

Latif Al-Ani



BAGHDAD, “A MODERN PLACE” (1958-1978)

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In the two-fold liberation of Iraq from colonial power and the yoke of religion, after the Second World War, the photographer Latif Al-Ani, one of the first in Iraq, played a key role, portraying the rapid urban and social changes in the country, which Saddam Hussein and the bombardment of Baghdad in 2003 brought to an end.

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BAGHDAD. 'A MODERN PLACE' (1958-1978)

Pedro Azara

(Re)Discovery of Latif Al-Ani

The photographers Yto Barrada—a Moroccan contemporary artist—and Latif Al-Ani, from Iraq, met in 2000 in Baghdad in relation to research being conducted by Barrada, an admirer of Al-Ani's work. Al-Ani had been famous between the 1950s and 1970s in the East and the West but was by then forgotten. For the previous thirty years, he had been unable to take any photographs in accordance with the principles that had underpinned his work up to 1977. Thanks to Barrada's mediation, the Arab Image Foundation, based in Beirut and by some miracle untouched by the recent destruction in the Lebanese capital—one of the most important photographic archives in the Middle East that preserves photographs by unknown as well as studio photographers that document life, customs and beliefs rather than monuments—received on deposit some 2,000 photographs that Al-Ani had been identifying and classifying since the late seventies, shut up in his studio. And this was just part of his photographic collection. A very large proportion of his work was held in the archives of the Photographic Department that Al-Ani had set up and run in the Ministry of Culture—previously the Ministry of Guidance—, where he had worked.

'Destruction of archives incites a collective amnesia, an eradication of memory by means of erasing its documentary and historical apparatus, consigning it to the flames. Because of the destruction of documents and the record of the history of kinship and ties to place that all the peoples and religions of Iraq have, those who wish to incite ethnic hatred and religious intolerance can rewrite history as they please. When documents are confiscated by foreign powers the result is similar; without them there can be no reconciliation for Iraq, and there can be no peace.' Iraqi-American historian and Assyriologist Zainab Bahrani (*Document*, 2013).

In April 2003, barely three hours after the last ultimatum issued by the international coalition, led by the United States, to the Iraqi government, the city of Baghdad was subjected to heavy

bombing. Public buildings —administrative and political— and infrastructure were the main targets. The national document, photograph and film archives, as well as the national library and the Iraq Museum, were destroyed or looted: the Al-Ani archive was stolen. All of Al-Ani's photographs and negatives were lost and have not been recovered as yet. Our knowledge and recognition of his work have been damaged beyond repair. Only a dazzling survey exhibition of the photographs safeguarded in the archive in Beirut, held at the 56th Venice Art Biennale in 2015 and subsequently shown in 2016 in Ghent (Belgium) and in 2017 in Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, organised by the Anglo-Iraqi Ruya Foundation and its director Tamara Chalabi, and curated by Philippe Van Cauteren, the Historical Book Prize awarded to Al-Ani at the Rencontres Photographiques d'Arles (France) in 2017, and a few recent solo shows at the Sharjah Art Foundation in the United Arab Emirates in 2018 and in London, have brought Al-Ani's name and work back from obscurity. His last international exhibitions prior to these were held fifty years earlier in East Berlin, where he travelled at the invitation of the government of the German Democratic Republic to participate in the fourth Berlin Festival in 1965. Al-Ani's sole work known and much loved by all in Iraq was and still is the image of a smiling peasant woman with a sheaf of wheat in her arms, featured on the 25,000 dinar note—equivalent to around fifteen euros—printed after the fall of President Saddam Hussein and still in circulation to this day—based on a photograph taken by Al-Ani but used without his permission—, though very few remember the origin of the image or the photographer, lost in 2003.

