



Stephen Shore and Tarek Al-Ghoussein with Madeline Yale Interview

Spring, 2012

In November, Stephen Shore and Tarek Al-Ghoussein conversed about their recent work made in Abu Dhabi. Over a 4-month period, Shore, assisted by Al-Ghoussein, led a series of workshops with 10 emerging Emirati photographers. Both discuss Emirati Expressions, their newest series, and their experiences as educators (Al-Ghoussein is also the Professor of Photography at American University in Sharjah (AUS) and Shore is Professor of Photography at Bard College). Emirati Expressions culminated in an extensive publication and exhibition on view at Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island from November 2011- January 2012. Madeline Yale begins by asking Shore about the project.



Tarek Al-Ghoussein, (In) Beautification 1535, 2011
Lightjet print, 39.25 x 59 inches
Courtesy of the artist

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Afra Bin Dhafer, The Lesson, Self-Portrait, 2011
Digital photograph, 36 x 23.5 inches
Courtesy of the artist

MADELINE YALE: What is Emirati Expressions and how did you become involved?

STEPHEN SHORE: Following my commission for TDIC (Abu Dhabi's Tourism Development & Investment Company) in 2009, I was asked to lead a series of workshops that culminated in the exhibition and publication Emirati Expressions. I reviewed portfolios and selected 10 photographic artists to participate. I wanted to build a group who collectively achieved a variety of aesthetic goals and approached the medium from different skill levels.

TAREK AL-GHOUSSEIN: TDIC was committed to fostering a dialogue between the "international" artists, like Stephen Shore, JR (another artist) and myself, and the participating Emirati artists.

MY: Emirati Expressions is accessible from varied semiological perspectives. Some work contains language that is foreign to some Western audiences. What are your perspectives on work that may carry a mystique of foreignness for some?

TAG: It's interesting that you refer to a different 'language' because ultimately all photography is characterized by a shared language. The actual written text contained within some of the work is obviously important, but I don't think it is the strength of the image.

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SS: I can understand the pictures in visual terms, and I think they are completely approachable and wonderful, but I know that there is another layer that you [Tarek] as someone living here might see in some of this work because of specific cultural references.

TAG: Just as with any other culture, it is difficult to define what is essentially Emirati. I think that some artists in Emirati Expressions present ironic juxtapositions that seek to comment on what is considered Emirati and what may be understood as Emirati but may have originated elsewhere and been assimilated over time.



Stephen Shore, Abu Dhabi, 2009
Chromogenic print, 16 x 20 inches
Courtesy 303 Gallery (New York, NY)

MY: How do you see culture and identity as a construct of place? And how are these entities communicated photographically?

TAG: Since coming to the UAE, my understanding of the words identity and culture has been challenged. I also feel there is a struggle to define identity. The UAE - the Middle East in general - is changing rapidly in ways that we do not yet fully understand. We may assume that identity is fixed and static but that may not necessarily be the case.

SS: One of the workshop participants, Salem Al Qassimi, said that 'we are creating the tradition'. At the time, I asked him what regional and cultural identity meant to him. His work, Here, There, is a lot about this - it is about the exchange of language and culture. As soon as he said it, it just made so much sense. I look around here (in the UAE) and see some architecture that is essentially international style architecture with 'Arabic' fenestration. That's not cultural identity.

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TAG: Exactly. But often people think that these architectural elements are the way to maintain identity but often the elements are merely decorative.

MY: Yet it may provide clues to geographic identity.

SS: The other aspect Salem is saying is that he and the other artists here are making contributions to that identity. These (young artists) are a product of their heritage, they are as exposed as anyone in the contemporary world is to cultural influences from all over the world. They are taking all of it in, and adding what they bring to it - they are producing the living tradition.

TAG: My earlier work is an exploration of the term identity. I'm of Palestinian origin, born in Kuwait, residing in the UAE. I've lived in the US, UK, India and Japan. The self Portrait series considered how many in the West may perceive Palestinians, and Arabs in general, as terrorists. I wanted to use the headscarf, the keffiyeh, as a kind of symbol to both reference and challenge that perception.

