



Nikon

Vau-Leo
© 1946

Van Leo

from Turkey to Egypt

By Martina Corgnati



Leon (Leovan) Boyadjian, known in the art world as “Van Leo,” was born in Ceyhan, 43 km east of Adana (classic Antioch) in Cilicia, on November 20th 1921.¹ Van Leo’s family passed through the years of the genocide and the First World War relatively sheltered by a privileged social position: his father worked at the German-owned Baghdad Train Company, which saved him and his family from being deported. In 1924, after the formation of the post-war status quo and the consolidation of Atatürk’s power, the Boyadjians followed the path well trodden by thousands of Armenians since the late 800s and left for Alexandria, Egypt.

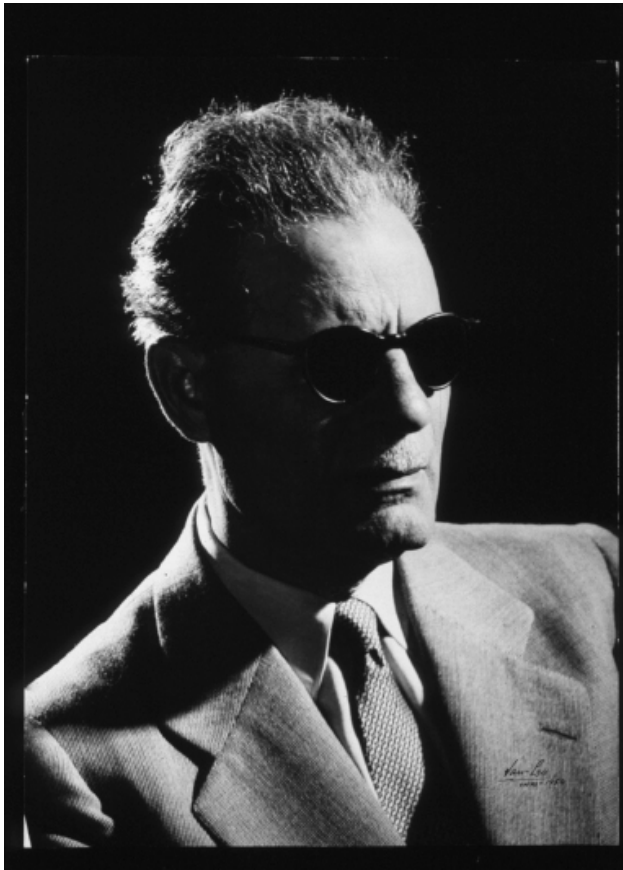
¹ Leovan Boyadjian’s date of birth is known from identity documents kept at the Van Leo fund at the American University of Cairo. The reported dates found in literature pertaining to the photographer were often wrong, such as those offered by current authors and critics that have researched aspects related to Van Leo, have stated a range of dates such as 1921, 1922, and others.

The first photographic forays in the Middle East occurred within the Armenian community. In Egypt, legendary figures such as G. Lekegian, who arrived from Istanbul around 1880, kick-started an Armenian led monopoly over photography and the photographic business. Gradually, other photographers began to populate the area around Lekegian’s Cairo studio, located near Opera Square, creating a small “specialized” neighborhood in both the commercial and ethnic sense. Favored, perhaps, by historical familiarity with images and Christian religion’s acceptance of representational media; Armenians tended to pass on the trade, which at the time could only be learned through experience in the workshops. Due to this process, Armenian photographers were often quite experimental. Armand (Armenak Arzrouni, b. Erzurum 1901 – d. Cairo 1963), Archak, Tartan and Alban (the art name of Aram Arnavaoudian, b. Istanbul 1883 – d. Cairo 1961), for example, who arrived in Cairo in the early twentieth century, were some of the first to try “creative” photographic techniques that played with variations in composition and points of view.

The first photographer Van Leo met in Cairo was an Armenian artist called Varjabedian. Still a child, Van Leo regularly visited his provincial photography studio and, years later, Varjabedian would be the one to introduce him to the photography “temple” in Cairo. This was the name given to the area from Opera Square to Qasr al Nil Street where an abundance of photographic studios and foreign jewelers mingled with the Egyptian artistic aura. At this time, Van Leo was a failing student at The American University in Cairo (AUC), and abandoning this path, Van Leo became an apprentice to Venus Studio, which was then owned by the Armenian photographer Artinian.