Latif Al-Ani in Baghdad

Al-Mutanabbi Street, in the Ottoman centre—old quarter—of Baghdad, was blown up in a car-bomb suicide attack in 2007. Reconstruction work began soon after in a bid to erase the traces of one of the bloodiest attacks in Iraq's recent history and targeted against the busiest pedestrian street in the country's capital. By some miracle, among the survivors of the attack was the historic Shahbandar Café, which stands at the corner with Al-Rasheed Street, the most elegant commercial and residential street in

Baghdad between the 1920s and 1970s. Another of the features of Al-Mutanabbi Street are the large columns that provide a gateway into one of Baghdad's largest bazaars, as well as a roof over a vast number of second-hand books displayed outdoors on wooden tables. The stalls outrival those at the Sant Antoni book market in Barcelona, those alongside the Seine in Paris, and the street with the largest number of bookshops in the world, Enqelab Street in Tehran (Iran). It was in the studio of an old Iraqi jew photographer on Al-Mutanabbi Street that Al-Ani learned the basics of photography in 1947, a time when Iraq already achieved total independence from British colonial rule —apart from the ubiquitous presence of British, French and Dutch oil companies, nationalised in 1971— and was a country in which photography was still uncommon. It is in this old book and magazine market, refurbished and under close surveillance from the army, which still patrols today, that one can even now find copies of the magazine *Ahl al-Naft* (The People of Oil), published by the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) between 1951 and 1958. This magazine featured photographs on the industrialisation of the country —bridges, dams, chimneys and oil pipelines— that Latif was commissioned by the IPC to take. One can also come across copies of *New Iraq* magazine, edited by Al-Ani and published by what was then known as the Ministry of Guidance.

Besides his trip to East Berlin at the invitation of the GDR government in 1965, mentioned earlier, Al-Ani travelled to Washington, Los Angeles and San Francisco to attend the openings of a travelling exhibition of his work (*Faces and Facets of Iraq*) in 1963, followed the year after by another touring exhibition entitled *American Life*, which visited various cities in the Middle East and North Africa and took Al-Ani to Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. In addition, he followed an official Iraqi delegation in Tehran, taking colour photos of official political events but black and white shots that were more personal, whether commissioned or not. Even so, apart from the photos he took on his travels, most of Al-Ani's photographs, at least those that have survived, primarily depict Iraq in the 1950s and early 1960s. Baghdad was his favourite subject, but one also finds photographs he took in Iraqi Kurdistan, in northern Iraq, and in the wetlands in the south.

This was a Baghdad where two different worlds cohabited but did not mingle. On the one hand, the secluded villages—today northern neighborhoods integrated into the capital—traditional Adhimiyya and Khadimiyya, the first exclusively Sunni, the second Shia: religious villages or neighbourhoods on either bank of the Tigris, where the word of the imam is law, where women are obliged to wear the black veil to their feet and the men wear long tunics and turbans, and where the municipal authority of Baghdad has no power whatsoever. Neighbourhoods where only members of their particular branch of Islam are permitted to live and which are organised around ancient shrines from which minarets rise, delimited by a continuous wall and visited by millions of faithful pilgrims, and surrounded by lofty Ottoman houses made of wood that line the narrow alleys. And secondly, there are the new neighbourhoods, developed and built in the 1950s at the initiative of the Ministry of Urban Planning, mainly by the Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis, who had 500 people working in his studio on projects scattered across the entire Near East: neighbourhoods erected in the middle of nowhere, dazzling cubic constructions, all identical, forming endless rows that stretched as far as the eye could see, adjoining broad avenues without a scrap of shade, that caught the eye in the middle of a desolate landscape, albeit unspoiled and as yet undeveloped; a symbol of urbanity, of beneficent human intervention, a manifestation of the new order far from the tortuous and tormented urban fabric of traditional Ottoman neighbourhoods where the light barely penetrated.

Al-Ani was interested in both modern architecture and archaeological sites such as Babylon and Ctesiphon, in the south and north of Iraq, as they were seen by tourists. In his capacity as photographer for the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), the Department of Photography of the Ministry of Planning and the Iraq News agency, Al-Ani was able only to project a bright image of Iraq, a country looking towards the future, distancing itself from the stagnation that the Ottoman Empire had kept its Arab provinces in, and embracing rapid industrialisation: the electrification of the country, the construction of reservoirs for irrigation purposes, the railway network, land and air communications and facilities for extracting and distributing 'black gold'. The econom-

