



Visions Refocused: Interview with Halim Al-Karim

October 28, 2014, by JOO HAN



Halim al-Karim in Hong Kong. Photo by Joo Han.

Iraqi artist Halim al-Karim, based between the United States and the United Arab Emirates, is best known for his photographic portraits that he deliberately shoots out of focus—which he then manipulates and paints over, infusing them with an enigmatic air. Covering a wide array of subjects, ranging from the ancient Sumer civilization of Iraq to the country's modern political affairs (such as the Saddam Hussein era), al-Karim's photos reconstruct historic images and explore the ways they are produced and received. Much attention has been paid to al-Karim as an artist in exile, who fled Iraq during the Gulf War in the early 1990s. Recently, ArtAsiaPacific sat down with al-Karim before the opening of his new solo show in Hong Kong, "Coma in Paradise," at AJC gallery, to

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discuss the techniques behind his large-scale productions, as well as his personal experience of Asia.

What I notice instantly about your photography is the large size. Could you take us through the basic procedure of your photography?

I try big formats, as big as 250 × 150 cm. It has never happened in the whole history of photography, [to create photographs] in this size [using the collodion wet-plate process].

The collodion wet-plate process, is a photographic technique that I use and dates back to the 19th century. I try to mix eras: I use old techniques that are about 200 years old, as well as contemporary elements [in order to] give more [depth] to my work. It is so that you cannot guess when the photographs were created.



HALIM AL-KARIM, Coma in Paradise 2, 2013, photograph, Lambda print, 140 × 100 cm

Speaking of guessing, viewers cannot seem to guess what or who your subjects are, as they are often blurred and painted over.

When I shoot, I do it with a screen (usually silk fabric) placed in front of the models. I cover the face of the models with a very thin layer of latex and spray pigments on the model, as well as on the white screen. I also add layers of wax and acrylic on the negative itself. I scan the negative and print it using a Lambda printer.

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I also shoot out of focus. The concept of shooting out of focus [is] to reflect the notion of time. You don't know if it is yesterday or tomorrow. I do this to make the works more universal and out of context. I don't know how to explain it, but [the idea is to shoot the photographs so that] you cannot guess where they took place. [They become more about] common issues. I don't like to make [them be about] the Arab, Western or Eastern world—it's about all of us.

My impression is that your photos are original works, both in their creativity and execution, and is contrary to the popular notion that photography is reproduction. Could you comment on that?

I have no problem with [the notion of] reproduction, or with editions, regarding photography. I never have an issue with it, because, for me, [an image] works like a mirror. You show viewers [different copies of] the same piece, but each edition will [be perceived differently] depending on the person seeing that piece.

Could you tell us more about your subjects? Are they anonymous people?

[In a sense] they are “famous” people, because they're prostitutes. We all know about them, even if we don't acknowledge them. I never shoot friends, wives, daughters or other family—just prostitutes, because they really deserve our care. I feel that my mission in life is to take care of prostitutes around the world.

[Prostitution] is a major crime that we commit against ourselves, by allowing for it to happen and letting this huge slice of our society sell their souls.

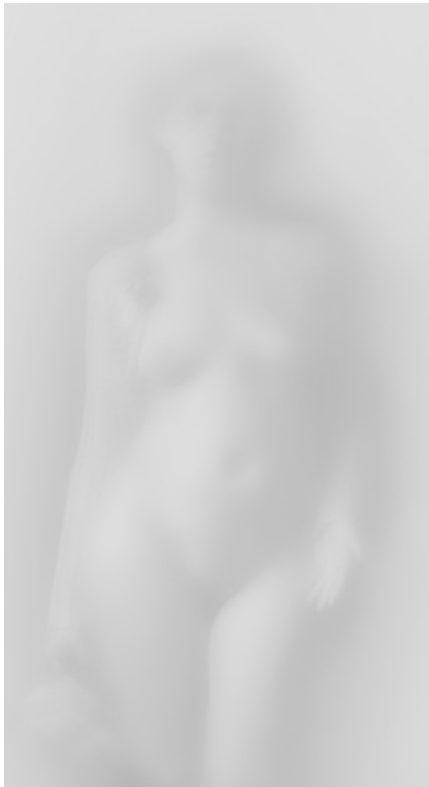
What is the meaning behind the title of the series “Coma in Paradise” (2013), which is also the title of your Hong Kong show?

I really believe that paradise exists in our lives and on Earth. Politicians use their dirty tricks to brainwash the people and put them be in a “coma” of sorts, while they themselves live in paradise. Each politician is in his own paradise, and he doesn't care about the other people in the society. They want people to just be blind [to the reality happening around them] and to think that life is perfect—hence, “Coma in Paradise.”

The other series [on display at AJC is] “White Ash” (2013). I'm trying to present the idea of people who are really fragile and, thus, cannot resist violence. [When faced against violence] they choose the other way. The works [embody] these people's ability to “disappear.” [When faced with violence] they just “burn” their souls, and what remains is “white ash.” This is their way to avoid violence and not react to it . . . [In the work] their

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image appears like shadows emerging from fog. I play with this technique. You feel that the figures are coming out of the photograph, and that they're coming inside you.



HALIM AL-KARIM, White Ash 7, 2013, photograph, Lambda print, 220 × 120 cm

You seem to focus on this process of viewing and how observers make sense of the image.

Yes, because when I see someone in my life I really feel that I'm that person. They're just part of me, and part of my soul. I feel like I have different parts of me that live in different places and times. This is also the sense that I'm trying to achieve with "White Ash." Some people don't have that ability to "burn" themselves—or transform themselves—or to resist violence by "disappearing" [into themselves].

Your work is often described in terms of political freedom. Incidentally, Hong Kong has been going through several rounds of protests recently. How do you feel about your works being exhibited here at this time?

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People believe my works are political statements, but for me, in the end, I just want to free my soul and the souls of other people. A government as an administrative body cannot handle millions of people, and I don't blame them. But we the people have to do something to liberate our souls. To feel justice. And to end this crime of prostituting [our people].

And yet, history repeats itself. There's nothing new about what's been happening in Hong Kong. That's why I'm not participating. These protestors want to change something, but things will never change so long as humans are in charge.

Halim al-Karim's exhibition "Coma in Paradise" is on view at AJC gallery, Hong Kong, until November 17, 2014.