

# Austrian photographer puts 'intrepid' back into art

Espace SD hosts adventurous exhibit showing work by 10 contemporary artists

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Special To The Daily Star

The world according to Austrian photographer H.H. Capor goes something like this: Artists should be intrepid. They should travel for the simple reason that they have the freedom and opportunity to do so. And then, they should feed their experiences abroad back into their work.

This logic is evident in art history from Paul Gauguin's Tahitian adventures to contemporary painter Franz Ackermann's completely nomadic lifestyle. For Capor, it has fueled his trips to Europe, the States, South America, and the old republics of the Soviet Union.

And now, by way of an impulsive excursion to Aleppo three years ago, it has landed him here in Beirut for Ten Views, a group show of contemporary Austrian photography on view at Espace SD, Gemazeh, through June 28.

Ten Views, which Capor helped organize, features the work of 10 artists ranging in age from their late 20s to their early 50s. Capor is one of those artists, and he managed to drag five of his compatriots to Beirut with him for the opening and a series of workshops with local students. For all of the artists involved, their one-week stay marks their first time in Lebanon. Capor only wishes more people had been willing to come along.

"It's frustrating," he says. "Artists are supposed to be free." But much to his dismay, Capor has found that many of his colleagues back home and in Europe are content to stay put and wait for the world to come to them.

In 2000, when an invitation to participate in the International Photography Gathering in Aleppo made its way rather



Shots like this one by Tsidilis are among the Ten Views on display

circuitously from the Austrian Embassy in Damascus to Capor in Vienna, he jumped at the chance to show his work in Syria. He was the only artist from his country to do so. "If it had been something in Paris or London, hundreds would have wanted to go," he says.

Far fewer seem willing to plunge into cities that stand off the linear map of the art world's major hubs. At best, this is an example of artists being shamelessly careerist about where they take their work. At worst,

it's lacking in the kind of adventurous spirit that makes it possible for artists to constantly crack open their perspective on the world to create something new.

Whatever the case, Capor took the bait. And he has returned to Syria several times since - to mount a solo show at the Aleppo's Galerie Le Pont, to partake in a workshop called Celebrations and Traditions, and to attend the International Women's Art Festival. Each time he came back, he brought more

people with him and asked everyone he met where he should show next. Eventually, someone suggested Espace SD.

"At first," Capor admits, "I was hoping for a solo show." But after discussion with Sandra Dagher, Espace SD's owner, they decided to broaden the scope.

Galleries in Beirut, Dagher explains, "very rarely do exhibitions of foreign artists, and contemporary foreign artists, forget it." A show of one contemporary Austrian photographer might have struck the art-going public as a little random. But in terms of cross-cultural exchange, a group show could prove more intriguing.

"I put a lot of trust in him," says Dagher, who gave Capor free reign to select the 10 artists. That trust turned out to be well placed, as Capor is in a prime position to curate an exhibition like Ten Views.

Born in Vienna where he still lives and works, Capor pursued photography and architecture before settling into an artistic career in 1981. He once studied with Nan Goldin, and founded two artists' collectives along the way, Ad Oculos and Ostwind. Since 1997, Capor has been working at Fotogalerie Wein, a job that gives him insight into what's being produced by young photographers throughout Austria today.

Without overstating the point, Dagher stresses that there are similarities between the art scenes in Austria and Lebanon: "It's like here, they don't really have a photography market, so they need institutions to help," she says. (The Austrian Embassy in Beirut and two cultural foundations immediately kicked in enough funds to bring the artists to Lebanon for this show; such is the beauty of state funding for the arts.)

"The music and theater of Austria are well known, but photography as art is still quite new," adds Capor. "Photography is not an easy life; there are few people who collect."

In addition to the institutional challenges, contemporary Austrian artists also face the familiar, vexed issue of negotiating past history. The very act of taking pictures adopted a malignant, documentary role under the Nazi dictatorship during World War II. Only gradually has Austrian photography regained its independent, creative, and culturally vital weight.

You would never suspect this, however, in assessing the strength of Ten Views. Capor has assembled a robust show, with each artist conveying a cohesive, fully explored set of ideas and techniques. Andreas Ziperle, in a series called The Colors of Peace, has mounted extreme close-ups of fruit directly onto the walls without frames, and never has a kiwi or grapefruit looked so lush and abstract. Christian Punzengruber's dizzying multiple exposures create an oddly affecting dance out of a hairdresser's trade. And Christina Tsidilis' pictures of an old woman - holding cutouts from fashion magazines to her face and body - twist poignancy and the grotesque into an emotional, original portrait of femininity.

On aesthetic grounds, it is difficult to divine any grand themes from so varied a show, except to say that there's a lot of kitsch and color on view here. In general, these works are modestly scaled and focused on the quirky details of everyday life. They are neither majestic nor monumental.

Clearly contemporary Austrian photography has not been entirely swayed by its proximity to Andreas Gursky and his ilk. (An influential school of photom-

graphy has been emanating out of Germany for about 10 years now. Bernd and Hilla Becher from their teaching posts at the Academy of Arts in Dusseldorf, have inspired a full generation of talent, including Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, and more.)

One common strand does exist in Ten Views, however, in these photographers' collective embrace of travel. Willy Pucher has presented 11 very funny shots of two ceramic penguins named Joe and Sally (reminiscent of the garden gnome scenes in the French movie *Amélie*), posed like dopey tourists in front of the Eiffel Tower, the pyramids, the New York City skyline (when south was still anchored like a compass by two tall buildings).

Ingrid Fankhauser, in *Confusion of Emotions*, deals with a more non-touristic mode of travel, snapping details of people and places to function more loosely like memories.

But perhaps the most heart-breaking work in the show is Capor's own. *Traces of a Lost Partnership* captures the end of one trip (a long-term relationship) and the beginning of a new one (their lives apart). Before his girlfriend moved out, but after she'd decided to do so, Capor stopped taking pictures of her and started taking pictures of her stuff - her piles of clothes, scraps of paper, tapes, trinkets, the sentimental knick-knacks that materialize when two people twine a life together.

"I was obviously trying to carry on the partnership by photographing her things," Capor writes in the accompanying text. "Traces of her, details that reminded me of her. Maybe I tried to hold her tight."

Ten Views is on view at Espace SD, Avenue Charles Helou, through June 28. For more info, call 01/563134