ic benefits were spent on changing the look of the capital by providing it with new neighbourhoods—built in the image of the urban development advocated by European rationalism—, new public spaces—squares, rotundas and gardens (albeit ill-suited to the climate) the very picture of modernity enhanced by the presence of abstract or informalist monuments—and amenities previously unheard of in the sleepy city—schools, hospitals and the country's first university. The image of Baghdad that Al-Ani wished to convey is exemplified by the luminous photograph featuring a young woman dressed according to the fashions that prevailed in urban societies in the early 1960s, shown walking away from the photographer with a degree of indifference or apathy, rather than determination, as if in no doubt she would reach her destination, the wide portico that constitutes the Freedom Monument (*Nasb al-Hurriyah*), which the architect Rifat Chadirji and the sculptor Jewad Saleem created in the famous Tahrir Square, inspired by the tragic figures Picasso painted in *Guernica* and by Mesopotamian reliefs, on the orders of General Abd al-Karim Qasim, who came to power by mounting a coup d'état in 1958, overthrowing the monarchy and executing the royal family. Even so, the photograph is not as clear as it might seem: the sharp contrast between the stylised elegance of the woman, wearing a sleeveless short dress made of sheer fabric decorated with flowers and carrying a handbag, and the black expressionist bronze relief figures—applied to the face of the large concrete plaque raised on supports at each end—, which twist in an aggressive, imposing and violent manner, hints at the positives and negatives of the new Iraq that the new public authorities were promoting.

Undeniably, Al-Ani did not portray the miserable living conditions of the people who had migrated from the south of the country to the ring of shanty towns on the outskirts of Baghdad. In contrast, the photographs he took in the southern wetlands reveal the slow passage of time with almost no changes in people's lives, while some pictures, taken thanks to the planes of the Iraq Petroleum Company, are aerial views that show harmonious developed complexes, avoiding the details that would otherwise be out of keeping, the poverty that would intrude in a photo intended to present a positive image of a new country; views that, per-

haps intentionally, are far removed from the truth, taken high above the people living down below.

Archaeology and Architecture, Tradition and Modernity

That said, many of Al-Ani's photographs that descend to everyday reality feature unusual encounters. Figures that are out of place with their surroundings, surroundings that are not suited or arranged for the people in them. Al-Ani focused on encounters that are impossible but which do not generate a sense of rejection but rather ironic incongruities. Neorealist and Nouvelle Vague films seem to have influenced his gaze. The photograph of a flock of sheep making their way along a perhaps newly tarmacked road and hurriedly moving aside towards the gutter as an elegant woman passes by conveys the spectator from the twentieth century back to a timeless past. A number of archaeological sites and monuments serve as a backdrop for wealthy foreign tourists, transported straight from a comic film. Elegantly dressed for a summer resort on the Mediterranean—and not for the desert—in sunglasses, artificially permed blond hair, stiletto heels, immaculate suits and short sleeveless dresses with flared skirt and cinched at the waist, they pose in front of the ruins without looking at them, alongside 'locals' dressed in tunics and turbans, in a scene in which the bizarre and the incongruous co-exist.

Al-Ani seems to use a compositional procedure associated with collage: figures that could easily have been cut out and transposed onto backgrounds in which they look out of place, though they do not generate a negative response but unwonted associations of ideas, after which it is impossible to see the backgrounds and figures independently. Instead, they are inextricably bound together, giving them an unexpected appearance that is part vaguely ridiculous, part forced and part inevitable. Al-Ani's largely concealed sense of humour is revealed in the well-lit photograph taken from a very low angle slightly to the side of a woman with long black hair in sunglasses, a short white jacket, white high-heeled shoes and matching handbag, posing calmly against an original high adobe wall of the Processional Way of Babylon—enlivened by reliefs of monsters scattered across it—, contrasting with the flat, black back-lit silhouettes filming her. An air of absurdity emanates from the ring of sculpted monsters that

surround the woman, who is indifferent to the grandeur of the walls and the magical danger contained within the sculpted figures, as if the modernity that has seized the woman and those filming her had literally turned its back on the old world, a trophy rather than a still living asset. This photograph exposes the loss of the aura of the vestiges of antiquity, the purpose of which was to protect those who sheltered beneath or behind them, transformed in the mid-twentieth century into mere touristic settings to which very little attention is paid.

