

INSIDER/OUTSIDER PHOTOGRAPHERS  
AND THE INTRA-CULTURAL TOURISM  
LANDSCAPE

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On the occasion of Manama being named the Capital of Arab Tourism in 2013, six photographers originating from the Arab World participated in short-term residencies together with five Bahrain-based photographers. All were given the same task: to create new work focused on personal explorations of Bahrain's urban and natural landscape. The resulting commissions are presented through the internationally travelling exhibition *Recreational Purpose*, a photography exhibition featuring many noted photographers from the Arab world, but also serving the dual purpose of promoting in a progressive fashion, cultural tourism.

When looking at the varied images produced, the international artists: Taysir Batniji, Nicène Kossentini, Hrair Sarkissian, Wed Abdul-Jawad, Jamal Penjweny, Steve Sabella, most of whom were not familiar with Manama and furthermore, Bahrain's history beforehand, it is apparent through their work and personal statements on the experience, they operate as intra-cultural tourists from the Arab World. Tasked with examining and ruminating through their photographer's lens, Bahrain, Manama and all the city encapsulates—at once representing not only the capital of Bahrain, but a modern Arab hub of trade and commerce in the Gulf, linked to its historic past, but perpetually moving forward. The deft navigation of the push-and-pull between contemporary culture and heritage is best exemplified via Manama's modern architectural skyline, which upon exploring and embedded deeper into the city and surrounding area's infrastructure, numerous historic and UNESCO World Heritage sites are preserved; many of them are alluded to in these commissions.

Examining the place they call home under the premise, and later an exhibition, thematically exploring cultural tourism turns Camille Zakharia, Ghada Khunji, Eman Ali, Waheeda Malullah and Haya Alkhalifa into insider-outsiders. Both belonging and understanding the place they call home with an 'insider perspective', by commissioning them to create new work under the auspicious guise of promoting cultural tourism, they are repositioned as observant 'outsiders'.

A pervading sense of nostalgia and awareness of the relationship between the natural and manmade world are central themes in Batniji's *Interface* series. In one frame, an image of a weathered armchair humbly sitting on the shore suggests the need for recollection as time quickly moves forward, progressing into the future, as exemplified in his landscape of the Manama skyline in the background. In less obvious ways, Batniji suggests more elusive interactions between the natural world and the manmade, presenting a barren desert image, free from recognisable conventions of civilisation, with the exception of a distinct mound of darkened sand in the middle of the frame, referencing human engagement.

The seven black-and-white landscapes that comprise Kossentini's *The City in the Sky* series cause one to question their own perception of reality. The landscapes are both

hyper realistic, depicting everyday scenes in Bahrain, from a beach scene of families, to a campground set up near a tree serving as an oasis in the desert, images that one might expect for a tourism campaign, yet their underlying fantastical nature gives them an otherworldly, unexpected quality. As each landscape is manipulated so the sky is both above and below, enveloping the main scene that commands one's focus, these realistic scenes offer a skewed sense of intriguing reality at the same time.

Sarkissian's images from *Under Process* present scenes in Bahrain as very much a stage for examining the history of the place, which upon arrival, he was unfamiliar with. Using his camera as an excavation tool, Sarkissian operates very much like an archaeologist, 'digging' through Bahrain's history in the National Museum, resulting in an image of a diorama of buildings and palms, as well as the eerie skeleton curled in a foetal position, with a museum didactic placard in the foreground, reminds us of the important place museums hold in tourists' psyche as a site for intellectual enlightenment and edutainment.

Digging into the architectural history of Bahrain further, Abdul-Jawad's vertical, upwardly angled black-and-white photographs of heritage buildings, contemporary architecture, everyday street scenes, and sometimes, a shot with both styles of buildings in the frame, offer visual vignettes on the architectural histories and transitions that epitomise the Manama landscape. Giving the buildings full attention, these photographs serve as 'portraits,' of each building, capturing their personality as one would attempt to capture in traditional portraiture. Devoid of any human figures, these dreamy images render an intimate quality, characteristic of what one might find in a personal album.

