

Sueraya Shaheen: A Photographer Among Artists

By: Danna Lorch



Ayman Baalbaki, 2014, Inkjet on archival paper, edition of 10, different sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

The whole of the photographer Sueraya's 20 year practice can be connected firstly to her desire to feel rooted in a thriving arts community and secondly to an unquenchable curiosity to encounter and document artists within the raw context of their own studios rather than inside the sterile white, commercial space of an art gallery or under the invasive glare of lights in a traditional photography studio space. With a child's memory she recalls the bohemian art salons her Syrian-born parents would host in their flat in Beirut in the late 1960's. Her mother would cook and her father would invite his friends - artists, writers, and philosophers - guests would debate, smoke, eat and play cards on the

balcony until the early hours of dawn.

War erupted when Shaheen was ten years old and though her family was forced to relocate to Europe and then America, for the next 30 years she romanticized the height of the artistic society she'd been born into. In 2010 a path rife with blind curves finally returned her to the region with a move to Dubai, "I knew that the Middle East I remembered no longer existed, but when I came to Dubai I'd been imagining that idea in my mind from the shadows and the photographs leftover from those days" she says.

She had first picked up a camera while attending boarding school in Switzerland - it was a cheap



Hassan Hajjaj, 2014, Inkjet on archival paper, edition of 10, different sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

Kodak with disposable flashcubes and the film had to be wound by hand, but she realized then that she intuitively understood how to shoot. A late bloomer, she graduated in her late 20's from Washington D.C.'s Corcoran College of Arts and Design, assisting Claudio Vasquez, a commercial photographer with a complex studio filled with expensive equipment. "The lighting drove me crazy as well as getting the angles right, having to shoot at the same time, and understanding the relationship between light and temperature" she remembers. From this experience she realized that her own practice would be grounded beyond the studio, manipulating natural light with a basic Canon 5D, and admits to sometimes working outside of manual mode, a confession that surely would turn up the noses of many a fine art photographer.

As a student she began to think of herself as a photojournalist, a sentiment that was perhaps best articulated in her first solo show, *Small World* (1998), which presented black and white street portraits of

children in Central America's post conflict zones as well as in the pediatric cancer wards in Belarus. An early career stint with United Press International backs this up, as does *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, a series of 5 black and white photographs taken from a car window in South Lebanon, capturing the seemingly carefree expressions on refugee children's faces as they escape after the bombing of a United Nations compound. The series was acquired by Lord Malloch Brown and is installed in the UN headquarters in New York. She plans to return to her photojournalism roots in October 2014 as part of the minRasy projects team set to attend Qalandiya International in Palestine.

An ongoing project that began as her 1994 undergraduate thesis project at Corcoran in which she would shoot artists at work, has continued across continents and decades most recently focusing on studio visits with 100 Arab artists, or roughly two generations of the region's most established names. The portraits are deceptively simple, a kind of *trompe l'oeil*, like a poetic shoot of the street



Khaled Hourani, 2014, Inkjet on archival paper, edition of 10, different sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

artist eL Seed were even rendered using just an iPhone, but these are not one dimensional representations. Study the portraits more closely and it becomes clear that Shaheen is photographing her subjects within the particular context of his or her own artistic palate. The images are intimate vignettes incorporating everything from an ambitious To Do list on the painter Shurooq Amin's table to Khaled Hourani on hands and knees in his cluttered office at the International Academy of Art in Palestine, painting zebra stripes on donkey skins for a retrospective. Owing to what she names as simple curiosity, Shaheen might also capture the inside of an artist's desk drawer, searching for clues about who someone is, or perhaps more importantly, who they aspire to become. Clever references in all the portraits call up the core of an artist's practice as well as best-known work.

There is no better example than a 2010 encounter of Hassan Hajjaj standing on the gritty pavement outside his London studio; the contents stacked against the

barred windows behind him framing his figure with red plastic Coca Cola crates and other elements of the material culture that he incorporates into his street images, Hajjaj could easily be one of the subjects represented in his own defining Rock Star series. The portrait is Shaheen's subtle play on the artist's oeuvre, particularly *Le Salon* (his 2009 installation for the Jameel Prize) which also framed portraits with Arabic logos of brands, any of which could be found in a Marrakech souk, signifying an exploration of the power of international consumerism and the link between logos and nostalgia for place. She recalls Hajjaj literally yelling at her to "Get out of town. Go to the Middle East and take portraits of artists there where there is so much excitement right now". She accepted his mentorship, moved to Dubai and easily adapted to and became part of the city's rapidly emerging creative hub. The environment reminded her of weekends as a student at Corcoran when she'd take the \$39 bus up to New York City, back when Warhol and Basquiat could



Tagreed Darghouth, 2014, *Inkject* on archival paper, edition of 10, different sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

still be met at openings in walk up lofts, well before the GAP and Starbucks gentrified the once experimental neighborhood of Soho.

Michel Foucault's theories on power essentially suggest that individuals absorb knowledge and are taught to behave according to the norms of the strongest regime. As applied to the medium of photography, power bordering on exploitation is an ongoing dynamic that exists with some tension between a photographer and her subject, with the photographer typically being the one to regulate how the subject is presented to the outside world. However, in *Encounters*, by allowing her subjects to choose the location and lighting for their portrait sittings and by regarding their visual conversation as an exchange of creative energy rather than a contained transaction, Shaheen has learned to maintain a remarkable power balance in which neither subject nor photographer could be argued to be fully in control. Selected works from the nearly 100 studio visits Shaheen shared with Arab artists, were most recently shown in a private gallery in Houston. Although

Encounters happens to be rooted in the Arab world, previous stages of the ongoing project presented a bevy of Western artists including the American realist painter Manon Cleary and the provocative Chapman Brothers, also in a studio context. The message Shaheen hoped to deliver in her Houston solo show is "If someone walked into my show and saw these portraits, they wouldn't be able to identify the artists as being based in the Arab world. These are just a bunch of kids making art, just like everywhere else I've shot. In essence, I am saying that we are all artists and part of the same tribe no matter where we are from".

About the Writer

Danna Lorch is a Dubai-based editor, writer, and blogger focusing on art from the Middle East, with an emphasis on artist interviews and studio visits. She holds a graduate degree in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University and has recently written features for Canvas, The National, Open Skies, Vogue (India) and other publications.

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