



Sueraya Shaheen photo archive of Middle Eastern artists on display in the US

The Lebanese artist Sueraya Shaheen's collection of photographic portraits of prominent Middle Eastern artists is currently on show in Texas as part of the Fotofest Biennial.



A photograph of the artist Ayman Baalbaki, part of Sueraya Shaheen photo archive of artists she's met over the years. Courtesy Sueraya Shaheen



Anna Seaman
April 9, 2014

The Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki stands on a rooftop somewhere over Beirut. A glass window at his feet partly reflects the cloud-laden sky, which hangs like a blanket over the distinctive urban landscape and breaks into clear blue at the front of the image, above where Baalbaki takes centre stage.

It is a beautiful photograph that captures the essence of the artist, who paints portraits of his city in fiercely daubed brush strokes reflecting its tumultuous nature.

Then there is eL Seed, photographed in a penthouse apartment in Doha. The French-Tunisian street artist, known for his calligraphic markings on public buildings all across the region, is shot in silhouette with the skyline behind because the photographer wanted him to be “leaping over the buildings”.

The photographer in question is Sueraya Shaheen, a Syrian artist who was born in Beirut but left the Middle East in 1975 to live and work in America.

Shaheen, who now lives in Dubai, returned over the past few years to shoot a collection of documentary-style portraits of artists who are part of the current wave of the Middle Eastern art scene. She quickly gained international recognition.

“Ever since I was at college, I’ve been fascinated by visual artists. I would visit them in their studios and take their photographs and by the time I graduated I knew this was what I wanted to do.”

Shaheen followed this pursuit but it wasn’t until 2009 that she began the project with Middle Eastern artists.

“I had never lived in the region and when I came back I could just feel something,” she explains. “I could feel the presence of artists – they were a different species of people.”

Baalbaki was one of the first artists she shot after meeting him in London where she also photographed Hassan Hajjaj, the Moroccan-born photographic artist known for his wildly colourful portraits.

Then she came to Dubai, where one of the first artists she met was Halim Al Karim.

She continued to follow her nose, meeting artists through artists and tracking down others by attending lectures, exhibitions or simply visiting their studios.

Quickly, she built up a large archive and, in a kind of full circle, the collection has returned to the United States for display in Barbara Davis Gallery in Houston, Texas, as part of the FotoFest Biennial.

The exhibition, titled Encounters, is not a comprehensive study, Shaheen insists, but merely a recount of the artists she met and pursued over the past few years.

“I couldn’t do everyone so it had to be about me, about who I encountered,” she explains. “It is not an academic book on who are the most important artists. It is my experience inside this bubble.”

And it is proving to be a popular series. Sheikh Sultan Al Qassimi, the owner of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, bought four images for his collection. Ramin Salsali, a prominent Iranian collector who owns a private museum in Dubai, purchased one of Bita Fayyazi, an Iranian sculptor and installation artist.

Shaheen has also received support from Fadi Ghandour, the owner of Aramex who bought one and also sponsored the shipping to the US for the exhibition.

But Shaheen says her motivation is far more than financial.

“What is happening here is really interesting, it is such a mix. Living artists are selling at auction for enormous amounts of money and there is a whole ecosystem around it, especially surrounding the commercial aspects. But what I am interested in is preserving the charm of the artists themselves. I want to capture their spirit.”

Comparing the artists here to the Young British Artists movement in the late 1980s in the United Kingdom, Shaheen says that it is a moment in history that will be pivotal later on.

“The artists are nomadic, they travel from place to place and that informs their work, too, and I think to show it in the US was extremely important.

“This shows that what is happening in the region is not what people think. There is incredible creativity and passion here and I am trying to show it through the eyes of these artists.”

• **Encounters runs until April 19 at Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston, Texas.**
See more photos at www.thenational.ae

aseaman@thenational.ae

Updated: April 9, 2014 04:00 AM

Most Popular



'That was a movie, this is real life': 'Contagion' casts Covid-19 message

Film

Japanese comedian Ken Shimura dies of coronavirus

On Stage



Pearl Jam's new album is their best in 12 years, but that doesn't make it good

Music



Dubai artist creates sand art asking people to stay home

Art



Heard bagpipes in Dubai Marina? We found the piper

Music