A woman dressed in tight-fitting clothing and the inevitable stiletto heels covers her head with a scarf knotted beneath her chin, veiling her face. She seems lost or disoriented not far from the ruins of the palace at Ctesiphon that can be made out in the distance. The complex impression that Al-Ani portrays or suggests is perhaps the uncomfortable fit between tradition and modernity; the difficulty modernity has in adapting to an environment that is coming ever closer but which it does not understand; and the resistance of time immemorial to the rapid changes taking place every day and every hour. They are not the only figures seen posing against a wall. A girl too stands in front of an adobe façade, undoubtedly in an old neighbourhood, but an enormous black hole to one side seems about to swallow her up in an image that seems drawn from a film noir movie, though it remains unclear whether the traditional forms represent a threat or are doomed to disappear, but they do of course constitute a thorn in the side of modernity, which ignores these traditional forms that sound the alarm, that warn and are a nuisance. In contrast, as revealed by the photograph of a traditional teapot in the foreground, with a large spout, the curvature of which calls to mind and matches that of the arch of the ruins of the palace of Ctesiphon just visible in the background, tradition and antiquity combine, drawing a landscape that modernity, industrialisation and tourism have moved on from, regarding such places as curiosities worthy of interest on a holiday outing or as a decorative motif printed on a cigarette packet or ornaments intended for tourists, but with no real impact on the new modern secular life pressing ahead and asserting itself. A telling image that equates tradition and archaeology, the past and antiquity, detached from modernity.

Conclusion: Latif Al-Ani Today

Our reading of Al-Ani's photographs today is undoubtedly very different to the way they must have been seen at the time. They announced a new world that reacted without violence but estrangement when it came across 'traditional' ways of life. In 2022, the modernity these photographs show and embolden is a thing of the past and almost as incomprehensible or unlikely as the walls of Babylon: a world ended by coups d'état, wars, invasions and the deadly attacks that seek to halt and turn back the hands of time. For a few short years, during which Al-Ani was able to work, modernity and the past looked at each other and though they did not mix, neither did they engage in conflict with each other; two different and distant worlds that observed each other, occasionally with indulgence or humour. A way of looking that Al-Ani created or captured and which today kindles nostalgia and incredulity as we know that this gaze has ended forever, as Al-Ani himself observed, disheartened and in silence, during the final years of his life in a Baghdad devastated by war and violence. A lesson and a warning that we should heed as we look at these beautiful photographs that reflect a stance vis-à-vis the world—that perhaps only existed in the photographer's lens.

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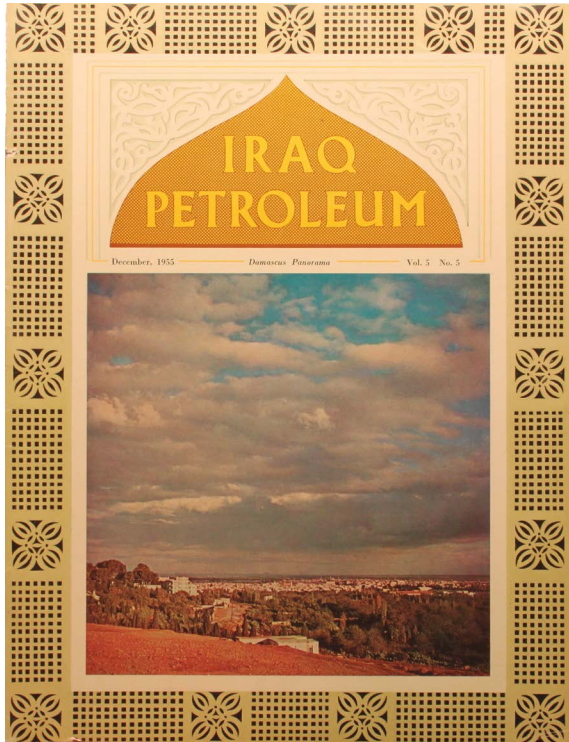
Shorja Street, Baghdad, 1960-1969
Collection Latif Al-Ani, courtesy Arab Image Foundation, Beirut



Alley in Baghdad, n.d.
Collection Latif Al-Ani, courtesy Arab Image Foundation, Beirut



American tourists in front of the ruins of the Taq Kasra in ancient Ctesiphon
(Salman Pak, northern Iraq), 1964
Collection Latif Al-Ani, courtesy Arab Image Foundation, Beirut



