

Against the City

Revisiting the exhibition of Mohammad Ghazali's photographs at Emkan

ALIREZA AHMADI

L
I
U
N
D
E
R
E



Ferris wheels of poor districts © Mohammad Ghazali

As it is obvious in his new collection, Mohammad Ghazali Opens in a new tab or window., whether subtly or explicitly, insists on not remaining faithful and confined to what his camera captures. A collection entitled "Dredge" presented in Emkan Opens in a new tab or window.. The photographer likes to impose his will on the work through making new decisions, stylishly and meticulously, on the whole process of production, print and exhibition. On the one hand this exercise of will on all the details of the process of production itself, and on the other the nature of these decisions, all tending towards laconicism, brevity and retreat, are in complete contrast with the subject of the artist's work. A subject he has persistently concerned himself with for a number of years: his hometown, Tehran; a city in a constant state of chaotic becoming; crowded, disordered and showing no sign of logical reasoning for major decisions.

This contradiction and contrast hits you immediately on entering the exhibition. The initial sensation is precisely "silence", a visual silence: just ten pale frames, on the ground, leaning against the bare whitewashed walls. The photographs ask for patience and attention from the observer; the very qualities missing from

our raw, rushed, experience of the city. You need to bend, pick up the photographs and, examine them closely looking at them front and back.

This is the artist's initial modification of the traditional and customary practice of presenting photographs. As if placing the photographs on the ground is a protest against billboards and the importunate adverts on the walls of the city. Precisely in contrast with the nature of commercial images, that intrusively pop up on route and impose themselves on one's vision, Ghazali's photographs are more like books and the exhibition more like a library: whichever you become interested in you pick up and peruse.

And when we look at the content, this confrontation with the spirit of the city reaches its peak. So much so that Mohammad Ghazali's entire work can be construed as some sort of individual rebellion against his dwelling environment. The story is that the artist chooses a thing/sign from a framed scene of Tehran, muffles its surrounds with paper tape and gives permission of expression to that thing only: the gallery's enclosure is the realm of the artist's dictatorship and, in each frame he, through suppression of the city's disorder and establishment of a private order by reducing the aspects of the city, presents to the mind and eye of the audience only one piece. It is through the very suppression, elimination and silence that the audience is given the opportunity to reflect.

This act of selecting a segment of the picture can be considered from two perspectives. First what it is that the artist chooses and what is the reason behind it, and then, how and in what manner does he do the selection? Here is a list of the selected items, i.e. the framed ones with paper tape: patches of cloud, a few pine trees on the white background of a building's wall, a Ferris wheel in the distance, an ailanthus bush, the urban sculpture of Pegasus, a dome of a mosque, a model airplane on top of a building, a small bridge between two buildings in a narrow alley, a tree and a bicycle and a kid, and finally two adjacent towers. Except for the last one, all of them have some aesthetic value. They are things pleasant to the eye and the heart. Therefore, we may conclude that the artist has left what was pleasing to his eyes and all else is covered up. In fact, this cut off and parenthesized observation is the only way to enjoy seeing Tehran. The logic behind this body of works is similar to what I and, undoubtedly you too, do during our involuntary exposure to the city, for example when stuck in traffic. Under the barrage of ugly elements we pick up a beautiful corner, fragment or part to look at. And it won't be possible to enjoy the sight of that piece unless we turn a blind eye to all unsightly things surrounding it. Enjoyment of watching a branch dancing, an azure dome shining, a beam of light on a piece of metal, and an object's reflection in glass.

But let us look at the artist's method of selecting and marking up. In other words, let's stick to paper tapes. The tapes the artist sticks all around his desired objects. The first thing about them that is noticeable is his attention to the aesthetic requirements of the work. Consideration given to how the tape should be placed in each frame. On what part of the photograph should the edge of each tape fall, what element in the photograph should fall exactly in the midpoint of the width of the tape, or begin to emerge from the edge. The outcome is a number of frames within frames where their conjunction subtly takes position somewhere between mechanical order and seemingly disordered complexity.

As it is mentioned in the statement of the exhibition the tapes are like stairs. Stairs that direct the eye to the work's closet and pull the force and influence of that element out from the picture and bring it to the eyes of the beholder. This stair-like form is mostly obvious on the lower parts of the picture frames, which is why, every now and again, I am reminded of the wide stairways of the ancient Greek edifices, the vision climbs the stairs step by step to reach to the balcony of the piece. Some other times these traces seem to form a basis for that selected thing. As if the artist has conferred art status to something in the city and, making a pedestal for it, turned it into a sculpture to behold..

The interesting point about Ghazali is that in his works the polarisation of invisible/visible has acquired more than two dimensions. And there are some shades of partially visible between that invisibility and this clearness. And who can completely refute the assertion that those obscure ones lure the eye more than the apparent ones? That is how a conflict is triggered. From under the tape, a car, a building or a tree trespasses

the arena of the uncovered thing and wants to catch the beholder's eyes. Sometimes through arousing one's curiosity by being semi-concealed, and on some other occasions by peering from under the tape's edge and sneaking into the realm of visibility.

This struggle is part of Mohammad Ghazali's overall conflict with his surrounding environment. He, who puts his city on the workbench as raw material and works on it with tape, scissors and paper. And in the end makes it something more tolerable and thought-provoking.