



The massive fire that broke out in Al Quoz last March destroying 83 warehouses has already faded from the collective consciousness of Dubai. Dariush Zandi and Shaqayeq Arabi joined the macabre mob which visited the site out of curiosity, for catharsis, for souvenirs or to scavenge anything useful they could lay their hands on.

What they salvaged has now been transformed into *Scraps*, an exhibition at Total Arts, a gallery, which they run. When the husband and wife team — he is an architect and photographer and she is a painter — went on Friday afternoons ‘bounty hunting’, they didn’t immediately realise the aesthetic value of what they were collecting. The concept of an exhibition evolved as the morbid beauty of the objects struck them. For Arabi the explosions were like part of lived history. “I grew up in Tehran through the Iran-Iraq war where we saw neighbourhoods being blown up,” she says.

“The incident affected us personally because it happened a few hundred yards from the gallery. We saw the billowing smoke and breathed the acrid stench,” says Zandi. It’s this reality that the exhibition sets into stark relief: strewn around the dimly lit exhibition area are twisted steel frames, hanging wires, bent corrugated metal sheets, a clump of forks, knives stuck together. They still exude a faint smell of smoke. It’s history bizarrely frozen in time against the barely audible sound of explosions playing in the background. Ironically, there are a couple of charred fire extinguishers too. A mound of rusted cans of paint with flecks of bright orange colour congealed in the very act of oozing out.

“But for us, it’s not recreation of a tragedy, it’s a kind of celebration,” says Zandi. “It shows life does go on.”

“We went to the site a week after the accident because we wanted to know what the place looked like. When we saw the strange assortment of charred objects, the way they were juxtaposed struck us. There were plastic wallets with the US flag and images of Osama Bin Laden and Ronaldinho strangely fused together. And there were bunches of rusted safety pins that had been entangled artistically. No artist could have shaped them

Twisted metal frames are strewn around the dimly lit exhibition area. Hanging wires and clumps of wires stick together still exuding a faint smell of smoke

thus even if he had tried. A natural element like fire had made sheets of metal flow like folds of fabric.”

“Objects like sewing machines and scissors had gained an aesthetic dimension. We realised that nothing gets destroyed. They get metamorphosed. That’s what the exhibition celebrates,” says Arabi.

Undoubtedly there’s poignancy too. There’s a bicycle which was not part of the objects in the warehouse. “It obviously belonged to someone working there. Though we cannot confirm this, we were told the man died in the accident,” says Zandi.

But then, is it wholesome to showcase these horrors? Zandi and Arabi deny that they are being insensitive or are exploiting a tragic accident. “We are not selling these objects; we are merely exhibiting them,” they say. “We have put them together by ourselves. We

believe this is the first ‘art installation’ in the region made entirely out of scrap salvaged from a local accident. We hope the authorities put the exhibition in a museum as part of the archive of a city growing.”

Growth can often imply destruction. Another facet of this can be seen in the complementary exhibition being held at the gallery. They are a series of photographs by UAE photographer Mohammed Al Murr. Called *The Neighbourhood is Gone*, it captures old buildings being demolished to make room for new ones — for gentrification.

“In the process of change neighbourhoods vanish quickly, along with memories and dreams. This is what happened to a neighbourhood near my house,” says Murr.

“Both exhibitions capture destruction, one by nature and the other by man,” says Arabi. But then, even the fire that destroyed the warehouses was caused by greed. It was sparked by firecrackers smuggled into the country and kept illegally in the warehouse. But Zandi and Arabi don’t want the subtext to be a parable.

“We want people to experience it,” they say. “It’ll be interesting to see what the objects will look like in 20 years time and if anyone will remember the incident,” says Zandi.

Scraps runs until April 23 at Total Arts Gallery, Al Quoz. (04-3475050)