



THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2008 The Daily Star

Friday, February 08, 2008

Framing the charisma of modern architecture

'Lightscares,' on display at Beirut's Goethe Institute, features dramatic, occasionally sensual and always detailed 'portraits' of buildings

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

Daily Star staff

Interview

BEIRUT: "My background is more as a people photographer so for me, these are portraits," says Nagib Khazaka, referring to the 32 prints included in his latest exhibition, where, despite his introductory remarks, people are scarce and inanimate objects loom large. "Lightscares," which opened at the Goethe Institute Wednesday evening, is subtitled "A Photographic Anthology of Modern Architecture." It features dramatic photographs - in both sumptuous color and stark black-and-white - of building facades and peculiar urban forms in such cities as Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, Paris and Munich, where Khazaka, 39, was born.

The show is divided in two, with more classical images on the Goethe's upper exhibition hall and more abstract compositions arranged on the floor below. The former are classical in that they provide the viewer with enough space and context to grasp that these are cityscapes. Khazaka's photographs here look upward and, as such, the architecture that is framed by them inspires awe - with grand curves, rippled balconies and exacting angles set against expanses of blue sky.

The latter, by contrast, amplify sharp yet sensual details - the luscious curve of a rotunda in Singapore's National Museum; pristine triangles isolated from the same city's Esplanade Bridge; a crescent-shaped slice of stairs in Munich's Pinakothek der Moderne. Another image of that museum - a close-up of its streamlined, light-filled dome - no longer looks like a photograph at all but rather like a photogram created in the darkroom by a geometrically inclined artist playing dexterously with light-sensitive material.

"If I were to take your portrait, I would sit you down and we would talk," explains Khazaka. "I would discover your interests, your character." For two years, while he was traveling through Europe and Asia, Khazaka maintained much the same process but with buildings and architectural marvels instead of subjects in flesh and blood.

Despite the subtitle, "Lightscares" isn't really an anthology of modern architecture. None of the movement's masterpieces are in evidence, and there are no buildings by the likes of Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer or Alvar Aalto. A later, more corporate-style building by the firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill turns up once, as does Norman Foster. Tadao Ando makes an appearance twice, and one of the most striking images in the exhibition frames a quarter-circle of blue sky cut from curved grey concrete in Tokyo's Omotesando district. The title, "Un Coin de Ciel Bleu, C'est Comme un Coin de Bonheur," is also the show's most poetic.

But Khazaka's work doesn't engage modernism per se. It doesn't historicize the movement or give it the Bernd and Hilla Becher treatment by shooting it coolly and clinically with a subtext that quietly mourns for its imminent obsolescence.

"This is not about the place or the architect," says Khazaka, who does, however, dutifully note the architect responsible for the building he frames, unless the architecture is merely vernacular (and in those cases, often wilder and more interesting). "It's about the geometries, the structures."

Khazaka started taking pictures when he was 12. He studied in Germany, Switzerland and the US and now divides his time between Beirut and Munich. His practice is split between commercial work and fine art photography. "Lightscares" is Khazaka's first major exhibition, though he staged a smaller show at Galerie Rochane in Saifi Village late last year, in part to test the waters of local tastes.

"Photography is appreciated in Lebanon but not as art," he says. For that reason, he laid out his current exhibition carefully.

"The upper room is a warm-up, to introduce you to the subject. Then you go down into the abstract part. The real show is downstairs. This is much more me," he says.

The centerpiece of the series on the lower floor is a bold, large-scale image of Tokyo's International Forum, all zigzagging lines and oval droops that rush from floor to ceiling back to a single, central vanishing point. Other images celebrate simple forms, such as a series of triangles detected in the design of the Austrian architectural firm Coop Himmelb(l)au's BMW showroom in Munich, or parallelograms worked into the International Forum, or an image of a building in Paris' La Defense

that appears, as the title asserts, like a knife.

More pensive is a shot of a landing in the Munich museum, called "Zen Stairs," an interior utterly stripped on ornamentation save dappling vertical light from the ceiling. And most abstract of all is the photograph entitled "Corner," where three surfaces meet in a glow of light, slipping between recognition as two walls meeting the ceiling and interpretation as the thin crease of a reclining woman's hip.

Next up on Khazaka's agenda are trips to Scandinavia and Argentina. He plans to continue photographing architecture but is considering a few ventures outside of major cities. But just as he doesn't shoot buildings as buildings, he says he won't shoot landscapes as landscapes. "I'm not Ansel Adams or anything," he jokes.

Nagib Khazaka's "Lightscapes" is on view at the Goethe Institute in Manara through February 29. For more information, please call +961 1 740 524

THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2008 The Daily Star