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Sueraya Shaheen exhibition in Bahrain

Find out behind La Fontaine's latest photography exhibition, 'Encounters'



By Time Out Bahrain staff
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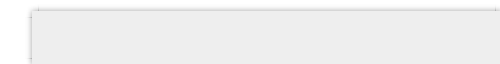
We find out more about artist Sueraya Shaheen who's behind La Fontaine's latest photography exhibition, 'Encounters'.

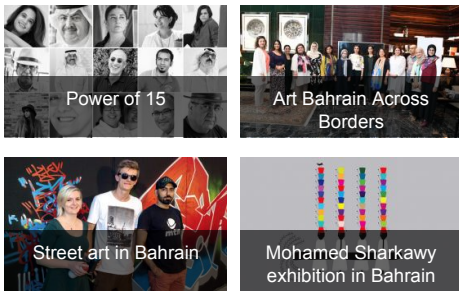
It's undeniable that the Middle East has a thriving arts scene and what's interesting about the newest exhibition at La Fontaine, 'Encounters', is it's less about the art and more about the artists behind some of the most poignant works in the region today. The artist, Sueraya Shaheen, who is Syrian, born in Beirut, and currently works as a photojournalist between New York and Dubai, shot documentary-style portraits of players who are part of the current wave of the Middle Eastern art landscape. Quickly, this body of work gained international recognition and has been displayed in the US and now Bahrain. We find out more about the enthusiastic, enigmatic and passionate lady behind the camera and what inspires her...

Where does your inspiration for your art projects come from on a daily basis?

I get most of my inspiration from the process of something that's about to happen. Whether it's a performance and I'm backstage in rehearsals, or at an exhibition and I'm documenting the installation, I find that the images with the most to say happen before and after the 'main event'. At least they are the most interesting to me.

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I find inspiration in the different stages of something, as well as the movements and expressions of those involved. Regarding 'Encounters', this is a series that I wanted to be able to show together but for each image to be able to stand alone.

How did you choose which artists to portray through 'Encounters'?

Picking the artists came organically and one thing led to another. I happened to be somewhere, and so were they, so I asked. I'd be in someone's studio and the artist would mention another's name and I followed the leader. It's a journey for me of discovery, and connecting the dots, and really part of my travels around the region.

What are your thoughts on the art scene in the Gulf and Bahrain?

Bahrain is very fun for me because I'm always discovering. Just by hanging out at Digimax, which seems to be the spot where all the fine art photographers do their printing, I meet artists every day. Renowned Bahrain-based photographer Camille Zakharia told me about it and in turn I met Melchior de Tinguy and Mai Al Moatez – we exchanged work and that seems to be the vibe there in Manama from my experience. There's a sense of an artist's community.

You were born in Beirut, lived in England, the US and Dubai. How have these experiences been reflected in your work? Can you compare the arts scenes?

Dubai is like New York City for me. I purposely don't drive. I metro around and hail taxi cabs. The gallery scene is thriving and it's challenging. Every month the whole artistic landscape changes within each arts district. In Bahrain, for me, everything I visit... it's more of an inspiring feeling I get. All the old houses that have been renovated to house art are breathtaking, and everything is warm and inviting. There is more space around you, literally.

I really enjoy all my trips here and since I stay for such a short amount of time, there's always something new. I love going around Hoora.

How has the exhibition experience in Bahrain gone for you so far?

I love being able to show this body of work in an unconventional white box gallery. Although all the walls are painted white, we were able to experiment and use an entire wall for one image which made it seem as though we're walking along the rooftops of Beirut!

La Fontaine owner Fatima Alireza is a visionary. She really was able to arrange the images proportionally within the ruggedness of the space. I wouldn't have even considered stacking the prints but it worked, and now the portraits 'talk' to each other. Melissa van Maasdyk, the other curator, convinced me to write up stories about each portrait which I wasn't interested in doing either. So, really, the two co-curated the show and it was a good lesson in letting go.

Where is art headed in the Middle East? What will it look like in ten years, do you think?

In ten years there will be more museums and more galleries if that paradigm still exists! But who knows? All eyes are on the Internet but even that's changing. By the time this article is published, who knows what would have transpired? Things happen and change and one just has to keep their flow open and fluid.

What else are you working on at the moment and what projects do you have in the pipeline?

I am photo editing and working with a small group on a new magazine devoted to photography and new media. I love photography so I'm pretty much game to get involved in it on every level. I also do portraits on commission so my whole life revolves around photography.

'Encounters' by Sueraya Shaheen is on until June 15. La Fontaine Centre for Contemporary Art, Hoora (1723 0123). Visit www.suerayashaheen.net.

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