canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

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Ziad Antar's search for poetry in unexpected places, Amir H Fallah's energetic and personalised work, Sadik Al-Fraji's dark Existentialism and Nohad and Layla Machnouk's eclectic art collection.
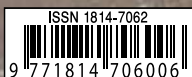
SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

ZIAD ANTAR

From New York bridges to Dubai skyscrapers, Ziad Antar mixes expired film with contemporary topics. **Alice Pfeiffer** chats with the Lebanese multimedia artist on his challenging and subtly politicised imagery.

tall, 1970s-style building stands proudly in a sunlit landscape surrounded by palm trees. *Côte d'Azur Hotel* from the *Beirut Bereft* series is a photo shot by Ziad Antar in 2007, a year after a devastating war ravaged a city where havoc often fills the streets. Sky-high with a tinge of retro, the representation embodies a vision of the Lebanese capital that the artist wants to remember and promote. For Antar, images are ideas that transcend their own medium; they are semiotic fields in which he lays out arguments that are sometimes too intricate for words. Essentially, the act of capturing the moment surpasses the end result.

It is this drive to find vital meaning and poetry in unexpected places that has motivated Antar from an early age. Born in Sidon, Lebanon, he graduated from the American University of Beirut with a degree in Agricultural Engineering – a field in which his family has long practiced. "There is no such thing as a good or bad choice, no such thing as failure; nothing scares me," he explains. His undergraduate major came to inspire a body of works, years later, in 2009, when he presented the show, *Terre de Pomme de Terre,* which documents potato harvesting, at Almine Rech Gallery's Paris branch. On the creative backburner, Antar maintained a fascination for image-making and taught himself photography. As a young adult, he attempted a high jump to fine art, and, with a stroke of luck, moved to France to study at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris and completed a residency at the Palais de Tokyo. From the terra firma of Sidon to the glossy galleries of the French capital, there are no distances too wide or challenges too big for Antar. "I don't care about failing – on the contrary, without failure there is no risk and without risk there is no chance of finding new meanings," says the artist, whose work has since been shown in the Centre Pompidou and New York's New Museum, both in 2009. What comprises the richness of his work today is a sense of

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alienation paired with profound humanness, located in areas one might not suspect.

SERIES AND RESTRAINTS

Antar has been playing around with cameras for as long as as he can remember. His path appeared clearer to him when, in 2000, while working as an assistant to Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari at the Arab Image Foundation, he came across an old film produced in 1976 in the legendary Studio Sherazade of commercial photographer Hashem El-Madani, incidentally in his hometown. Zaatari has taken a genuine interest in El-Madani's pictures for years largely due to how studio portraiture in Sidon at the time persevered vis-à-vis political conflict. Antar began shooting what surrounded him, like a tourist as opposed to an artist: frantically clicking away, eager to document rather than to sublimate. His initial snaps were to be the founding basis of one of his key series, *Expired*. Without prior testing of the film, he took the risk of the results turning up completely blank. Chance is something Antar grasps – he knew that he could shoot for weeks but the film may have been too old to catch anything, concluding in a squandered mission. "This whole pro-

Opening spread, from left to right:
Foujaira. 2010. Colour print on aluminium. 55 x 55 x 5 cm; *Abu Dhabi*. 2010. Black and white print on aluminium. 55 x 55 x 5 cm; *Al-Hamria Port, Sharjah*. 2010. Colour print on aluminium. 55 x 55 x 5 cm. All images © Ziad Antar and courtesy the artist and Almine Rech Gallery, Paris/Brussels; *Burj Khalifa II*, from the *Expired* series. 2011. Black and white silver print photograph. 125 x 125 cm. Edition of five. Image courtesy Selma Feriani Gallery, London/Tunis.

This page:
S11, from the *Sculptures of Jeddah* series. 2012. Photographic enlargement on premium paper mounted on dibond. 120 x 120 cm. Edition of five plus one artist's proof. Image courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.

Facing page:
S9, from the *Sculptures of Jeddah* series. 2012. Photographic enlargement on premium paper mounted on dibond. 120 x 120 cm. Edition of five plus one artist's proof. Image courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.

