



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Omar Mismar,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Omar Mismar on August 25, 2020. The interview took place at Mismar's office in Beirut, Lebanon, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie. I'm interviewing Omar Mismar in his office at the American University of Beirut. It is August 25, 2020, and this is the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Omar, could you tell me a little bit about your life in 2020? Uh, there's a lot of ground to cover, but um, but just tell me about your life and work this year.

OMAR MISMAR: Um, I try to remember really because, uh, the amount of events and the cascade that had happened in this year is really um, overwhelming, uh, mind-blowing, and, uh, completely unfair, um. We started the year off with uh—actually, I'll start from October 2019 where a group of um, people, a huge number, uh, took to the streets in protests against this, um, stale regime that we have here in Lebanon, uh. It started on October 17th and it was dubbed the October Revolution. It resulted in the resignation of the cabinet back then and, uh, there were, you know, hopes and aspirations of real, structural change to happen in Beirut, which eventually it did not happen. That revolution was uh, at its peak in October and November and then uh, it dwindled down, uh, until the pandemic came and it halted everything, basically.

Coupled with that was a very severe economic crisis that hit Lebanon and Beirut where the Lebanese Lira was devalued by almost 70 percent, so people lost 70 percent of their purchasing power, um. So, uh, coupled with the pandemic again, the—it was quite really impossible to uh, to think of going back to normal and to define actually what that would look like.

Um, so the quarantine started in—I remember in April, if I'm not mistaken, and that was the first wave. It was pretty—it was mild actually here in Lebanon. We had, uh, less than 100 cases every day. We had a two-week full lockdown and then, um, people just could not continue like that because all of the stores were closed; people were, you know—did not have any source of income. All the work was stopped, so the government took a decision to reopen and with reopening the cases—the COVID cases skyrocketed again and now we're back to a full lockdown, which started, uh, last Friday.

In between the first and the second waves of the pandemic, um, I think, I believe, that most people heard there was a huge explosion that, um, hit Beirut on August 4. It was an explosion at the Port of Beirut. Around 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded, were stored in the port for six years, and they exploded. Uh, the blast hit almost the entire city. Over 200 people died; thousands were injured; there are tens that are missing still at this point in time at 20 days after the explosion, um. And so I mean, it's really like an accumulation of years of corruption that resulted in this explosion. It was by no means an accident, and everybody knew. Everybody who is holding—who is in power at this point in time in Lebanon knew, had an idea of what was happening, and did not, um, do anything about it basically.

And so, I mean, somehow after such a major traumatic event, really, we forgot that COVID, uh, was really the, you know, the master of this year. It was really a, kind of, a secondary issue now that people were picking up pieces of their lives, of their loved ones really, and trying to move on. And because of this, kind of—this really heartwarming sense of solidarity that was happening, uh, within the communities, um, you know, cases could have increased because of that, but also there was absolutely no alternative. The government did not, um, do or initiate any sort of, uh, help or emergency, kind of, aid in the first week or two. It was only until the third week that something started to happen. It was too late, and it was too little, really.

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Um, so we're back to lockdown now, uh, a lockdown that is quite different than the first one because the shattered glass and the plastic nylon sheets, uh, somehow, um, filter our—filter the

way we see the outside right now. Sounds of shattered glass, also of drilling, of moving is really what is, uh, taking over the soundscape of the city, um. People are finding it very difficult to, kind of, abide by the curfew, which is a six to six curfew because, uh, because people need help and people need each other. And it's just um—only when we thought things could not get any worse and—with, you know, the revolution that we were all—you know, that many of us were supporting and part of to the economic collapse, to the pandemic, and then this explosion happened. So we're back to quarantine, but also, it's, uh, different than two months ago somehow, um. At least for me, I spend a lot of time at my house, but also, I find it very difficult to stay there right now, uh, because of the condition of the house and how noisy it is. You expect a city to be, uh, quiet in lockdown, but it's not the case now at all. This is, you know, this is aside from any possibility of getting any work done, too. It becomes quite a vicious cycle of wanting to make work, but also finding it uh, untimely or impossible to do that and then feeling irritated, agitated about that and, you know. It's just like, um, this is how it rolls unfortunately.

Um, we are also starting the semester—uh, we're supposed to start the semester on the 1st of September. Now it's postponed to the 7th of September. It's going to be also an online semester, uh, which is its own beast [laughs], I think. And, you know, like, it's really uh—I'd say there's like a, kind of, state of um, limbo almost here for us, specifically for me, especially for me in Beirut.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well—and it's just sort of an unbelievable human toll to already have these other crises going on, and I think what's so striking to me hearing you tell it is the reminder that as different as 2020 feels, it's still part of history. Like, everything that was happening before 2020 still carried into it, um, and the disappointment and the desires for change, um. And so I guess, to—because there are so many things to address, um, within what you told me, I guess the first thing is in a moment where—so you've got lockdown, you've also got this massive shared trauma and fear and instability; how are you caring for yourself and your loved ones, and how are you connecting with the people around you?

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OMAR MISMAR: Um, you know, I think that, uh, connection has also changed within these—within these few months. During the first lockdown, it was more about, uh, being there with, you know, with your partner or, uh, and-or with the people that you were seeing and, you know, mixing with but that's it. It was, like, a really tight circle. Uh, after the first lockdown and the blast, uh, things have entirely changed as well, um, because we needed to um, to help each other, we needed to be around each. We couldn't—you know, that two-meter social distance does not work in in these times of, um, you know, of total, uh, fall down. They don't. The people were—some of the people were wearing masks as they were cleaning the debris and rubble, but some just couldn't because they were—you know, they felt it was an added layer of suffocation to their lives, basically.

I keep in touch with friends via social media or, you know, the other kind of—through texts, through phone calls, through Zoom video calls. Um, I try to see people who I can see, like, organize like a weekly potluck dinner, uh, for us just to get together and be together, you know. It's not really—at this point, it's not very much about um, discussing and debating; it's more about being together somehow, of not feeling that you're by yourself. And uh, that's mostly how things have been going. I mean, otherwise all of the meetings, all of the kind of appointments are scheduled online, and that also is very cruel, I think, in these times that we're going through here. You really need—I really need the human presence, the human touch somehow, and that seems to be, uh, quite unattainable in these times.

BEN GILLESPIE: I guess I wanted to ask a little bit about—and it's hard to imagine getting any work done during this time. I mean, ambient anxiety was already so high, um, and then after the blast, I mean, what is there even to do? There's so much work to be done in the community and so many—just, it's a new mountain that has to be moved. What I'm wondering is do you find your attention being drawn to new things? Are there—what's occupying your mind, your work mind, during this time?

OMAR MISMAR: But also my—the work, kind of, aspect of my life was very much, um, influenced by all of these events that I described, uh, before. On the first night of the revolution, actually, that when protests, kind of, started on October 17th, I was part of a show here called *Home Works* which happens every two years, and it was this year—the opening was on October 17th and the night of the opening, people had to leave and everything closed. There was another show scheduled for November but also it was—it felt quite untimely and almost irrelevant to be,

uh, doing these shows in the, you know, in the height of uprising. And then, um, we decided to do it in January but then the gallery had to close because of the economic crisis in January and then COVID came, so it feels that my work line and that timeline of events are very much intertwined and, kind of, uh, one is completely devouring and blocking the other.

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I find right now that writing has been, um, one of the, kind of, soothing and calming things that would help me go through the day or the week, really, especially after August 4, just kind of making sure that friends and loved ones abroad know that I'm okay, but also trying to, uh, send out, uh, some sort of dispatches of what's going on in Beirut, uh, and they are in the form of short texts or an image and a text, and I usually share them on social media, to close friends, to people that I know care and can, you know, and are curious to know what's happening in Beirut. So describing, kind of, the feelings—my week, what I did during that first week of the blast, for example. Not because it's important what I did, but because I think it's indicative of what is happening around on a national level.

Also, you know, like thinking about the materiality of the explosion, let's say, and the haptics and the, uh, sounds of it. So sounds of glass and nylon and, uh, I don't know, uh. Any sort of big sound is really making, um, me and I believe most of the people who experienced this this disaster, you know, jump in their place or feel, you know, edgy or agitated. And I feel like this will take a long time of, uh, healing if one can achieve such a thing. And, uh, in terms of work that is—that existed before all of this, it's really in storage; it's on hold; it doesn't feel, uh, that it will—unfortunately, that it will see the light anytime soon.

I mean, uh, I think that—I don't want to say a percentage, but most of the art spaces in Beirut were severely damaged by the blast, and it was—it was difficult, quite difficult before to find spaces to show work, and now it's, uh, it's quite impossible to do so. There are relief efforts and aid happening, but you know, this will take a very long time, I believe.

BEN GILLESPIE: So to—I guess, to wrap up. Thinking about the future, what would you want descendants to know? What would you want future artists to know? What would you want future students to know about this moment and your full experience of it and—

OMAR MISMAR: Uh, I think I would say that, uh, you know, taking care of oneself and their loved ones feels that, uh—feel to be the utmost priority in such times, to, you know, to give oneself room to, uh, feel tired and to feel, uh, you know, the need to be alone but also to have the kind of—I don't know, stamina or perseverance to continue fighting for the things that they believe are worth fighting for. In the case of Beirut, it's really about, um, fighting for the—for overthrowing this entire ruling class and this entire, uh, country of oligarchs, really, that are ruling this country. And, um, you know, this is like one amongst many things but to, you know, to keep these, uh, I don't know, wishful thinkings as, you know, as, um projected into the distance somehow.

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Things that we walk towards, things that we sometimes run towards, sometimes that we roll towards if we're feeling tired. I think that, uh, it's really crucial to have a mild sense of, uh, drive. And this is in no way similar, you know, the question of, "What's your five-year plan?" I think [laughs] I'm completely, you know—I completely, what's the word? Like I feel, um, repelled by these types of questions, and it's more about as artists, what is coming from, um, our feelings and also from our critical thinking that is worth, uh, you know, driving forward with, towards a particular issue or cause.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, thank you very much for speaking with me. I hope you get to rest [laughs].

OMAR MISMAR: Thank you. Thanks a lot for talking to me, for your questions as well.

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