MY to TAG: Your new series (In) Beautification, all shot on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island in 2011, further explores the relationship between identity and landscape.



RIGHT: Salem Al Qassimi, Here, There (Arabic), 2011
Digital photograph, 21.5 x 14.5 inches
Courtesy of the artist



LEFT: Tarek Al-Ghoussein, (In) Beautification 1713, 2011
Lightjet print, 39.25 x 59 inches
Courtesy of the artist

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Tarek Al-Ghoussein, Untitled 2 (Self Portrait Series), 2007
Digital print, 21.75 x 29.5 inches
Courtesy of the artist

TAG: (In) Beautification series documents processes associated with landscapes in transition. The images illustrate a desire to diminish the distance between the subject (myself) and the environment.

MY: In 1713 the earth and the vines seem to reclaim you as their own, while modernization in the distance is fast encroaching. There is a beautiful cinematic foreshadowing to this work.

TAG: Relying on subtle interventions and non-invasive interactions, the images explore how constructed landscapes reflect struggles to forge an identity while abandoning indigenous horticultural elements that are particular and serve to define a place.

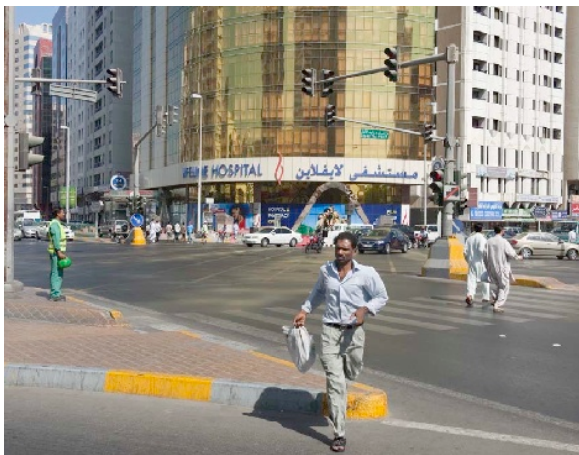
MY: Stephen's exploration of Abu Dhabi is visually quite different, though it thematically draws some parallels with explorations of cultural space. Stephen, you previously said you don't want to repeat yourself. When you're aware of repeating yourself you look in different ways, see in different ways and perhaps explore different spaces?

SS: With the Abu Dhabi series, I wanted to find a middle ground between approaching a culture that is very different from mine with the freshness of the eyes of an outsider, but with the insight of someone who can tap into some of the forces that are creating the culture. In a way I was being a visual anthropologist. I am interested in cultural forces, but I can only photograph them where they become visible. I found myself attracted to

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architecture and artifacts where I can see cultural forces manifest. For me, this has simply grown out of traveling and looking at places in the same way over and over again, for years.

With a good digital camera, I can take a kind of picture that couldn't have been taken 5 or 10 years before. I used a Nikon D3X, which has extraordinary optics. It produces a print that might have been made with a 4x5, but I have the flexibility and spontaneity of a 35mm.



Stephen Shore, Abu Dhabi, 2009
Chromogenic print, 16 x 20 inches
Courtesy of 303 Gallery (New York, NY)



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Chromogenic print, 16 x 20 inches
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MY: You said you enjoyed the process of slowing down through the use of large format negatives for *Uncommon Places* (a semi-autobiographical exploration of America begun in 1973, following *American Surfaces* which was shot with a 35mm).

SS: That slowing down forced me to be consciously aware of every decision I was making. Because of the cost of 8x10 color film, I couldn't shoot five pictures. I didn't bracket, I didn't shoot from two different angles. It was not meant to be an intellectual discipline; it was a matter of simple economy. I didn't want to take pictures that I only knew would be good, because I'd only take safe pictures. After a number of years of doing this, I got a sense of what I wanted. The end result was I would walk down the street and see dozens of pictures around me; I would see far more pictures than I could possibly take with an 8x10. What happened over the years is my mind speeded up. So I made the decision that I would give up the ultimate quality of the 8x10 for the pleasure of solving more photographic problems in a day with a smaller camera.



