

An Inside View of Arab Photography



Samer Mohdad

[Samer Mohdad](#) was a 10-year-old boy living in the mountain village of his Druse ancestors when Lebanon's civil war broke out in 1975. His life changed overnight: His childhood playmates were now his sworn enemies. The traumatic experience of the war, which lasted until 1990, stayed with him and, Mr. Mohdad believes, eventually led him to photography.

"I used photography to express my fears and worries," he said. "It was a sort of therapy."

Fittingly, rather than immerse himself in the thick of the

conflict's action, he worked on long-term projects exploring "the hopes of normal people living in a civil war." His images were different, nuanced and complex.

"At the time, many of the photographers covering Lebanon from the outside were on assignment from magazine editors who wanted to see blood, see the direct victims of war," he said. "For me there were already enough of these images, and I wanted to show the view from the inside."



Bedouin women driving a car in the Empty Quarter, Sharoura, Saudi Arabia. 2003.
Samer Mohdad

Those images are now part of the 2014 edition of [Houston FotoFest](#), the oldest and longest-running photography festival in the country, which was founded by [Wendy Watriss and Fred Baldwin](#). This year's exhibit, whose lead curator is Karin Adrian von Roques, is "View From Inside:

Contemporary Arab Video, Photography and Mixed Media Art," and features artists from 13 countries.

Mr. Mohdad, who worked with Agence Vu, has photographed in many of them, publishing six books — including "[Mes Arabies](#)" and his most recent, "[Beirut Mutations](#)." But when he started his career, there was little awareness of Arab photography in the West, where many museums did not bother to collect it.

"When I first exhibited my photography at the Musée de l'Elysée in Switzerland in the early nineties, there was no category for my work," he wrote in an essay on his website. "The label 'Arab photography' simply did not exist. Up until then, famous images of the Arab world had been taken by outsiders, westerners who traveled to the Middle East in search of exoticism and thrills."

Mr. Mohdad helped found the [Arab Image Foundation](#) in Beirut, with Fouad Elkoury and Akram Zaatari, and set out uncovering and preserving the Arab world's photographic patrimony.



Video clip, Egypt. Revolution. 2006. Khaled Hafez

The region's first photography studios started in the latter part of the 19th century, while it was still under the control of the Ottoman Empire. The photographers were mostly Armenians, Nestorians and other non-Muslim minorities, because, Mr. Mohdad said, "presenting an image in Islam was prohibited for a long time."

He discovered that there was a lot of early Arab photography, particularly in family albums of the wealthy. He discovered doctors photographing naked bodies, engineers photographing construction and merchants photographing their wares.

"There was a huge richness of Arab culture," he said. "But the problem was that pursuing an artistic profession was something you could not be proud of at that time."

It was not until the 1950s, he said, that photography gained acceptance as it was used to document Palestinians. In the last 20 years a new generation has embraced photography, using digital processes and the Internet to express themselves. Some of the same forces that shaped the Arab Spring are motivating Arab photographers, and it can actually be safer to express oneself about politics and religion using images rather than words, Mr. Mohdad said.

"Creativity comes when you are oppressed," he said.



Palestine, from the series "Metamorphosis." 2012. Steve Sabella/Berloni Gallery

While Arab photography has been exhibited in Europe, it has been little noticed in the United States, Ms. Watriss said. But this year's FotoFest aims to change that. The festival includes many Arab photographers, from North Africa and the Middle East, including Abdul Nasser Gharam, Steven Sabella, Lalla Essaydi, Lara Baladi, Khaled Hafez and Jowhara AlSaud. The majority of them are nondocumentary photographers working in the art world.

Ms. Watriss, 71, and her partner, Mr. Baldwin, 85, have

dedicated the last 30 years to promoting photographers from regions rarely represented in the American photographic canon. They have focused previous biennials on photographers from Latin America, China, Russia, and Central and Eastern Europe, and they have helped start dozens of photo festivals around the world.

"We have been able to clear out some of the clichés and prejudices that linger in all of our brains," Mr. Baldwin said.

Now they are stepping down as the leaders of Houston FotoFest, although Ms. Watriss bristles at the mention of the word retirement.

"Thank God we even just touched the surface," she said.

"The work is really exciting and we are still finishing the Russian book, then a book on Latino photography and then I'd like to go back and do a book on photography in China."

They also have plans for a FotoFest 30-year retrospective book. And after that, they plan to organize the archives of their own photographic work, much of it a result of their own 40-year partnership.

"When we got together, my life changed," Mr. Baldwin said. "I was a real rascal. And it is wonderful after all these years to be able to look back and say I haven't just taken from life but that we have spent a good deal of effort to give back."



A voter checking her name before casting her vote on the second day of voting in Egypt's presidential election, at a polling station in Giza, south of Cairo. June 17, 2012. Ahmed Jadallah/Reuters

Follow [@smodad](#), [@FotoFest_Intl](#), [@JamesEstrin](#) and [@nytimesphoto](#) on Twitter. Lens is also on [Facebook](#).