

And I, Will I Forget
Manal Al Dowayan
Cuadro Gallery, Dubai

Where does a memory go after it has left the lips of the living? Does it disappear into the atmosphere like a thin rain? Is it assigned a serial number then stored by a divine keeper of time in a secret safe deposit box, to be retrieved in the future by someone yet to be born?

Manal Al Dowayan creates conceptual art out of Mnemophobia: the fear of forgetting and of ultimately being forgotten. At the root of her practice lies a ritual of untangling and classifying memories in order to protect the past. A video installation, *I Had No Wings* (2015) captured the backseat blur between past and present tenses as the artist was driven through (name of town) in Saudi Arabia. *If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me* (2012) created connections through the oral histories and artifacts of the generation of oil men and women who converged during Saudi Arabia's oil boom.

While previous works have been grounded in Al Dowayan's native Saudi Arabia, her current solo show at Cuadro Gallery, *And I, Will I Forget* is a collection of silkscreened and mixed media images that makes the artist's personal family history into universally relatable moments while examining the blurry distinction between fact and fiction when stories are retold over time.

When she embarked on a 2015 residency at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation on Captiva Island (Florida, USA) Al Dowayan brought along little else but a silver biscuit tin that her late father had given to her when she was 12. Inside were nearly 1,000 unviewed Kodachrome slides from shots he had had captured between 1962 and 1973—the period in which he had left home, studied in the US, gotten married, honeymooned, and ultimately became a parent. By the time Al Dowayan was an artist, her father had already descended into Alzheimer's, taking the significance of these captured moments along with him. None of the people in the slides are still alive and the chronological sequence and fact-based timeline behind the images are indecipherable.

"Telling your own story is the most powerful tool. Once you tell it yourself, it changes every time. What remains of that story and how is it told, and why does it matter?" asks Al Dowayan. In the most basic sense, the artist summoned her late father to "step through the door"¹ to collaborate with her on this show, using his stark, displaced black and white portraits as the foundation for her silkscreens and mixed media images, completing the project that he began but never finished, and re-appropriating his journey into her own meaningful narrative.

¹ This phrase is a reference to writer Marilynne Robinson's 1980 novel *Housekeeping*, which traces how a family responds to a significant death. Here is how Robinson speaks to reconnecting with a memory of the departed: "There is so little to remember of anyone—an anecdote, a conversation at a table. But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door and stroke our hair with dreaming habitual fondness not having meant to keep us waiting long."

Memory invariably erodes like sand dunes in the desert. A stiff portrait of two unsmiling men in Saudi traditional dress standing shoulder to shoulder has been printed on copper, linen, paper, and mirror. The repetition of these images on different materials, certain iterations more discernible than others, is a visual demonstration of how over time, different cinematic aspects of an experience become what the mind can recall, or what is salvaged from a trauma when the rest is too heavy to carry forward.

Characters appear and disappear in the series without association, almost like they have been arbitrarily cut and pasted into time. This is arguably the influence of *Captiva*, where Al Dowayan lived and printed in the late Neo-Dadaist Robert Rauschenberg's home and studio. Beginning in the 50's Rauschenberg experimented with what he termed his *Combines*, a medium composed of adhering various found objects, news clippings, or household litter to the painted canvas. These works became increasingly more conceptual—culminating in the famous *Portrait of Iris Clert*, a crumpled telegram that brazenly read, 'This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.' Although she is not nearly as prescriptive as Rauschenberg, in a sense, Al Dowayan is also creating new stories from found materials, conjuring artificial facts for the audience to grasp and believe.

The body of images speaks to the bone-aching loneliness of leaving one's home and adapting to another culture—something Al Dowayan's father experienced when he left Saudi to go to study in the US—then futilely attempting to explain one's experiences to family, but never quite being able to gather the right words together to make them understand.

Who is that solitary figure standing somberly beside his truck, with a boxy 1960's stone villa and a palm tree behind him? There is an implicit loss to the haunting image, which looks as though it was shot quickly from a driver's side window, perhaps as a last documentation of a long goodbye. The artist—who spends much of her time traveling, is part of a largely UAE expatriate population living for long stints in a cosmopolitan melting pot far from a country of origin, perpetually questioning the meaning of home. In this sense, Al Dowayan's father's story is assimilated into the audience's collective memory to be kept safe in a different form at least for one more generation.

-Danna Lorch