Magazine *Iraq Petroleum*, December 1955



Twenty-five thousand Iraqi dinars banknote, featuring a peasant woman carrying wheat, based on a photograph taken by Latif Al-Ani

LATIF AL-ANI: A LIFE BEHIND THE LENS

Mona Damluji

'I had the responsibility of disseminating Iraq visually. I took this very seriously.'¹

—Latif Al-Ani

Latif Al-Ani began his career as a documentary photographer during the height of postcolonial nation-building in Iraq in the 1950s. While his contemporaries integrated international modernist movements in architecture, art, poetry, music and film-making into Iraq's contemporary urban life, Al-Ani captured this changing landscape through the art and science of black and white—and later color—documentary photography. Al-Ani's preferred instrument was a Rolleiflex camera. He shot photographs of Iraq in the streets and from the air, aboard oil company planes and military helicopters. His photographs were published in magazines with primarily national audiences and later exhibited around the world including in Bahrain, Kuwait, Germany and the United States. Al-Ani was committed to developing his own photographs, which ensured the pristine condition of the negatives now archived in the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, Lebanon.

During his career, Al-Ani worked on assignment for various magazines and news agencies. These assignments sent him to all corners of Iraq in order to document urban and regional development and the communities benefiting from the modernization projects. In Al-Ani's words, "I took photos of all Iraq, from the North to the South, and we used to take photos of the popular crafts, the everyday life, industry, education, we shot everything in Iraq."² At the same time, Al-Ani used his camera to create a record of the extant monuments of past civilizations—Abbasid, Sumerian, Babylonian—that the Hashemite regime strongly associated with Iraq's modern national identity. With every site specific pho-

¹ "Interview with Latif Al-Ani," Tamara Chalabi, in *Latif Al-Ani* (Hannibal Publishing: Berlin, 2017), p33.

² Unpublished interview with Latif Al-Ani. Arab Image Foundation. 2012.

tograph and each of the countless individual portraits he captured of people living throughout Iraq, Al-Ani's work contributed toward a larger image of modern Iraq as a whole.

Al-Ani was born in Kerbala in 1932, the same year that the Kingdom of Iraq was recognized by the League of Nations as an independent nation-state and no longer under the authority of the British colonial mandate. In his lifetime, Iraqis experienced the 1958 revolution that brought down the monarchy and established a new republic, followed by several political coups in the 1960s and 1970s, the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), the U.S. led invasion in 1991, more than a decade of devastating sanctions, and the U.S. led invasion and occupation (2003-2021). Al-Ani, however, never expressed any interest in documenting unrest and conflict in Iraq. Until his retirement in 1977, Al-Ani preferred to focus on the subject of everyday life, which he described as "the beautiful life without violence."

On November 18, 2021, Al-Ani's passed away in Baghdad at age 89. To honor his legacy and influence in establishing a photographic vision of Iraq's modern identity, hundreds of photographs from his prolific collection of personally preserved images have been seen and celebrated around the globe in recent years. His works have been exhibited in galleries, reproduced online and published in print. And so, Al-Ani's photographs continue to do the work of preserving an image of how Iraq once was, which inevitably stands in contrast to the prevalent image of Iraq as it is today.

From Passion to Profession (1946-1954)

Al-Ani discovered his interest in photography from a young age. As a teenager, he worked with his older brother Amir at their family print shop. Al-Ani frequently visited the boutique next door, which was owned by an Iraqi Jewish photographer named Nissan. Al-Ani began borrowing Nissan's camera to create a makeshift portrait studio on the street. "I used to put a picture on a wall and took a photo of the sitter against the background...a picture of a plane, and the sitter strikes the pose as if he were in the plane,"³ Al-Ani recalled in an interview with the Arab Image Foundation.

³ *Ibid.*

Al-Ani finally received his first camera at age fifteen. The Kodak box camera was a gift from his older brother Amir, purchased from Nissan. The camera never left Al-Ani's side. By that time, in 1947, Al-Ani had joined the Babel theatre company in Baghdad as a young aspiring actor along with five other friends. They attended lectures on theatre and, reliably, Al-Ani was always carrying his camera. He fostered his artistic passions, shooting photos and performing, as a hobby until the moment he learned of a job opportunity as a photographer's assistant.

