

Tarek Nahas sitting in front of Anne Collier. *Woman With a Camera (Polaroid)*. 2015. C-print. 126.4x148.6 cm. Edition four of five. Facing page: (above) William Klein. *Troupe La la la Human Steps in metro, painted contact sheet, Paris 1990*. 1998. 50x60cm. Unique; (below) Taryn Simon. *Black Square IV, The Blaster, South Africa, Invented by Charl Fourie as an Anti-Hijacking system photographed installed on a Toyota Corolla, one of the most frequently carjacked vehicles in South Africa*. 2009. Archival inkjet print. 80x80cm. Edition five of five; Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #375*. 1976/2000. Black and white photograph. 17.78x12.7cm. Edition six of 20; Larry Clark. *Dead 1970 (T28)*. 1968. Black and white photograph. 35.56x27.94cm. Edition 24 of 25; Anne Collier. *After You Get What You Want (Recto)*. 2017. C-print. 118.62x153.52cm. Edition five or five.



Acquainting the EYE

Lebanese business lawyer and art collector **Tarek Nahas** speaks to Katrina Kufer about the importance of research, a passion towards photography, and why it is time to change the narrative on Lebanese cultural production
Photography by Joe Kairouz



Tarek Nahas chuckles as he says he only ‘happens’ to be Lebanese for the art world. “In my head I am International, in my soul I am Lebanese.” Such a statement is a precursor to the bridge he and his wife Laurence have built within the region’s photography scene. Known for being one of the few dedicated photography collectors and resources in the Middle East, Nahas indicates that the number of photography collectors globally has upped substantially from the mainstreaming of the medium 40 years ago. But photography is not yet in the clear as debates on its gravitas linger, and a niche within the Nahas collection incites further contemplation: the outside-in perceptions of Middle Eastern, more specifically Lebanese, photographers.

“If you listen to everyone, you’ll have so many opinions,” says Nahas on the progressively outdated notion that photography still doesn’t quite hold its own against its predecessors. “Photography has proven itself to be one the most important art forms, even though it only became considered as one when it entered museums.” He cites New York’s MoMA as one of the headlining institutions that normalised photography, but admits decades on, people still question whether it deserves the out from its minoritisation. “It’s a major art form,” he explains. “Look over the last 100 years and you’ll see that Man Ray equals some of the best painters of his time. Photography’s depicted performances, created and staged themes, used by street photographers, it profiles the times... this shows the diversity and creativity of the medium.”

Yet Nahas’ passion for the still image only began 15 years ago, which took even him by surprise. His parents purchased artworks—“like any family they bought paintings but not as collectors”—but his upbringing in a culture loving home was interrupted by the Lebanese Civil War. “In the Arab world at the time we didn’t have museums, and I’m





Josef Koudelka. Azerbaijan, Baku, abandoned oil field. 1999. Inkjet print. 83x254cm. Edition two of seven; Hiroshi Sugimoto. Lake Superior, Eagle River. 2003. Gelatin silver print. 50.8x61cm. Edition one of 25.

from a generation that had to cope with war in Lebanon. In 1975, no one was thinking about art,” he laments. Nahas’ intermittent time spent in France as a youth “allowed me to work on myself, reading and becoming more acquainted with art.” His first foray into buying resulted in more traditional formats, but an encounter with Bert Stern’s photo of Marilyn Monroe in a black dress altered his trajectory. “I didn’t know I was starting a collection, I just bought a photograph and it grew on me, I don’t know how or why, but the revelation grew that this is what I liked most. I have never bought anything other than photography since.”