Extremely concerned with business but less inclined towards didactical or experimental activities, Artinian turned out to be a teacher without fantasy. This provided a very conservative, traditionalist outlook, unsatisfactory for the young and demanding Van Leo, who took his training upon himself. Strongly influenced by postcards of Hollywood stars and images from movie magazines that he had collected since he was a teenager, researcher Veronica Rodriguez believes that this fascination is evident in his later work. Transforming regular women into “Divas” like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, he used elements such as make-up and lights, acting like “Magic wands,” to create “image divinities” and transformed everyday banality into uncanny epiphanies.

Simulating and recreating female subjects became one of Van Leo’s goals and in 1941 the influx of soldiers and entertain-



ers seeking fortune from all corners of the British Empire inspired Van Leo to take the photographic profession more seriously. By 1947 Van Leo had taken over the premises of the Metro Studio on Fouad Street (today known as 26th of July Street) and adopted the name that would bring him to fame. By rearranging his real name (Leovan - Van Leo) he created an almost exotic, Flemish-like sound evoking the ancient masters of sixteenth-century naturalism and, for its shortness, easily memorable.² With this new name, Van Leo started to sign and date many of the pictures coming out of the modern environment of his studio which had been designed and decorated by the surrealist painter Angelo de Ritz, co-founder of Art et Liberté in 1937. During this phase, Van Leo participated

² The relationship of Van Leo's name to Flemish painters, improperly described as painters of light (a qualification more pertinent to Caravaggio), belongs to Pierre Gazzio, Van Leo. Portraits of Glamour, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 1997.

in Sunday-morning group meetings at de Ritz's home in Cittadella, where he elaborated upon some of the aesthetic positions that have come to characterize this, arguably his best, period.

Success came to Van Leo rapidly, and by 1959 the young photographer was specializing in studio portraits with a few outdoor-scapes throw in for good measure. Both new stars and established celebrities - not only from Egypt, but worldwide - wanted to pose in front of his lens: the promising young actor Omar Sharif (Photographed in 1950), the famous actress Fatma Rushdi (1950), the Egyptian feminist journalist Doria Shafik whose portrait became the cover of Cynthia Nelson's 1996 biography,³ the Lebanese musician and actor with Druze aristocratic ancestry Farid Al-Atrash, the actor and composer Mohamed Abdel Wahhab, Egyptian actress Faten Hamama, the belly dancer and actress Amira Amir, the Lebanese singer Sabah, ballerina and star of the Egyptian film world Samia Gamal,⁴ and, one of the most influential figures of Egyptian culture of the last century, a writer, critic, essayist, and Taha Hussein.⁵ However, even with growing fame, Van Leo never chose his clients or chased celebrities. In fact, Van Leo openly disapproved of such publicity methods. This was not evident through the sense of freedom that characterized his relationship with tangible aesthetics, for he did not change his taste to please his clients, nor did he adapt his style to the trends of the moment. Similarly, he did not hide his disapproval towards color photography that he defined as a tomb for the printing technique and formal invention.⁶

Without noticing, Van Leo, in his fierce hostility towards photographic realism and the easy pret-à-porter techniques, followed the views of Baudelaire, a strong denigrator of the artistic industry who was suspicious of art's ability to seek and seem to enable the faithful reproduction of nature. In 1857 the French poet wrote, "Since photography gives us every guarantee of accuracy that we could desire (that's what they believe, the fools!), then photography and Art are the same

³ C. Nelson, Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist; a Woman Apart, AUC Press, Cairo, 1996.

⁴ By the end of his career, during the 1980s, Van Leo also photographed the singer Dalila.

⁵ Taha Hussein was known all over Europe for his autobiographical texts, such as, An Egyptian Childhood, 1932 and The Stream of Days, 1943, and was even nominated as Secretary of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 1950.

⁶ "Van Leo never really ran after the money. He never sold out to color like all the others: black & white was the real thing." B. Iverson, Van Leo: a Moveable Feast, cit.



thing” and, “From that moment [since the inception of photography] our filthy society rushed, like one Narcissus, to gaze at its trivial image on a scrap of metal.”⁷ Naturally, Van Leo knew, in spite of appearance, that photography could never be truly realistic. However, he feared the vulgarity that emerges when photography abdicates from its transfiguring function and merely tries to adhere flatly to things in the sense of what Ansel Adams defined as “shapes” and not “forms.”

