

## Jalal BinThaneya: Industry

### Cannibalized landscapes bring an awareness of oil

'Are we going to celebrate the last barrel of oil that leaves the region or are we going to despair?' Jalal BinThaneya's photography relentlessly poses this same question from conflicting angles as he trawls cannibalized industrial landscapes of the United Arab Emirates for answers.

Classifying himself as "an accidental artist," BinThaneya fell into a serious practice entirely by chance when in 2013, he looked on as workers began to unceremoniously demolish the historic watchtower on Dubai's Jebel Ali Port. Built in the 1970's as the export of petroleum reserves supercharged Dubai towards globalization, Sheikh Rashid famously held meetings in the stronghold during the 90's. At first, BinThaneya stood by with hands clasped together as though paying his respects to the dead. 'That's a piece of our history just gone' he thought, fiddling with the iPhone in his starched white pocket. 'So I began snapping hundreds of photos.'

He has gone on shooting to understand—and even at times—to provoke ever since. *Industry*, an ongoing series, gains rare access to, examines and contrasts obsolete and active refineries, pipelines and oilfields. By making dormant industrial ghosts his subjects, BinThaneya aims to jolt viewers into an awareness of how oil is synonymous with material culture, added to everything from nail polish to aspirin, water pipes and asphalt roads. Like an irrepressible sugar craving he says, 'we are hungry for it but don't realize. Everything would come to a standstill without industry. We can't live without it.'

Oil is inescapable and so are the industrial processes and places that render it so useful. There is a rising paranoia about what would happen without it. But is that going to become a reality anytime soon? 'The beautiful thing about petroleum,' BinThaneya explains, 'is that it never really disappears. Dilute it and it's in the water. Burn it and it's in the air. Bury it and it's in the earth.'

It is challenging to draw out the original purpose of BinThaneya's machines from the isolated segments he reveals—but this kind of factual knowledge is not the point of the work. 'I'm not concerned with the project of documenting these spaces and issues,' he clarifies. 'Instead, I am amplifying them in large format to drive public debate about what is happening behind fences and walls.'

The photographs divulge steel pipes tangled like snakes, fairytale-like spiral staircases leading up broad oil tanks, and intricate ladders sinking into sand. There is an unexpected element of poetry here. Although there are never any people present, these are actually portraits, as everything BinThaneya captures involves nature's manipulation by human hands. Individual pieces from the series have been shown in group exhibitions around the UAE at spaces including Tashkeel, Sharjah Art Foundation and The Empty Quarter.

Today most industrial photography is of a corporate nature, appearing in glossy annual

reports geared towards investors. However, BinThaneya follows a strong line of fine art industrial photographers including Edward Burtynsky, Margaret Bourke-White, and the *f/64* Group. The latter was founded in the 1930's by Ansel Adams and Willard Van Dyke and caused offense to other photographers at the time. *F/64* was committed to a realist aesthetic that called attention to fading agrarian landscapes, processes and implements—a stance that broke with the romantic, painterly styles popular with Americans who, during and after the Great Depression looked to art for a dream of better days ahead. BinThaneya can relate. 'I find I am in a similar situation trying to bring out the raw image, when the way most people perceive the purpose of images here is to make things beautiful or for nostalgic purposes. My subject matter doesn't fit in.'

He is grudgingly committed to slow photography. It can take months to confirm a site as multiple levels of permission, specialized protective gear and an accompanying in-house engineer are compulsory before the shutter can even click in the government-operated facilities. When access does finally come through, BinThaneya shoots rapidly, alternating between three different cameras. Film has to be sent to New York for developing, then to Germany for scanning—a process that takes weeks, is expensive and suspenseful, and demands unusual patience for someone who is the product of an instant, results-driven era.









