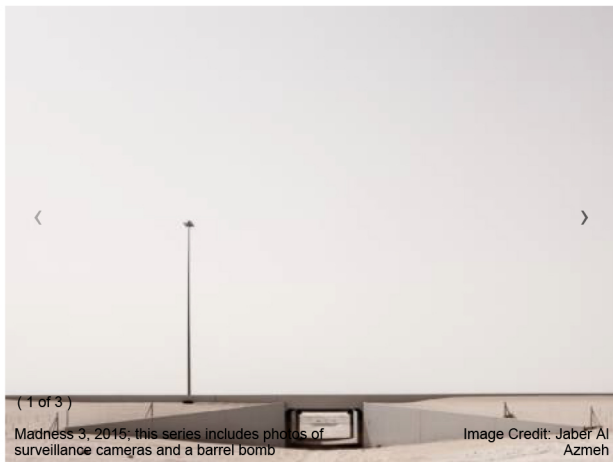


## The borders that divide and rule

Jaber Al Azmeh's photographs highlight the underlying causes of conflict, the price people pay, and the plight of the refugees it creates



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The conflict in Syria forced Jaber Al Azmeh to flee his country. But the artist, who is now based in Doha, continues to voice the feelings of ordinary Syrians and tell their stories through his work. His 2012 series "Wounds" highlighted the emotional ramifications of the uprising, and later his "Ba'ath" series addressed the lack of freedom of speech as the conflict unfolded, while also honouring individual stories of heroism. In his latest show, "Border Lines", the photographic artist takes a more detached and holistic view of the situation, exploring the roots of this crisis and its global implications.

Through photographs taken in and around the desert, the artist explores various aspects of a problem that is personal and regional but also universal. The images are minimalistic and calm, but there is a scream behind the silence that conveys the artist's anguish and the pathos of the situation. However, the artist also holds out hope for a better future.

"As an artist I have tried to do whatever I could through my work to help my injured country. But the situation became so ugly that I just lost hope and decided to stay away from all the news and disconnect

myself from everything that was happening. Instead of being mentally and emotionally somewhere else, I wanted to start living in the place where I am physically present.

“For me the desert has always been a place where I could connect with nature, find solace and feel refreshed. So I started spending a lot of time in the desert, driving around, camping under the stars and enjoying the beauty and tranquility around me. But the news about the desperate attempts of Syrian refugees to seek asylum and the unbelievably cold, hostile response to their distress made me feel very sad and angry. When I saw tyre tracks in the desert running in different directions and disappearing into the mist, I felt they were a metaphor for the struggles of the refugees and for the chaos in a world that seems to have lost its bearings. And that is how this project was born,” the artist says.

Through his photographs Al Azmeh has highlighted the systems and structures that control people and create schisms in the society. The story begins with a set of images titled “Madness”. These include pictures of surveillance cameras and a barrel bomb, which represents both the bombs being used to kill civilians in Syria and the oil barrels over which wars are being fought. Also included are photographs of an underpass and a mist covered pool in the desert.

“These works are about the insanity of war, the paranoia of rulers, their greed for power and money, and the way they brainwash people to follow them like sheep and end up drowning,” the artist says.

In the next set of images, titled “Nationalism”, the artist examines the notions of identity and belonging that make people fear “the other” through photographs of barriers and a border checkpoint in the desert. In one picture, a stack of sofas lined up in the desert alludes to those in positions of power who are either using the frenzy of nationalism to create barriers between people, communities and cultures or just standing by and watching desperate refugees being turned away at borders.

The artist then highlights the plight of refugees through a series of photographs titled “Survival”. His photographs of tyre tracks crisscrossing the desert or going in circles and disappearing into the horizon evoke the tragedy of migration, and ask questions about where the world is heading. Other images of abandoned trucks filled with household goods, and a row of empty buses also speak about the lives that have been uprooted and destroyed.

In a series of pictures titled “Mainstream” rows of identical houses and an empty billboard stand in silent testimony to the role played by growing consumerism and the media’s promotion of global brands in the conflicts happening around the world.

Every image in the show has a line that runs across it like a border, be it the horizon, a road, a fence or a row of trucks. But this symbolic border between places, between dream and reality, and between the conscious and unconscious, disappears in the last segment of the show, titled “Soaring”. Here the artist is presenting beautiful pictures of the undulating dunes in the desert, clear blue skies and enchanting sunrises. Taken during his trips deep into the desert the photographs convey a feeling of calm, peace and optimism.

“We are living in a system where everything is controlled by money and power and we are always stressed out. But I have experienced how being one with nature, sitting quietly on a dune and watching the

“I have juxtaposed my large-scale images of the dunes and clear skies with a small photograph of a fence running through the desert with a row of pylons and cables cutting across the sky, because I want to remind people that instead of sharing the beauty of our planet we are breaking it up with fences, borders, misplaced notions of nationalism and a relentless pursuit of money, power, and acquisitions. I feel we have reached the borderline and it is time to stop the madness. Everybody wants peace and happiness and we must all work together to achieve it,” Al Azmeh says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

“Border Lines” will run at Green Art Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, until July 2.