

TheNational

Tarek Al Ghousein to represent Kuwait at the 55th Venice Biennale

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Tarek Al Ghousein's K Files consists of eight photographs, where Al Ghousein has shot himself inside the stock market, a dilapidated palace, a football field, an old school and besides Kuwait's first oil well with the famous water towers spiking the horizon in the distance. K Files _473. 2013, Lightbox, 60 x 90 cm, CREDIT: courtesy Tarek Al Ghousein/The Third Line

Usually his landscapes are deliberately bleak. Tarek Al Ghousein has spent the best part of two decades photographing a series of self-portraits within particularly empty environments such as deserts, construction sites and crossroads – and mostly in the UAE.

We see him but we don't see his face and so he opens a conversation about identity and invites the viewer to question, along with him, where we belong. It is a common theme among the displaced Palestinian population but through many series (named A-E), Al

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

Ghoussein's art has moved from the early days of covering his face with a kaffiyeh to more open-ended existential statements, where his anonymity speaks louder than any obvious symbols.

This year, he places that nameless figure in a collection of images of recognisable landmarks from Kuwait to represent the nation's first Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which opens next week. Calling them The K Files, Al Ghoussein says they mark a divergence from his usual practice. "If you know my work it is very anonymous and intentionally so. There was never any specific significance for my selecting the sights. It was about doing a performance or an intervention on the site."

From a Palestinian-Kuwaiti family – his father was a journalist, a newspaper editor and diplomat – Al Ghoussein was born and brought up in Kuwait, and considers himself as belonging to both nationalities. He moved to the US to study, then to the UK.

When his plans to return to Kuwait in the 1990s were thwarted by the Gulf War, he settled in the UAE. He taught photography at the American University of Sharjah for 15 years and is now a professor of visual art at New York University's Abu Dhabi campus.



K Files _117. 2013, Lightbox, 60 x 90 cm, © Photo: Tarek Al-Ghoussein. CREDIT: courtesy Tarek Al Ghoussein/The Third Line

The K Files consists of eight photographs, where Al Ghoussein has shot himself inside the stock market, a dilapidated palace, a football field, an old school and in perhaps his most striking image, beside the site of Kuwait's first attempt at off-shore oil drilling with

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the famous water towers spiking the horizon in the distance. “I wanted to separate the work from the other series,” he explains. “After all, the desert in Kuwait doesn’t look much different from the desert here. However, for me the work is about all the images together. Like the rest of my images, they still work in a sequence.”

Whether it is his C and D Series, in which he is photographed with a blue tarpaulin in the desert as a representation of temporal living (part of which is in the permanent collection of the Guggenheim New York) or his more recent work taken in the construction sites on Saadiyat Island, Al Ghousein is constantly questioning self-definition. “All of my work has some form of exploration to it. At the beginning I was upset by the way Palestinians and Arabs were portrayed. But then I wanted to get beyond that so I took off the scarf and decided not to show my face. It is not about me, it is about a figure or a person, an actor in a scene and it explores the identity of the land and how we define ourselves through the landscape. “Even the work done in Kuwait address identity somehow; looking at different sites that are important to its history is an aspect of identity for sure.”

In his own quiet way, Al Ghousein has become one of the leading voices for contemporary art in the Gulf. In 2009, he was part of the group show to open the inaugural UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and two of his students – Lamia Gargash and Reem Al Ghaith – have also represented their country on the same platform.

Four years later he is taking up the mantle for his own country Kuwait, which he says is very dear to him. “It is a privilege to be chosen and I think it is great that more countries from the Gulf and the Middle East are participating. It is important that people start to learn about art from this part of the world and get past the stereo-types,” he says.

The K Files is a work-in-progress and when it goes on show next year at his UAE gallery, The Third Line, it will include a new piece tracking the journey of family photographs that Al Ghousein recently found for sale on eBay. “I have a lot more I want to do there. The name itself allows me to keep building to it because it is like an archive that I can keep working on.”

The K Files will run in the Kuwait Pavilion at the 55th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, from June 1 until November 24