



# I'm a Lomoholic!

Lebanese photographer Maher Attar's work has appeared in *Géo*, *Paris Match*, *Life*, *Time* and *Newsweek*; he is also a personal royal photographer, veteran war correspondent, Digigrapher, Sax player and book publisher who founded his own agency in Paris. He talks to *Alexandra Kohut-Cole* about his latest solo exhibition at Anima Gallery on The Pearl.



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A Still on a Land in Motion", a solo exhibition of recent work by Maher Attar, is important to him for many reasons. Not least that he will be celebrating his 50th birthday as well as 30 years of being in his profession. With this exhibition, Attar wanted to mix the old with the new, so the past is brought to the present by way of cultural evolution with a lomographic camera. He calls this a "fake past" and explains that he is writing history his way, documenting the charm of Qatar. "I want to give this a nostalgic and artistic touch," he explains.

Attar is a self-confessed perfectionist. "People sometimes have difficulty working with me because I go into detail on every single thing. When I print, for example, and even for this exhibition, some of the prints I repeated ten or fifteen times. It has to be more than perfect. Photography for me is not just a single, simple click." He takes pains to explain that he is not fighting against technology. "Technology, I think, brought up everything and for everyone".

Attar charmingly describes being on a "Lomo Mission". Each exhibit has been shot with his lomographic camera, for which he clearly has a passion. "I am a lomoholic," he says. "In the nineties in Austria they produced a new machine, a very simple camera. It was a very cheap QR130 - 735 (\$35-200) camera with a plastic lens, one speed, one diaphragm, and the finger decides the speed of the shutter." He explains that the cameras are temperamental and that he uses them with expired film. "I always use the one designed in Russia, made in China called 'Olga'." This suits his style as having lived in Paris for well on twenty years, Attar confesses to having "an oriental heart and a Western mentality, like a double identity or culture - you have to have a mix".

Attar's early mentors were the veteran war reporters he would listen to while working with them as the youngest of them at 19. "I was inspired in Lebanon during the war. All the big war photographers were there, but they have all died now." Two of these big names were Pulitzer prize-winning photographer Eddie Adams and the first female photographer to win



the World Press Photo of the Year award, Françoise Demulder. This was the early eighties and the last big war, Vietnam, had ended in 1973.

During this time, Attar himself nearly died; in fact the doctor did not expect him to reach hospital. A bullet had entered his face below his eye and came out through the back of his head. Only a tiny scar on his cheek marks the occasion. He also lost a chunk of his calf that a bullet ripped out. But Attar describes himself in those days as "a freelancer looking for something to sell. It was 1983, I was excited as a young photographer looking for a scoop, a good catch of the day, good hunting!"

Which brings us back to Anima Gallery to focus on a great example of "a good catch of the day" in the black and white image of a man and woman sitting in harmony gazing out to sea. "This was taken in December 2009, on the Corniche, on National Day. Imagine how many people were there and how hard it was to get just two people? I think then I was forcing myself to do a shot but then I saw this shot, I took it

Clockwise from left: Images of Doha, capturing the past and present in lomo; Attar's solo exhibition at the Anima Gallery







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and went home! The irony of this powerful image is that it is a young Qatari couple. A Westerner will view it as incongruous because you incredibly rarely see this with a Qatari couple but with Westerners all the time."

Attar's love of his lomo camera flies in the face of the modern digital photographic aesthetic whereby "everyone is a photographer", the skill is taken away and the whole thing is diluted. "The lomography camera grapples with lack of focus, poor exposure, inaccurate colors. And you wait for your image." By this he means that he sends all his photographs to be developed in Paris. This takes time, so he might have forgotten about an image until it comes back to him. Which is exactly what happened with another image in his exhibition, that of a series of ghutras hanging with the agals on a staggered hook arrangement. "This was taken at the entrance of the mosque. They were washing before prayer and then I saw the image like the Olympic rings. I took two frames, one was with flash, and that is the one I used. Six months later I developed the film, I had forgotten about it! Using lomo is like creating something from nothing". In this image, one *agal* has a long 'tail' to which the eye is drawn. This marks it out as Qatari. "This is how you can tell it is a Qatari *agal*; they are the only Arab nation to wear this style."

Attar came to Doha from Paris, "the capital of photography", so does he miss the French capital?

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When he left in 2006 he was working on his book *Once Upon a Time ... Souk Waqif* in which he captures the mystery and the spirit of the old Doha market. The book is partially in lomo. Attar added a few of these images as a precursor to producing a book entirely of lomo photographs.

He was simultaneously working on another book in Paris during this time; with a completely different subject matter - focusing on backstage at the Lido. "I spent three years on it, it's one of my favorite. It was interesting at that time to work with the dancers. I was trying to find a view on the profession that is an art." Some of the girls were studying architecture or medicine. "The most important thing was that these girls when they used to go on stage they were wearing the light, they wear the light" like a veil? "Exactly. They don't see the people, this light covered them and for me ..., this is why I decided to do this book". He called it *Bonheur* - Happiness.

The day job for Attar is director of the photo library at the office of HH Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, wife of the Emir, HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, which he cannot discuss in detail for obvious reasons. However, during the past year he became heavily involved in ROTA (Reach Out to Asia) including a program designed to teach children from Asian countries the joys and techniques of photography. "We published a book 100% by these kids. Some of them held a camera for the first time in their lives..."

When he wakes in the morning he wants to leave something behind "because I saw death." If his work is appreciated, he is happy. "An idea doesn't always work, but the assistant or public might like it even if I don't!" Therapy for Attar is a Harley-Davidson "Sometimes I go to the desert on my Harley, I take my camera and I try to get the photo of the day - have a good catch!"