85

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ject could potentially go entirely to waste, but that was part of the exercise: leaving a component of unpredictability gave it a whole new meaning when the images survived," reminisces Antar. He began shooting images of modernity around the world, from the Queensboro Bridge in New York to Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the world's tallest tower. What resulted were black-and-white images speckled with white dots, giving an almost tongue-in-cheek vintage quality to the shots. The buildings were turned on their heads and suddenly went from being gargantuan to quaint.

In his series *Portrait of a Territory*, shot between 2009 and 2011 and presented at the Sharjah Foundation in 2012, Antar produced photographs taken during several road trips on the coast that marks a large portion of the Emirates. Using old cameras (Rolefleix and Holga), he captured palm trees, amusement parks and seemingly mundane details of everyday life. The result – overexposed and marked by misty heat and an absence of human presence – imbued the images with a sense of barrenness, as though the subjects were missing from the pieces. Why? Because what Antar sought to

create was not a portrait of a territory, but rather, one of its inventory. Forcing himself to work only in series "because I don't believe in the moment", his work constitutes an archival approach to his voyages. He collects proofs, traces and documents, evoking something of Claude Levi Strauss, an anthropological approach to travel and documentation. "I look and wonder: why does this culture exist, how can I give it another reading without it being negative or positive? I am conducting research, I am *part* of that research and that's what I try to represent," explains Antar. He allows this research to be invaded by a certain type of organic wilderness: "I hate images that are too smooth or predictable and that's why I sabotage my own images by using old cameras," he says of his love of throwaway cameras, plastic lenses and cheap, corrupted tools. "What constitutes a good image? And does the fact that it looks more 'real' bring it closer to reality? Life is not filled with clean surfaces and photos shouldn't be either."

NEW TERRITORIES

Antar's leitmotif arguably fits in the same formula: finding the gap between reality, perception and representation. Photography and film have allowed him to achieve this thanks in part to their dual qualities of being both testimonial and creative – and the frequent slippage from the former to the latter, between objectivity and bias. "Ultimately, an image is a proof, it is there, in front of you

This spread:
S2, from the *Sculptures of Jeddah* series. 2012. Photographic enlargement on premium paper mounted on dibond. 120 x 120 cm. Image courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.
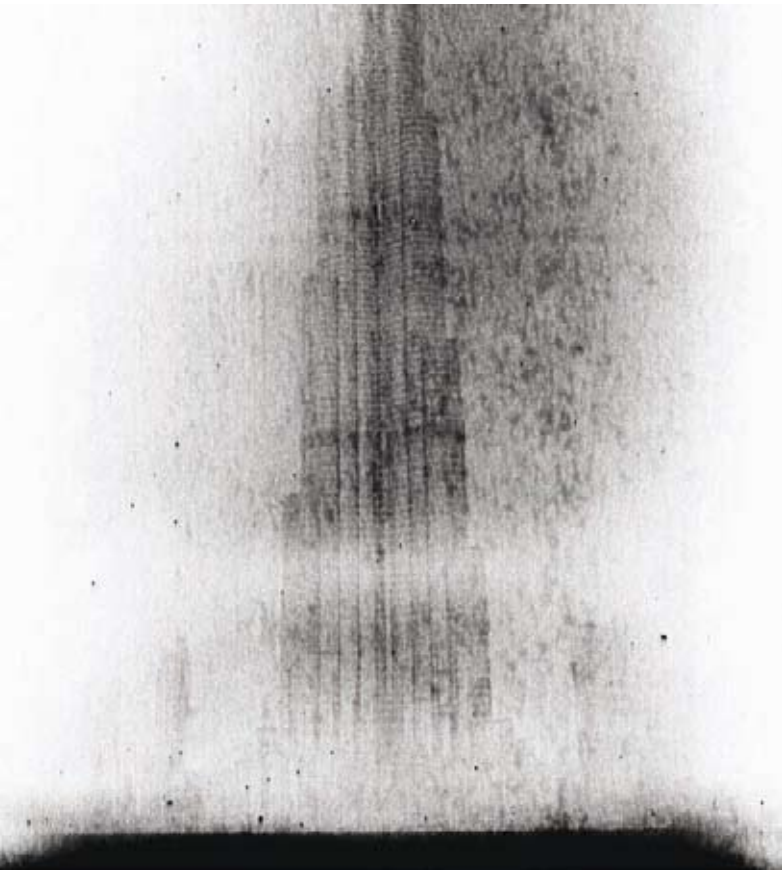
This page:
Left: *Burj Khalifa IV*, from the *Expired* series. 2011. Black and white silver print photograph. 125 x 125 cm. Edition of five.
Right: *Queensboro Bridge, New York*, from the *Expired* series. 2009. Black and white silver print photograph. 125 x 125 cm. Edition of three. Images courtesy Selma Feriani Gallery, London/Tunis.

