

Beautifully Objective

By: Noura Al Sayeh



Title - Hut 6 Hidd – Coastal Promenade Project - 20» x 20» printed on 22" x 22" paper Medium - Archival Inkjet Print on Hahnemuhle Fine Art Paper Edition - 3 of 3 Year - 2010

We first approached Camille Zakharia in March of 2010, a mere 6 months before the opening of the Venice Architecture Biennale in late August of the same year. Clearly unimpressed by our evident lack of time in preparing for such an event, he gave us until the end of the week to come back to him with a clear commission. After a few sleepless nights, it was decided that our work would focus on the evolving coastlines of the country. That weekend, wasting no more precious time, we went on a survey tour of the country pinpointing the areas that would be of specific relevance to our subject matter. Camille has already camera at hand, and we held our breath for a week waiting for the first images to arrive, hoping they would maybe give us a better clue as to where

we were heading. Personally, I also feared the images would appear a bit daunting in a stark reflection of the current state of our coastlines.

It is true that the coastlines have transformed into some sort of a no man's land in recent years, the backyard of the country that we believe we will deal with in better times. We avoid them now, imagining they will soon transform into manicured yet sterile developments, boasting 'island style' living and that we would somehow naturally reintegrate them into our daily lives. For now, they remain on the outskirts of our lives and our cities, spaces that we do not see anymore or more accurately that we do not really want to look at. Yet, it is specifically these spaces that it is vital to document now, as they best speak



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about the transient moment we are going through. They relay the brief hesitation we are witnessing, offered by an economic crisis that has given us the opportunity to rethink our priorities towards our urban landscape.

A week later, the first preview of the images arrived. To my great relief, the images were neither depressing nor daunting; instead there was a sense of mystery that came through them, which made one want to look at little bit closer. Camille's images had managed to uncover a haunting beauty in these places- a beauty few of us had noticed. Going through those same areas a week ago in his company none of us had taken note of the moving and sometimes absurd moments that had caught his attention, the casually

arranged cushions which evoked the soft allure of a late afternoon nap, the striking graphic composition of the mismatched prints of an upholstered interior, the heart-shaped palm branches at the foot of a hut... The images captured the beauty of the mundane, of the everyday and of the banal. They spoke of the vernacular life that goes on beyond and in between the high-rises we have become so used to seeing. Urban development is an underlying theme throughout the Coastal Promenade and, although it is never physically portrayed, one can feel its heavy shadow looming over the images.

Rather than trying to avoid these sensitive issues, Camille had the honesty of looking at them in the eye- with much of the same honesty that the subjects

of his portraits look back at the viewer. The depth and melancholy of their forward-looking gaze seem to hold the viewer accountable of having been a passive spectator of those profound urban transformations. With much the same brutal honesty, his typological portrayal of the huts reveals the specific personality of each, lending them an eerie human-like presence: Hut 16 Al Dair has an austere air, firmly anchored in the sea while others such as huts 24 Hidd and Hut 11

Nabih Al Saleh are of a more frivolous nature, flirting with the edge of the coast. The tenderness with which the subjects are addressed, be it a shabby hut or a weary fishermen, are such that one immediately feels a sense of protection towards them. That is perhaps the biggest strength of the photographs, in that they are able to capture the sense of fragility and vulnerability of these spaces, translating through a soft whisper the urgency of the situation.



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During the next two months, we received on a weekly basis a selection of images from Camille's ongoing documentation of the coast. More than a mere end-product for the exhibition, his photography was instrumental in directing the path the exhibition would take. His poignant portrayal of the huts is what ultimately led to the decision of making them the centre piece of our physical installation in Venice. As we reached the final stages of our preparations, and were writing our various press releases, Camille would often gently remind us to make sure that we mention that his photographic documentation had been done in an 'objective' manner. I was not really sure why he seemed so insistent on this point, it seemed clear that his personal vision and engagement with the subject went beyond the scientific distance that objectivity suggests. Perhaps, it is his way of reminding us that he is simply highlighting what it is available for us all to appreciate- an invitation to take a more considered look at our surroundings, in an attempt to uncover the beauty of the everyday.

Noura Al Sayeh is an architect engaged in both teaching and practise. She holds a Masters degree in Architecture from the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne (EPFL) and has practised architecture in Jerusalem, New York, Amsterdam and Bahrain. In 2009-2010, she was a teaching assistant at the LAPA studio in the EPFL. More recently, she curated, in collaboration with Dr. Fuad Al Ansari, RECLAIM Bahrain's National Participation at the 12th Biennale Architettura in Venice. She is currently Head of Architectural Affairs at the Ministry of Culture in Bahrain.

Camille Zakharia is represented by Art Sawa Dubai