

Images - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery and the artist. **Writer** - Maryam Ganjineh, Independent Art Consultant and Contributor

## Rashed Al Shashai: A Generation's Salvation

The story and formation of a young community's identity

Rashed Al Shashai's emotional and personal connection to the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure in Makkah is the main narrative shaping his series of work *Salvation*. His grandfather was one of many men present at the mosque at the time of the attack. A lean man, by climbing out of a window shaped as a geometric star—often used in Islamic architecture—he escaped death. Almost 40 years later, his resonating story and near death experience became inspiration for Rashed's conceptual vision, to create a sequence of photographs and installation artworks telling the story of how these events shaped his own generation's upbringing.

After many years of hearing his grandfather's accounts of the incident, Ahmed Rashed tells the story of a village close to Makkah named Mandasa Rashed. He was determined to depict the life of a once thriving community surrounded by mountains and used as a strategic point for combat during the incident. The project that began almost four years ago, in 2012, as documentary coverage of Mandasa morphed into a body of work that narrates a generation's cultural and social struggles.

Through his lens Rashed utilized the natural environment surrounding the village of Mandasa as a backdrop for his investigative and critical journey showcasing symbolic connections with the aftermath of the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure. Born in 1977 in Al Baha and raised in Makkah, Rashid exemplifies his generation living through the repercussions of the attack which had made society much more repressed. With *Salvation* he defies extremism, its

violence and their direct influence on communities and society of Saudi Arabia in the years since the seizure, while also looking ahead to the future.

His deliberate use of an uninhabited village sets the tone for a state of ruin and abandonment that is felt by his generation. In a trio of photographs Rashed captures the impossible escape from the village as a symbolic gesture of suffocation. The artist uses a star-shaped cutout in a fence looking outside the village as his only way to seek freedom. In each image, he redefines paths of escape and its impossible pursuit through a constant change of background imagery. However, the placement of the star is a symbolic window for his own escape and for what he hopes to be his generation's salvation obtained through the power of confident and independent thinking in the face of religious suppression.

In a powerful photograph, captured at 4 am, Rashed positioned himself on high ground facing Mandasa. His goal to not only have a full frame of the village from a distance but to also visually tell the story of its darkness and despair, 'its absolutely dark in the village at night. Where there is no light there is no life' he said about the photograph *The City from Behind the Mountain*. With this image he also captures the contrasting light passing through the neighboring city, highlighting life beyond Mandasa, which implies hope beyond isolation.

Rashed's *Salvation* series holds a personal relationship through his grandfather's stories of Makkah and Mandasa, and also conveys a more

His deliberate use of the uninhabited village sets the tone for a state of ruin and abandonment that is felt amongst his generation

universal message of his generation's voice advocating freedom and salvation.

The series focuses on the personal, social, cultural and environmental limitations imposed on the youth and the artist, while also exploring their abilities to overcome these barriers. With every photograph the light's fluid flowing movement signifies confidence through which redemption can be achieved.

*Salvation* was exhibited at Ayyam Gallery, DIFC, from 14-26 March 2016 during Art Week Dubai.















