

Preserving a forgotten history

Latif Al Ani's first show in Dubai reveals Iraq's history of 60s, 70s and 80s

Published: December 14, 2019 14:00

By [Jyoti Kalsi Special to Weekend Review](#)



DUBAI Latif Al Ani is known as the father of Iraqi photography. He started his career as a trainee photographer in the 1950's at the Iraq Petroleum Company and was the first photographer to shoot aerial images of his country. In the 1960's, after Iraq became a Republic, he set up the photography department at the Ministry of Culture, and in the 1970's he headed the photography department of the Iraq News Agency. For three decades, he documented the oil-driven modernisation, industrialisation and urban development of Iraq, and the accompanying economic, socio-political and cultural changes. His photographs constitute an invaluable archive of Iraq's transformation, especially because most records of this 'golden age' of Iraq have been lost due to the political turbulence in the country.

After resigning from his job in the late 1970's, Al Ani gave up photography. His work was rediscovered in 2000, when artist Yto Barrada met him during a research mission to Iraq, and it is now preserved at the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) in Beirut. Since then, his photographs have been presented in the National Pavilion of Iraq at the Venice Biennale in 2015 and at exhibitions in Iraq, Europe and the UAE. He became a Prince Claus Laureate in 2015 and his first monograph, published in 2017 won the Historical Books Award at Rencontres d'Arles that year. A documentary about his work, titled Iraq Invisible Beauty has also been produced.

Al Ani's first solo show in Dubai titled, *Vetera Novis Augere* (Augment the Old with the New) highlights a part of Iraq's history that is unknown even to most young Iraqis and explores the relationship between the past and the present. The mostly black and white photographs represent all aspects of life in Iraq in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. The striking images highlight Al Ani's experiments with unusual frames, light and shadow and a variety of subjects to develop a distinctive artistic style.

The octogenarian artist is happy about the resurgence of interest in his work, and spoke about it with pride and passion:

How did you get interested in photography?

I got fascinated with photography because next to my brother's shop, where I often helped was a photography studio. My brother bought me a camera when I was 15 and I began taking pictures of the people and everyday life around me. At the petroleum company, I apprenticed with British photographer Jack Percival, who taught me every aspect of photography from developing colour photographs to aerial work. After one year of training he sent me off to cover a major event attended by the King and his appreciation of my photographs boosted my confidence.

What were you interested in documenting?

As part of my job to take pictures for the petroleum company's magazine, *Ahl al-Naf* (People of Oil), I travelled to all the oilfields and refineries in Iraq and the pipelines in Syria and Jordan. At the Ministry of Culture, my department published the magazine, *New Iraq* in Arabic, Kurdish, English, French and German, which was distributed to diplomats and international organisations based in Iraq, so I travelled across the country documenting social life, culture,

industry, agriculture, education, factory workers, tourists, building of dams and other development. For the News Agency, I covered major events and top leaders and was part of their entourage on foreign trips. But while documenting modernisation and westernisation of our cosmopolitan society of that time, I also took pictures of the traditional way of life, historic monuments, archaeological sites and rural landscapes. My main aim was to show the beauty of Iraq and its people and I displayed my work at various international exhibitions.

Did you realise the significance of your work then?

The British managers at the petroleum company shared with me their apprehensions of a possible revolution in Iraq, so I knew that I had to preserve this phase of our history for future generations. After the revolution of 1958, the fear of the past being erased by the rush for modernisation motivated me to record a way of life that was being lost and document everything whether it was people, natural beauty or manmade structures. I wanted to portray Iraq as a civilised, modern society with an ancient heritage. During the American invasion of Iraq, millions of negatives were lost, so I am thankful that I created this archive and was able to preserve it.

Why did you give up your career and photography itself?

I decided to quit in 1979 because the then regime banned public photography, and because I lost my optimism about Iraq's future. People are surprised to see my photographs because they are so different from current images of Iraq. I hope these images will create awareness about what we have lost and help my country to move towards another 'golden age'.

Vetera Novis Augere will run at Gallery Isabelle Van den Eynde until December 28.

Jyoti Kalsi is a Dubai-based arts enthusiast.



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