Penjweny's photographs from the *City of Flowers* series bring magic in the form of vibrant, pink roses into everyday scenes, where his focus is less on Bahrain as a specific, physical place and more on the people who live there. The imposed roses transform normalcy into fantasy—four young men, holding chickens with heads of roses, a shot of an unassuming woman in front of a worn building, with a large, luscious rose in place of her head. Some shots are so focused on the people they represent, the possibility for miracles in their personal stories that any reference to Bahrain is lost altogether and the scene is universally welcoming, yet mysterious in the wonderment that envelops this cast of characters.

At first glance, Sabella's manipulated photographs from *Sinopia* appear curiously out-of-place amongst the other commissions, as they have such strong painterly qualities one wonders if they are photographs at all? Various, repetitive monochrome shapes are layered upon one another, creating a new world order of ambiguous architecture, with small identifiable elements, such as satellite dishes, windows and doors, give some reference point to the clandestine image. In contrast, a multi-frame rendering of Manama's iconic skyline is at once instantly recognisable, yet Sabella's technique once again is evocative of painting, this time more specifically watercolour, causing viewers to rethink not only their own presumptions about Bahrain, but also about the very medium of photography.

Geometry in the ordinary, in this case, the compounds, which generally house expats, is prevalent in Zakharia's *Birds of a Feather* series. Clean, orderly rows of villas, some more luxurious than others, shown in quiet pairs of twos and threes populate these suburban scenes of solitude. Contemporary, high-rise residential buildings, some finished, others still under construction, offer room for rumination on the kinds of lives lived inside these structures. Unabashedly anonymous and devoid of insight into the personal lives lived inside these buildings, Zakharia documents what life looks like from the outside for those living inside these shrouded communities.

The street scenes are filled with suggestions of faded opulence and urban grittiness in Khunji's *Within the Shadows* series. Lush bougainvillea blooms droop languidly over a covered, parked car. Black graffiti 'frames' a European-style, ornate protruding vase from a wall. Scenes of youthful figures engaged in sports activity behind a fence, a shot of a squalid home that looks long-forgotten, with a bevy of satellite dishes strewn on the roof, all offer a varied and intriguing narrative on multifaceted Bahrain, a side rarely portrayed to the outside world.

Ali's journalistic, action-style photographs are filled with scenes that seem only possible to capture from an insider's perspective, filled with unparalleled vibrancy. Action shots, blurred with the movement of figures, such as a group of women in colourful skirts walking and chatting, breathe literal life into the oft-static medium of photography. A scene of men eating in a cafeteria and a cropped shot of a man in traditional *Khaleeji* dress with a jacket, looking down at his phone, but missing his head, rendering his identity a secret, pushes viewers to focus on the instantaneous moment these events occur, rather than the specific identity of whom they suggest to represent.

The bread circles in Malullah's *People of Bahrain* stand as a symbol for both the sustenance of life as well as representing the various geographic regions of Bahrain. Capturing through photography the performance-like quality of this highly conceptual exploration of Bahrain's identity, the dichotomy between the broken bread and whole pieces, coupled with tattooed text offer insight into the multiethnic, multicultural history and character of Bahrain through a most unexpected pictorial surprise.

The sea and relationship between the ever-changing coast is the central element of focus in Alkhalifa's vibrant *Flux* series landscapes, which inherently is central to the history and culture of Bahrain. Two-frame, large landscape shots of a pristine bay tease with inviting, turquoise waters akin to what one expects to find on a tropical island paradise, yet subtly hints at the connection between the natural landscape and manmade world with a structure peeking out at the far right corner. Alternatively, more obvious examinations of the relationship between construction and the development of Bahrain in correlation to reclaimed land abound in images of new developments being built with the Manama skyline in the distance.

The works in *Recreational Purpose* challenge both insider and outsider visions of Bahrain today, a testament to the never-ending ability that photography has to capture and reimagine the human and physical realities of the environment we call home and ones we sojourn to as visitors. Moments that could so often have gone unnoticed and underappreciated are brought to permanence through the photographer's lens.