Baudelaire's controversial relationship with photography is not new to us.⁸ It is a matter of fact that his critical essays gave birth to a stream of thought contrary to “photographic real-

ism” and initiated debate on the nature and artistic legitimacy of this new visual language that continued until the 1960s. The position of Van Leo as an operator and as an intellectual, and his defense against the artistry of his own language, has, therefore, to be read taking into account the background of distrust kept alive among critics, intellectuals and men of culture. Similarly, his work must be viewed alongside the increasing tendency, at the time, for the studio picture to degrade itself, to “sell” to commercial interests, focusing on money and often resulting in technical simplification.

1951-52 saw several violent uprisings take place in the Opera Neighborhood. Shops and agencies owned by the affluent Jewish and European communities were burned and the merchandise destroyed. The jewelry store, situated on the first floor of Van Leo's Studio, was targeted in the burning rampage and the whole building was put at risk. It was during this time that Van Leo experienced his first trauma. This was made worse by the beginning of the Revolution that brought Muhammad Naguib, followed by Gamal Abdel Nasser, to power, the following year.

Van Leo started to worry that his country was changing in front of his eyes: foreigners began to leave, the dressed up ladies and the multicolored characters disappeared from the once elegant streets. Egypt seemed to become, simultaneously, grayer and duller, and more loud and chaotic due to its demographic growth and the increasing impoverishment of its people. As a result, the form of society that the artist was familiar working with was suddenly only visible in glimpses before disappearing completely. Hoping to escape an increasingly unfamiliar world, Van Leo planned to go and study at the Art College of Los Angeles. This never came to pass,⁹ instead he moved to Paris where his brother had recently opened a studio on Avenue Wagram. Van Leo worked for one year in the Harcourt Studio, the temple of beauty where, according to Roland Barthes, he who had the privilege to stand in front of the camera lens would appear, “forever young, fixed forever in the climax of beauty... perfectly silent, which means mysterious, filled with all of those secrets that we imagine lie within each beauty that does not speak, doesn't say a thing.”¹⁰ After this year, although Egypt was changing, Van Leo returned as he could not face abandoning his studio – his personality – and all of the work he had done, even though this meant that

7 C. Baudelaire, “On Photography,” from *The Salon of 1859 in The Mirror of Art*, Jonathan Mayne editor and translator. Phaidon Press Limited, London, 1955.

8 G. Marcenaro, Baudelaire “contro” Nadar, in *Id.*, *Fotografia come letteratura*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2004, pp.41-69.

9 This is proven by the letters kept at the Van Leo fund at the AUC. See also N.Azimi, *There will never be another*, cit.

10 R. Barthes, *L'acteur d'Harcourt*, in *Mythologies*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1957.



he had to adapt once more to a new and unfamiliar world. In spite of this, his pictures did not show any signs of the extraordinary changes he had gone through: Van Leo keeps on taking pictures of whoever comes knocking at his door, including the new prime minister Muhammad Naguib, in 1952.¹¹ Yet, while keeping a precious book on the subject *Études de Nus* (Editions du Chêne), that he had probably bought in Paris, Egypt's changed society provokes him to burn a great number of his nude picture negatives for fear of the fundamentalists. This was at a time in which undressed models were banned from Art schools and classrooms and the removal of nudes hanging

11 "In 1952 he was asked to photograph General Naguib at the Abbassia barracks. The photograph in its expression of mood and character transcended the superficiality of the officer's public image." F. Bassiouni, *Van Leo's Unrivaled Images of Cairo's Belle Epoch*, cit.

in museums and art galleries was also discussed.

Time seems to be against Van Leo in this era, a negative trend perhaps only reversed during the later years of his life through an encounter with the American photographer Barry Iverson. Iverson was the last client of Van Leo's Cairo studio. A great friendship that sprang up between the pair and played a part in Van Leo's decision to donate the entire body of photographic work remaining at his studio (almost 10,000 negatives and 400 vintage)¹² to the American University of Cairo, in April 1998. This bold decision refocused the attention of the critics towards Van Leo. In fact, several broad and systematic exhibitions were dedicated to his work, and in 2000 he became the first photographer to receive the prestigious Royal Netherlands Prince Claus Prize which catalyzed a retrospective of Van Leo's work at the Townhouse Gallery, Cairo. Unfortunately, Van Leo died the 18th of March 2002, and was only able to witness these first few events in an unstoppable process of reviving his work that continues today.