Al-Ani began his professional foray into photography several years later when his friend Aziz invited him to apply to become a trainee in the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) Photography Unit. Aziz was an editor for the British-controlled oil company's Arabic language magazine *Ahl al-Naft* (trans. *People of Oil*), where Al-Ani's photographs would eventually be published on a monthly basis and seen by tens of thousands of readers throughout Iraq and the surrounding region. He applied for the job and was hired in 1953 by Jack Percival, a British photographer and founding staff member of the IPC Photographic Unit.

With Percival's mentorship, Al-Ani honed his passion for photography into his profession. According to Al-Ani, "I learned everything there. [Jack] was my boss, my teacher and my spiritual father."⁴ As a photographer's assistant in the IPC Photography Unit, Al-Ani first gained a foundational training in the equipment, conditions and craft of handling cameras and washing and developing Percival's film in the dark room before ever shooting his first photograph on the job. Al-Ani recalls, "The IPC was a school for me in working seriously, having discipline and order. I think I was lucky. I loved my work, and it was evident in the work. Jack Percival wanted to teach me everything he knew. One day we were in his office and he had a thick photography manual. He told me, 'Latif, I won't leave Iraq before teaching you everything in this book.' He saw my enthusiasm. He took me on many trips to train my eye."⁵

Working for the British-controlled oil company in Iraq opened new doors for Al-Ani. Shadowing Percival on assignment

⁴ "Interview with Latif Al-Ani," *op.cit.*, p21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p25-6.

for the IPC magazines *Iraq Petroleum* and *Ahl al-Naft*, he traveled throughout Iraq and beyond its borders for the first time. Al-Ani went to Syria and Lebanon where the pipeline terminated and transferred crude from Kirkuk's oil fields to tankers on the Mediterranean. However, before he could join these trips, he first had to do mandatory military service in order to obtain his passport. Percival wielded the power of IPC's political influence in Iraq to arrange for a reduction of Al-Ani's compulsory service from two years down to three months. The company arranged for Al-Ani to pay a special fee to the government so that his service duty would be reduced. This freed Al-Ani to work full time, traveling with Percival and training his eye.

Al-Ani's first professional assignment was to photograph the king. After one year of training, Percival handed him the camera while on assignment for the opening of the British Industrial and Agricultural Trade Fair in May 1954. Percival asked Al-Ani to take over the assignment and shoot photos of King Faysal II for a full album that was to be published commemorating the special occasion. At first Al-Ani felt nervous about the assignment and noted that the company executives were surprised Percival gave him the job considering his lack of experience. However, Percival's confidence in Al-Ani's capabilities cleared a path for his initiation as a professional documentary photographer.

Iraq from Above (1954-1960)

Being a member of the IPC Photo Unit afforded Al-Ani an unprecedented level of access to documenting Iraq's cities, infrastructure, and people. In particular, this meant access to the skies above Iraq. Al-Ani famously captured infrastructural projects from the air on board oil company and military aircraft that commanded unparalleled freedom of movement in Iraq's airspace. In his words, "During the royal period (until 1958), we were free. We used to go to the airport, rent a plane from the Civil Aviation Society and went for shootings. No one told us what to do and not to do."⁶ In the years of the monarchy, the

⁶ Unpublished interview with Latif Al-Ani, *op. cit.*

IPC's public relations office served simultaneously as the defacto public relations office for the government. For this reason, IPC photo unit assignments were often informed by the Ministry of Culture and many photographs published in IPC's magazines were reproduced in state brochures and albums. This permitted Al-Ani access not only to oil company planes, but also military aircraft and photography equipment. Although he favored the intimacy of the Rolleiflex camera that rarely left his side, heavier duty equipment was necessary when shooting aerial photos including working with the British Army's cameras in Kodak Ektachrome color.

