

PRESENT AND FUTURE: The Photography Of Hala Elkoussy

By Ian Jeffrey

Why ask people to act parts and to perform? In conventional street photography participants' actions are explained by their setting. They pass by en route and on missions we can easily imagine. As observers, we can investigate such pictures without too much difficulty, for nothing untoward is happening. In these pictures by Hala Elkoussy this is not the case, for the solitary participants in all of these instances have been placed and directed. What, then, does she have in mind? Well, many of her personnel appear to be waiting, and that of course is an ordinary enough thing for us to do. On the other hand much waiting involves waiting for something to happen. You wait in expectation of the arrival of the bus. Or a friend is expected. Or, if you are a youngster, you may await the arrival of maturity in a glamorous and distant future.

Waiting calls the present moment into question. The present moment, which is photography's moment, stands subordinated to the future, when whatever is anticipated will be realised. The photographer accomplishes something like a taxonomy of waiting and of its closely associated condition, preparatory time. We shop, for example, in order to eat later. In a café we await companions; and in one instance a solitary eats by himself, as if to demonstrate an unsatisfactory outcome to the process. There is mythic waiting too, represented by a woman who knits on the flat roof of a house by a set of empty chairs and a TV receptor dish. It might be Penelope awaiting news from Ulysses. The dish, and an adjacent aerial suggest the possibility of news from afar; and a headless doll on a padded chair looks enough like a symbol to bring symbolism to mind. At the other end of the scale you find mere expectation in the shape of an alleyway at the Bab El Nasr Cemeteries. A child peeps out from a doorway wondering who this is who will pass her way, and two chickens stand alert and ready to be startled. This is a version of the future as nothing more than contingency: small events, incidents and happenings.

Altogether the pictures amount to a cross-section of consciousness. The starting point in each case is the here-and-now, with its wealth of small traces: a café wall, for example rubbed and abraded by daily traffic. In that particular instance, reconstruction # 7, the sole participant appears to live without very much expectation in a realised state of bodily comforts: a cigarette, coffee, a chair and the promise company. At the other end of the spectrum there exists the possibility of a place in history, represented by a boy waiting under a three-part portrayal of political leadership. He leans against a railing which constitutes a kind of ladder, and in the foreground a chalked grid says that the ascent will also be a game of chance.

Somewhere within the ensemble of pictures the photographer, who is also a philosopher, considers the question of choice. The school boy underneath the national fresco will be exposed to a play game of fortune. Elsewhere a young person in blue approaches a baker's façade with

two identical windows. Which to choose in such a case? In some cases, on the other hand, there are quite practical decisions to be made between, for instance, the comfort of an elevator and the difficulties of a set of stairs. There maybe also be no choice at all, epitomised in the case of the solitary eater seated under a sign that says that 'we do not have any other branches'. That may account for his inertia and look of sadness.

The idea is not to make us think, for we will think in any event. What she really intends only she can say, but the effect of the pictures is to involve us in the business of thinking. We can begin to piece together a theory with a structure. (Re)construction # 1, for instance, with its generalised picture of affluence presided over by a light which is also a star perhaps represents a starting point, a conventional dream and aspiration. (Re)construction # 2, which is a truly striking image, seems to symbolise some kind of extraordinary and animating vision of either carnival or utopia; which he can see but which is closed to us for the moment. You could proceed, characterising every image in the set, right through to the final image in the set of a burdened pedestrian on a dirt road running parallel to a raised highway. With enough care and attention you could work out terms and ciphers for every element which she negotiates: material visions, utopian visions, simples choices between similar and different items. With sufficient time and ingenuity you might code each picture according to what kind of present it delineates and just how it understands the future.

Hala Elkoussy's is a new kind of photography. In the past, over the last twenty years or so, we have often been dumbfounded by contemporary photography, especially if it was presented in the context of art. We were meant to be astounded and reduced to silence. This was no bad thing, but carried to extremes it led to indifference. Perhaps under the twin influences of social photography and of video, with its natural emphasis on continuities, photography has begun to turn towards the discursive and even to the argumentative. The 17 images in this set are all finely realised examples of the new tendency. Together they constitute an intriguing and challenging addition to the corpus of art photography.

Ian Jeffrey is former head of the Art History Programme at Goldsmiths College, University of London, co-head of the MA Image & Communication Programme at Goldsmiths and author and editor of numerous books on photography among which: Photography – A Concise History, Thames & Hudson, 1981, Revisions: An Alternative History of Photography, National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, 1999, The Photography Book, Phaidon Press, Bill Brandt Photographs 1928-1983