Facing page:
Left: (Detail) *Al-Madina*. 2013. Photographic enlargement on premium paper mounted on dibond. 120 x 120 cm. Edition of five plus one artist's proof.
Right: (Detail) Untitled. 2013. Photographic enlargement on premium paper mounted on dibond. 120 x 120 cm. Edition of five plus one artist's proof. Images courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.

and tells no lies – and that comes with certain limitations too," he says.

Eager to push himself further, he has tried his hand at a new medium, curious to discover its new capacities and expressions of existence: for his latest show at Athr Gallery in Jeddah (15 January–1 April), he has produced a series of cement statues. These are replicas of numerous sculptures in the Saudi port city, many of which were commissioned from as far back as the 1970s and include pieces by the likes of Moore, Vasarely and Lebanese Modernist Aref Al-Rayess. Antar photographed the sculptures when they were covered by tarpaulin for restoration purposes, leading to indistinct shapes; one can only wonder what hides underneath. "Wrapping up the sculptures gave them a new form, a new reality; they initially existed as the artist wanted, now they exist in another form. During my show, they will re-exist as a newer form, with a new material and new point of view," says Antar of his fascination with sculpture as the bearer of multiple incarnations and truths. "Behind all this procedure or pattern is

a questioning, a search and a proposition on the change of realities." Alongside these works will be a series of photographs and 8mm film, which index oddities that Antar found in the city, such as abandoned objects and a dismantled bicycle. "The sculptures were commissioned to celebrate the city, but will, with time, take on another meaning, history and future," he explains. "The objects are about change too."

NEGOTIATING CONFLICT

"I work on what I see around me and war is sometimes a part of it," says Antar. Some of the constant themes in his body of work are inevitably the political and social situation of the Middle East, which he depicts in offbeat images, creating potent demonstrations of how and where war has affected daily life. In a candid way, Antar confronts the audience with questions, free of empathy or a clear political standpoint. As a citizen who has experienced political turmoil on a firsthand basis, his creative output is one of documented personal

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observation". In *Products of War* (2006), he catalogues a broken bicycle, engines and cans of food that he found in the city – ultimately lending this micro, decontextualised approach a deeply humanistic feel. He also presents empty cans of tuna – "And some vegetarian foods too because some of the soldiers don't eat meat. Everyone is human after all," laughs Antar. Yet in *La Marche Turque,* Antar adopts a more lyrical approach, where a single sequence shot captures the hands of a pianist performing Mozart's piece of the same name. All one hears are the noises of the instrument's hammers without the notes, evoking the July 2006 war. In a simple manner, he has suggested a certain orchestration and repetition of a conflict.

Antar's vision is perhaps best summarised in *Beirut Bereft*, a project in which he indexes abandoned buildings between 1960 and 1990. Construction in some has been halted, others still stand, while many are abandoned and several are used by Syrian immigrants. Nevertheless, what Antar tries to create is not an inventory of destruction but a panorama of those still erect. It is not a work about memory, however, but rather, a project centred on the context of abandonment and disappearance. Antar looks to ignite new hopes and confidence in the region. "As long as there are people, there is life, and there is hope," he maintains.

Under Construction runs from 15 January–1 April at Athr Gallery. For more information visit www.athrart.com, www.alminerech.com and www.selmaferiani.com