Light from the Middle East: New Photography

From the Art Fund Collection of Middle Eastern Photography at the V&A and the British Museum

13 November 2012 – 7 April 2013

Light from the Middle East: New Photography is the first major museum exhibition of contemporary photography from and about the Middle East. It features more than 90 works by some of the most exciting artists from the region, spanning North Africa to Central Asia.

The exhibition is part of a collaboration between the British Museum and the V&A, which has over the last three years seen the development of a major collection of Middle Eastern photography thanks to substantial funding from the Art Fund. The collection of 95 works has been built in response to a surge of interest in the visual arts in the region and is beginning to remedy the under-representation of Middle Eastern photography in UK collections. Light from the Middle East includes 87 of the works from this shared collection.

The photographs on display show the creative responses to the social challenges and political upheavals that have shaped the Middle East over the past 20 years and include work made following the recent revolution in Egypt. The photographs present multiple viewpoints of a region where collisions between personal, social, religious and political life can be emotive and complex.

The exhibition showcases the work of 30 artists from 13 different countries including internationally established practitioners such as Abbas (Iran), Youssef Nabil (Egypt) and Walid Raad (Lebanon) as well as emerging talents such as Taysir Batniji (Palestine), Shadi Ghadirian (Iran) and Abdulnasser Gharem (Saudi Arabia). The work covers a wide range of techniques and subject matter, from photojournalism to staged and digitally manipulated imagery.

Marta Weiss, curator of the exhibition said: “In the past few years contemporary photographic practice from and about the Middle East has been some of the most exciting, innovative and varied art anywhere in the world. The exhibition celebrates the creative and sophisticated ways that contemporary artists use photography to respond to the complexities of the Middle East.”
Stephen Deuchar, Art Fund Director said: “This new collection of photography created by the V&A and the British Museum with Art Fund support is being formed at a time of profound change in the Middle East. Artists and photographers, as cultural commentators, are themselves amongst the agents of change. This exhibition showcases highlights from this important new collecting initiative.”

The exhibition is structured around three key themes; Recording, Reframing and Resisting. Each explores a range of strategies Middle Eastern artists have used to engage with the medium of photography.

The opening section shows how photography can be used as a powerful tool for recording people, places and events. From Newsha Tavakolian’s series Mothers of Martyrs (2006) featuring elderly mothers holding framed pictures of their sons who were killed in the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s, to Jananne Al-Ani’s disorienting aerial views of the desert in her video Shadow Sites II (2011), this section demonstrates various ways in which the camera has been used to document and record.

The work in the second section explores an interest in reframing and reworking pre-existing photographs. Shadi Ghadirian’s series Qajar (1998) recreates 19th-century Iranian studio portraits, updating them with contemporary props such as sunglasses and Pepsi cans, while Taysir Batniji applies the modernist style of the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher to his series of photographs of Israeli watchtowers in the West Bank.

The final section looks at practitioners who resist the authority of the photograph, questioning the medium’s ability to record factual information. Whether manipulating or digitally altering images, or physically attacking the print surface by scratching and burning, these artists demonstrate a desire to undermine the legibility and reliability of the photograph. In the intimate and poetic series Le Retour Imaginaire (2002), Afghan artist Atiq Rahimi rejects new technology, opting instead to photograph war-ravished Kabul with a primitive box camera. The recent series Uphekka by Nermin Hammam reworks photographs of Egyptian soldiers taken during the protests in Tahrir Square, Cairo in 2011 and transports them to multicoloured fantasy settings that are far removed from the struggles of the Arab Spring.

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Notes to Editors
• Light from the Middle East: New Photography is curated by Marta Weiss, Curator of Photographs at the V&A
• The exhibition takes place in the Porter Gallery
• The exhibition is FREE
• The Museum is open daily 10:00 – 17:45 and until 22:00 every Friday
• The V&A has the oldest museum photography collection in the world and holds the UK’s national collection of the art of photography
• The V&A’s collection of Islamic art from the Middle East is one of the most important and extensive in the world

About the Art Fund Collection of Middle Eastern Photography
This exhibition has been made possible through the establishment of the Art Fund Collection of Middle Eastern Photography at the V&A and the British Museum. The national collection was established in 2009 to facilitate the V&A and British Museum to jointly build a core collection of Middle Eastern photography, an area previously under represented. The collection includes work by both celebrated and emerging artists across the region, whether in their countries of origin or in diaspora. The works cover a wide range of subject matter spanning the late 20th century to the present day.

Highlights from the exhibition can be see on an interactive map of the Middle East on the Art Fund website, where you can also listen to exhibition curator Marta Weiss introduce some of the key artists. www.artfund.org/light

About the Art Fund
The Art Fund is the national fundraising charity - supporting museums and galleries across the UK in acquiring works of art. It has over 90,000 members and campaigns, fundraises and gives money to museums and galleries to buy and show art. Art Fund offers many ways of discovering the fascinating, world class collections of art through the National Art Pass and the Art Guide - www.artfund.org

Exhibition Publication
An accompanying exhibition catalogue Light from the Middle East: New Photography (edited by Marta Weiss, with essays by Venetia Porter) is available from Steidl. For PRESS information on the book contact +44 (0) 203 077 1167 or press@steidlville.com

For further PRESS information about the V&A exhibition Light from the Middle East: New Photography please contact Alice Evans or Amelia Macgregor in the V&A press office on +44 (0) 20 7942 2508 / 2502 or email a.evans@vam.ac.uk / a.macgregor@vam.ac.uk

A selection of press images are available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk