



Jaber Al Azmeh, who lives in Doha, often escapes to the desert to enjoy its serenity and beauty. Courtesy Green Art Gallery

## Syrian photographer Jaber Al Azmeh captures the beauty of the desert in latest exhibit

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At first, and in a manner driven purely by aesthetics, Jaber Al Azmeh photographed tyre tracks in the sand during his travels in the Qatari desert.

A nature lover, he had been photographing the landscapes of Syria in an abstract manner, with a view to publishing them in a book.

That plan was put on hold four years ago at the outbreak of the civil war, when he and his family fled their native Damascus and moved to Doha. There, he set up a company for commercial photography, similar to the one he had managed back home.

"I didn't want my kids growing up surrounded by violence," says Al Azmeh. "When we left Damascus, our souls and minds were there, but physically we were here. Though I miss my home, I realise that with this new life, I should be here physically and mentally."

In Doha, he often escapes to the desert to enjoy its serenity and beauty.

"The desert took my breath away, visually and emotionally," says Al Azmeh. "It's calm, strong and harsh at the same time. I started to feel that it has an effect on you – that same feeling people get when they meditate."

On one of these desert trips, he chose to forgo GPS systems, and opted instead to challenge himself to navigate on his own. Al Azmeh allowed his camera to guide him – perhaps, in doing so, to metaphorically “find” himself.

“I was working on something beautiful but I wanted something more powerful, and I felt that something was missing in terms of context,” he says.

The images of the tyre tracks were unprompted and pretty. Though the camera lens he then discovered symbolic objects – abandoned oil barrels, a lone security checkpoint, a frozen line of disused buses, a posterless billboard – all allegories of capitalism, surveillance, security, migration and consumerism. Emblems of a contemporary reality, they stand derelict in a barren desert and speak volumes about industry – but also of the reduced currency of the existing human condition.

Al Azmeh allowed spontaneity to lead him and believes that most of the images in *Borderlines*, his fifth solo exhibition, which opens at Green Art Gallery next month, came together before the idea was fully formed.

“I oscillated between the beauty of the place and would then remember the world’s ugliness and its state of affairs,” he says. “My mind works at these two extremes. I am an optimist and I love life, but I can see ugliness and I’m giving it portraits.”

This new body of work is a departure from his previous series, in that it encompasses a macro perspective, so to speak.

*Wounds* (2012) poignantly hit on the emotive reactions to the Syrian uprising with a series of black-and-red images that re-enact moments of tragedy and despair.

*Baath* (2014), named after the Arab nationalist ideology and a daily Syrian newspaper, tackled the censorship and lack of freedom of speech that the Syrian revolution brought on.

“Initially, I hadn’t thought about those bodies of work as bodies of work,” says Al Azmeh. “They were my contribution to the crisis, my form of activism.”

Unlike *Wounds* and *Baath*, *Borderlines* addresses global issues.

One image features a row of identical houses, none of which feel like homes.

“It’s almost as though a house is a product and thoughts are all the same – like everything is ‘copy-paste’,” says Al Azmeh. “So you start to see the ugliness of capitalism.”

At once minimalist and serene, the images also embody a threatening notion. There is something acutely intimidating about them and yet, simultaneously, they are deeply engaging in their metaphoric nature and simplicity.

Rendered in various sizes, perhaps to insinuate the varying degrees of global issues, Al Azmeh intends to hang the photographs at a precise height where a line runs through them all. That line, a rather mercurial aspect in its own right, separates land and sky – and perhaps indicates the border between conscious and unconscious.

Al Azmeh intends to close the exhibition on a hopeful and positive note with

a series of abstract images of the desert.

"Something about the desert resembles a woman's body and it has a woman's strength and beauty, too," he says.

"I do consider myself an optimist. On the one hand I do see the ugliness in the world, but there are moments when I forget and look at its beauty."

• **Borderlines runs at Green Art Gallery, Al Quoz, Dubai, from May 16 to July 2. For more information, visit [www.gagallery.com](http://www.gagallery.com)**