

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Cicely Farrer, "Akram Zaatari: On Photography, People and Modern Times", *This is Tomorrow*, 10 December 2013

'These are very old memories, now time runs fast'. These are the words of the iconic Middle Eastern photographer Van Leo discussing the activities of the Studio Sheherazade (established in 1953 by Hashem al-Madani in Saida, Lebanon), spoken as Akram Zaatari's film 'On photography, People and Modern Times' comes to an end and loops back to shelves full of grey archive boxes. Zaatari, the founder of the extensive 'Arab Image Foundation', has spent several years working with the Studio's archives, and for his first exhibition at Thomas Dane Gallery he displays segments from which many of his own video and photographic works have derived. Relationships of love, desire, communication and displacement between people, objects and images are portrayed; preserved memories of ordinary lives during the civil war in Lebanon (1975–1990).

Inside the gallery, a reconstruction of the photographic studio puts the mechanisms of the archive on display. Among the photographs is a series of six in which two boys pose in amorous positions alongside a cut-out of a blonde woman in a tight-fitting dress, advertising Gevaert Film. In their playful posturing, the viewer senses their eagerness to exhibit themselves to the camera – a trope that Zaatari revisits in non-exhibited works such as 'Dance to the End of Love' (2011) where Arab youths display themselves through low resolution YouTube living out heroic fantasies. Glass-topped display shelves at the gallery show the social rituals frequently played out in photo studios; a series of wedding photos is on display alongside wallet-sized portraits cropped into heart templates and juxtaposed with ornamental bouquets. The official style of these images marks them as having a social utilitarian purpose whereas 'Two boys posing with Gevaert Film Advertisement' (2007) simulates the then-disallowed act of physical interaction before marriage, marking the difference between the public and private activities of the studio.

Housed in towering cabinets, glass-framed photographs of perfectly aligned scalpels, pens, scissors, ink or film boxes are organised by category for the visitor to search through. Zaatari documents the meticulous archiving of objects found within the studio, and through this act they become fetishised, desirable antiquities highlighting the physicality of the technology itself. Each object creates a sense of construction, a production system which outputs a photograph. Constructed memory is present throughout all of the works, which emphasise the malleability of memory through images and stories, be they true or fictitious.

In the second gallery, 'On Photography, People and Modern Times', a 42-minute, two-channel film installation is projected in a cinematic format with red velvet theatre seating, narrating the photographic archive and its intimacies as a spectacle for the audience. The two channels conjure up the physical nature of the studio itself when it was running in the 1970s, in opposition to the current clinical setting of the archive. Interviews from 1998 are displaced onto a TV that is set within a stop-frame animation of the clean, bright archive. These conflicting temporal logics speak of the distance between the activities of Studio Sheherazade and the sterility of its current home. Some of Zaatari's underlying concerns that are not explicitly stated in the exhibition are hinted at in the film. The recognisable negatives of 'Body Builders' (2007), photographs by Hashem al Madani from 1948, are looked at in front of the light of a window, drawing on concerns of male desire, the expectation of the hero and the body.

In the film, the photographer Van Leo plays a solemn piano piece while answering probing questions about specific photos. The tone of the narrative changes as a darkened black and white photograph of a man holding up a gun, ready to shoot, is unwrapped before the camera. A fictional cinematic trope is recalled, but the image can also be read as a suspicious symbol of the violence associated with Lebanon. Zaatari says that he often seeks to illuminate 'the state of image making in situations of war': here, he identifies both the physical and emotive constructs that form these photographs.