

PROFILE

Images - Courtesy of the artist, the Arab Image Foundation and the Ruya Foundation.

Writer - Suzy Sikorski, art historian and writer.

Latif Al Ani: Through the Lens

Father of Iraqi Photography

Latif Al Ani, whose role as 'Father of Iraqi Photography' encompasses three decades of documentation, from the 1950s through 1970s. His work captures the *belle époque* of the cosmopolitan and modern Iraq during these years, detailing a wide range of political, industrial and colloquial cultures of the time, from the 1958 anti-colonial revolution up until the rise of Saddam Hussein and the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. A subtle interplay between objects, people, archaeology and urban life, his photographs narrate a jarring realism of a fleeting moment within a booming Iraq.

Al Ani was employed by the British controlled Iraqi Petroleum Company, later developing the photography department at the Iraqi government's Ministry of Information and Guidance in 1960. In the 1970s he became Head of Photography at the Iraqi News Agency, amassing over 1,500 black and white documentary photos in their archive. In the Ministry of Information, he was regarded as the only Iraqi who knew how to develop colour photographs, training others like Bulus Hanna and Halim Khatat who were some of the first to shoot aerial photographs of places like Liberation Square, Mirjan Mosque and the ruins at Ctesiphon. Al Ani traveled throughout the country to photograph for the magazine published by the department – *New Iraq*, which was printed in five different languages: Arabic, Kurdish, English, French and German. He documented all facets of Iraqi life, including its industrial boom, cultural preservation, the camaraderie of its workers, and agricultural production. As the artist said, 'I always translated the message into

beautiful images, regardless. My concern was the beauty of the image, not politics. This was my creed. The fear was already planted inside of me, but I took advantage of this job to document.'¹

Taking up photography at the age of 15, his earliest photos were of his natural environment, and of people, including faces and those on rooftops. One of his friend's, Aziz Ajam, editor for the Iraqi Petroleum Company's Arabic language magazine *Ahl Al Naft [People of Oil]*, helped him to become a trainee there, and it is there that he began to develop his film in studios on Rashid Street. As he says on his early interactions with his community, 'It was always an event when I went to a place with my camera. People gathered. It became my social identity; it imposed a certain authority, garnered respect, and people responded well to it since everyone wanted their photo taken. I often pretended to photograph someone while aiming elsewhere. People always wanted to touch the lens.'²

Al Ani's works displayed in the current show, at the Sharjah Art Foundation, curated by Sheikha Hoor Al Qassimi, feature a juxtaposition between formal and historical contrasts. They orchestrate a jarring invitation to the shifting vantage points, cropping and scale contrasts that he wished to create, beckoning to a new era of photography that had never been executed in the country before. His works feature beautiful landscapes and ancient murals of his land juxtaposed against modern elements of

¹ Latif in conversation with Tamara Chalabi, published in *Latif Al Ani*, M. Montazami, Hatje Cantz, 2017).
² Ibid.

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brick buildings and infrastructure projects. In one of the exhibited photos, *Pipe construction for the Darbandikhan water pipeline project*, a worker is in the process of constructing the foundations of the dam that are illustrated in the photo by a bulky, whirling structure of spirals that beget a combination of loops of shade and sunlight, bringing a rich interplay in elements of form, light and historical reference to the forefront.

For decades, Al Ani produced these images out of this explicit fear since the revolution of 1958, recalling 'there was no stability... Fear was a major motive to document everything as it was. I did all that I could to document, to safeguard that time.'³ In 1980 the

³ Ibid.



