

Shifting Boundaries

Camille Zakharia
Cuadro Gallery, Dubai

Each of Camille Zakharia's photo collages bring together several negatives that begin with the generic asphalt that is found in airport and suburban shopping center parking lots around the world—from tar painted sunshine yellow to denote the precisely measured space each vehicle is allocated, to the cornflower blue used to reserve a spot for drivers with physical disabilities. The artist, who escaped Lebanon's civil war in 1985 and roved between continents before building a longtime practice in Bahrain in 1999, is preoccupied with the prescriptive rigidity of the parking lot setting, which he views as a metaphor for the way 21st century life has until quite recently been structured according to national borders and legal frameworks.

While Zakharia has been working in the medium of collage for more than 25 years, *Shifting Boundaries*—his current show of 15 new works at Cuadro Gallery in Dubai—blurs colors, lines, and patterns with unprecedented fluid abstraction. The series reflects the Middle East's shifting political realities, with conflict and economic hardship forcing entire civilian populations to flee or migrate in search of basic security and livelihood. In a wider context, accessibility to the internet and social media, as well as the ease with which people can now travel great distances by plane, has created a new generation of third culture children who, like Zakharia, collage their own identities from resonating customs, memories, or relationships they gather along a zig-zagging journey. As a result, the very definition of home is less and less defined by a mother tongue, a birth certificate, or a passport.

Because of the intricacy involved in the photo collage process, it takes Zakharia up to 40 days to complete a single composition, straining his eyes while Umm Kulthum's contralto drifts like smoke rings through his Manama studio space. He finds it hard to work without her melancholy lyrics. Every collage is obsessively composed of thick, multiple layers encompassing up to 2,000 photo cutouts affixed to one another with acid free glue in an intricate pattern that only emerges once Zakharia has begun to move the pieces around on the blank canvas, negotiating a game of artistic hide and seek over which shards of a given image are meant to stay veiled beneath the layers and which will be disclosed to the viewer.

Street and parking lot markings determine where people are allowed to stand and where they are not, how to move, and when to stop—all of which is ordered by an omniscient government body monitoring compliance through security cameras.

He explains, "What I am saying is that things are changing in terms of understanding even the most rooted words, like *belonging*. People are redefining basic terms that we thought we knew. There are no geographical lines that cannot be crossed. People go here and there. They are children of the world."

With *Shifting Boundaries*, the artist suggests that the quintessential small talk question, *Where are you from?* is fast becoming irrelevant. Perhaps a more pertinent question to ask a new

acquaintance (or even oneself) ought to be, *'Where do you belong?'* Here Zakharia merges seemingly fixed lines to create a new, liminal shade of aqua ink (a combination of blue and yellow on asphalt) and patterns that feel more intuitive than preordained.

This attitude marks a departure from previous exhibitions including *Out, Then* (2015), a highly conceptual show in which flocks of onyx birds in flight juxtaposed with penitentiary-strict markings from the *Division Lines* series betrayed the artist's inner conflict—an impossible desire to move away from the past and the residual impact of the life choices that were made for him by political events. *Belonging* was also the title and the subject of a 2010 project in which Zakharia interviewed, photographed, and created individual photo collages for 42 residents of Bahrain with divergent origins and backgrounds, asking each subject to define home and what makes them feel a sense of place on the island. Interestingly, none of the portraits offer national identity as anyone's primary reason for connection. It is easy to see how Zakharia's current show is a further examination of those conversations and unanswered questions.

Several of the works in *Shifting Boundaries* incorporate fragments of worried, handwritten letters Zakharia's mother mailed to her son from civil war-era Beirut, equally anxious to learn how he was coping abroad as she was to reassure him of her own survival. *Je m'accroche* refers to the Victorian children's game of pulling petals from a flower and counting aloud, "I love you, I love you not." In this case, Zakharia is playing a game with memory, alternately reciting, "Holding on, not holding on." The blue pieces have the appearance of nails heads. Does Zakharia want to cling to his past or let it go? There is a vulnerable uncertainty to the work that applies not only to the artist's future but also to the wider Arab world—refugee and diaspora populations and all.

Text: Danna Lorch