

## Syrian Suffering on Display: It's Happening Now...



*Italian freelance photographer Alessio Romenzi traveled to Syria in 2012 and his photos are on display at The Hangar in Beirut. (Source: Alessio Romenzi)*

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**Photographers capturing the horrors of war and transporting them to the safe environments of galleries raise questions as to where the boundary of what art is lies.**

When Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué debuted “The Pixelated Revolution” this year, it brought forth [questions](http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/3091) on how artists can take on the region’s uprisings without seeming “callous or crass.”

The one-man show had the artist professorially presenting a YouTube clip of a Syrian who, with a handheld camera, unwittingly recorded his own (presumed) death by sniper fire. Mroué analyzed protester videos through a film manifesto and then compared their technical aspects to that of Syrian state TV clips. Once the street opposition produces stable images like the tripod-assisted state TV, he commented, it will have advanced to another level.

Was it okay for Mroué to treat the Syrian uprising and its human casualties in a way that, on the surface, seemed detached?

As the Syrian uprising continues, Mroué's self-questioning is increasingly relevant, even if it can lead one to entirely different conclusions. It seems there will be no shortage of opportunities for artists to put the uprising on display. The latest example is a photo exhibit currently at The Hangar featuring the work of Italian freelance photographer Alessio Romenzi.

Romenzi's photos are "far more than just another example of photojournalism," reads the exhibit brochure for the solo show titled "It's Happening Now..." The photographer was in Syria for the first half of 2012 and now, his collection of photos from places like Homs and al-Qusair hang in UMAM's gallery.

The photos depict martyrs' funerals, makeshift hospitals, and revolutionary processions. With so much tragedy in Syria, it seems inevitable that his lens often gravitated toward the most dramatic (and increasingly common) scenes: mothers weeping at news of their sons' deaths, friends crouching over the gravely injured, and children mourning corpses.

It's here that questions arise: What makes photos taken by a photojournalist "far more than" photojournalism? Is it art? If so, how can certain scenes that depict very recent and real human tragedy be considered art?

A placard in the gallery states: "Rest assured that all proceeds collected will help defray the costs of producing other cultural initiatives and providing care for Syrian refugees." The "rest assured" bit acknowledges the initial discord that can accompany looking at Romenzi's photos in a gallery and imagining them being sold for (possible) display in living rooms or offices. It doesn't seem right to most that one could sip champagne with these photos as a backdrop, even if the more common ambiance of a gallery is quiet contemplation as opposed to round-the-clock merriment.

Not all of the photos depict suffering, but many can't help but allude to tragedy given their setting. This isn't something the exhibit skirts either. A brochure states that the photos "demonstrate the utter brutality of the violence and capture the reactions of people in extreme situations." Then,



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in the same breath, it calls them a “success.” The horror is introduced as an integral feature of the series. The visitor is asked to recognize the violence of the situation, but also to acknowledge that, somehow, the photos are something more than documentary.

Any good photographer frames their photos in a certain way and aestheticizes to some degree. This is unavoidable and it’s what separates the good from the bad. But there’s also the extreme end of aestheticization best exemplified by renowned Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. Salgado’s photographs make the direst situations, like refugees in Ethiopia’s Korem Camp, look like high-fashion shoots. His stylized approach led *The New Yorker’s* <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101079/When-Peoples-Suffering-is-Portrayed-as-Art.aspx> Ingrid Sischy to write that “beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal. To aestheticize is the fastest way to anesthetize the feeling of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action...”

To Romenzi’s credit, his photographs do not anesthetize. The Italian’s photographs are presented chronologically and the captions firmly place the events in real-time Syria, not in some isolated, ethereal art sphere. With all the images presented sequentially, one intense shot after the next, one can look at them more as a whole set that follows a story told by the photographer.

It just so happens that in this story, Romenzi himself is a character. He is the roving war photographer who forms an “emotional connection” with the people and feels compelled to tell their stories. An enlarged photo of Romenzi wearing a white scarf, sunglasses, and looking disheveled in a desert environment is at the entrance of the exhibit.

There’s an element to this method of storytelling that many photographers themselves recognize as problematic – art or no art. Though Romenzi said that he set out to “do something for the people,” it’s also clear that his photos *do something to* the Syrians he depicted. The Hangar brochure states that Romenzi believes that in situations of brutality



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and violence “people reveal themselves completely under such conditions: devoid of masks or facades.” This implies that the Syrian people were naked under the lens for our benefit, so that us humans not facing sniper bullets can get a glimpse of what real humanity looks like. Seeing the photos in this way might reveal more about the gallery goers and art viewers than the Syrians portrayed.

At *The New York Times* (<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/forum/>), photo director of the Associated Press Santiago Lyon was asked about the hazy area of photojournalism, art, and human suffering. He responded, “[I]s reducing the visual information to mere aesthetics acceptable? If it sears an image into the viewers’ mind and heightens their awareness by making them remember a particular scene and think about it, then my answer would be yes. If it converts a very real human drama into just another forgettable pretty picture, then my answer would be no.”

**“It’s Happening Now...” is at The Hangar until July 29, 2012.**