

TAREK AL-GHOUSSEIN ON A TERRAIN IN TRANSITION

With Abu Dhabi abuzz with the fair and the opening of the Louvre, we glance back to how the island looked before everything changed

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Tarek Al-Ghoussein. Untitled 9 (C Series). 2007. Digital print. 55 x .75cm. Edition of 6. Image courtesy of The Third Line Gallery

Although Tarek Al-Ghoussein is best known for his forlorn and performative self-portraits in vast and desolate landscapes, his work has taken another turn recently. At Dubai gallery The Third Line, he is currently having his third solo exhibition, *Al Sawaber*, a poetic unfolding of loss and dwelling in the abandoned spaces of a government housing complex in Kuwait, which is slated for demolition. In his rendering of the notion of absent presence, his photographs reveal the traces of the human imprint in what people leave behind, with religious icons, personal artefacts and posters displayed against vivid textures of decay and peeling wallpaper. Lending the impression of paintings, these

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intimate portraits of place show how the Kuwait-born Palestinian photographer is just as much a master of the domestic interior as he is of the landscape outside.



Tarek Al-Ghoussein. (In)Beautification 2581. 2011. Digital Print. 60 x 90 cm. Edition of 6. Image courtesy of The Third Line Gallery

Son of a diplomat, Al-Ghoussein lived in Japan and Kuwait and spent over a decade in the US while studying photography. But he can claim the UAE as his home, having lived here for 20 years, teaching at the American University of Sharjah and currently at NYUAD. "I've been at Saadiyat, where I teach, for the past five years – this is longer than I've ever been in Kuwait," he says. Given his rapidly transforming surroundings, Al-Ghoussein's photographic series, (In)Beautification (2011) and (In) Consideration of Myths (2012-13) of Manarat Al Saadiyat's natural, unbuilt landscapes are particularly worth contemplating today, as Abu Dhabi moves towards fulfilling its future vision of a new cultural hub with the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi on 11 November.

The photographs serve as a visual documentation of a place that is in the process of 'becoming', an island in the throes of significant change. And Al-Ghoussein's barren shots of Manarat Al Saadiyat, now the location of Abu Dhabi Art fair and the focus of the emirate's brave new vision, are a reminder that until a decade ago, the place was scarcely inhabited and home mostly to mangrove trees. His images invite questions about how a cultural topography can be so rapidly activated and how urban planning encroaches on local histories. "I began photographing the area in 2010, as part of a Guggenheim commission that gave me permission to photograph the island, and I held

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onto the images until 2013, when the museum was supposed to be built. At the time, Alexandra Munroe from the Guggenheim in New York asked to see me. She said the museum had just bought some of my pictures, and invited me to photograph the site. When I first went – I hadn't been out there before – I found it to be very surreal."

Although the site is still much the same today, that hasn't deterred Al-Ghoussein from returning to explore further. He is intending to continue his photo-documentation of the 213 islands that exist around Abu Dhabi in a publication he is planning with Munira Al Sayegh, the details of which are still under wraps. (ed)

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