Van Leo: Photographer

What kind of photographer was Van Leo? Why is his work so important to the Middle East's photographic production and to a broader context? Several critics, as Zaatari and Ryan, have already answered at least the first of these questions. Van Leo's photographs constitute a document of precious value to the last fifty years of Egyptian society and act as proof that somewhere in the Arab world someone knew how to make photography into an artistic language.¹³ From a general point of view, the thousands of male and female portraits, the more than 400 self-portraits, and the unusual landscapes and "stolen" portraits, documents a fascinating, now lost, society. The work is also a testament to the expression of Van Leo's free and inventive research, and his sharp manifestation of "style," a term always weak when assigned to photography but still somehow effective.

Van Leo was able to establish a particular relationship with his photographic subjects based on interpretation. Through this, he had the tenacity to give form to his own genre, autonomous to fashion photography and to the naturalist or "psychological" portrait. In other words, here the interpretation act is transfigurative yet unveiling. The attention given to all of the details, not only on the shooting "set" to the staging and the

12 These are approximate numbers, kindly given to me by Stephen Ugola, archivist at the Rare Books and Special Collections Library of AUC.

13 A. Zaatari, *Van Leo, the Discipline of a Rebel*, cit.

lights, but also to the composition, the pose, the expression, and later to the development and retouching, that Van Leo always did himself,¹⁴ proof to his visual and manual bond to pictorial practice. A practice Van Leo probably didn't disdain at all: He always distinguished between the "color in photography" and "color photography," which he detested. In fact, according to him, the nature of the photographic image lays on the black and white, in perfect consonance to the positions of the straight photographers and the editors of "Camera Work"; but it must be pointed out his non-occasional collaboration with a watercolorist to complete some of his prints with a colored veil in the 800's pictorialist way. This is why his work seems anomalous when compared to the products of most European and American photographers active between the Forties and Sixties; color, highlights the coating of things, the skin, the lips, and clothes, challenging an improbable naturalism. Van Leo tolerated this double pretence better than the often careless pretension of truth in color photography. Better still, he seemed pleased by the excess of artificiality, by the somehow retro dimension of these images, which, by placing them explicitly on art's side, created the sophistication of "haute couture" instead of photographic "pret à porter."

A Face is a Landscape

Whoever is photographed is changed through the act in itself. As the subject is in pose, we could say that photography does not represent him but creates him, making of him its own "material." The study of this "live" material was always fundamental to Van Leo. Nigel Ryan tells us with what accuracy Van Leo planned each portrait. He studied the subject to decide the style, the clothes and makeup that was often so heavy that it had the effect of transforming the person into some sort of statue. Teddy Lane, for example, was prepared in this way, for his session in 1944, for a portrait which was to become one of Van Leo's favorites and which referred back to the famous Hollywood prototypes such as Morgan Farley by Edward Steichen (Steichen's picture was taken in 1926).

Van Leo had started to "portray" even before having the certainty of becoming professional: his father tested him for the first time by having him photograph the executives and workers at the tobacco company where he used to work. This involved photographing hundreds of people¹⁵ and may, in

part, have been the beginning of Van Leo's self-taught ability to read faces, even those that seem insipid, ordinary or usual, and to reveal the "best" aspects hidden in all of them. For Van Leo every face was a potentially interesting subject, thus he preferred working with whoever gave him the freedom and discretion to invent the situation and to choose the "mask that better suits". Therefore, the ideal client was the one who allowed Van Leo's manipulation without imposing an already made rigid mask. Even more appealing was a subject who completely lacked an opinion or an intention regarding the right image of himself, especially those unable to have such opinions, such as a blind man.