By the time Al-Ani began taking aerial photos in the 1950s, the Iraq Development Board had been established in order to channel state revenues from IPC's oil extraction toward major modernization and infrastructural projects. Many assignments for IPC's magazines focused on the Iraq Development Board's large-scale infrastructure projects, including dams, roads, bridges, industrial structures and housing. Often Al-Ani would accompany the IPC film unit on flights, capturing still images of the same projects that the filmmakers documented with moving picture cameras from above for the company's Arabic language films and cine-magazine *Beladuna* (trans. *Our Country*). Other times, Al-Ani would shoot his photos aboard a military helicopter documenting everything from modern petrol stations to ancient ruins of past empires.

Aerial photographs offered the readers of IPC's popular magazines a top down view of the country as it was being modernized. In a sense, it showed Iraq's citizens how to recognize national and urban landmarks from the airborne vantage of state, corporate and military planners in Iraq. "At one point", Al-Ani recalled in an interview, "the Iraqi government wanted to advertise their new Trident plane. We decided the best way to do so was to photograph it flying over a uniquely Iraqi landmark, the Shrine of Musa al-Kadhim, just outside Baghdad, which has two domes. This was Jack Percival's idea. We got into the IPC's Viscount plane to do the shoot. From the air, I saw things in a different way. It was a very different sensation. Colours were different. I saw the contrast more clearly between the ugly and the beautiful. Everything was

more exposed. Nothing could be hidden.”⁷ Framing landscapes and built environments through a camera lens from above, Al-Ani produced images that gave all Iraqis the ability to visualize modern Iraq using the planner’s eye in order to make sense of the dramatic changes occurring throughout the country in the name of modernization.

Al-Ani lived most of his life in Baghdad. His photographs of the capital—published on the covers and in the pages of *Iraq Petroleum* and *Ahl al Naft*—earned him recognition as one of Iraq’s premiere documentary photographers. A number of Al-Ani’s aerial images of Baghdad draw attention to traffic circles puncturing and punctuating the surrounding urban fabric. British planners introduced roundabouts to Iraq in order to facilitate vehicular passage along Haussmannian boulevards and steel bridges that restructured the flow of commerce and life in the capital. Al-Ani’s aerial images tend to emphasize the scale and interconnectedness of such infrastructural projects. From the bird’s eye view in his photographs, the long linear expressions of modern boulevards, bridges, housing blocks, and dams can be interpreted as abruptly disrupting the existing environments that they bisect, while simultaneously enabling controlled economic circuits through the spatial mobility of people, vehicles, resources and capital.

Yet, while many of Al-Ani’s famous photographs frame Baghdad from the air, producing an illusion of detached objectivity, his street photography provides a contrasting and highly subjective lens on urban life in mid-twentieth century Iraq. His street-bound images train our attention differently to recognize the human footprint on the city. Al-Ani captures light in ways that trace the multitude textures of pedestrian urban life, from the intimately shaded alleys created by cantilevered brick *shanshil* in Iraq’s older neighborhoods to the naked openness of startlingly bright wide roadways that separate the fresh concrete facades of a new housing development. Al-Ani’s photograph of the modern Iraqi artist Jawad Salim’s *Monument to Freedom* is a tribute to the iconic landmark that simultaneously offers a com-

⁷ “Interview with Latif Al-Ani,” *op.cit.*, p26.

ment on the public artwork by adding to Salim’s historical narrative the contemporary pedestrian figure of an Iraqi woman who appears here at the same scale as the monumental bronze figures elevated on the stone slab towering over her. Taken together, Al-Ani’s aerial and street photographs bring together the contrasting perspectives of the Hashemite regime and British oil corporation, on the one hand, who wielded the power to shape everyday life in Iraq through sweeping development projects and, on the other hand, the men and women who walked the city as changed around them.

Leading the Institution (1960–1977)

The 1958 July Revolution overthrew the British-installed Hashemite monarchy and established the first Republic of Iraq. Almost immediately, the cultural activities that had been sponsored by IPC were recognized as a national asset by the revolutionary government. While the previous regime had relied on a working relationship with the oil company to produce films, magazines, brochures and reports that favorably represented Iraq among international audiences as a modern developing nation-state, the Ministry of Culture (former Ministry of Information) sought to establish in house facilities and expertise to control the public image and information related to Iraq and the new regime. In short, “the Ministry needed me,”⁸ Al-Ani explained. “I was the only one in Iraq who knew how to develop color photos. I accepted on the condition of being paid a higher salary than what they were offering. I hired an assistant, Halim al-Khalat, who later became a well-known photographer, and I also trained Bulus Hanna.”⁹ So, two years after the revolution, Al-Ani moved his work permanently from the oil company to the Ministry of Culture. There he founded the photography department, which provided photographs for the five magazines published by the Ministry. The magazines featured stories highlighting aspects of modern Iraq for readers in five languages: Arabic, French, English, Kurdish and Turkmen.