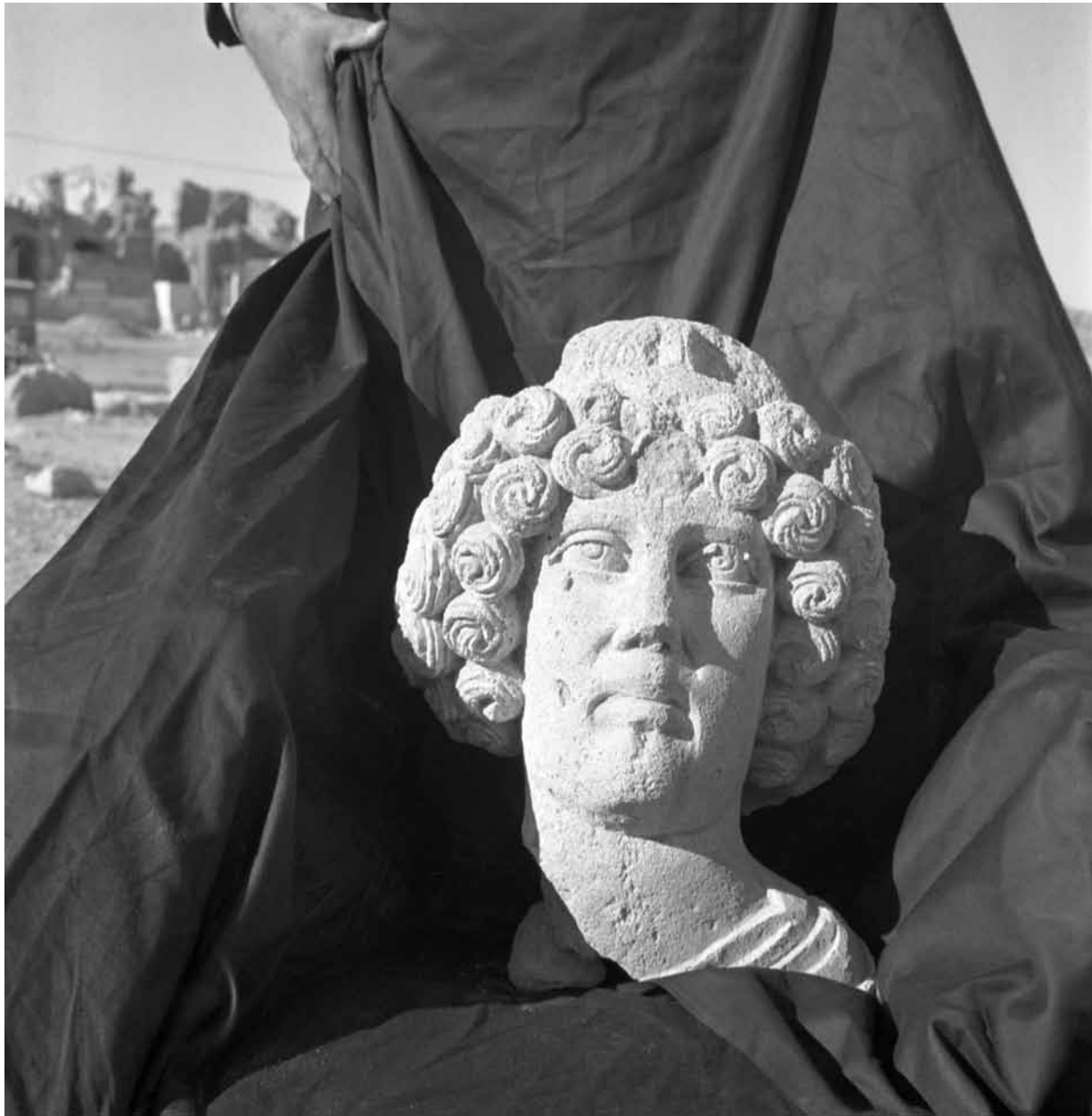
photographer stopped producing work; he was devoid of his passion, finding his country without the beauty he felt within those three glamorous decades.

Today much of his archival photographs have been destroyed due to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and it was only recently that the artist has been rediscovered. In 2015 his work was featured in the Iraqi Pavilion's 'Invisible Beauty' at the 56th Venice Biennale and his first monograph was published by Hatje Cantz with support from the Ruya Fondation. Subsequently, he won the Historical Book Award at 'Les Rencontres d'Arles' in 2017.

At 85 years old, the artist remains in Baghdad, eager to find the next generation of young photographers that may capture the same shimmers of hope and perseverance he found. Not only do his works encapsulate the Iraqi struggle, but they also seek to embody the tragedy of loss, whether it be of memory, or of a fantasy that merely existed within the enchanting objects and people surrounding us. His works appear to yearn for a momentous continuity that we all seek in the many 'golden eras' of our evolution, caught within a time capsule we seek to celebrate but that is unable to manifest into our current realities anymore.

Stolen head that was not retrieved, Hatra (1960)

Archival pigment print 25 x 25 cm



Left to right: *Building the Darbandikhan Dam (1962)*

Archival pigment print 25 x 25 cm

Al Aqida, High School, Baghdad (1961)

Archival pigment print 25 x 25 cm



US couple in Ctesiphon (1965)

B+W digital print on Fine Art paper 25 x 25 cm



Top left: *Al Malak, Baghdad* (1964);
(right) B+W digital print on Fine Art paper 25 x 25 cm

