

Essay for the 'New Chapter' catalogue in conjunction with an exhibition of new photographs by HH Lateefa bint Maktoum

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A conversation for now and later

I am drawn to photographers who were painters perhaps because they tend to recognize the process and practice of constructing; they 'make' photographs rather than 'take' them. In addition they often have a comprehensive visual history to draw from and refer to. They are knowledgeable people, visually literate.

Pioneering photographers of the mid-nineteenth century, more than twenty years after the announcement of the invention of photography, recognized that photographs - like paintings - are artificially constructed portrayals that had to be carefully considered, composed, lit and made. H.P. Robinson (formerly a painter) is one example of this. He made photographs that employed the 'grand style' of composition as advocated by Sir Joshua Reynolds in the eighteenth century. Robinson's most famous work and first exploration with combination printing, *Fading Away*, was made in 1858 from five glass negatives using the wet collodion photographic process. The negatives were contact printed onto albumen paper to make the positives that were then cut and pasted together to form the final piece that had a finished image size of 23.8 x 37.2 cm. By using five negatives for different parts of the composition, Robinson could control both tonal detail and compositional elements within the final image. Photographers today who employ High Dynamic Range (HDR) type practices to create balanced exposures in high contrast scenes are essentially elaborating technically on Robinson's nineteenth century technique.

Robinson's *Fading Away* refers to a family tragedy where a bedridden young woman, portrayed by his favorite model Miss Cundall, is represented as dying, surrounded by different generations of her family who bear witness and demonstrate their particular grief. The cause of the death portrayal has been attributed to tuberculosis, a prevalent disease of nineteenth century Britain that could affect all classes of society indiscriminately. Another more romantic reading of the work is recorded as it depicting a young woman dying due to a broken heart. This explanation has been offered in respect of a previous photographic sketch by Robinson of the same model and subject matter titled *She Never Told Her Love*, made as an illustration of a verse from Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night'.

The photograph *Fading Away* employs a painterly attitude of construction. Robinson's intention in both his practice and in his extensive writings on 'the pictorial' was to elevate photography from the mere scientific and place it within the realms of art worthiness. Whilst this idea of photography as art may be

accepted today, making such a claim in the nineteenth century was seen as contentious if not eccentric. At the Photographic Society of London, established in 1853, one of the members commented that photography was "too literal to compete with works of art" because it was unable to "elevate the imagination". Robinson's struggle for establishing artistic photography lay in the paradox that photography was seen as a medium of 'unassailable facts'. For Robinson the photographer's imagination was there to manipulate and compose 'facts' and with that process he would make the 'body' of the work, the 'soul' of the work would be in its artfulness. In an extract from 'Elements of a pictorial photograph of 1896' Robinson writes "It should be true to nature, but if it is to be a work of art it must not represent nature as faithfully as seen in a mirror". The photographer's imagination was seen as the key to art rather than the constraints of the medium.

Robinson's work and that of his contemporary J.M. Cameron provide an attitude toward art worthiness in photography, that it should be both painterly and noble in message. Both would include literary references to their works in the title and/or with accompanying poems/writings. This practice of *Ut pictura poesis*, associating pictorial work with text, represents a long tradition in painting and printmaking and serves to further promote the photograph into an art worthy context.

Fading Away is accompanied by a poem by the romantic poet P.B. Shelley, *Queen Mab*, written on the matt of the photograph

*Must then that peerless form  
Which love and admiration cannot view  
Without a beating heart, whose azure veins  
Which steal like streams along a field of snow  
That lovely outline, which is fair  
As breathing marble perish*

In the chronological history of photography this 'pictorial' approach to photography was superseded by 'Naturalism' as introduced by P.H. Emerson in Great Britain. His work and writings demanded neither manipulation nor artificiality, but photographing actual people in actual places as opposed to dressing models and arranging them in front of artificial studio environments etc. His work represents modernism in photography at the same time that Cezanne was defining modernism in painting. A. Steiglitz in America further developed this in the twentieth century. He promoted a 'straight' approach for photography, devoid of all 'flim flam' and later to the possibility of the photograph as a metaphor or 'equivalent' in both his own work and that of his prodigies. Such work preceded 'pure photography' as demonstrated in particular by members of the F64 group that included Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham and Edward Weston amongst the eleven contributors. Their photographs were characterized by a clear, sharp-focus aesthetic, the title 'F64' referring to a smallest aperture of the camera lens, one that would provide the largest depth of field (focus). Such work that promotes a meditation of place and its clearest and purest

photographic rendition exemplifies a significantly different approach to photography as an art form compared to that of Robinson.

Robinson's work made in the nineteenth century can be seen in the context of what is now referred to as the 'constructed reality' or 'staged photography' genres. Examples of this genre can be seen by both analogue and digital practitioners such as - and in no particular order - Philip-Lorca DeCorcia, Jerry Ulseman, Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Justine Kurland, Boyd Webb, Gursky, Cindy Sherman, Camille Zakharia David Hockney, Shadi Ghadirian, Duane Michaels, Halim Al-Karim, Claude Cahun, Vivian Sundaram, Mari Mahr and in this exhibition and catalogue by Lateefa bint Maktoum.

