

RECREATIONAL PURPOSE:
BAHRAIN REVISITED
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As an art medium, photography is enjoying the wholehearted embrace of the Arab World. It has both the immediacy and the wanton disregard for convention necessary to capture the region's fast developing and starkly contradictory realities.

Photography in Bahrain dates back to the late 19th century. It was not until 1985, however, that its official beginning as a mode of artistic expression was marked with the establishment of the Photo Club by the Bahrain Arts Society. This non-profit body provided training and a platform for Bahraini photographers to exhibit at home and abroad.

In 2005, and again in 2007, Andreas Gursky's iconic photographs of Bahrain's Formula One track drew global attention to the country's hitherto unexploited potential as a subject. While a number of Bahraini photographers were already practicing professionally, several factors—a renewed economic affluence, readily available technology, rapid changes that inspired a desire to record for posterity a fast disappearing way of life, as well as the popularity of the medium in the rest of the Middle East—converged to swell the ranks of amateurs and professionals.

The momentum culminated in Bahrain winning the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2010. The project, *Reclaim*, included a significant photographic component along with film and architecture. At Bahrain's 2013 Venice Biennale pavilion, two out of the three artists featured were photographers. Earlier this year, the Centre for Photographic Arts was established in the Jamsheer House in Muharraq, supported by the Shaikh Ibrahim Centre, the French Embassy and the Alliance Française. From within this context, Bahrain's choice to curate an exhibition of photographic art to celebrate Manama's status as Capital of Arab Tourism 2013 appears a natural one.

Of the eleven photographers whose images comprise this show, six were tourists and five live in Bahrain. Of the latter, three are Bahraini. All are Arab. Armed with no more than their cameras and the instruction to take pictures, the cohesion evident in the final exhibition belies the size of the curatorial gamble.

While initially difficult to identify the tourists' images from the rest, on closer examination it becomes clear that those unfamiliar with Bahrain brought to the task their own aesthetic and conceptual references while the projects of those who live here were in large part informed by a keen nostalgia and a sense of ownership of the space, sharing it with a curiously unguarded hospitality.

Common threads run through the exhibition, the two most obvious being the distance the photographers placed between themselves and new urban developments, and the sparse human presence. Almost unanimously, the city skyline was captured from afar. The towering new buildings with their glass façades appear diminutive, sandwiched between the vastness of the sky and land. All sought the perspective that could only be imparted by distance, whether to enable them to better understand and connect with an unfamiliar city, in the case of visiting photographers, or to make sense of the changes that are engulfing their hometown and better comprehend their place in it.

Nicène Kossentini inserts thin slivers of distant cities, playgrounds, industrial silhouettes and beaches between expanses of sky, each a playful tableau that resonates with her belief that Bahrain is one of the mythical lands of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. The romantic feel of her work is echoed by Wed Abdul-Jawad's pinhole images. Shot from the bottom of a spiralling glass tower, the dreamy quality characteristic of her device softens the monolith's violent eruption out of the ground. The same camera lends an otherworldly aura to older buildings. Steve Sabella's photomontage features the same cityscape of which Abdul-Jawad's building is a part, also at a distance, repeated with its reflection.

Standing alongside a similarly sleek work of the Tree of Life, Sabella grants the same aesthetic weight to the ancient tree as he does an entire city.

Haya Alkhalifá takes the viewer behind the scenes of a paradise island to witness the spartan efficiency of the realities of creating and maintaining a tourist destination. A seemingly endless row of new air conditioning units hidden from the view of sun worshippers cools their hotel or mall from behind a low wall; newly reclaimed beaches await transformation. Her visual forthrightness contrasts with the pragmatism of her written statement and hints at nostalgia for what has been left out of the pictures.

In an exhibition about tourism, the absence of people is immediately conspicuous with all but two of the photographers opting to leave people out of their work to a large degree; some have left them out completely. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the black and white photographs of Ghada Khunji whose earlier work is populated by a rich cast of characters with whom she gets up-close and personal. This is a more personal journey for Khunji and the intimacy she is seeking is with the space itself, the backdrop of her childhood. The only concession she makes is allowing the ghostly figures of a football match to appear backlit against the glare of a setting sun.

Totally devoid of human presence are the works of Taysir Batniji, Hrair Sarkissian and Camille Zakharia. Their visual approach appears to be similar but they diverge conceptually.

