

## Camera on a continent

by Muhammad Yusuf

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Showcase Gallery, Dubai, has an avowed mission to show artworks by established and emerging artists from Africa, Europe and the Middle East. But its director Sharon Harvey, is never so pleased as when she shows art or artefacts from Africa.

A Zimbabwean with strong views on race (she is very liberal), the environment (a Green, from all angles) and a passionate believer in the arts as a bridge between cultures (she often cuts a lonely and brave furrow vis-à-vis African Art in Dubai), she recently showcased the photographic works of Lebanese-French artist Christian Ghammachi titled Forsaken, in what was the photographer's first solo show in Dubai.

Ghammachi, a forceful speaker with an easy laugh, was born in Lebanon and lived in Kuwait, Belgium as well as South Africa. He says he made the decision of a lifetime in early 2013 - namely, to give up his career in corporate law, and pursue his passion for photography, full time.

"The resilience of Africa" or an Africa that holds its head high despite its troubles, is a detail that captivates him. Wanting to give a shape and form to it, he drove to Namibia and the Skeleton Coast, the Etosha elephant park (Namibia), besides travelling through South Africa by motorbike. The result is a series of black and white photographs, which captures the desolate pride of Africa. Its gloss was something that caught the experienced eye of Harvey.

Aged, living animals, dead-on-the-shore former sea-faring vessels, decaying buildings - these are the stuff that Forsaken was made of. Ghammachi makes a

profession out of extracting the glory of near-extinct things.

Alpha, for example, showed the spotted face and dreadlocked mane of an old lion. His youth long past him, the animal's bust still had a dignified air about it. "He is the oldest lion in Masai Mara, Kenya's game reserve," said Ghammachi, who went there too.

Skelli 1 and 2 series showed elephant skulls. There is an Indian proverb that says "you can't tie an elephant in a cowshed, even if he is starving," meaning, even a starving elephant needs more space than a well-fed cow. Ditto with the skulls. Their massive size was an indication of the tonnage the beasts carried and the awe they induced, once upon a time.

March showed a herd of around twenty elephants, marching for food and water. "It was a daily ritual for them," Ghammachi said. "They took around two around hours to reach the wetlands from the forest where they slept, to graze." The black and white image captured their strength, size and unspoken dangers.

The huge size of the tusks, the firmly held trunks and the ready-for-action legs, caught the pachyderms in the middle of movement. But there was a marked tenderness to the image, given that the magnificent creatures could soon be things of the past.

Kili (short for 'Kilimanjaro', Africa's highest mountain) encounter, was an amazing snap, given that the elephant was just a few metres away from the photographer. A show-down was possible: Ghammachi had got out of his vehicle to lie prone on the earth with his camera for the shot. But the reward was an immortal picture of the looming "Kilimanjaro of animals." The incident took place in Amboseli, Kenya.

Intimate was a close-up shot of a very shy elephant. With lowered trunk, pushed back ear and downcast eye, it was the very picture of

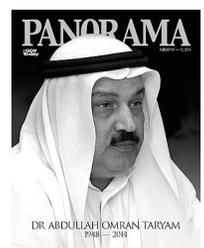
### FRONTPAGE



### GALLERY



### PANORAMA



### TIME OUT



modesty. Perhaps it was a plea, in its own way, to people to let elephants live.

Fate, Tilt and Lines showed the jettisoned houses of Kolmanskop, Namibia, which was a thriving mining town till 1954. As the titles showed, the buildings had started tilting under neglect and their lines were haphazard.

Fan had a twist to it. Actually, it showed the carcass - or 'car'cass - of a car. Ghammachi said he heard a strange hum coming out of the car skeleton. It was the (resilient) fan under the hood, which was still whirring with the wind!

Eduard Bohlen sort of encapsulated the mood of the show. It was the image of a shipwreck on the Skeleton Coast of Namibia. It lay around 800 metres inland from the sea and was more than hundred years old. Its broken-down hull, open to the sky and sand, looked for all the world like a beached whale.

"The journey to the ship wreck", said Ghammachi, "was a mission in itself. I had to get a licence and then make a trip through the dunes for five hours. We had to wait for low tide and also for the right kind of light. Jackals lived in the wreck and had breakfast with us!"

He understands the nature of raw earth, rolling clouds and sere sands. He runs his film on the sharp edges of stones, can feel the sharp tip of an elephant's tusk, detail the wrinkles on its skin with precision, can move like a native in the folds of soil and shoot rust flakes and sand particles with equal felicity.

He can astonish with his perspective and in him, the object and background are a mixed affair. He can even be surrealistic. "Does the quality of a photograph depend on the quality of the subject?" he wondered. "Is it the photo of a beautiful girl or is it a beautiful photo of a girl?" He is given to pondering such chicken-and-egg questions.

"Ugliness can also be beautiful", he declared. He is chary of photo shopping. "I have rules", he said. "One, items should never be removed from the work. Two, one has to do the same work as in analogue photography. Three, photos should move, since photocopies don't". He said he "scratched some photos; others were too pure to be scratched".

Ruth, a Dubai banker with a South African background, besides applauding Ghammachi's derring-do, said that African elephants were her thing. "I don't normally go to photography exhibitions, but this has an African theme," she said. "Forsaken lives up to its title". She could identify with the dangers the photographer faced, since once she herself had been charged by an elephant in 'musth.' To add pep to the show, on inaugural night on Oct. 21, Showcase had roped in a French cheesemaker to deal with the culinary side of the exhibition. It was a nice way of saying cheese to the show.

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