

The exhibition in the US showcasing the Arab world through an alternate lens

[Bridey Heing](#) Nov 12, 2018



Lamya Gargash's 'The Globe' (2015). Courtesy of the Artist and The Third Line, Dubai

A new exhibition at the American University Museum in Washington, DC, - creates a dynamic vision of the medium of photography and the Arab world – a term that here, defies simplistic geographic expectations in favour of richly

understood heritage and culture that is connected to the world at large.

The work on display in *Tribe: Contemporary Photography from the Arab World* highlights the multifaceted ways in which those who identify as Arab, experience and understand their heritage, culture and identity. The exhibition resists simplistic notions of what the Arab world itself is, embracing a vision of the region as deeply intertwined with the rest of the world. The result is a blend of traditional imagery, striking reframings of history and the evocation of surprising connections.

The show features pictures that have been published by *Tribe*, a magazine dedicated to photography in the region. Artist Janet Bellotto curated the show with art historian Dr Woodman Taylor. Bellotto says they didn't approach the task of setting up the show with a particular eye towards what themes might emerge. Instead, they focused on ensuring as many countries were represented as possible, as well as including a significant number of works from artists working in the diaspora. It is organised around six themes: Longing / Belonging, Ritual and Emotion, Evoking Space & Place, Psychological Projections, Public / Popular Cultures and Imagined Futures.

“Certain artists related their work to traditional ideas or spaces, while others were experimenting with non-traditional processes, as well as engaging global concerns in their work,” Taylor explains. Some of those worldwide connections are created by a shared visual language. Lamya Gargash's photographs of the hauntingly empty Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi are reminiscent of images of abandoned structures in the former Soviet Union, while Yazan Khalili's brightly hued refugee camp series *Colour Correction* bears a resemblance to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

But in other cases, the global context of the work is more subtle, such as in Yemeni-Bosnian-American artist Alia Ali's *Borderland* series. It was inspired

by a blend of influences, foremost being the sense that many identities are flattened as a result of conflict or other marginalising experiences. Working in the United States in 2016, Ali was struck by the ways in which dominant cultures understand or situate the identity of other cultures, particularly at that time, Mexico.



Alia Ali's 'Pongo (Borderland Series)'. Courtesy of the artist

“We tend to see Mexico through the lens of their suffering, not through their beauty,” she says, and it struck a chord with her. “That’s how Yemen – my own country – has been seen. No one knows Yemen for its jewellery, incredible history of architecture, or of its trade and textiles.”

The project that grew out of that sense of shared erasure, took Ali around the world, offering her the opportunity to learn about and engage with cultures that sometimes crossed borders. Thinking about the ways in which textiles can be seen as a representation of the way “fabricated barriers” can both unite and divide, Ali had created her auto-portrait series *Cast No Evil*, in which she was shrouded in textiles. This carried over into *Borderlands*, where fabric is used in the same way.

Palestinian-Iraqi artist Sama Alshaibi’s *Silsila* series centres on environment and history. “While I’m usually creating projects that speak to the fissures of a life story, such as displacement and physical insecurities, *Silsila* was a place for me to meditate on hope and connection,” she says.

Sama Alshaibi’s *Silsila*:

In her image, textiles appear in the foreground, obscuring the figures who are at times dwarfed by the sweeping landscapes she captures. On display for this exhibit is the titular image from the series, which shows a woman, her back to the viewer, praying in waist-deep water. Mirrored in the water below, the figure projects strength and calm, and what Bellotto sees as a universalism and diversity of faith.

Other works challenge our perception. In *Wo-Man*, Almoutasim Almaskery plays with ideas of gender by photographing women in traditional male dresses. In *Pokemon Go in Syria*, Khaled Akil drops an anime character into the wreckage of Aleppo, posing questions about popular culture and conflict.

Khaled Akil’s *Pokemon Go in Syria*:

Lebanese artist Lara Atallah focuses on the duality of the Mediterranean as both a tourist destination and a body of water associated with the deaths of refugees. “This body of work looks at the sea as both a place associated with

leisure, but also one that is associated with death,” Atallah explains. “The sea is the only recourse left when land routes have been made inaccessible. These images invite viewers to reconsider their experience of that space within a global context of heightened nationalism.”

A subtle series by Palestinian- American artist Joanna Barakat poses interesting questions about personal history and identity. The *Imposter Series* is made up of images showing the artist as a young girl in Palestine, a place where she did not grow up, creating an alternate story of what her life might have looked like. “Like many others who grew up in diaspora, I was left with the feeling of being a foreigner in my native land,” Barakat says. “Manipulating these photographs with the inclusion of myself as a child allowed me to create snapshots into an imagined narrative of my childhood, reinforcing themes of nostalgia, cultural identity and belonging.”

Joanna Barakat's *Imposter Series*:

The exhibit’s inclusion of diaspora artists also frames the question of what the Arab world is in an interesting and illuminating light, challenging the idea that these cultures and heritages are somehow isolated from the rest of the globe. “Often artists from Arab diasporas bring critical perspectives from their position of being outside any given country, yet still being connected to their originating cultural upbringing,” Taylor says.

Alshaibi also says the experience of displacement should not be seen as removing her or others from the Arab world, but as a reflection of conditions experienced by many. “I would argue that I, like many other Arabs, live in a different kind of Arab world – one of displacement, and constantly negotiating our otherness,” she says.

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While the exhibit's wide range and depth makes a central takeaway difficult to pinpoint, it is hard to overlook the fact that this show interprets the region in a way that defies the simple notions of place and identity. Although artists like Alshaibi expressed concern about what the term "Arab world" can mean when applied narrowly or without a sense of the diversity of experience represented in the geographic space we commonly apply the term to, there was also a sense that this exhibit has been curated thoughtfully, and reflects diversity in a way that could open visitors' eyes to a new way of seeing the Arab world. "I'm not sure that any single art show can destroy stereotypes and transform hearts and minds," he says. "But I do believe in the art itself to open doors and ask questions."

Tribe: Contemporary Photography from the Arab World is on show at the American University Museum, Washington, DC, until December 16

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