

## Wraithlike figures and the spaces that rule them

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From the «Dialogues» series, 2010-2013.

BEIRUT: Ghost stories are, ultimately, optimistic things. Whether the understated, antiquarian tales popularized in the early 20th century by M. R. James, or their gratuitous contemporary successors punctuated by decapitation and writhing possession, all assume that the human spirit lives on after death.

“Of Places and Dust,” the comprehensive semiretrospective of analogue work by photographer and filmmaker Caroline Tabet, currently on show at Karantina’s Art Factum Gallery, evokes something of the Jamesian approach to ghostly presence, eschewing explanation in favor of implication and suggestion.

It is not only human figures that are depicted as phantasms, but the spaces these figures inhabit – for the most part crumbling buildings, derelict in peacetime. At once haunted and haunting, these abandoned places have a presence as powerful as that of their human subjects, their spirits enduring even as their architectural carcasses decay.

“Of Places and Dust” consists of seven series of work completed over 13 years, presented in whole or part over the spacious gallery’s two floors. Tabet and Art Factum’s director Joy Mardini chose the work in tandem, the artist explains, sifting through the fruits of a 20-year career to find the unifying threads of the photographer’s discourse.

A 2007 project with photographer Joanna Andraos, "290 Rue du Liban," is the most evident example of Tabet's ghostly manifestations. Viewable in book form, though not on display, these images – capturing blurred Victorian-garbed women wandering the halls of Tabet's condemned former home – are a testament to the aesthetic utility of representing memories as ghosts.

Although the seven series on display are not necessarily intended to be equally spectral, a sense of something otherworldly permeates Tabet's work.

Beginning with the earliest images included in the Art Factum show, a collection of shots of the derelict City Center Cinema (aka the Dome or the Egg) taken in 2001 as part of a wider series on abandoned buildings entitled "Beirut Lost Spaces," several themes assert themselves, recurring and evolving in later works.

Though more classical than many of Tabet's later experimental series, these photos reveal a lengthy love affair with black-and-white analogue shots, which form the bulk of her work. They demonstrate her preoccupation with derelict spaces, displaying traces of the esoteric mood that comes to dominate later series.

A decade later come the three sets of images in "Dialogues," a series of black-and-white shots of three Lebanese dancers, who had been left to explore the abandoned spaces in war-damaged buildings unguided, dancing in the silence of the empty rooms.

Beginning with photographs taken in 2010 of Zeina Hanna in the rubble-strewn, rebar-studded framework of the never-completed Tabarja Hotel, the project continues with images of the sinuous Alexandre Paulikevitch in the Catholic Printing House in 2011. It concludes with the latest set, shot in 2013, capturing experimental dancer Khouloud Yassine in defunct beer factory La Grande Brasserie du Levant.

"I was fascinated by the work of certain dancers that were around me," Tabet says, recalling the genesis of the project, "but I wanted to be beyond dancing. It's not only dancing, it's this ability that dancers have to take part in a space, to really evolve in it and to sometimes completely merge with it."

The three dancers achieve this in different ways. While Hanna clings to the metal-pierced walls of the hotel, hoisting herself aloft like a mountaineer hugging the face of a precipice, Paulikevitch drapes himself in phallic abandon from an enormous pillar and droops beside a newel post, camouflaged in the bright stripes of sunlight and shade from a nearby window.

Yassine, who requested a location where the surrounding city could be felt, bows and arches her body in the open air, becoming a blurred silhouette as she is captured through the beer factory's windowpanes.

It is the spaces that dominate each shot, the individual character of each building overpowering those of the human figures, who bend their bodies in an effort to conform to the architectural lines. "It's a work on the body, on the place, also the dust," says Tabet, "because it's very raw places and I like to give this feel that ... the space is a skeleton and they evolve into it."

Like many of Tabet's images, these photographs radiate a timelessness, compelling the viewer to assimilate what could be stills from a Japanese horror film. Is this a girl with a dog's head? A woman in evening dress and a gas mask? Or simply a curtain of black hair disfigured during Tabet's darkroom meddlings?

There are also three series of color photographs, united by their muted shades, but more varied in subject and technique than the black-and-white shots. A 2008 series entitled "Nudes in Cold" are almost classical in their approach, recalling Renaissance paintings in their subdued palette, juxtaposition of the nude female body with rich fabric and furnishings and the clarity of their window lighting, which creates a chiaroscuro effect.

By contrast the most-recent color images, five blown-up Polaroids dubbed the "Land" series, are more focused on texture and material than representation, approaching abstracts. What unites the two series is their resemblance to paintings – Tabet achieves a depth and texture in her work more commonly created with a brush than a lens.

"Of Places" takes time to digest, but is worth the effort. This multifaceted show will keep the mind satisfied long after the body has left the gallery.

Caroline Tabet's "Of Places and Dust" is at the Art Factum Gallery in Karantina until July 27. For more information call 01-443-263 or visit [www.artfactumgallery.com](http://www.artfactumgallery.com)