

Nostalgia: Souvenirs of the Mind

23 November–19 December 2013

JAMM Art in collaboration with Albareh Art Gallery proudly presents *Nostalgia: Souvenirs of the Mind*, a group exhibition, bringing together a number of cutting-edge artists from the Arab world, exploring the architecture of memory sites throughout the region and proposing a temporal break from the intoxicating business of sheer living, gazing into a past that sometimes appears frozen and sometimes imagined. The rapid transformations of the Gulf region and the Middle East in general often prevent environments of memory from consolidating into building blocks of reality. More often than not, the predicament of nostalgia occurs not as a total field of vision but as a margin of abeyance, not completely absent and likely to resurface anew any time.

Mohammed Al-Kouh's photographic project *Tomorrow's Past* is an attempt to map out architectural landmarks erected during Kuwait's Golden Era, as the country first embraced the paradoxes of modernity, in hand with independence, economic development and the need to create expanded living spaces that provide the public domain with the assurance of durability. As the solid modernity of concrete, aluminium and glass morphed into a liquid world of alienation and temporariness, these memory checkpoints faded into a foreground of oblivion and thus, Al-Kouh recreates them as photographic ruins, presenting before us a world both whimsical and uncanny, laying stranded somewhere between possibility and spatial doubt.

These landmarks such as Fahad Al-Salem Street, the Al Ahmadi Drive-In Cinema and Al-Sawaber Complex, manifest themselves in the artist's photography not merely as documentary curiosities but as mythical places from another era, simultaneously far into the past and beyond the distant future, but altogether not present. The hand-coloured photographs—originally black and white—call our attention into structures either demolished or abandoned, excavating memory sites into a visual archive of transition. These haunting images exist suspended in a temporal freeze that accentuates not only their historical distance but also stresses emotional remoteness. *Tomorrow's Past* does not attempt to re-stage the past but to let it speak on its own as a site warm and reachable.

The works of Camille Zakharia, *Stories from the Alley*, sited in the island of Muharraq in Bahrain, complement Al-Kouh's practice, capturing the all too present traditional architecture of Bahrain and presenting it as a captivating archaeological document, fraught with traces of codes already forgotten, but yet inscribed in the living walls of consciousness, often forgotten under the debris of unconsciousness yet altogether present. Zakharia's work, dealing often with immigration from Arab lands, visually and imaginatively documenting his journey between Lebanon, Canada and Bahrain, is deeply circumscribed by the sensibilities of nostalgia and the tireless attempts to define—or at least map out—the boundaries of a past that seems often lost, confusing and irretrievable.

Mohammed Al-Mahdi and Annie Kurkdjian explore nostalgia from a different perspective, less architectural and more personal. Al-Mahdi's paintings, in the signature style of the Bahraini painter, are an unprotected journey between often fading and hostile memories. The artist is at work locating the joyful sites of childhood through rough brush strokes that become singularly warm in the composition. Kurkdjian, on the other hand, is depicting the emotional and physical transformations of the body under circumstances of conflict and violence, reflecting on her own experiences during the decades-long

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Lebanese Civil War. The Lebanese painter focuses on bodies apparently stable but internally deformed by the inability to describe their own experience; it is a crusade against forgetfulness.

Nostalgia: Souvenirs of the Mind is a representative sample of diverse artistic practices from the Arab world at a time of transitions when shared memories constitute the sole boundary of personal and collective identity, consolidating the past with the slow depth of longing and belonging, establishing lasting emotional bonds with spaces constantly shifting and changing, often leaving us breathless when we attempt to find ourselves at home in them. Nostalgia is here not simply a sentiment but the possibility to grasp in fuller detail the external configurations of a region fertile in estranged languages of seeing and understanding, mapped as a homogeneous entity and thus failing to account for the many architectural, historical and personal complexities of a place so young and so old at the same time.

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