

ARTS & CULTURE

A report to the outside world from inside the underbelly



DUBAI: The debut solo show by Emirati photographer Jalal Bin Thameya has opened at Tate Modern, Nod Al Sheba, marking the first public outcome for participants of the gallery's Critical Practice Programme 2018-19.

"Beyond the formal processes of a new body of work exploring the unavoidable byproducts of modernity in the UAE, provoking public debate about what happens behind fences and walls by magnifying spaces and subjects in large format, that drives the conversation further."

"This series," says Founder Lee who mentored him in a programme with Tate Modern, "crosses time manufacturing cycles, but there are no cars being driven, no gas being pumped, no roads. It is the beginning and the end - you already know the middle; you already live the middle."

"Bin Thameya shows you the other parts - the refineries making gas, the graveyards of oil-refiners making the oil. These are the times about to be shed."

"Overall, this body of work shows us a world that many of us do not see but benefit from and contribute to in various ways. We can equally ignore the oil refineries and the car graveyards

as they are out of sight and out of mind. They are still important... This work gives us access to a world which is hard, if not impossible, to obtain otherwise. We see, in minute technical details, the beginning and the end of the manufacturing cycle."

Lee is an American multimedia artist, curator and educator, whose work explores topical issues including post-colonialism and environmental change.

Lateefa bint Maktoum, owner of Tate Modern Gallery, said that "Jalal Bin Thameya invites the viewer to go beyond the fence, to witness the documentation of unseen industries that affect almost every minute of our lives."

"Bin Thameya's ghostly scenes expose society's all-encompassing reliance on oil and nature's manipulation by human hands," said Tate Modern's Deputy Director, Lisa Bell Leachgar: "his pictures are structured and balanced in their composition, yet frequently capture chance encounters, highlighting a side of the UAE largely hidden from view."

"Beyond" combines elements of landscape, documentary and industrial photography, with

subjects influenced by a career in logistics. Entirely self-taught, the artist seeks to slip behind barriers to record the UAE's underbelly - the monolithic scrapyards and refineries and networks, peripheral to most people's lives.

The huge, archaic, obsolescent, scenes are rendered in finest detail, thanks to his use of medium-format digital and large-format slide cameras, which deliver sharper, less grainy pictures than more commonplace equipment.

The process of gaining access to these tightly guarded spaces itself was part of Bin Thameya's creative process, he said. "An inability of the time spent working on this series was spent gaining access to these places before the images started to take shape. The world has become even more security conscious and this has added to the difficulty in creating images related to infrastructure and industry."

He took part in Tate Modern's K&A Critical Practice Programme, a long-running initiative offering studio space plus professional support, mentorship and critique. During his time in the programme, he was mentored by Jassim Al Awadhi, one of the first Emirati professional

Top: Drive shafts cut a menacing look after being discarded.

Insetive oil and gas facilities seem never-the-less as gleaming white pastures.

Inset: Jalal Bin Thameya.

among practitioners and the wider community.

INSIDE STORY: "Since I was a child," Bin Thameya says, "I've been trying to get into places. I know it sounds silly, but I have always been trying to get into something."

"It was always a struggle going through school, always a struggle getting into university, always a struggle learning or seeking knowledge on how to qualify as an artist and how to express myself."

"That rather became a routine ritual of making the images - the difficulty associated with getting into these places, returning to find that these places have changed, and the disappointment associated with all of this because, sometimes, you don't get in. It was a really hard time when doing the Beyond the Fence series."

"Another challenge posed to this sort of photography is that, in 2014, in the bureaucracy when attempting to enter facilities, the obscurity of some scrap yards and plants who do not wish to allow for images to be made of their spaces."

"A majority of the time spent working on this series was spent gaining access to these places across the images, access to cars, trucks, the world has become even more paranoid and this has added to the difficulty in creating images related to infrastructure and industry."