

## Transition encapsulated

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The works presented by Lebanese photographer **Nadine Kanso** at B21 Gallery in Dubai continue to explore her identity as a fully modern Arab woman. The exhibition title, *Rewind: Ya Zaman*, almost sounds like a nostalgic call, the ironic result of a linguistic word-crossing that mixes English and Arabic.

"Rewind, oh old time", it states, by using the verb that indicates the act of a tape to go back to its beginning in order to be played again, giving us a new chance to watch the same film or to listen to the same music as if it was for the very first time ...

The works of art on show are photo-assemblages which consist of the superimposition of today's figures over a background bound in paperboards, a mounting of images, notes and newspaper or printed text cuttings that send us back to the past.

One's first impression is that of a total extraneousness between the two dimensions represented here and this feeling undoubtedly constitutes a precious clue to interpreting Kanso's work.

The background is actually bi-dimensional, a wall which modern Arabs can at least look at, but more often turn their shoulders to. There is no authentic dialogue between this backdrop and the foreground; indeed, the foreground shows young men and women carrying showy objects, symbolically oversized, crushed — like everyone else — by their purchases.

A pinkish shoe with a dizzy heel, a golden mobile phone, watch, bags, cherry-red sunglasses, embroidered jeans and red lipsticks: these are the objects that today's young people carry and relate themselves to, much more frequently — or at least more easily — than with their own past.

And yet the past, as it is collected here, has a defined coherence: Every panel is dedicated to the most representative personalities from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s: political men, poets, writers, artists, singers ... the pride of the Arab nation.

However, here comes the most crucial question one should ask: Logically speaking, can we still talk about a compact entity like that of an "Arab nation"? The political and religious fragmentation does not authorise such an over-national definition; this is Arab "imagery", perhaps, rather than authentic identity — a slippery ground where one can fall at any time.

This first series of photo-assemblages is completed by a second group of works, characterised by an ironic perspective, the proof of that special humour and auto irony that one comes to discover and appreciate after living in the Middle East for a while.

The technique is the same: A few details from the panels used as background in the first group of pictures are here, surmounted by road signals which provide further information in order to define a perspective.

There is a correspondence between the two groups of pictures, like an unexpressed syllogism. We can parallel Al Ustaz ("The teacher") dedicated to Michel Aflaq, the ideological founder of the Baath party — who is twinned with a couple of teenagers-to-be playing with some technological "toys" — and Speed-bump, where this road panel faces a detail from the previous backdrop: the impression we get is a criticism to political ideology, as if it is nowadays perceived as a limit to progress and modernisation.

A detail from Sha'r Al Mara, the panel dedicated to Nizar Qabbani (known as the "women's poet") in the second group of photo-assemblages must respect a severe 20-km/h speed-limit, as if women's cause was forced to underlie to a clear slowing-down.

Itihad I ("Coalition I") presents the first presidents of Iraq, Yemen and Syria in front of whom an Arab-dressed man with a golden mobile seems to symbolise the idea of material luxury and simultaneously the concept of physical distance that the phone means to reduce. In the second group of photo-assemblages, a detail from this background is partially covered by a "No way forward" road panel.

It seems to be a political message, as a negation of any nationalism. However, it might rather be an ascertainment: The artist seems to record a sort of surrender to the opportunity (or the necessity) to find new countries to settle down in, in order to secure oneself a piece of that welfare which seems to represent the new homeland and the new identity to compare with.