Stephen Shore, Abu Dhabi, 2009
Chromogenic print, 20 x 16 inches
Courtesy 303 Gallery (New York, NY)

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Tarek Al-Ghoussein, (In) Beautification 2581, 2011
Lightjet print, 40 x 59 inches
Courtesy of the artist

MY: How do you negotiate between the "matter of simple economy" approach to photography and your students' introduction to the photographic medium through their cell phone cameras and online networking? Going back to what Stephen said about Emirati Expressions photographers "producing the living tradition," how do you as educators help students develop their photographic engagement with a place where its identity is characterized by its exponential development?

TAG: I introduce film as a starting point, but we soon move to digital. Working in large format certainly changes the way you work - not just because of economy, but because in most cases it demands that you work on a tripod. I work digitally, however I always use a tripod because it forces you to slow down the process of making an image. For my students, working digitally allows them to shoot more images of a particular scene. A follow-up critique is necessary in this context because many of the students at AUS come to the program with no formal visual background. However, they learn very quickly.

SS: What you're saying, implied in your question, is a serious pedagogical problem: how does digital affect the discrimination that young artists learning the medium are expressing? I think what Tarek said about the tripod is absolutely insightful. Not only does it slow you down, it changes your relationship to the camera. The camera is no longer an extension of your eye. It becomes a tool that is outside of you that you manipulate. And that simple change alters your consciousness about photographic decisions.

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Stephen Shore's work has been widely published and exhibited for the past forty years. He was the second living photographer to have a one-man show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He has also had one-man shows at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; International Center of Photography, New York; George Eastman House, Rochester; Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Jeu de Paume, Paris; and Art Institute of Chicago and has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. His series of exhibitions at Light Gallery in New York in the early 1970s sparked new interest in color photography and in the use of the view camera for documentary work. Books of his photographs include Uncommon Places; Stephen Shore: Photographs 1973-1993; The Velvet Years, Andy Warhol's Factory, 1965-1967; Essex County; American Surfaces; Stephen Shore, a career survey in Phaidon's Contemporary Artists Series, and most recently, A Road Trip Journal. Finally, The Nature of Photographs, a book in which Shore explores how photographs function visually. His work is represented by 303 Gallery, New York; and Spruth Magers, Berlin and London. Since 1982 he has been the director of the Photography Program at Bard College in New York State, where he is the Susan Weber Professor in the Arts.

Tarek Al-Ghoussein is an artist based in the UAE. His work has appeared in international exhibitions throughout Europe, the United States and the Middle East. His images are also featured in several anthologies and a monograph on his work In Absentia was recently published by Page One and The Third Line. Tarek Al-Ghoussein's photographs are in permanent collections at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Royal Museum of Photography in Copenhagen, Darat Al-Fanun in Amman, Sharjah Art Foundation, the Barjeel Art Foundation in the UAE and Mathaf Museum in Qatar. Tarek Al-Ghoussein is currently Professor of Photography at the College of Architecture Art and Design at the American University of Sharjah.

Madeline Yale is an independent curator and writer of photography based in Dubai and London, where she is pursuing a Ph.D. in photography in the Middle East at University of the Arts London and is a member of TrAIN, Chelsea College of Art & Design's research center for transnational art, identity and nation. She is a visiting lecturer at Sotheby's Institute of Art and a consultant to Bonhams. Madeline is a member of HCP's Advisory Council and spot's Editorial Board. She was the organization's Executive Director/Curator (2006-09) and Adjunct Curator (2009-10).

http://spot.hcponline.org/pages/stephen_shore_and_tarek_al_ghoussein_2473.asp