Taha Hussein had a long and unattended eye infection that made him blind at the age of three. This condition permitted Van Leo to intervene freely in his image without having to compromise any idea or desire.¹⁶ Hussein would never take off his glasses, and this was the exact image Van Leo captured: the skin dazzled by light in a dramatic contrast with the black shades of his glasses, the forehead slightly frowned, a deep wrinkle between the nose and the mouth, the upper lip just a bit raised, his shoulders sealing the composition. Suspended, against the absolute darkness of the non-dimensional background, Hussein's face reveals in its wrinkles and the intense character of the subject without showing any psychological deepness (but after all, is it possible to talk about a psychology without actually seeing the look of his eyes?). Because there's nothing "official" in the image, no controversy, nothing intellectual, nothing compassionate or "human";¹⁷ if we did not know the person, nothing in the picture would tell us that he is a man of State or a writer, we would not even notice his blindness. The image reveals that Van Leo does not let himself be impressed by Taha Hussein's fame and he does not pity him for his condition as a blind man. He focuses instead on the purpose of "working" on his face, on what is "visible", and not on thoughts or feelings.

The image provokes spontaneous comparison with another famous photo, *Blind Woman* by Paul Strand (1916). What interested Strand was to document the difficult situation of the woman, certified by the Official License of New York City, but also to reaffirm the contrast between him/us and her, the wide abyss between "seeing" and "not seeing" made paradoxically "visible" by the sign offered to us, "she, who's blind, offers us to read her blindness certificate, something she will never

14 The precision and obsessive care Van Leo put into every detail of every steps towards the realization of an image reminds us of the maniacal control Brancusi had with all of the stages of bronze fusion, including the final polishing that often lasted and was repeated for months on each piece.

15 See: A. Zaatari, *The Third Citizen. A conversation with Van Leo*, cit.

16 N. Ryan, *Obituary: Leon Boyadjian (Van Leo)*, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, cit.

17 N. Ryan, *Obituary: Leon Boyadjian (Van Leo)*, cit.



read or see.” Van Leo, on the other hand, is not trying to reaffirm a state but to show it as a condition the subject is used to. In other words, he reveals the “surface” of someone which is characterized especially by the denial of sight itself, by those eyeglasses that interrupt the continuity of the face and at the same time define it, creating a distance, denying access to the intimacy of the presence all though granting a peculiar expressivity; in other words, they play the role of a mask.

Naturally, Van Leo’s favorite place for working was his studio, a sort of “non-place” isolated by walls and draperies, where the context can be rebuilt at all times and the world remains outside. Still, Van Leo kept revealing that he was also an inventor by taking occasional trips down the street to take pictures of his models outdoors, or to shoot a landscape. Perhaps no image could be more scenic than the gracious Egyptian actress Berlanty Abdel-Hamid riding a horse with the Giza pyramids

in the background, taken in 1961 perhaps during the filming (could have even be on the set) of *Nida Al’ushshaq (A Lover’s Call)*.¹⁸ In this image, Van Leo indulges cinema’s approach and even suspense.¹⁹ However, by playing with the irresistible impact of the context, Van Leo does not neglect the implicit dramatization brought by the lights of the sunset which elongate the shadows of the Amazon and her mount over the desert’s sand and that join with the shadow of “someone” standing in front of them and not visible to us. A love meeting or a trap? Happiness or danger? Was there a young Rodolfo Valentino standing there or was it a group of restless desert thieves? While questioning the viewer in this way, the photographer also plays with the scenery, transforming the pyramids into a sort of behind the scenes “scenic make-believe” despite their actual presence.

Van Leo sometimes liked to joke about sex, about the relationship between man and woman and the passions that come with it. Jealousy, for example, is staged in one image as a well studied story of two rivals who grab each other by the hair and clothes, perhaps because they were both in love with the young man whose picture is hanging in the wall behind them, Van Leo himself. Such images are a new type of performance but through which the photographer is also trying to tell us something about his own life. Interestingly, it is not usual to find this kind of images from this time Middle East, but they are found rarely in Europe or America.

Van Leo made no mystery about his love for women, as witnessed in the couple of “invented” self portraits. In the first one, dated June 1st 1944, he “inverts” the classical relationship of the fable. By placing the man in the passive role of the “sleeping beauty”, this transforms him into the object of the girl’s of desire - her look and lips move towards him. This exchange of roles is definitely unusual and almost embarrassing at a time in which the reciprocal positions of man, seen as a conqueror – dominant - active, and consequently woman, seen as prey – dominated - passive, were relatively inarguable. Instead, Van Leo is there to “let” himself be seduced, caught and awoken as the two bare backs and faces seem to set into one another, through the contact and tension of a kiss.

