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Art in Review

By Holland Cotter

Jayce Salloum "There Was and There Was Not" American Fine Arts 22 Wooster Street, near Canal Street SoHo Through July 13

Some art does all the work for you; some art gives you the pieces and lets you make of them what you will. The room-size installation titled "There Was and There Was Not" in the rear gallery at American Fine Arts falls into the latter category.

Jayce Salloum, a young New York artist of Lebanese descent, has gathered a sizeable archive of ephemeral material related to Lebanese culture and history, arranged it on tables, shelves and walls, and, without offering much in the way of guidance, lets the accumulation tell its own complicated, often perverse story.

Souvenir cocktail trays from Beirut the sunny resort sit beside news photos of the city's destruction. Turn-of-the-century studio tourist shots of Lebanese beauties join Mr. Salloum's own rows of pinned-up Polaroids of the country's Islamic architecture. The artist has provided reading matter galore, from local newspapers to academic histories, much of it in English, and a couch for those intent upon study.

The show's title is a translation of the Arabic version of the "Once upon a time" that opens fairy tales. With it, Mr. Salloum hints that the anthropological research database he has compiled is as much a source of fiction as of fact: what "Lebanon" means is likely to change a bit with each viewer and with each new infusion of material into the ever-growing and peripatetic installation. (It travels to Canada after closing here.)

History, personal and otherwise, is an important subject in the work of younger artists, and it's fascinating to see how many ways -- casual and focused, hands-off and hands-on -- they are finding to tell it.