

Review of Moises Saman: *Discordia* at The Arts Club, London



Documentary photographer Moises Saman has forged a highly successful career capturing newsworthy images in some of the world's most dangerous conflict zones. In December 2010, the international community watched as Tunisia was gripped by revolution. The political turmoil soon spread across a host of territories including, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Jordan, with protests, demonstrations, riots and civil wars erupting across the Middle East and Africa.

Since 2011, Saman has been chronicling these upheavals in a photographic series entitled *Discordia: The Arab Spring*, which he is compiling into a hardback publication. As a Magnum photographer he works to commission, with many of the images taken on assignment for *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. However, as Pernilla Holmes, co-curator of temporary exhibitions at The Arts Club, explains: “[Saman] is such an interesting example of the cross-over between documentary photography and art ... Even when treating very difficult subject matter, the works have beauty.”

The project as a whole consists of 184 photos and captures some often harrowing images. Yet, Holmes and her co-curator, Amelie von Wedel, have notably focused on five photos that are almost entirely devoid of human presence. This absence of any specific protagonist evokes a powerful sense of ambiguity: although the titles provide the date on which the image was captured, without people to use as a point of reference we are left unsure as to where in the timeline of events we find ourselves.

These works therefore emphasise the cyclical rather than the absolute nature of time, which helps to link Saman's work to "art and conflict" through the ages, as they become images that could have been captured at almost any point in time. Holmes says: "Art has always portrayed conflict – for example in the work of El Greco, Gericault, Benjamin West and so many other examples; Moises' work is today's manifestation of the same impulse."

Saman states that he is not attached to any photographic equipment in particular and that the images have been captured using a variety of camera models. It is, therefore, the story that sits at the forefront of his work rather than any aesthetic concern. He does, however, have a recognizably theatrical style, which makes some of the images appear almost staged, although in reality they were all captured spontaneously. *LIBYA, Tripoli, March 9, 2011* the only photo to include a human figure (whose face is concealed behind a picture of Qaddafi), almost appears to take its iconography from the post match celebrations at an American football game. The man stands in the centre of a field surrounded by firework smoke so that the contrast between the black of the sky and the white of the smoke creates a rather painterly *chiaroscuro*.

Each image conveys an individual narrative, but the series is linked by a common theme of transience. Consequently there is a sense of unease that permeates the exhibition, as we feel that the destruction was sudden and unexpected. In *Qaddafi Underground Command Centre, LIBYA, Tripoli, September 12, 2011*, arguably the exhibition's lead image, as it is exhibited centrally and therefore dominates the viewer's line of vision from the out, the dictator's underground bunker is shown noticeably devoid of the man himself and with a thick layer of dust accumulating upon the surface of the desk.

The opulence of The Arts Club, a members' only destination whose founders include Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, juxtaposes very effectively with the decay and disarray of *Discordia, Syria, Aleppo, March 25, 2013* depicts a dilapidated room with a crystal chandelier, harking back to its former glory days, which is mirrored by the room in which it is exhibited.

Moises Saman: *Discordia* at The Arts Club offers a mere snapshot of the project as a whole, but the care with which the photographs have been selected creates a hauntingly thought-provoking collection that skilfully reflects on the ephemeral nature of the world we inhabit.

Moises Saman: *Discordia* runs at **The Arts Club** until January 2016.

By appointment only: Wednesday, 10am-midday and Saturday, 10am-midday.

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Credits

1. Moises Saman, *A highway overpass in the Zmalek district of Cairo, EGYPT*, October 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Magnum Photos.

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