¹⁸ The film was a fortunate comedy by Youssef Chahine who was emerging as the *deus ex machina* of the blooming local Hollywood. Chahine was already internationally famous for his film *Le Fils du Nil*, at Cannes Film Festival in 1951, and for having launched Omar Sharif’s debut in 1964.

¹⁹ To enjoy the landscape, he gives up the lights and the studio’s magic alleys - bics that could have added value to the round face and the actress’ button nose, so loved by an audience, in those years, especially attracted to fancy sentimental feuilleton performed by the twenty-six year old Abdel-Hamid.

Different, but no less interesting, is the image that portraits Van Leo in the act of hugging a bust with cleavage and hair locks, rococo and a bit fulsome, kitsch. The artist-Pygmalion, in this case, fatally falls in love with his own creation, his work of art, and it is hard to pick a better metaphor for what happened to Van Leo with his models through photography, the instrument of art that they incarnated, seduced and wrecked the author.

Always a spell, a fatal attraction, as the creator, Van Leo becomes, and declares to be, a careless but conscious victim, a partner with the atmosphere, with the goal and common desire always shared with his model: the “realization” of its beauty. This game reaches its climax with the most creative among Van Leo’s models, Miss Nadia Abdel Wahed, as told by Akram Zaatari in his video interview *Her + Him*. Van Leo. Van Leo encountered this splendid girl from Heliopolis, during her twenties, in 1959. She had arrived at the studio asking for a particular “service.” She wanted to be portrayed in eighteen different poses while she took off, one by one, the eighteen articles of clothing she was wearing, thus concluding the shots completely nude. The situation could not have been more disturbing for Van Leo as the model imagined, for herself, the set and controlled it energetically, almost overbearingly, playing its own role until the final triumph of her beautiful bare body unveiled to the photographic eye. This active, if not dominant, role reminds us of a very young Meret Oppenheim in front of Man Ray’s lens at the Marcoussis studio. The young artist, in this case, subtracts herself from the boredom of embodying the erotic object and claims power over the press wheel. Staining the palm of her hand with the fresh ink and lifting it proudly towards the lens, she transforms herself simultaneously into an androgynous being (one of the wheel’s rays draws a sort of phallic element in front of her pubis), and into a bachelor machine, a faber woman, whose hand is ready to become an instrument of the creative act. Nadia Abdel Wahed also claims the active position in the seductive game and the narcissism to be undertaken by the photographic medium. Used as a sensitive mirror to exalt her, man is dismissed, discharged. Van Leo always saved the pictures of the flashy, short haired brunette with the name of a novel by André Breton that had enriched her with a mysterious and magical aura: *Nadja*, la femme fatale, the long and announced encounter of illusion and foreseeing, that in timeless Paris’s streets transforms men into poets. Perhaps Van Leo did not know Breton’s writing; however, *Nadja* had the same effect. Reactivating the process of estrangement, proper of a magician who knows how to pull something of new significance out of his hat, a new allusion, a new mask, “*Nadja*, parce qu’en russe, c’est le commencement du mot espérance et parce que ce n’en

est que le commencement.”

Surrealism and Surroundings

“A fellow with a brilliant smile and lively eyes, bending over prints or studying a profile, conjures up the entrancing phantoms that populate the most beautiful of people’s dreams.”²⁰ The photographic invention is a spell that captures ghosts, forcing them to materialize in images, to transfer from dreams to plates. Jacques Ovadia, in a 1950 article titled *Surrealism de l’esprit* (printed by the “*Je Dis*” magazine), traces Van Leo’s profile. A synthetic but significant portrait: associating the photographic invention to one of the surrealist obsessions among the psychic automatism and the séance - the art of materializing dreams - Ovadia assigned Van Leo an “inventor” license. A more demanding cultural context, together with a more exacting and stimulant environment, would have made him a surrealist to all intents, or at least a natural ally to Breton’s group. Yet, it is still interesting that, according to Ovadia’s testimony, the Metro studio was becoming a meeting point of not only bourgeoisies and starlets hunting for glory, but also for members of the artistic and cultural vanguards, more advanced and cosmopolitan. The cultural potential and creativity that could be found in this embryonic cultural and artistic circle never bloomed into anything else, perhaps due to the succession of political events,²¹ or Van Leo’s lack of intellectual inclination as evident from his library.

