

ATFAL AHDATH

At the 10th Sharjah Biennial in 2011, the Beirut-based trio called *Atfal Ahdath* (which can be translated as either “Juvenile Delinquents” or “Children of the Events”, it’s up to you) launched a travelling project entitled *Take Me To This Place, I Want To Do The Memories*, exploring studio photography practices in the so-called Third World and their impact on society, in particular, the gap between the aspirations and realities of the “crushed classes”. *Words: Charlotte Jansen.*



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Take Me To This Place eventually wound up back in their home town at Running Horse Contemporary Art Space. At first, the work struck me as thickly ironic, but it then revealed itself as the opposite: in a world stuck in inequality, self-editing a fantasy life through photographs is often the only means to fulfil your dreams. “We think we can be much more fucked up. In hindsight we would have wanted to go more into the uncanny and disturbing now,” the group—Raed Yassin, Vartan Avakian, Hatem

Imam—tell me, reflecting back on the project that put them in the spotlight.

Each of you come from different creative disciplines. How does that work when you come together in the studio?

The most conspicuous word here is “discipline”. Discipline is a virtue that should be upheld. We never intended to uphold virtues in Atfal Ahdath. We would meet every Thursday—it was Tuesdays, then it became Thursdays. Now we meet

sporadically. We argue, shout, laugh and discuss each other’s work unreverently. We waste a lot of time. It is very rewarding. When we agree, we produce things together. We don’t consider a work finished unless all three of us agree. This is more tenaciousness than democracy. This process can be very frustrating but also makes us understand our interests and choices better. Academically, between us, we have attended art, architecture, design, film, music and theatre schools. This makes our meetings intense in

general, where a lot of ideas are put on the table. Agreeing on one thing is difficult, since each would have a different opinion, each of which is strong and convincing.

What interests do you share then?
Reproducibility, standardization, template-ization are things that we focus on. This is why popular culture and the dominant discourse are fertile grounds to plough. We also like trash, because if pop offers insight to the production of value, of taste, of culture and even ideology,



Previous pages, left
Impossible Men IV
 2011
 Photographic series
 Archival inkjet print on
 fine art paper
 100 x 150 cm

Previous pages, right
Untitled Couples 7
 2013
 Photographic series
 Archival inkjet print on
 fine art paper
 100 x 100 cm

This page
*Take Me To This
 Place, I Want To Do
 The Memories*
 (Tokyo edition)
 2012
 Installation shot in Mori
 Art Museum, Tokyo
 Variable dimensions

Opposite page
Exploded View
 (Beirut edition)
 2013
 Variable dimensions

**“THIS MENTAL IMAGE THAT
 EVERYONE HAS OF THEMSELVES IN
 FANTASTIC DREAM WORLDS
 IS NOW VERY EASILY VISUALIZED
 AS IMAGES”**



trash flirts between obedience to and dissent from the dominant discourse. We are interested in the cultural production that is made by societies in our world—specifically, what is called the “Third World”. Since this cultural production is inspired by the social, economic and political issues around it, it tends to create complex, weird and messed-up results visually and sonically.

You grew up during a time of intense conflict in Lebanon, and the problems haven't gone away, but it struck me that your work doesn't speak directly about those things—how do you feel about art as escapism?

Fuck escapism. Actually, we feel we need more confrontation. We work around issues that currently affect our society, and we try not to be nostalgic in relation to the past. Is escapism triggered by the hope of escaping or the wish for it?

Anyway, the fundamental conflicts that we are part of in the world are of the present. The question reminds us of many discussions we would have of how some artists we like, from mainstream, pop, trash and alternative production, lost their edge because of a certain sense of responsibility towards their audience, or the general public. We see a lot of art that sounds academic and socially engaged like a research centre or a political party. In Atfal Ahdath we don't research, we obsess. Our obsessions can be insightful, and can trigger political and cultural scholarship, but they are not such themselves.

What role does studio photography continue to have in Lebanon?

Are there aspects that connect it to customs in other Arab countries?
 For *Take Me To This Place, I Want To Do The Memories* we visited photo studios in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, the UAE, etc. If we had had more

time and means we would have wanted to expand it even further geographically.

Historically speaking, studio photography had a similar function across the Arab world because it was technically limited, thus restricting the amount of people who could access them. Since the dawn of the digital age, these studios have become somehow more democratized as people across all classes could document and create their memories within those spaces.

Currently, we have found that studio photography practices vary from one country to another mainly because of the economic situation of those societies. In Lebanon, for example, photography studios have more of a generic role—wedding photos, graduation photos, passport photos, etc—whereas in Egypt, they perform the same functions in addition to creating fantasy-scapes for people who cannot fulfil those desires otherwise in real life.

That kind of fantasy image-making is pretty prevalent around the world now...

Nowadays, what renders imagination and fantasy into physical reality is affordable technology. This mental image that everyone has of themselves in fantastic dream worlds is now very easily visualized as images. We feel that's why fantasy image-making has become so popular everywhere. We look forward to what comes next.

And what is next for you?

We wrote a road movie. It's a medium-length fiction that deals with issues like autobiography, identity, humour, landscape and virtual reality. It's set in a non-specific terrain and in an unidentified time. We can shoot it in any language. We are still looking for a producer. It's a process that has helped us learn the excitement and frustrations of working in the film industry.