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Images don't always show the true picture

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Five women artists deconstruct the process of photography to illustrate how biases, viewpoints and motives tend to tint reality

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Image Credit: Supplied
Ruin in Adana Minaret, 1909, 2012, Mehreen Murtaza

Since the invention of the camera, photographic images have been one of the most important ways of

reporting news and recording and preserving our history. People generally tend to believe that a picture is a truthful depiction of reality and history. But the fact is that images can be manipulated, and they often are. We know that they can be altered by modern digital technology; but we should also be aware that pictures can be distorted by the viewpoints, biases and motives of those who create them and by the contexts. We must also realise that our perception of people, events and objects are influenced by the way they are portrayed by the image makers.

Challenging the idea of the image as truth is the central theme of an exhibition titled “A Permanent Record For Future Investigation”. The show is curated by New York-based Iranian artist Kamrooz Aram, whose own work is focused on questioning the creation of a false history of Eastern cultures and renegotiating certain histories. He has brought together five women artists from different parts of the world whose work explores the history of image making and the notion of the image as historical document. They include Tehran-based Nazgol Ansarinia, Talia Chetrit, who lives in New York, Egyptian artist Eman Eisa, Mehreen Murtaza from Pakistan and Hajra Wahid. The artists have found innovative ways of blurring the lines between documentation and fiction to show that the meaning of objects and spaces depends on the context in which they are seen and that the reality and truth of an image are subjective and malleable.

Ansarinia takes inspiration from her Iranian heritage to comment on biased news reporting in the media. In her series, “Subtractions/Refractions”, she has created collages using two radically different articles about the same event from two different newspapers. The articles have been cut into many small pieces, and carefully assembled in the form of traditional Iranian mirror

mosaics. “When you look in a mirror, you expect to see a true reflection of yourself. But what you see in these mirror mosaics is a kaleidoscopic distortion of reality. Similarly, the role of a newspaper is to reflect the reality within society. But when you read two different perspectives in two different newspapers, it becomes evident that reality is subjective and depends on the storyteller’s perspective. Like the mirror mosaics, my newspaper mosaics are visually attractive, but do not give us a true picture of the event,” the artist says.

Chetrit is interested in examining the concept and process of photography itself and understanding the cultural, historical and social significance of image making. In her photographic work “Modular Sculpture”, she simultaneously presents two different views of a mass-produced modular sculpture. Her aim is to show how through the process of photography, an object can be transformed from everyday kitsch into an elegant modern work of art. “By shooting from multiple angles in a flattened space, I wanted to highlight the limitations of the medium of photography as well as its ability to represent an object in a controlled and specific manner,” she says.

Wahid focuses on the human element in the distortion of truth, quite literally using sleight of hand to demonstrate how pictures can lie. Her ongoing project, “Anouchian Passport Portrait Series”, is inspired by an archive of 198 portraits of men and women taken by Armenian photographer, Antranik Anouchian, in Lebanon, in the 1950s and 1960s. Wahid, who lives in Canada, accessed these portraits through the Arab Image Foundation, and she has recreated these portraits as a series of pencil drawings. But the interesting thing is that while creating these reproductions, she has used a mechanical technique, using her eye as a scanner and her hand as a printer.

The resulting images are light and ephemeral, inviting viewers to project an identity on to the anonymous faces. The new work in this series that she has created for this exhibition comprises three pairs of portraits titled “Side profiles”. Each pair of portraits is based on the same photograph, but due to the human element in the process of drawing, they do not look identical. Thus the artist illustrates how tiny variations in tone and the uneven application of marks can change an image, resulting in a difference between the original story and its retelling.

Murtaza’s interventions are less subtle. For her installation titled “The Dubious Birth of Geography”, she has collected 15 photographs documenting various historical events. The pictures relate to colonisation, the creation of new territories and the thoughts of significant figures such as writer George Orwell. But the artist has altered these images by adding various elements based on myths and rumours associated with these events and people to create her own science fiction-like versions. “I have taken the historical photograph — our most trusted visual documentation — and changed it to depict events that stem from conspiracy theories, mythological tales and miraculous happenings. These images look like the ones you see in history books, but I have mixed fact with myth and magic to create new narratives. By presenting history in this absurd manner, I want to force viewers to think seriously about how images have shaped who we are today and the power of images to influence how we understand ourselves in the future,” the artist says.

Eisa, on the other hand, negotiates the question of representation in terms of the rendering of a memory. Each of her artworks is a triptych comprising three elements that seem to be totally unrelated. But in the artist’s mind they are connected. Each piece begins

with a photograph of a location that has some personal significance for her. Based on the feelings, memories and associations that this space evokes in her mind, she constructs what she calls “settings”. She photographs these settings and displays them as a framed still-life image in the centre of the triptych. However, this picture of the “setting” is very different from the image that originally inspired it and generates a fresh response from the artist, which becomes the third element in the work. The piece she is displaying in the show begins with a picture of a pond with flowers, which evoked memories of festive traditional meals and was hence transformed into a “setting” of a table laden with food; this in turn reminded the artist of a piece of music, represented in the artwork by a set of headphones. The work thus represents the process of interpretation and reinterpretation of an image seen through the lens of emotion. With this performative and playful approach, Eisa invites viewers to create a fourth element based on their own associations with each successive element in her artworks, highlighting just how subjective individual interpretations of images can be.

The exhibition will run at Green Art Gallery until January 10.