

A Volatile Age

Raed Yassin and George Awde at Shubbak

This year's Shubbak Festival did not have an exhibition dedicated to photography. It did, however, include the works of two strikingly different artists who explored the role of photography to frame and interpret our understanding of childhood. This volatile age is filled with some of the most intense memories in our lives. Images with biographic detail become ingrained in our minds, triggering memories of mood, smell, sounds and emotions of the captured moment.

In an age of Instagram and social media, it may be difficult for a younger generation to imagine how rare images of childhood once were. They were kept in albums and occasionally brought out for collective viewing. An absence of these printed specimens reduced memory to stories, bereft of the authenticity and evidence which the medium of photography was claiming to provide.

Raed Yassin's childhood photographs were largely lost during the Lebanese civil war of the 70s and 80s. For his series *Dancing, Smoking, Kissing* the artist re-imagined some of these lost images as delicate silk embroideries. Less interested in bringing these photographs back to life through re-staging and re-enactment, the artist chose to heighten the preciousness of the memorised physical photograph by selecting sumptuous material like silk and luxurious fabric. The computerised mechanical embroidery machine replaces darkroom techniques. The motives are instantly recognisable from

historical photographs: casual arrangements of people with heads turned to face the camera; a child on the back of a camel; a furtive kiss and a family scene by the seaside. We are familiar with these conscious postures and the frontal positioning. We also recognise the un-composed casual shot, when the photographer deliberately tried to catch a spontaneous family moment.

Raed Yassin relied on memory to redraw by hand these remembered photographs as line drawings. The slowness of the hand replaces the speed of the camera shutter, the painstaking selection of colour, fabrics, texture and embroidery stitches becomes a time-consuming process to mourn the immediacy of the captured photographed moment. The value of the memorised image is heightened as well as compromised through the selection of precious material and a mechanised manufacturing process.

Dancing, Smoking, Kissing also cleverly exposes the collective lives of this by-gone era. The flared trousers, oversized glasses and motifs like fathers balancing their child on one arm do not just present autobiographical detail, but offer glimpses into social conventions and shared tastes. Old family photographs become important documents of personal as well as social history.

Another kind of childhood memory is invoked in George Awde's haunting portraits of young boys at

the threshold of adulthood, which were shown as part of the exhibition *I Spy With My Little Eye...* at the Mosaic Rooms and curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath.

These are not images filled with nostalgia and memory, but with expectation and an uncertain future. Bathed in hazy coloured light, pubescent boys take on still poses precariously balanced between casual incidence and carefully staged self-representation. Their appearances seem as monumental as they are fragile. The large-scale camera, which the artist uses, demands a clear sense of awareness and cooperation of the sitter. Yet there is a palpable distance between the photographer and the subject, a distance of difference of age, personal backgrounds and experiences. These images belong to the artist's last series *His Passing Cover* and depict a group of six Syrian boys now based in Beirut. Condemned to a transitory existence away from their homeland and insecure about their identities as children or adults, their searching gazes look for the promise of a future, yet they hint at a reluctance and defiance to embrace what lies ahead.

Unlike Raed Yassin's ironic and re-assuring retrospective vantage point from which he explores the collective past of childhood, George Awde's photographs capture the unsettling and existential moment when identities and destinies are still open and fluid, when what will later become memory is still a raw and intensely charged sensation.