Each of Batniji's photos captures a single moment mid-way between a beginning and an end. In most cases, the task or object appears to have been inexplicably abandoned, as in the case of the unfinished buildings and the shrouded car. Collectively, however, the images imply a linear dynamism that negates the stasis of the individual shots. The mundane tasks may have been forsaken in favour of others, more productive or interesting. A sense of loss permeates the portfolio, as if Batniji believes that the abandonment is permanent.

Sarkissian, on the other hand, hones in on a natural cyclicity. His exploration of the unfamiliar leads him to the cycle of life as a universal constant. Bahrain's ancient burial mounds foreground the dwarfed village on the horizon, perhaps as a reminder that death is a very natural part of life and as such, should be equally celebrated. But he also celebrates the beginning of a new life in his photograph of a billboard stand-in for a yet-to-be constructed development, maturity in the form of a pristine white compound and a city skyline, as well as the timeless beauty of a barren landscape.

Zakharia's photographs confront head-on the romanticised notion of compound living. He replaces the soft focus of the real estate agent's lens with the ostensible neutrality of the documentary photographer's. By presenting them unpopulated and in mid-construction, from outside high walls or at a great distance, he strips away the element of 'home' and asks the question: do cookie-cutter developments imply a cookie-cutter life?

Unlike the rest, Eman Ali's and Jamal Penjweny's photos are teaming with people. Ali's voyeurism is democratic and unapologetic. The iPhone camera is there for a reason, and she has no qualms about using it. Equally idealised by the indiscriminate hunger of her camera is the solitude and serenity of prayer and the frenetic energy of mall shoppers. Slipped feet under the lacy hem of a nightgown, hands adorned with henna and gold clasped in gossip, a billowing *bisht*^[1], the backs of heads, an unlikely and awkward hallway conversation all thrust the viewer into the very innards of Bahraini life.

Jamal Penjweny mitigates the anxiety of the unfamiliar with a psychedelic explosion of roses that strangely unites the unwary inhabitants of his dreamscapes. The whimsy initially appears out of place in the portfolio of a photo journalist whose work includes photographs of the Iraqi conflict and documentaries about gun running. However, his is a dark whimsy. The flowers divert attention away from the illicit fantasies of a married woman while she sits secure in the anonymity afforded by her black veil, they conceal nipples,

burst out of heads, human and avian, and button up a soldier's shirt. Innocently beautiful at first, one cannot help but question how benign their invasion is.

It is Waheeda Malullah's work that best sums up the exhibition. Like most of the other works, Malullah's features no people but in this case, she takes it a step further, underscoring the absence by naming her work *People of Bahrain*.

Malullah inscribes the names of cities, towns, suburbs and villages on Bahrain's staple bread and then systematically tears it up into ever smaller pieces, dismantling the names in a metaphor for the centuries' old hybridisation that has not eliminated the differences between the inhabitants of these areas but has, to a large though not total extent, subsumed them—a plaintive call to look beyond differences. To the familiar eye, Malullah stops just short of the cascade of hot broth that would have turned her bread to *thareed*^[2], a climax that would not have served her project aesthetically or conceptually as it would have turned the bread into a glutinous porridge.

If nothing else, one clear message reverberates throughout this show: this is not a place where worlds collide but rather coexist, albeit not always seamlessly, sometimes even grating uncomfortably against each other. The world that is presented here is oftentimes concealed from the casual beach-going visitor. This exhibition can thus be construed as an invitation to venture out into that very real Bahrain that exists outside the glitz, but to do so in a hushed reverence with no more than these haunting images to guide the would-be tourist. Alternatively, like these photographers, he can choose to chart his own way.

1. A DARK, LIGHTLY WOVEN WOOLLEN CLOAK WITH GOLD TRIM WORN BY MEN IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE ARABIAN GULF ON FORMAL OR CEREMONIAL OCCASIONS. A SIMILAR GARMENT OF THICKER WOOLLEN FABRIC, OFTEN CALLED *ABAYA*, IS WORN BY MEN IN OTHER PARTS OF THE ARAB WORLD.

2. A TRADITIONAL BAHRAINI DISH MADE OF HAND-SHREDDED PIECES OF UNLEAVENED BREAD WHICH ARE TOPPED WITH A CHICKEN AND VEGETABLE BROTH IMMEDIATELY BEFORE SERVING. IT IS MEANT TO BE EATEN BEFORE THE BROTH SATURATES THE BREAD, TURNING IT SOGGY.