

AN INDUSTRIAL-STRENGTH PORTRAIT OF THE RELENTLESS RACE TO THE FUTURE

► **Rupert Hawksley** chats with the Emirati photographer whose desolate images of scrap yards and oil refineries illustrate the pace – and dangers – of 21st century growth



Jalal Bin Thaneya began pursuing photography in 2013 as a side project
Edward Michael

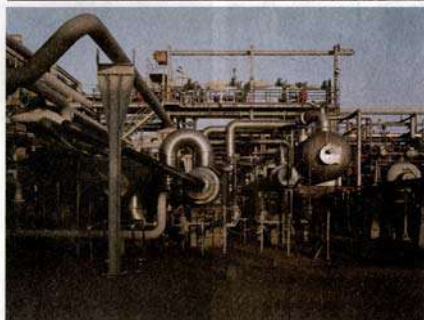
Jalal Bin Thaneya's photographs make me think of death. Dozens of oil-blackened drive shafts, wrenched from discarded vehicles, are stacked on top of one another, each resembling a bone from which the flesh has long since rotted away. Three walls of grubby axles, like piles of soil-covered skulls, crowd in on you, as if you've just stumbled upon a mass unmarked grave. Row after row of engines sit precariously on makeshift shelves, their grey fans hanging limply like fading petals.

These pitiful fragments of metal, which Bin Thaneya photographed in scrap yards in the UAE, are the casualties of our relentless pursuit of progress, the "unavoidable by-product of modernity". They linger around stubbornly after we have taken what we need from them, like stains on the inside of a coffee cup.

"I had someone tell me that the subject matter is very negative," says Bin Thaneya, 33, whose debut solo show, *Beyond the Fence*, is currently on at Tashkeel in Dubai. "Fair enough – but this is not something I've made up, the images are not doctored or enhanced."

Bin Thaneya, a self-taught Emirati photographer whose work has been exhibited at the Empty Quarter Gallery in Dubai and the Sharjah Art Foundation, is simply presenting the reality of our insatiable global demand for bigger and better models of, well, everything. If the collateral damage of this makes us feel uncomfortable – or "negative" – then so be it. "These things are a part of our lives," says Bin Thaneya. "We can't live without the scrap yards."

While the scrap yards represent the end of life, the oil and gas refineries, with their shiny pumps and futuristic funnels, which he also photographed for this show, represent the beginning. For it is here that the black lifeblood of engines is sourced. It is striking to see these images side by side – production and destruction; hope and despair. "There is



something divine about this," says Bin Thaneya. "The whole process of life is a cycle."

The photographer is opaque about his motivation for photographing these sites. He is initially unwilling to be drawn on the environmental implications of our reliance on oil and gas, preferring to highlight the aesthetic elements of his work. "My work is very neutral," he says. "Are you a documentary maker or are you an artist?" Bin Thaneya is adamant that he wants to be the latter.

But I'm not sure it's possible to look at his photographs in this way – or not entirely, at least. For while there is a certain beauty to these images – a stack of interlocking tyres reminds me of an enormous braid of plaited hair – the real strength of his work is its absolute commitment to desolation.

At last, as we stand in front of a photograph of crimped, lifeless axles, we get to the point. "The human race is very apocalyptic. We've always been like that, we've always set out to destroy," says the photographer. "We discard and this is what happens."

Clockwise from top, 'Axle Wall 01', 'Drive Shafts', and 'Oil and Gas 02' are all part of the *Beyond the Fence* exhibition at Tashkeel Photos Tashkeel

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Earth can handle our waste but not at the rate we're expanding. Human beings are very destructive by nature," he says. "Beyond the Fence, so-called because Bin Thaneya has captured images we are not ordinarily supposed to see, is the result of his participation in Tashkeel's annual Critical Practice Programme, a year-long course where he worked with two mentors, Flounder Lee, associate professor of Studio Art at American University in Dubai, and prominent Emirati photographer Jassim Al Awadhi. "It helped to fortify my idea of what I wanted to do," he says.

He began to pursue photography in 2013 as a side project, while he carved out a career in the logistics industry. The camera was his redemption. Years of stifling a restless creative spirit had driven him to breaking point. "Suppressing yourself is the worst thing you can do as an artist," he says. "I became a toxic person. Whenever you want to express yourself, you should."

After photographing the destruction of a control tower at Jebel Ali ports, Bin Thaneya began taking pictures of deserted hospitals and old bomb

shelters in the northern emirates. "It was a bit more of a weird approach to photography," he says. Unsure that this was the direction he wanted to pursue, however, Bin Thaneya spent a year considering his next move before deciding to explore the oil and gas fields around Dubai. His interest soon aroused suspicion. "There is a security barrier and people ask, 'Why does a local guy want to take a picture? Why are you giving yourself a headache?'" he says.

But his persistence has paid off handsomely. *Beyond the Fence* is a highly impressive debut solo show. The influence of one of Bin Thaneya's favourite artists, the American painter Charles Sheeler, who captured brutal industrial scenes in the mid-20th century, is obvious. But that's fine. Bin Thaneya is still finding his own artistic voice. And on the evidence of these photographs, he has an awful lot of important things to say.

Beyond the Fence is at Tashkeel, Dubai, until June 11. For more information, visit www.tashkeel.org