⁸ Unpublished interview with Latif Al-Ani, *op. cit.*

⁹ “Interview with Latif Al-Ani,” *op.cit.*, p19.

Throughout his career, first at IPC and then at the Ministry, colleagues outside of Iraq recognized Al-Ani's contributions and talent. Beyond the region, he was invited to Germany and the United States, where his work was exhibited and he participated in cultural exchange opportunities. At one point, Al-Ani recalls, National Geographic invited him to do a book focused on northern Iraq. Ultimately, he turned down the opportunity due to the political climate at the time which fostered suspicion about individuals partnering with American organizations.¹⁰ The photography department maintained an archive, however, as Al-Ani has lamented, "everything disappeared in 2003."¹¹ Moreover, the story of the loss of this archive in the aftermath of the US-led invasion and occupation is part of a larger narrative of epistemic violence that destroyed and robbed Iraq's cultural and social institutions.¹² Al-Ani began to divide his time between the Ministry and the

¹⁰ Unpublished interview with Latif Al-Ani, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² In April 2003, arsonists, thieves, saboteurs, and military operatives devastated national collections of archives, objects, and buildings in Baghdad. Unidentified regime loyalists and profiteers torched and looted the Iraqi National Library and Archive (INLA), despite its proximity to the Ministry of Defense. A fragile collection of original documents from the Ottoman and monarchy periods was flooded and destroyed in unverified circumstances. Much of the documentation of Iraq's Jewish community in the basement of the Iraqi Security Services building was badly damaged before the US Army confiscated and transferred it to Washington, DC. Baghdad's National Museum of Modern Art was severely vandalized and stripped of furniture and fixtures, as thieves walked away with thousands of original works of Iraqi art. Under the auspices of the Iraq Memory Foundation, Kanan Makiya assumed custody of extensive archives in the Ba'th Party Regional Command Headquarters and transferred them to the Hoover Institute at Stanford University. Additionally, the US military took about 100 million pages of documents from Iraq during the invasion. The Pentagon and CIA insist on keeping these papers classified. Reporting in the days after the invasion of Baghdad reveals that US military forces left sites of cultural significance vulnerable and unprotected despite pleas for help by local staff and onlookers. Environmental hazards caused by the bombings, rampant looting, and vandalism left the INLA, the Iraqi Museum and other government buildings in near ruins. As a result, the INLA lost one quarter of its library holdings and sixty percent of its archival collections, including rare books, photographs, and maps. Myriads of artifacts and sites spanning ten thousand years of archaeological and architectural history have been irretrievably lost, damaged, or even destroyed, while large quantities of looted modern artwork have disappeared from Iraq altogether.

Iraqi News Agency, until, eventually, he moved over to become the head of the News Agency's photographic section. He retired in 1977 and moved to Kuwait for five years. Returning to Baghdad in the 1980s, he enjoyed his time as active as a mentor and advisor for the Iraqi Society for Photography. However, Al-Ani stopped taking pictures altogether.

In the final years of his life, Latif Al-Ani became the subject of a documentary film. His lifetime threads the story of Iraq, from nominal independence from British rule until the drawn out cessation of the American occupation. His photographs toggle our perspective on Iraq between a view from the high above in the air and one firmly rooted on earth, in the streets and among the people. Al-Ani strived to build a photographic archive that placed what he understood to be the best of Iraq at the center of the frame. In his words, "I wanted to show Iraq as a civilized, modern place. I avoided the negative things that I didn't want people to look at."¹³ Coupling a point of view that was all his own with the wants of a very powerful petroleum company and top-down governments, Al-Ani's photos offer us a glimpse into the contradictions of modernity and "the beautiful life" in Iraq.

¹³ "Interview with Latif Al-Ani," *op. cit.*

Curator: Pedro Azara

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