

WHEN YOU LOOK AND YOU CAN'T SEE

SUPRAINFINIT Gallery: Ziad Antar

Curated by Mihaela Varzari

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Curatorial essay

The exhibition WHEN YOU LOOK AND YOU CAN'T SEE brings together works in photography, video and sculpture by the Lebanese artist Ziad Antar spanning the last 10 years. The main exhibition space of the SUPRAINFINIT Gallery hosts the 10 photographs from the series *After Images* (2016) and *Dark Matter* (2017), as well as the video *La Souris* (2009). The vitrines' walls, visible only from outside, introduce the third series of photographic works, *Cactus* (2014) and are part of an installation that include a public sculpture.

After Images is the result of Antar's long term engagement with photographing the Arabian Peninsula, emirate by emirate. His visit to Asir, south west region of Saudia Arabia, was related to a controversial theory by Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi, which advocates that the origin of the Bible is in Arabia, specifically the region of Asir. Knowing he was going to take pictures in Arabia, Antar used an old camera, passed on to him by a relative, only to realize that once he arrived at Abha airport, the lens had gone missing. What followed was a photographic documentation of the region using a lens-less camera. The result are blurs of light and color, sumptuous and sensorial, some seemingly of no specific place, some as if they had been taken under water. Others are luminous and capture the sun, and if you squint a nuclear explosion may appear, yet some are amorphous shapes like black and white shadows. Hans Ulrich Obrist, the co-curator together with Manal Khader of Antar's exhibition *After Images: Stories from the Mountains of Asir* (2016) observes, in his curatorial text, the liberating function of these non-representations, these smears of color. He comments: 'They are a statement against sacredness and offer a possibility of freedom in a very turbulent landscape.'^[1] This challenging of religious doctrine and convention through radically profane readings of them, recalls a similar irreverence that Antar enacts upon photography itself. In using it against its intended purpose, as he sets out to do in his lens-less landscape images, we may recall Maurice Blanchot's ideas concerning the image and fascination, whereby the image must pass through a series of deaths in order to become visible and fully severed from its referent. Antar's treatment of the photographic image; the deliberate over-exposure, lack of clarity, absence of perspective; are the very opposite of the attributives we usually associate with photography's principle strengths, but which are also, nevertheless, possibilities of the medium, specifically its 'unavowable' possibilities.

The title of the exhibition WHEN YOU LOOK AND YOU CAN'T SEE evokes a blind spot; a visual typology and an economy of seeing, that Antar's works are invested in. Albert Camus anti-hero Mersault is also familiar with a kind of blind spot – he suffers a visual outage on a beach in French Algiers, and kills an arab. No other reason is given for this murder than this momentary blindness caused by the overwhelming sunlight. The blind spot, for Mersault, functions as an alibi for his murder, as it does in Antar's works but for different reasons. Here it legitimizes, without judgment or sentimentality, a state of affairs. The landscape speaks for itself. From blinded, dazzled, by too strong a light, such as that of sun, to the final limit of day, which is night, the series *Dark Matter*, the second photographic works in the exhibition, rejoin Antar's investigation into what may constitute visibility. Over the recent years, Antar amassed a vast collection of photographs taken with his mobile phone in the night, and he asked his friends to send him night photographs. The images would then be overexposed in Photoshop until some shapes or colors emerge. The resulting images are undeniably arbitrary; undistinguished patterns of pixelated surfaces, some of them in vibrant synthetic colors, others muddier or even opaque. *Dark Matter* raises a series of questions related to digitalism; the first, an older issue, goes back to the French avant-garde, and asks what it means to be an artist in an era oversaturated by images; the second addresses the persistence of an ever expanding narcissism, perhaps a symptom of the pervasiveness of social media. Antar turns his phone away from himself and transforms it into a collective experience by involving his friends to play along for fun, who upon request sent over shots taken in the night. The photograph of beams of light in the dark has been selected for its suggestive traces of a shared physical experience, and we are left to speculate on the source of its origin; a drunk friend during a concert in the middle of the night or merely an accidental pocket photo. In both series what started as a documenting project, ended up with an 'archiving' of light and a production of aberrant forms and color, whereby the medium of photography becomes the main character.

Living in an area where Antar comes from, in many ways, marked by conflict, proxy or otherwise, his work indirectly touches upon Lebanon's recent troubled history. The video *La Souris* amusingly captures that uncomfortable truth specific to almost all power based relationships; that of complicity. A simple setting is composed of a toy mouse being repeatedly directed at a real mousetrap. Lucky in its few chances to cheat death, finally the trap snaps shut. The unexpected ending shows the mouse sitting parallel to the trap in some sort of perverse pact. Trained as a film maker, Antar demystifies this medium by using it in its most rudimentary way, a thread which runs throughout his entire practice, whereby lack of facilities and means of production are taken as artistic provocations.

Antar's videos are translations of his ideas into the realm of the moving image, as already noted, and this process of mediation is responsible for his photo-sculptures, the results of transforming photographs into three-dimensional objects. And so the third photographic series present in the exhibition covers both of the gallery's vitrines, but visible only from outside. While documenting Beirut, also known as the city of cacti, Antar decided to photograph them; an exercise perhaps in self-exoticization through an over-identification with such a recognizable national symbol.

Close to the gallery's vitrines, in a public mini park, a sculpture in cement and resin representing a mature cactus has been installed. As enigmatic as it is, to make a replica of a cactus, it reflects Antar's artistic practice, which develops intuitively away from conceptualization, and only after a work is complete, certain explanations emerge. There is another reason made apparent more recently, which Antar explains, namely how cacti were used as fences in Prehistory, for protection against animals, as well as for marking private property; hence the inevitable wars. The cactus, according to Antar, has trapped streaks of violence within its history. We shall see how the people of Bucharest will react upon encountering this prickly, solitary, self-sufficient, hard to handle and difficult to love plant in concrete, and how it will stand as an autonomous piece of artwork.

[1] *After Images: Stories from the Mountains of Asir*, Contributions by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Yahya Amqassim, Manal Khader, Yasmina Jraissa, Kaph 2016, p.18



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