

Dubai
THE EMPTY QUARTER
BY HIND MEZAINA



The Dark Lens by Artist Cedric Delsaux, The Empty Quarter ©

The Empty Quarter is the only gallery in Dubai, United Arab Emirates devoted to fine art photography. It explores the photographic dimensions of the Arab world and beyond. In addition to their exhibitions, the gallery participates in public art fairs like Paris Photo, Contemporary Istanbul and MENASArt Fair in Beirut. The Empty Quarter also curates and organises exhibitions in collaboration with international institutions and museums, and publishes photo books.

The gallery was founded by photographer Princess Reem Al Faisal from Saudi Arabia, businesswoman Safa Al Hamad from the United Arab Emirates and Elie Domit from Lebanon, who is also the Creative Director. It opened in March 2009 with an exhibition titled *Behind The Veil* by renowned photographer Eve Arnold, who documented the royal wedding of the Maktoum family in Dubai back in 1971. Since then, The Empty Quarter has hosted more than 25 exhibitions.

Continuing with the theme of Dubai, the gallery exhibited *Dubai, Transmutations* by French photographer Martin Becka, who captured modern Dubai using photography techniques from 160 years ago, "staging a collision between the historical and the present time", and Cedric Delsaux's *The Dark Lens*, showing a science fiction version of Dubai, for which he inserted characters and vehicles from Star Wars into existing Dubai locations, resulting in a seamless composition - making these aliens look very much at home. Beyond Dubai, we've seen

Photographs of Mecca from 1895 taken by the Saudi optician Al-Sayyid Abd al-Ghaffar and Dutch scholar Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, and the exhibition *The Worst Journey in the World*, which had the most pristine looking photos taken by Herbert Ponting taken between 1910-1913 of Captain Scott's expedition into the Antarctic.

One of their more popular shows *Fashion: The Story of a Lifetime* showcased museum quality collection of vintage and modern prints by famed international photographers, whose lifetime stories are intrinsically tied to 20th-century high fashion. We also got a taste of India with *Sampling India: Of Blind Men and Elephants* which featured six emerging photographers relating to the Indian subcontinent.

One of their most relevant exhibitions *The Spectacle Of War* included acclaimed photographers like Benjamin Lowy and Richard Mosse. It came at a time when the Arab Spring was at its peak and gave us a look at how media plays a role in war.

The Empty Quarter took part in Paris Photo this year (their 3rd participation), where I met up with the gallery's co-curator Hester Keijser (who is based in Holland, and is also one half of the team behind the brilliant photography blog Mrs Deane, www.beikey.net/mrs-deane). We talked about the gallery and had an animated conversation about the photography scene in the Gulf region.

Hester and Elie work as a team and do a lot of the research before putting together any show. "We try to find an angle for a show which could have a certain interest for a specific public in Dubai. We are exploring issues, documentary style photography that has a story that will touch people."

When asked what she thought about the photography scene in the Gulf, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, Hester's said, 'It's a very young scene, too early to tell.' As a photographer myself from Dubai, I tend to agree. Recent photography exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates featuring Emirati photographers tend to revolve around the theme of identity - apart from a few stand outs, a lot of the work ends up appearing cliched or naive. Hester's thoughts on this, "Actually, the work is very much still in the adolescent stage, an important part of growing up, hence also the interest in identity - those are questions that you ask at a certain time in your life, when you reach adulthood and want to know who you really are, what you allow to shape your persona." She goes on to say, "There is no photography history in the United Arab Emirates like in other parts of the world and the Emiratis want to set themselves apart from the global visual culture." But I'm assured it will change, "it takes time" she says. In the meantime, Hester's advice to young photographers from the region who want to make it beyond is to "seek a mentor abroad, this can even be done online, which can be important for those photographers who do not get to travel so much".

The gallery is a must for all photography enthusiasts. It's slick, spacious and really puts together high calibre exhibitions that hardly disappoint. It also has a very decent collection of photography related books and DVDs that you won't find anywhere else in Dubai, so it's an opportunity for visitors to be able to take something more than just an enjoyable visit to the gallery. It's something I wish I had in Dubai when I was growing up.

For their latest exhibition, The Empty Quarter will take us on a journey into space with *Third Rock From The Sun* running from 7th December 2010 till 31st January 2012. Hester explained that this exhibition is an ode to a time long ago, when we had a generation that would look up to the sky and dream about flying into space, "Today's iPhone generation has forgotten the dream of flying to the moon". The exhibition will include photos from the Space Project series by Vincent Fournier, Jan Kempenaers' magnificent photographs of Soviet space age monuments, vintage photos of the solar eclipse dating from the late 1800s. There will also be a fashion element with a section dedicated to space suits, using visual material taken from the recent publication *Fashioning Apollo* by Nicholas de Monchaux. Last but not least, several films will be screened, including a world premiere for a documentary about the first Iranian space tourist, Anousheh Ansari.

The Empty Quarter
Gate Village, Building 2, DIFC
Dubai, UAE
www.theemptyquarter.com

Fashion, Story of a Lifetime by artist FC Gundlach, The Empty Quarter ©