

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Ashitha Nagesh, "Reflection in Water: Interview with Akram Zaatari", Artinfo, 26 November 2013

Akram Zaatari is one of the foremost artists working in Lebanon today. His work, a mixture of photography, film and his archival project for the **Arab Image Foundation**, blurs the already fine line between fine art and documentary. He set up the Arab Image Foundation with fellow artist **Walid Raad** in 1997, with the aim of collecting and preserving a vast archive of photographs taken across the Middle East in the 20th century. The centrepiece for his exhibition at **Thomas Dane Gallery** is the film *On Photography, People and Modern Times* (2010), a collation of video interviews Zaatari conducted with photographers in 1998, who were mostly working in the middle of the twentieth century. Zaatari spoke to **Ashitha Nagesh** about his work, collecting images and the nature of photography.

Could you tell me a bit about the film that's showing at Thomas Dane, *On Photography, People and Modern Times*?

I've always wanted to do something with the research material that I gathered in the late 90s when I was travelling and collecting pictures for the Arab Image Foundation. I had filmed a lot of interviews but at the time I put them aside. You can see from the timestamps in the corner that they are mostly from 1998 – I think that sometimes materials need to ferment and reach maturity. So around 2010 I decided I was going to use the interviews for a work that's about how documents are viewed differently depending on their contexts – for example, when photographs come into the custody of an institution that takes care of them in a different, very clinical way. After they are separated from their owners, the people who loved them and the people with whom they have lived, they become different. So I wanted to narrate this double life that the pictures go through – one life at home and one life in the hospital.

Speaking of hospitals and clinical settings, for me that is one of the things that stood out the most in the film – it's very white and sterile.

The film is a critique, because I started thinking again about the initial motivations for setting up the Arab Image Foundation, and even about the personal beliefs I held that photographs should be saved from people and brought into this archive. Today, I don't think in the same way, but I do acknowledge that I've done it and it was great; it was a learning experience, and a challenge. But this is how we've changed since the 1990s. I'm not like that anymore.

The idea of wearing a costume and the appropriation of a certain culture came up a few times, too. In India for example there is the same thing – if you go to Kashmir, you can visit studios where you wear the Kashmiri costume and get photographs taken. So we have a lot of photographs of my grandmother and great grandmother doing that, and I thought it was interesting that you brought in this same idea of "dressing up" for pictures.

Yes exactly, I think photography in the early 20th century made people perform. You perform for the image, because the camera does not describe you as you really are; there's an amalgamation of description and performance at the moment the photograph is taken. Most of my work regarding studio photography is about this – how these studios become theatres in which people act. Many times they

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act out things that they miss or don't have in life – particularly social status. In wartime people dressed up as fighters – so they would pose with guns, which were usually borrowed. Photography in the 20th century was all about performance.

Speaking of guns in this context, I am reminded of “The Exhibition of War Trophies” that was brought up in the film.

Ah yes – this exhibition is very typical of the 70s. They still do this in Lebanon and Syria, because there is an ongoing war with Israel; whatever is captured from the Israelis is put on show. It's to show pride in seizing something that belongs to the enemy.

In the film [Hashem el] Madani says, “when you look at your reflection in water, that's photography.” There's a conversation to be had here between this and the idea of performing for the camera.

Yes, of course. Photography is like looking into a mirror. You know the recording device will just reflect what's true, so you trick it by performing – and in doing so, you yourself become a performance. What I particularly like about this [quote] is that it's coming from a religious place. In a way, he was trying to justify the legitimacy of photography from a religious point of view; Madani's way of explaining it is very simple, very down to earth.

Was there a religious stigma around photography at the time?

There was definitely a debate around whether or not photography was accepted in Islam. But I don't think it was ever a very sound one because the people who were most excited about photography were the Ottoman rulers, who were representative of the Islamic tradition. However there were constraints around painting, because you are not allowed to represent the Prophet or God; it's thought that only God creates, and that men are not allowed. This especially applied to figurative work – in fact, abstractions were encouraged. But photography was different altogether because it was considered to be a science, and science is something that is man-made. So that's why photography was eventually accepted. But of course, there were always social constraints if not religious ones – for example, photographs of women were not allowed to be circulated outside of the family.

This reminds me of *Damaged Negatives*, the two portraits of women from Madani's studio that have been vandalised.

Yes, exactly. A man came to Madani's studio one day and accused him of taking pictures of his wife without his consent. Madani replied that she was a customer who had been coming there for years, that he didn't know she was married, and that it didn't matter anyway because she wanted the pictures. The husband demanded he be given the negatives, but Madani said that he could not give them away as they were the property of the studio. But he agreed to scratch the negatives so that they would not be usable anymore. He initially scratched the wrong negatives, so he ended up ruining two portraits. I like them because they show us how photography was used and how it was feared. Making a picture supposedly useless gives it a different meaning.

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At the end of *On Photography...*, after you're shown negotiating with Van Leo, there's no resolution at all, which is unsettling.

Van Leo is the only person I negotiated with on camera, when I was trying to take more pictures. I feel like he was divided between saving his collection by giving it to me, or keeping the pictures with him, at the risk of dying and them being lost forever; he didn't have any children and he lived alone. It's an almost existential dilemma. It's very tough; I don't know what I would do in his position. In a way, this is the moment of a man departing from... well, the photographs were not even like his children – I think they meant more to him than that; they were his life.

Did he give you the photographs in the end?

Yes, he gave me the three pictures I asked for, but a week after I interviewed him he had a stroke, and I was already back in Beirut. He had agreed for the Arab Image Foundation to have all of his collection, but after that he had to empty his studio and donate everything to the American University in Cairo, which keeps the images to this day. He was already very sick when I interviewed him. He passed away in 2002. Actually, most of the people you see in the film have now passed away.

Wow – I suppose you forget just how long ago 1998 was.

Exactly – sixteen years now.

So is there an element of homage there as well?

It's more of a revision of my own attitude to collecting. I would not now take all of those images from someone if I felt they were hesitant to give them. Sixteen years ago I would insist, because I was totally convinced that saving pictures is more important than saving emotions and connections with the past. Today, I think that saving emotions is more important – especially now we have the technology to digitally scan. In the 1990s scanning was so expensive.

There was another gentleman who took wedding portraits, and had very specific ideas about how his subjects should be styled.

Ah yes! Out of his entire archive, he only gave me the three pictures that you see in the film. He thought that he didn't have the right to give pictures of people that had trusted him with their image to a stranger. He felt that people come to a photographer because they trust them, so he could not betray his clients.

How we view our own image has changed so much in the years since then.

Exactly – I always say now that we are not taking pictures anymore, we are all in broadcasting. We broadcast our lives and ourselves on YouTube and Facebook.

- See more at: <http://uk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/989423/reflection-in-water-interview-with-akram-zaatari#sthash.ACMC3Rqj.dpuf>