

THE BEST SIDE

*The largely forgotten 85-year-old Iraqi photographer **Latif Al Ani** is increasingly being remembered. Justly so, writes Simon Bowcock*



*US couple at Taq Kasra,
Al Mada'in, Salman Pak,
Baghdad. 1965. 2245x2362px.*



Three years ago, few in the art world knew the name Latif Al Ani. That changed when he was included in the Iraqi Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, an exhibition that reintroduced his work to an international audience. A retrospective monograph followed in 2017, and made such an impact that it won the Historical Book Award at the Rencontres d'Arles, the world's leading photography festival. The 85-year-old photographer was given further exposure with an exhibition in London at the end of last year, organised by the Ruya Foundation, which has been instrumental in bringing his work back to public attention.

At the top of professional photography in Iraq for over 20 years, Al Ani's career spanned three decades from the 1950s to the 1970s. He founded the photography department in Iraq's Ministry of Culture, and was also a principal photographer for the leading business magazines of the period. It is easy to see why: Al Ani had an incomparable facility to portray his country in its best, modernising light. A good example is *Child in a modern house, Baghdad, 1964*. While it might be a photograph of the Middle East, the child, with its happy little face beaming from a Modernist staircase, could easily be passed off as a Julius Shulman photograph of idealised Mid-Century Modern California living.

While not overtly a political photographer, Al Ani was, in an artistic sense, subversive. For every classy bureaucrat-friendly image with an all-is-wonderful sheen—such as the happy little girls in *Kindergarten, Baghdad, 1963*—there is a less comfortable photographic cousin. *Little girl in front of her home, Hiti, Ambar, 1962*—with the slogan “Long live the Iraqi Republic” daubed in Arabic on the wall above the shy little girl's head—is a compelling, even terrifying, portrayal of innocence among the tumult in Iraq, which has hardly abated since. This ability to produce images which transcend their official purpose and take on a much more human dimension is what makes Al Ani remarkable as an artist, for it is with such pictures of ordinary people that he excels.

One of Al Ani's key photographic preoccupations was the old rubbing against the new, which he evoked most skilfully when using deceptively simple compositions. The ancient and the modern collide powerfully in *Shepherd, Baghdad, 1962*: a timeless-looking boy holding a lamb is juxtaposed with a new highway, symbol of the modern, oil-driven Iraq. Is the boy's wistful stare along the road into the future, or back at the past? And the old woman bent forward with the child on her back in *Dohuk, Kurdistan 1963* may look like she belongs to the distant past, but she is surely being propelled forward by the weight of the future.

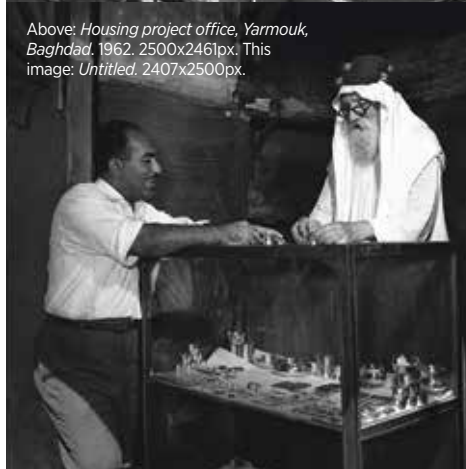
Foreign tourists abound in Al Ani's Iraq of the 50s and 60s, as do women dressed smartly in a western style, underlining the stark difference between those comparatively relaxed and cosmopolitan times and those which followed. Al Ani sees great beauty in the



Shopping in Baghdad, 1964.
2516x2500px.



Above: Housing project office, Yarmouk, Baghdad, 1962. 2500x2461px. This image: Untitled, 2407x2500px.



Iraq of that mid-century era, a beauty that has long vanished. “When I see the photos, it brings that time back, it's a proof that it existed, that it was a reality,” he said in an interview with the Ruya Foundation's Tamara Chalabi. “If there were only verbal recollections, I might think it never existed.”

Although not a Ba'athist, Al Ani's undoubted abilities meant he continued to hold senior official photographic positions into the late 1970s. But the political climate meant he was eventually forced to stop working as a photographer. Things became difficult when he discovered that a protégé had been sending reports about him to no less than Saddam Hussein himself, and by the time he returned from a sojourn in Kuwait (where his wife was assigned to teach) in the early 1980s, anyone openly photographing in Iraq risked immediate arrest by the authorities. Inactive as a photographer in the decades that followed, Al Ani's work simply disappeared from public consciousness.

Now, decades later, the artist's work is having a rebirth. In 1963, Al Ani had a landmark exhibition in the US comprising over 100 prints, which began in Washington DC before travelling to seven other major cities. In 1965, he had an 80-photograph exhibition in East Berlin, of which he noted: “I wanted to introduce life in Iraq to the Europeans. The images represented all aspects of life in Iraq, faces from Iraq. I wanted to

show Iraq's human richness, as a place that had ethnic and religious diversity.” But perhaps understandably, his view of Iraq since that time is much darker. “The beginning of the end started in 1958,” he said. “The retreat started slowly, and then got faster after 1979. By 1990, it was galloping, and then it flew with fury after 2003 until now.” And through the photographer's captivating images we remember it all. ■