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The Human Fold: A Hashem El Madani Tribute Exhibit Pays Homage To The Late Photographer



Artist Akram Zaatari's exhibition of works dedicated to the late photographer Hashem El Madani

At Cincinnati's FotoFocus Lebanese history is revealed through multidisciplinary artist Akram Zaatari's exhibition of works dedicated to the late photographer

Newly-wedded couples in dapper suits and lush wedding gowns, goofy youths roleplaying with western film props, or a man placing a tender kiss on another man's cheek behind his coy gaze — these are but a few of the many scenes captured by the late [Lebanese photographer Hashem El Madani](#) in his walk-in studio in Saida. It was there in Lebanon's picturesque southern city that El Madani worked for decades, creating his art between the burgeoning wealth of the 1950s and the 1980s, when the country was recovering from the chaos and destruction of Lebanon's Civil War.

For Beirut-based multidisciplinary artist [Akram Zaatari](#), El Madani's intimate observations of Lebanese life—from familiar mundane rituals to mysterious performances of identity and desire — is not only an archival treasure, but also an artistic medium, not unlike a painter's tubes of acrylic or sculptor's mounts of clay.

Zaatari discovered the late photographer's work soon after co-founding the Arab Image Foundation, a [Beirut-based non-profit organisation](#) committed to preserving and conceptualising photographic practices in the Arab region and its diasporas since 1997. Zaatari will exhibit his ongoing project on El Madani's rich photography repertoire at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio during the fourth iteration of the FotoFocus Biennial, which occupies various art centers across Cincinnati as well as neighbouring Ohioan cities during October.



Akram Zaatari. 1966. Her + Him Van Leo. 2001-2012. HD video, black and white and colour, sound, mono, and vitrine with 12 C-prints. 31 mins. Edition 3/5 + 2 AP

Aligned with this year's title *Open Archive*, Zaatari's *The Fold: Space, Time and the Image* project delves into examination of archival material from an ideological viewpoint, bridging works by two artists born into different tumultuous eras of the same geography. Asking viewers to acknowledge the physicality of found photography, the [52-year-old Zaatari](#) presents his predecessor's social-realist images not only as chroniclers of a past they share through different experiences, but also as threads of a complex cultural pattern that resists evanescence. Captured in the photographer's stills are microcosmic histories, alternatives to mainstream accounts in textbooks. Through Zaatari's deeply researched compositions, the images branch out to the present, narrating timeless tales of human endurance.

From the emergence of technological means to the flux of [Palestinian refugees](#) after 1948, junctures that constitute the mid-20th century collective Lebanese identity, each photographer weaves various riotous periods from their country's past into their carefully construed images. A generous portion of shots portray Lebanon's thriving social and economic heydays preceding the Civil War, conveying the calm before the storm; others encapsulate tragic tales, such as the untimely-departed Mrs. Baqari whose pictures were scratched with a pin upon her jealous husband's request.

The subjects' urge to be commemorated with theatrical props — such as guns due to the influence of Hollywood Westerns at the time — in front of a generic studio background, which manifest photography's potential to illustrate the psyche as opposed to its documentarian role. The subjects are performative, far from candid; they're immersed in hyperbolic zeal to be photographed and immortalised, posing in exaggerated versions against a reality outside the studio.

Numerous decades later, El-Madani's two young men suavely posing with a lifesize [Marilyn Monroe](#) cutout, their arms crossed over the cardboard mannequin in pride or Zaatari's three bodybuilders proudly displaying their muscles behind hazy marks on a damaged print, reach a new audience in Cincinnati. It is far from El Madani's Saida studio, which he named Shehrazade, and which remained in business until a bomb explosion in 1982. At the time of its closure, the studio had photographed an unsurpassable portion of Saida locals, amassing an archive of over 75,000 stills that embody bittersweet moments in the lives of ordinary people.

At the same time, human notions of intimacy, vulnerability and poise are filtered through Zaatari's meticulous lens, exposing uncharted narratives onto withstanding fractions of history.

Encompassing diverse concepts including film, installation and printed media, *The Fold: Space, Time and the Image* blends an existing body of work with a portion Zaatari created upon invitation from the [Contemporary Arts Center's Steven Matijcio](#), who joins the biennial as a guest curator alongside numerous local and international names. "The process is similar to assembling

a dinner party,” explains Matijico about organising the exhibition with an artist whose work encompasses the roles of an archivist as well as a curator. “We have been taking *guests* in and out, trying to add new works and have things circulate.”

The installation, *End of Love*, for example, includes 150 mainly matrimonial photographs of couples, revealing unexplored narratives in existent imagery. Another part of the exhibition is *Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright*, a twelve-minute film in which two separated men communicate their enduring love for one another through a traditional typewriter *sans* human body.



Akram Zaatari. *Bodybuilders*: printed from a damaged negative showing Munir El Dada in Saida, 1948. 2011. Image courtesy of the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico City; Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg & Beirut

The month-long [FotoFocus attracts a local and global crowd](#) of lens-based art professionals and aficionados, gathering an ambitious programme with more than 90 projects over an ample geography spanning through Northern Kentucky. True to its title, this year’s installment furthers the conversation around photography as a documentarian and mimetic practice, prompting alternative approaches to looking at pictures beyond the surface. Zaatari’s assumption of the *against* photography idea contributes to the biennial’s blanketing theme, deliberating on the potential of images and their responsibility, to reflect a fast-changing reality, and, in this case, the reality of a nation’s decades gone past.

Space, Time and the Image runs from 5 October 2018 through 10 February 2019 at Contemporary Arts Centre. Contemporaryartscenter.org