

## FOREWORD

*Recreational Purpose* is a group photography exhibition organised by Bahrain's Ministry of Culture to celebrate the naming of Manama as Capital of Arab Tourism 2013 by the Arab League. The curatorial intent was to question the increasingly close link between culture and tourism, notably in the Gulf region. If culture was increasingly being used as an asset to attract further tourism, would it be possible for tourism promotion to create critical cultural content?

The rules of the game were simple. Six photographers from outside the country and five from within Bahrain, either citizens or long-term residents, were given a short brief: to take photographs of the island without any constraints on format, content, message or intentions. The only restriction was the use of photography as a medium.

Nicène Kossentini, Taysir Batniji, Steve Sabella, Hrair Sarkissian, Wed Abdul-Jawad and Jamal Penjweny, the six photographers from outside of Bahrain, arrived as tourists and were given minimal logistical support. Instead, they were presented with the country as a virgin canvas and given free reign to inscribe their personal readings and interpretations on to it.

Camille Zakharia, Ghada Khunji, Eman Ali, Waheeda Malullah and Haya Alkhalifa, were given the same minimal indications but embarked with the apparent advantage of an insider's view of the country.

At first glance, it is difficult to differentiate photographs taken by the outsider from those taken by the insider. The resulting photographic portfolio included all of the ingredients of our tourism assets, albeit in a slightly different package, and with very personal interpretations. The Tree of life, the Dilmun Burial mounds, the Qal'at Al Bahrain Fort, the coral stone houses, the towers, the beaches, the desert and the farms all feature in the photographs.

The contents of the National Museum appear somewhat mystical in Sarkissian's images; the sea is rendered surreal in Kossentini's portrayal; Sabella recomposes the urban landscapes; Ali's iPhone images unveil a side of Bahrain that is often hidden from the tourist; Alkhalifa's photos reveal contemporary developments with a starkness that conveys the sterile environments that she perceives them to produce; Malullah's photographic series illustrates the urban composition of Bahrain, creating a visual map of the country through the naming of all its cities and villages; Penjweny's *plastered* optimism gives a portrayal of a village lifestyle still very present in Bahrain; Abdul-Jawad plays on the advertising idiom of old against new through the very old technique of pinhole camera and finally, Zakharia, Batniji and Khunji celebrate the mundane that captures, better than any tourism promotion attempt, the identity of the Bahraini landscape.

Tourism and travel rely on emotions and sensations more than on market research and data, and art as a medium conveys a candour that is often missing from commercial promotional efforts. The multitude of tourism campaigns that seek to portray the Gulf region as a self-orientalising and exotic destination filled with the requisite palm trees, sand dunes and a tent thrown in for good measure against a contrasting backdrop of modern towers, shopping malls, beach resorts and world-class museums have flattened the diverse geographies and histories that make up this part of the world. By continuously attempting to be unique, rich in culture and heritage yet fun-filled, we are, in fact, increasingly all portraying ourselves as the same.

As this exhibition travels, presenting an image of the country less polished and correct but hopefully more real than the one in travel brochures, we hope that it will, nonetheless, do its share in promoting the country as a place where culture is understood as a specific social and urban context and not as a standardised template. For recreational purposes, this was an experiment in doing things differently.

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