Many of the above-mentioned are well known to Lateefa, we have looked at and talked about them and many more during our 'think talk' meetings. At these meetings we have shared thoughts about photographs both formally and conceptually and talked about how our individual backgrounds, our experiences, cultures and memories are influences. In addition we looked at paintings by Giorgio di Chirico, Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca and the Pre Raphaelite brotherhood in particular, where we looked at and talked about their narratives, treatments, composition, colour palette, poses etc. This is research activity that artists engage in; sometimes it is applied, adapted and sometimes rejected but mostly it is like breathing, you just do it, you breathe it in and learn by it.

Previously I have mentioned examples taken from the history of photography as well as introducing Robinson's work in particular because much of Lateefa's work relates to this historical context and debate. Like Robinson she has a painting/fine art background and she 'makes' photographs; she draws and notates preliminary sketches of her work in her sketchbooks that provide a fascinating insight into her thought processes and pre-production considerations. In earlier work she uses Photoshop software much like Robinson used combination printing as a form of bringing together different elements to create the final piece. In this exhibition Lateefa demonstrates examples of both 'straight' photography and of 'staged photography' genres as preferred methods, where Photoshop is employed for craft rather than construction. Her art is about an ongoing narrative, it is personal, there are numerous underlying stories and references in her photographs, some readable whilst others maintain a mystery for the viewer to discover and interpret in their own way and time. Over a hundred years ago Robinson wrote 'A picture should draw you on to admire it, not show you everything at a glance. After a satisfactory general effect, beauty after beauty should unfold itself, and they should not all shout at once . . . This quality [mystery] has never been so much appreciated in photography as it deserved.'

I have a particular affection for a number of Lateefa's early works. I respond to their worlds, there is often a secret or juxtaposition that provides a visual poem. An image is formed that refers not to a decisive moment but more a collection of moments fused together, a reflection of a time and place that is made from a number of memories/moments rather than one. There is a subtle narrative and a

sense that things could and will inevitably change. References to before, during and after are often elements in her work.

Just as Dubai and the UAE are changing so is Lateefa's life with marriage and the blessing of children. Marriage and motherhood brings with it challenges. So she looks at the change in herself and her surroundings as essentially the same thing. What is valued from the past is brought into focus just as the optimism of the future. The brave new world of post-modernism relies on a recognition for and respect of its past.

Robinson was working at a time when photography was not considered a potential art form and he sought ways to address this through his work and writings. When I first came to the UAE twenty years ago, there was little evidence of either contemporary photography or art practice. The fine arts appeared to be an essentially private and generally unsupported practice. The physical change of Dubai and the UAE has been comprehensively reported and commented upon by many. The development of international museums and art fairs in the UAE has attracted significant coverage, a range of universities have flourished and now offer maturing arts programs, but what is less recognized is the individual support for artists and for local art practice. Nearly ten years ago Lateefa, having completed her own undergraduate arts program, established Tashkeel specifically in order to support and potentially define local art practice. This has become a home for many artists and now designers through studio provision, workshops, dedicated programmes, artist residencies and exhibitions. In parallel with this, Lateefa has continued to be engaged with her own creative work.

This exhibition is one more chapter that bears witness to her own development as an artist and to her support as well as contribution to the definition of contemporary art in the here and now. The photographs are not like stills from a film as some of her earlier works were and are grander than theatre; to me they are more operatic. To appreciate opera is to watch and listen with some degree of concentration in order to hear, feel and appreciate the richness of the narrative and its performance. Going to the opera can be an intense and rewarding experience with conversation about its performance existing way beyond the curtain call. Opera creates resonance. These latest photographs by Lateefa are sumptuous, drawn with light and F64-like detail. Their narrative is her poetic portrayal of expectation and realization and also serves as a universal story. As such, the works can be appreciated both aesthetically and as message. Robinson's work required a necessary collaboration between the photographer and the skill of the models performance and pose to portray a character and narrative. Lateefa's work is more a collaboration with her ever-evolving self and that of her surroundings and future.

I think Robinson and Lateefa would have a good conversation if it were possible. I can hear Lateefa asking about compositional form and about why he later rejected his combination printing technique and I can hear Robinson asking about dealing with colour in photography and about Lateefa's use of both models and

increasing use of self in her work. I can hear them both discussing how message can be visually explored, how to decide what may be offered to the public and what should remain private and I can hear them smiling as they both reveal some of the secrets and mysteries in their works, subtle inclusions that observers may miss in the works but are there as part of their signatures. They may conclude their meeting with thoughts and exchanges about the challenges of photography being lyrical as opposed to literal and agree to meet later in order to continue the conversation.

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