respect, the place and destination of the photographic image is very interesting to think about in its own right: after the huge flex formats she produced for her *One Dollar A Day* series (2016), she is working on the (very) small format for this book.

It's interesting to note that even when she presents her more directly plastic work, she prefers to stage it whenever she can: the tent series are captured in their exhibition space, the flex of the refugee child made iconic by the use of gold leaf is staged by Jocelyne herself, and doubled with stills from the shoot – snapshots captured of a lived moment. It's the memory, what's left to her after the passage of time, that she wants to recount: a gesture of life.

Last but not least, this book gives access to a number of previously unpublished works – a strange status, these images never printed, rarely reworked, never signed before being printed in the pages of this book. These unpublished works include series of photographs abandoned for lack of support (*Les Masques*); others conceived over the long term, over the course of visits and discoveries, but never truly conceptualized before the conception of the book (*Les Icônes*).

While her films are important testimonies for the historiography of the MENA region, this picture book summons the filmmaker's personal intimacy: far from being a history course, this book appears more like a diary offered as a testament to a world ready to keep on rolling. A souvenir book of a rich life at the forefront of all struggles, this static work provides a time out from the whirlwind of images in the 45 films and videos produced in a career spanning almost 50 years.

## Conclusion

This book of photographs is to be seen as a singular work in Saab's career, which takes advantage of this new form of narration to redraw the contours of her career – a career that includes margins, dismisses doubts, reframes to adapt the discourse. Intended to be printed and exhibited, these images nevertheless stand out for what they tell of a career: this book is a self-portrait. Without a word and escaping cataloguing, this book opens onto Saab's caustic gaze: her transition from cinema to photography in the early 2000s enabled an immediacy that allowed her to capture both what moved her – the sea – and what has always troubled her – the expression of fundamentalism. Sensitive, at times almost hermetic, these images lack the documentary value and political significance of the works (films or photographic series) from which they are taken. They offer a journey through fifty years of history, through the eyes of a woman who captured the spirit of her times, with the media of her maturity, at every stage of her life.