

## Imageless aesthetics of 'Dark Matter'



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👤 Danielle Krikorian | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: "Dark Matter" features the digital archival work of Lebanese artist Ziad Antar. Organized by the Beirut Art Residency, the exhibition is currently on show at the St. Joseph Crypt, whose gloomy underground architecture complements Antar's obscure photographs.

The antique stone walls, yellow lighting and stone vaulting cast shadows that seem to merge with the artworks. The viewer is directly submerged in the "dark" world of the exhibition.

Antar told The Daily Star that the title "Dark Matter" evokes his photos' dark, abstracted nature while referencing their murky origin.

"The number of images taken has increased enormously," he explains, "with roughly 7 billion images being taken every two days. ... I felt that many people have appropriated the position of the photographer. The bigger question remains. What are they and these images saying?"

"I think they are showcasing an 'I.' This narcissism and subjectivity has restricted both the photograph and the photographer. ... What I'm trying to do is remove this subjective point of view. My photos start from black images that have been taken randomly from the internet, from devices in shops, from friends and from my own devices. I try to see what can be taken out of them, and transform them into artworks. I am showing the non-image, the dark matter from which my photography stems."

The untitled works in these photo series are all abstract, pixelated pieces. Featuring colors, silhouettes and shadows, their subject matter is endless. One photo shows abstract shadows of trees. A black-and-white print captures a surreal human silhouette. Other pieces illustrate unidentifiable objects, with suggestions of ledges, faces, purple skies and what seems to be a dark bamboo forest.

Another series erases the subject matter, and the familiar, completely.

Antar's individual photos don't show a clear image, but an image of a non-image.

In their celebration of a "pure unidentifiable form," these works are reminiscent of

modernist canvases. As such, Antar's works represent the triumph of medium over subject matter. What remains are the shades of dark colors, pixelation and the frame's geometry. These frames encapsulate worlds of their own – each working independently and in combination with the other works on show. Some are monochrome and depict singular shades of alienating greens and navy blues. Others represent blurred and intangible forms.

Toward the end of the exhibition, one image shows three white, ghostlike shapes against a black background. The contrast is striking, making the white surfaces glow against the dark background.

Standing out against the photos, an untitled video installation documents several musicians performing the song "Night of Love," a signature tune of the renowned Egyptian vocalist Umm Kulthum. The video conveys each musician's individual struggle to deliver the song's lovelorn message. It also captures the rich, nocturnal beauty of Arab art and Egyptian art in particular.

The composition is itself gloomy and the oriental melody might be read as a sensual, contextual and historical grounding to the other works on show in "Dark Matter."

"Umm Kulthum's song recounts the story of a night where the lover of the heroine never comes. ... I filmed the scenes of the musicians over years. In the Arabic auditory memory that we have, you can describe and imagine the whole scene of this night of love and loss," Antar explained. "The relationship between the musician confronting the audience is similar to my confrontation of the 7 billion photographers. They juxtapose in their desire to make people dream, question and want more."

It's possible to find some continuity between this show and Antar's previous Beirut solo – staged in early 2016 at the now-erased Beirut Exhibition Center. Purportedly captured with a camera without a lens, the images in "After Images: Stories from the Mountains of Asir," also unhinged the photo from its conventional figurative responsibilities.

Perhaps, Antar's present show can be read as a gesture to capture both the experimental and the essence of contemporary photography – which, evidently, should not be limited to illustrative images.

Rather, these digital images may stand on their own, independent of the object they signify. "Dark Matter" is about creating and exploring new territories and boundaries.

"Dark Matter" closes Oct. 28. For more information, visit:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/868813349939020/>.

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