



Latif Al Ani, *Portrait of an Iraqi lady, Baghdad, 1961, 1961*, inkjet print on Hahnemühle fine art photo rag pearl 320 gsm paper, printed 2019, 23 1/2 x 23".

DUBAI

Latif Al Ani

GALLERY ISABELLE VAN DEN EYNDE
Unit 17, Alserkal Avenue, Street 8, Al Quoz 1
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Latif Al Ani's retrospective opens with a self-portrait. It is 1957, and the Iraqi photographer, at twenty-five years old, appears with a Rolleiflex strung around his neck while a crooked mountain range near Iran hardens the skyline behind him. Although pivotal to Iraq's young photographic history, Al Ani has only somewhat recently gained a reputation as its "founding father." After that self-portrait, he would go on to document the country over the next two decades, capturing, in buoyant depictions of everyday life, a period of sweeping political change and modernization which he now describes as having "vanished."

Of the twenty-nine photographs on view in “Vetere Novis Augere (Augment the old with the new),” all but one are black-and-white. Alongside aerial photographs of mosques and railways commissioned by the Iraqi Petroleum Company in the 1950s, images of the capital taken in the early 1960s evoke years of flashy cosmopolitanism. The newly established Iraqi Republic was flush with oil money, and Al Ani illustrates this wealth with sleek cars seething down the city streets, in living rooms replete with Bauhaus furniture and floating marble staircases. Most compelling are the photographs of women taken during Abd al-Karīm Qāsim’s liberal prime ministership. In *Music lesson, School of Music, Baghdad*, 1960, a female student cradles an accordion with an expression of fierce concentration, while the woman in cat-eye sunglasses and posed against a sedan in *Portrait of an Iraqi lady, Baghdad*, 1961, appears formidable and footloose at once.

It is tempting to read Al Ani’s pictures as treatises on the transitory nature of any cultural epoch. He stopped shooting in 1979, when Saddam Hussein’s brutal ascent and the ensuing war with Iran made it difficult to photograph in public. Much of his archive was lost in 2003, during the US invasion. What the Arab Image Foundation has managed to protect of his oeuvre provides a rare window onto a culture since suppressed by violence, US-led and otherwise.

— Izabella Scott

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