The carefully acquired collection he has built with his wife spans their home and office spaces—where hangings rotate every two or three years, in part to maintain the delicate materiality—but Nahas is quick to note that he does allow impulse on occasion, despite preferring a more studied approach. “I have always had a thing for researching, reading, going to shows and training my eye,” he says. “I decide to start acquiring works by an artist, I look at his entire body of works, consider which pieces are most important and why—not for that artist but on a global scale and network—and then acquire. But not too many at the same time. I don’t acquire a lot in general. I want quality over quantity, and I believe limiting the number but increasing quality over time will result in works that are museum pieces.” Nahas displays as many as possible, and his predominantly international collection contains works by the likes of Thomas Struth, Nan Goldin, and his most recent acquisition, a work by Louise Lawler—which hang mostly in their home. The

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or artists working with photography as one of the medium of their artistic expression such as Walid Raad, Ziad Antar, and Roger Moukartzel, often found on the walls of his office. Few ever leave his possession—Nahas admits occasional upgrades from artists, but it is more due to a maturation of knowledge and taste, which now veers towards the conceptual.

There is a natural, thoughtful process to the Nahas’ methodology, which applies to engagement with gallerists, artists, institutions and curating. He cannot generalise the role of a collector, but for himself says it is about being one of the patrons for the Lebanese scene. This resulted in positions on the acquisition committees of museums such as Centre Pompidou and the Tate Modern, significant roles in organisations including Dar El-Nimer and Beirut Art Fair, organising four exhibitions to date, and publishing two books. But championing talent is less to spotlight a burgeoning scene—rather, Nahas strives to equalise the landscape. By removing geo-political categorisations through discussion and example, Nahas helps reveal that Arab creation is on par with Western counterparts, and is equally as guilty of pigeonholing its artists. “Think about Akram Zaatar, Fouad Elkoury, Randa Mirza, Nadim Asfar... they have nothing to do with conflict,” Nahas shares of internationally lauded artists liberated from notions of territory. “It really is a perception that we have to overcome.”

Curating *Across Boundaries* for the 2018 Beirut Art Fair, Nahas manually sourced 100 Lebanese photographic works from 30 private and institutional collections to explore the development of the medium, not the narrative. “*Documents*, *Intimate* and *Territory* were the three themes. They were not specifically centered around war. In *Documents* I did create a square in which I displayed those visuals so that people understood that photojournalists were there, but it’s important to look at what others have done. Some talk about family, artists like Vartan Avakian produce conceptual works, and though some touch on war, it might be the 1958 conflict in the work of Salah Saouli, nothing to do



Above: Bruce Davidson. Subway platform in Brooklyn, New York City, USA. 1980. Vintage dye transfer. 50x60cm.

with 1975-90!” Nahas’ efforts—even the gentle curation within his offices—exemplify a wealth of thematic complexity that is perhaps overlooked for headlining purposes. The scene it has built is strong, but one that only in recent years is garnering attention. “Directors of Paris Photo and Les Rencontres d’Arles, the two major photography based events in the world, came and discovered something they didn’t know and started speaking with me on how we can do something about Lebanese photography,” adds Nahas. “When people start to uncover the real art scene in places where there is tension, it becomes clear creativity isn’t only about conflict.”

Nahas’ approach is institutional and academic, organic and passion driven. He exudes respect for the medium and its history, which he seeks to gaze upon as much as learn from and about it, but his motivations aren’t passive. It is time to change the narratives—the weight of photography—adding as a final note, “We have to put this forward.” ■

Left: Hiroshi Sugimoto. Lake Superior, Eagle River. 2003. Gelatin silver print. 50.8x61cm. Edition one of 25; Marwan Sahmarani. Beit Beirut I. 2003-2015. Over painted photography. 10x15cm. Unique; Marwan Sahmarani. Beit Beirut II. 2003-2015. Over painted photography. 10x15cm. Unique.

Right: Bernd + Hilla Becher. Water Tower, Wauseon, Ohio, USA. 1977. Silver-gelatin print. 60x50cm. Edition three of five. Bernd + Hilla Becher. Water Tower, Greencastle, Pennsylvania, USA. 1974. Silver-gelatin print. 60x50cm. Edition three of five; Gilbert & George. Beardtree. 2017. Mixed media. 149.86x 187.96cm. Unique.



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