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Revisiting the here and now



Summary

Gilbert Hage doesn't like to give interviews.

The series' public life began with Hage's 2004 show of eight portraits.

Working on the same subject, in the same way, from 2003 to 2017 is probably enough time to consider your idea



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Lisa Golden | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Gilbert Hage doesn't like to give interviews. The photographer wants to hear people's raw responses to his work, without pre-empting anything. Fair enough, but hearing an artist's perspective can be important. Audiences must always make up their own minds.

WHAT TO DO?"Ici et Maintenant – Here and Now" is an exhibition of 99 portraits of young people – all in their 20s and 30s, almost all university students and former students, at the time – from across Lebanon. Taken between 2003 and 2017, these 230 x 275-centimeter images are projected upon the walls from nine projectors in the silent darkness of Mar Mikhael's Galerie Tanit.

There are no names, dates, ages, nothing to indicate any of the individuals' biographical details.

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more an indicator of a large number than a specific number. The culmination of the work is a "restricted" selection of 99 from the thousand-odd portraits he has taken.

Working on the same subject, in the same way, from 2003 to 2017 is probably enough time to consider your idea many times over, so Hage must be pretty sure about what he wants to say. It's also enough time to create a "sample" large enough to make a point.

What exactly is his point?

Hage's big, deadpan portraits are as engaging, challenging and thought-provoking as their installation is immersive. Every face, its geography, its glance, raises many questions.

WHERE AND WHEN? Hage's work raises obvious questions about notions of "here and now." There is a strong sense of these young people's presence as their images are shown before us, but what was the "here" of Lebanon when they sat for their portrait. What did it mean to them?

What exactly does "here" mean to viewers in Lebanon? How are we influenced by the visual iconography and the overall context of "here"? Enormous portraits are usually used to advertise, to promote, to commemorate and venerate, and are socially, politically, religiously loaded. Hage's images seem neutral, but are they any less loaded? What sort of dialogue do Hage's images create with those other portraits?

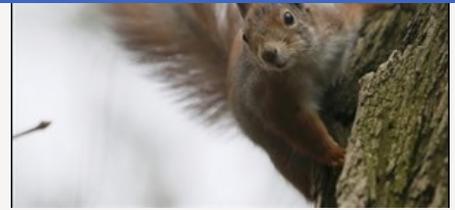
In a "here" outside Lebanon, what impact does place have on the viewer? Would audiences elsewhere be surprised by the faces before them? Does the work challenge ideas of the "there" of Lebanon for those abroad? Does it challenge ideas of the distance between wherever "here" is and "there," particularly at this time of travel bans and rising populism?

The work also raises questions about "now." The images were taken over more than a decade but who could tell? Who could say which was first or last, or guess the chronology from the earliest image to the most recent? What does that alone say?

Significant events have moved across the face of Lebanon since 2003, the 2006 war for instance. What were those young people thinking about the future as Hage pressed the shutter? What is "now" for them today? As more decades pass, how will we view these photos in a future "now"?

STARING AND STEREOTYPES As we gaze at these portraits, we project our questions and ideas onto their anonymous faces, scrutinizing every detail, searching for clues about their identity.

They are inviting yet, at this scale, also somehow intimidating. We stare at them, and they stare back, in an almost equally interrogating way. While formally emulating the passport photo, they are the opposite of passport-sized – opposed, too, to the cellphone-sized selfies that represent everything Hage seeks to absent.



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create our own narratives about them, push our perhaps stereotyped ideas onto them?

Much photographic work has been done on ideas of identity and subcultures. Take the enormous catalogue of images photographer Ari Versluis and profiler Ellie Uyttenbroek have amassed for their "Exactitudes" project – capturing "groups" of people in different places across the world, reminding us that the subculture we identify with has an enormous impact on how we dress and look and the identity we assume, often transcending notions of ethnicity.

In a 2004 article in Bidoun magazine about the first iteration of "Ici et Maintenant," Hage was quoted as saying, "What is 'Lebanese culture'? That's precisely my problem. That's the project. ... It's a melange, a blend of elements. It varies from individual to individual. ... It's a part of globalization that the West doesn't know, or refuses to know or doesn't have the chance to know. If you know Lebanon through the media only, it's not the real Lebanon."

Do these young people's identities mingle with global culture and subcultures or do they perceive themselves in terms of their nationality, village or sectarian affiliation? If you didn't know they were from Lebanon, could you tell? Are people so different the world over?

ID, PLEASE Hage's work, including this series, is heavily influenced by the Dusseldorf School of Photography, characterized by its often serial, deadpan, documentary-style approach.

In a 2004 interview in Influence magazine, Thomas Ruff, a key photographer in the Dusseldorf school, said of his own portrait series: "When I started making the portraits in 1981, my friends and I were very curious about what might happen in 1984, Orwell's year. ...

"There were a lot of controls placed on daily life, and we were often required to produce our passports for inspection. ... I wanted to do a kind of official portrait of my generation. I wanted the photographs to look like those in passports, but without any other information, such as the subject's address, religion, profession or prior convictions. I didn't want the police/viewer to get any information about us."

Hage's series can't not be in dialogue with Ruff's work. Whether Hage's motives were similar or different from Ruff's, Orwellian notions and questions of surveillance and control are perhaps no less important today than previously.

As for the many other questions this show provokes – for those too, you'll have to see the work and decide for yourself.

"Ici et Maintenant" is up at Galerie Tanit through April 1. See www.galerietanit.com.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on March 23, 2017, on page 16.

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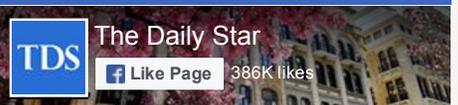
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