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## **Photograms mix artist's love of Madonna, Japanese art**

### ***Nadim Asfar's 'Juin' was created without cameras, lenses or negatives***

**By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie**

Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: "I want people to love photography," says Nadim Asfar, a 28-year-old Lebanese photographer who is currently enjoying his first solo exhibition in Beirut. "And to love it they must feel it as I feel it."

"Juin," on view at Fadi Mogabgab Contemporary Art in Gemmayzeh, features more than 30 images spread across the ground floor and mezzanine level of the gallery's storefront space - Mogabgab works typically as a private dealer specializing in monumental, international contemporary paintings, so the fact that he's taken a chance on a young local artist and opened up for a public show is a telling indication of Asfar's talent.

The entrance is obscured by a heavy black velvet curtain, the window papered over with matte black paper save a small square cutout mimicking the look of a photographer's standard darkroom enlarger. You look through the hole - and already there's a charming though questionably hygienic collection of nose prints on the glass - and you see a same size image on the wall. Inside, red filters over the track lighting amplify the darkroom vibe.

The effect of this keen installation is that visitors to the gallery are thrown into Asfar's world. To traipse into his creative space like so is all the more important because the works he has produced for this exhibition are all photograms - photographs created without cameras, lenses, or negatives, using only light sensitive paper, a light source and objects of the artist's choosing.

Asfar's objects are all flowers, from robust roses to delicate jasmines. Set as silhouettes against a black ground and often exposed several times, one gets a strange sense of each flower's texture, the thinness of the petals, the water still trapped in the stems. It's a fragile art form with a quiet aesthetic sensibility, made more intimate by Asfar's decision to frame his work with matte-board alone.

"(Viewers) must feel the paper," he says. "This is why I didn't use any glass. I think this is important. It's what artists in New York did in the beginning of the last century but here (in Beirut), with photography, we're still there, at the beginning of that century."

Asfar got his first camera at the age of three and another one at 12.

"I took pictures of the war, of bombs in the air, of my destroyed building," he recalls. "It was trash, these pictures, but I had an instinct that it was important."

Asfar's family left Lebanon for a few years, and when he returned at 16, photography was his way of reconnecting.

"I got to know Lebanon again through taking like 15 pictures of the cedars," he says.

Asfar studied at the Academie Libanaise des Beaux Arts (ALBA) and has worked as a commercial photographer in the years since, shooting for the advertising agency HNC Leo Burnett and doing press campaigns for clients like Exotica, Pikasso and Banque Al-Mawarid. He spent a year studying in Paris, but he maintains that his artistic impulse came accidentally.

"I don't have artistic culture. I wasn't into art. I didn't know of any photographers at all until I went to ALBA."

Asfar's true education came from an unlikely source: "Madonna was a catalyst," he says without a hint of irony. Is he serious? Absolutely. "She was the first thing I loved after my parents. Madonna was really my emotional and cultural reference. She took all this culture and mixed it. Everything came to me accidentally. Madonna's videos are inspired by classic photographers and cinematographers. Even now, she's a motor, something pushing me to go further."

Add to Madonna a memorable trip to Japan and you have the main elements of Asfar's style.

"The zen paintings, the gardens, the ikebana ... When I saw Japanese art it was so straight to the point. It's so not blah blah. European art, it's accomplished a lot, but it's very blah blah, very arrogant, very much a performance. If I have to choose, I really prefer the Japanese perception of things."

As inconceivable as it may seem, one can sense these two strains in Asfar's photographs - from Madonna, the drama of black and white; from Japan, an insistence on simplicity. In terms of technique, Asfar is well aware of his predecessors, from the Bauhaus school and Man Ray, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Christian Shad, to contemporary London-born, New York-based photographer Adam Fuss, whose most famous series, "My Ghost," captured christening dresses in photographs. Asfar can speak knowledgeably about the entire history of cameraless photography, not only in terms of technique but in relation to historical and art critical context.

"In the beginning, I was like, 'Okay, Man Ray did this so I can't.' In art school, they tell you so much how you need to invent new things." But Asfar eventually decided to go for it anyway. "What's new is my feeling," he says, "not the technique."

Asfar sees his images as straddling the line between landscape and still life. They are sublime, poetic things, he says, like sitting in traffic and looking to your left to see a tangle of jasmine spilling out of nowhere.

"I used to say that as long as Fairouz is here, Lebanon exists. Now I can say that as long as jasmine is here, Beirut exists, too."

"Juin," is on view at Fadi Mogabgab Contemporary Art, 268 Gouraud Street, Gemmayzeh, through August 15. For more information, call (961)03/734520

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