

The New York Times

Walid Raad and David Diao

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)

Paula Cooper Gallery

521 West 21st Street, Chelsea

Through Saturday

In 2009, at Postmasters Gallery in Chelsea, the New York artist David Diao produced one of the most moving shows of that year. Titled “I Lived There Until I was 6 ...,” it was his attempt to reconstruct, through paintings filled with words and diagrams, the house in Sichuan, China, where he was born and lived for a few years, until, with his country embroiled in political change, he was sent abroad. He never saw his birthplace again: the building was demolished. But he has never stopped seeking it out in his memory.

In the show he shares with Walid Raad at Paula Cooper, Mr. Diao has used paintings based on words and photographs to preserve an existing but endangered house: one built in Moscow in the late 1920s by the Russian avant-garde architect Konstantin Melnikov (1890-1974).

Melnikov conceived the house, which resembles a giant beehive with distinctive hexagonal windows, as his ideal home, and intended it to be converted to a museum documenting his career after he died. That never happened, leaving the fate of the house, and of the Melnikov archive it held, uncertain. Mr. Diao’s series of architecturally based paintings refer to the house directly but also evoke a personal and cultural past, forever slipping away.

The pairing with Mr. Raad, who was born in Lebanon and often takes that country’s fraught modern past as his subject, makes perfect sense in this context. In a continuing project called “Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World,” he traces an elusive cultural and personal journey through the lens of contemporary art, represented by series of prints.

The prints are based on pages from art books and magazines, but with the contents altered. Sometimes the original words are left intact, as in the case of a reproduced title page reading, “Contemporary Art Practices in Contemporary Lebanon.” The texts of other pages have been reduced to fragmentary phrases or single characters in Roman and Arabic typefaces, as if the history they record were in the process of being fractured and obliterated.

As installed at Paula Cooper, the work of these two Conceptualists looks spare, cerebral and cool. But it’s hard to think of a recent show more elegiac and filled with emotion.