

# THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

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## Akkar from another perspective

By India Stoughton

BEIRUT: The corpses of five songbirds lie in a tangle on the tarmac. You can tell how long ago each was shot by the colors of its plumage. The delicate green down on the birds' bellies, the peach of their throat and wing feathers fades as they decompose.

Four lie touching, as though in embrace. A few centimeters away is a fifth, its feathers bedraggled and fraying, blackened, as though burnt.

This gruesome yet haunting photo is one of a series taken in Akkar last year by 23-year-old French photographer Constance Proux. The fruit of four separate trips to the north Lebanon region, where a friend runs Relief and Reconciliation for Syria, an NGO working with Syrian refugees, Proux's "Akkar" series aims to shed a personal light on the area and its refugee population.

On her final monthlong trip to the area, the photographer was accompanied by her sister, Philippine, who is currently working on a Ph.D. in sociology. The two decided to work on telling refugee stories by focusing on the objects they brought with them as they fled their homes.

The photographs in the series are complemented by a loosely related series of texts, penned by Philippine and based on interviews conducted with the refugees with the help of translator Greg Shaheen.

On her third trip to Akkar, Constance says, she spent a month in a Christian village, where she got to know a number of local families and was struck by the contrast between the peace and calm of the village and the political tensions destabilizing the wider area.

Something of this paradox comes through in "Akkar," in which quiet, artfully staged photographs and poetic texts hint at buried stories of violence and upheaval.

The project has been selected for exhibition at the Manifesto Festival in Toulouse and the Unseen Photo Fair in Amsterdam this September. The sisters intend to show the work as an installation, accompanying the photographs with scrolling passages of text on LED screens and a map showing the location of Akkar and its proximity to Syria.

They didn't have a particular "target audience" in mind while working in Akkar, the sisters explain, but they hope the final product will educate viewers in a way that goes beyond media reportage from the area, which often boils down to pitying tales of refugee hardship or dramatic reports on the security situation.

“We didn’t want to explore the ‘pathos’ chord. That is not what we felt when we were there,” the sisters explain in an email interview. They hope viewers will be intrigued by the work, they add, left “with the desire to come back to it, to read other stories, to go back to the images after reading the stories, and back to the texts after revisiting the images.

“We hope that it will lead people to think differently about Syrian refugees next time they read about them in the newspapers.”

While they hope to challenge media discourses on Akkar, the sisters are clear about the fact that their work is not journalism.

“I consider the photography as documentary,” Constance says, “but the borders between documentary and art are quite blurry ... It’s not reportage as an illustration of a political or social situation, but it works with reality. The situation that is the subject of journalism is also our starting point but the approach is different.”

“We had time to collect experiences, relationships, stories and testimony and make an arrangement out of it, [an attempt] to create some cohesion out of the multiple and paradoxical experiences [we uncovered in] Akkar.

“Some pictures are staged. After spending some time with the person in a certain atmosphere, I wanted to have a picture ... that reflects an aspect of the exchange we had.”

Most importantly, “we don’t draw any conclusions,” the sisters stress. “We are looking at a very local point of view, and we include ourselves ... in the project. We arrived with some principles and ideas – working on Syrian refugees’ objects for example. But those principles were [often derailed] by the context ... We had to constantly readjust our expectations or beliefs.”

This flexibility comes through in the breadth of Constance’s photographs, which come in a variety of dimensions and formats and capture everything from artfully framed landscapes to the objects the refugees chose to discuss during interviews to the interviewees themselves.

Philippine’s texts, originally written in French, transform first-person recollections into third-person narratives. “Three months before their hasty departure, Fatima had prepared a large handbag in case they were forced to leave the country,” she writes. “She had filled it with important papers, passport photos and some extra clothes for herself and her children. She never went anywhere without this bag, purchased during a pilgrimage to Mecca some years earlier. She had also packed a ballpoint pen and a few sheets of paper, in order to keep a diary of events.”

Months later, Fatima lives in Akkar, having fled her village after it was bombed.

“The bag is worn, and ripped in places,” Philippine writes. “Fatima still has her treasured pen. When asked what happened to the diary she used to write in daily, she simply sighs and waves her hand dismissively. It has long since been lost – the question is absurd.”

The photographs are left uncaptioned, leaving viewers to forge their own connections. Could this capped gold gel pen have traveled to Akkar from Syria with Fatima and her family? Is the small boy clutching his knees and staring warily at the camera one of her three children?

“We wanted to avoid a direct correlation ... The text is not here to ‘explain’ the photography or the photography to ‘illustrate’ the text,” they explain. “They are both an attempt to answer the question of how to speak about the Syrian refugees.

“We asked them to talk about the objects they brought back from Syria,” they add, “and often it was a pretext to speak about their home, why and how they ran away ... We were hoping to collect more personal stories, to make their voices heard.”

To find out more about the Akkar project, please visit [www.constanceproux.com](http://www.constanceproux.com)

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