

# ARTFORUM

## Sophie Ristelhueber

GALERIE OF MARSEILLE

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Sophie Ristelhueber imbues her photographs—typically unpeopled war-torn landscapes and cityscapes—with a sense of humanity that belies her troubling subject matter. Whether dramatic aerial views of Kuwait in the aftermath of the Gulf War (“Fait,” 1992) or close-ups of improvised road blockades in the West Bank (“WB” 2004–2005), Ristelhueber’s images focus on physical evidence in order to emphasize the social ramifications of conflict and disorder.

In the two series that make up the current exhibition—“Beirut,” 1982–2012, and “Sans titre,” 2011—Ristelhueber uses contrasting methods to expose the human side of two very different landscapes. “Sans titre” appears at first to represent a mass of brownish-green serpentine entrails. In fact, the seemingly intestinal linkages turn out to be the rusty underground drainage system of a fountain at the Palace of Versailles. Though the rococo ornament is not itself visible, the implied contrast between it and what

Ristelhueber reveals to be lurking below reminds us that beauty is skin-deep. The fountain—a totem of stately order and decadence—is brutalized by the exposure of its underbelly and inner workings.

The second series testifies to Beirut’s turbulent past and present with somber images of bullet-pocked buildings, bombed-out neighborhoods, and abandoned homes. Despite the violent theme, Ristelhueber’s photographs—melancholic black-and-white images thoughtfully composed from a respectful distance—are hauntingly serene. Devastation and suffering are implicit, but instead of giving us gruesome shock-value images of urban warfare, Ristelhueber turns ruins into poetry, encouraging us to ruminate on a dire situation instead of quickly turning away in disgust.



Sophie Ristelhueber, *Beyrouth*, 1982–2012, black-and-white photograph, pigment print, 47 x 34".

— Mara Hoberman

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