

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

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Windows on Work

Tarek Al-Ghoussein at Galerie Brigitte Schenk

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Tarek Al Ghoussein, *Windows on Work* 3334, 2015. Analog photograph, diasec on alu dibond, edition of 3 + 2 ap, each 130 x 190 cm. Copyright and Courtesy the artist and Galerie Brigitte Schenk

A rumpled plastic bag containing what appears to be an outline of an orange rests lazily beside a dishevelled white scarf and a half-full bottle of water. A set of prayer beads dangles from the rear-view mirror. Propped up against the glass is a small colourful placard with the word 'Mohammad' written in Arabic. The space the driver inhabits feels simultaneously alive and abandoned, while the area typically occupied by passengers is almost ghostly and devoid of the personal flair seen in the foreground that the viewer is confronted with as they gaze into the vehicle through the front window. These are only a few of the details in one of the 5 large scale photographs from Tarek Al-Ghoussein's *Windows on Work*, in which migrant workers and their transportation buses in Abu Dhabi

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take centre stage. Framed by the windshields of these buses, Al-Ghoussein's photographs can be seen as inherently political, yet the vestiges of the drivers' belongings strewn across the dashboards reveal intimate almost poetic portraits of lives lived.

Born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, Al-Ghoussein's work has long dealt with issues concerning identity and belonging. Carefully selecting his locations much like a film producer, Al-Goussein presents the viewer with specific circumstances in particular places, which still manage to remain abstract enough to evoke a multitude of interpretations. In a similar vein, *Windows on Work* straddles the line between portraiture and intervention. Here, the absence of human subjects challenges us to think beyond the media hype and stereotypes of migrant workers that we are often presented with. The composition of the photographs is such that their framing is proportionate to the windshields themselves, working similarly to a passe-partout, and creating an environment in which one feels almost as if they are pressed up against the glass, peering into an uncanny space. Through this immediate proximity, feelings of familiarity are evoked in the viewer. Yet despite the material transparency of the windows, reflections of other structures and small specks of dirt on the glass serve as reminders that we are on the outside looking in, once again encouraging us to ruminate and reflect upon the prejudices and presuppositions that often pervade our subconscious.



Tarek Al Ghoussein, *Windows on Work* 0177, 2015. Analog photograph, diasec on alu dibond, edition of 3 + 2 ap, each 130 x 190 cm. Copyright and Courtesy the artist and Galerie Brigitte Schenk

Normally agents of transit, the buses are stagnant and empty, highlighting the social invisibility of the workers that sit in their seats who are ferried between work and the labour camps they live in, far from the soaring skyscrapers and glittering lights of the city. Like the buses that are constantly in motion as they shuttle people back and forth, these workers are neither here nor there, existing somewhere on the margins and in the *in-*

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between. Juxtaposing the spectral presence of the workers hanging heavily in the air, are the very tangible human traces left behind by the bus drivers. Their belongings, seemingly haphazardly arranged, are reminiscent of a still life. In *Windows on Work 6*, two white tissue boxes adorned with orange and green flowers, one of which appears to be empty, are positioned beside a bright crimson pillow. These inclusions of everyday personal items are forms of self-expression - a sort of semi-private sphere that these individuals have created for themselves. This is most striking in *Windows on Work 9*, in which a sunny minty green material partition literally separates the driver from his passengers, rendering our view unto his space even more personal, if not a bit voyeuristic. Unlike the uniformity of the drab passenger area where one can imagine the dull hum of the identical tiny fans mounted along the bus' perimeter that bring relief from the searing desert heat, each photograph provides the viewer with a nuanced glimpse of the drivers' belongings allowing us to further imagine who they may be.



Tarek Al Ghoussein, *Windows on Work 2609*, 2015. Analog photograph, diasec on alu dibond, edition of 3 + 2 ap, each 130 x 190 cm. Copyright and Courtesy the artist and Galerie Brigitte Schenk

Emanating a gritty tranquillity, the spaces represented in *Windows on Work* feel like oases in a region highly fraught with conflict. The imagined delineation of the absent workers and drivers in the photographs emphasises that there is more to these complex issues than just statistics and reports – behind the news and media lies the most important factor that is often brushed aside, and that is, humanity.

Windows on Work was staged from 20 February to 13 April 2016 at Galerie Brigitte Schenk.