As Van Leo is not interested in politics or history - only what enters his studio - therefore, it is unsurprising that after the revolution he distances himself culturally. Zaatari notices his tendency towards solitude that is exacerbated when art and culture are acquired by those rhetorical and magniloquent accents of populist and nationalist “realism.”²²

Landscape, to Van Leo, is recognizable only as starting from an interior, from an invention. This is a premise compatible with the praxis and estrangement techniques regarding everyday banality performed by militant surrealism, forever “unsatisfied” by the way things were. Possible affinities between Van Leo’s research and surrealism are to be searched for in this dis-

20 J. Ovadia, cit. in P.Gazio, *Van Leo. Portraits of Glamour*, cit.

21 After the revolution the free circulation of intellectuals and men of culture had become very difficult, while the political, ethnic and religious contrapositions deepened

22 Van Leo’s library was filled with photographic technique treatises and western photographic magazines, starting with American “*Popular Photography*” (in those days more advanced than today), fashion and movie magazines which were totally inadequate to meet even the minimal needs of a cultured man.



satisfaction and are evident in his approach to portraits where he shows a certain convergence towards Man Ray's work. Man Ray was always searching for alteration, movement, non focus, intervention or a cut that could render significant the image too "deaf" or too flat by itself. Van Leo comes close to this when accentuating the photographic effect through the eclectic use of light, to be treated as if it was liquid, an object to manipulate; in a certain sense "hyper-photography". This choice draws him in the direction of Man Ray's fashion images by being estranged and "symptomatic." The approach also brings him closer to theater and fashion specialists such as Horst P. Horst (1906-1991) and the Welsh photographer Angus McBean (1904-1990), Cecil Beaton's assistant and the peerless creator of vertiginous, theatrical, violent lights, lover of deep shadows and photomontages who was able to re-explore the charm of water-colored photography out of its time.

Van Leo and the surrealists also find communion through the use of similar "sets" and artificial constructions which are so pervasive that they are not limited only to make-up interventions, but to compromise the actual identity of the subject. Man Ray's fashion sessions, for example, find parallel with Van Leo's most experimental territory of "fictional identity construction" in the series of nearly 400 self portraits made during the most "surrealist" period of his research in the mid 1940s. In these works he wore all sorts of different masks and overlapped various images to obtain multiple compositions. Van Leo "enacts" an aviator, gangster, actor, pirate, prisoner, and even a hermit saint; he grows himself a goatee or portrays himself set behind a wooden frame, the perfect portrait of the best tableau vivant ever imaginable. Or he shaves his head, then he grows his hair back; he appears with a bow tie, a robe, a jacket and tie, half naked or barely recognizable behind the ground glass. His performance is obsessive and virtually inexhaustible. Man Ray had already tried something of this kind in his work, *The Fifty Faces of Juliet* (1941-55), where, accordingly to his poetic, the pictorial interventions, the solarization or the technical manipulations of the image and of the plate are numerous and decisive.

It must be added that Juliet's images form a sort of act of love towards another as the object of desire, other than the mere aesthetic, while Van Leo uses his own body as a tool for tempting narrative experiments, playing the role thoroughly each time, as if he really had "someone" in front of him. This corpus of disguised self-portraits confirms one of the greatest collections ever made public by a photographer, comparable, for example, to Steichen's early (and not only) pictures.

The fact that Van Leo was Armenian, and not identified with

Egyptian roles, social positions or even with an "himself" provided with an historical, familiar, and personal evidence, helped him cultivate a very original approach to his own image and, finally, his own identity. The same way that his models are pushed "beyond themselves," as temporary masks playing their own role and their type (vamp, charming man etc), Van Leo, as an actor of himself - just like Cindy Sherman would do almost forty years later - uses his body as a performer of non-existent movies, as an imaginary Hollywood fetishist. By questioning reality, he minimizes or better disputes ethnical and social attributes from within and, by doing so, launches an attack on the ideology of "natural" identity as something guaranteed as a strong point of a society and of men in general. By recreating a "movie like" atmosphere, Van Leo brings us into a world that is not real but is, at the same time, a simulacrum.

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