

Charming idea with a few unique touches

Angelika Richter-Ajhar's exhibition shows a mainly tourist view of Lebanon but has some genuinely stunning components

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The idea, in itself, is a charming one. In My Lebanon, an exhibition of black and white photographs by German photographer Angelika Richter-Ajhar, the artist seeks to "show in her pictures the true richness of the country and its people." Yet the photos in the exhibition, which opened Tuesday night at the Goethe Institute, show less of what Richter-Ajhar's Lebanon truly is than the somewhat Orientalist view of what Lebanon should be.

In creating her Lebanon, Richter-Ajhar has chosen to ignore all that is uncomfortable and complicated about the country and focus on a romantic land of ruins, hills, valleys and shepherds.

From the exhibition, you would have no idea that Lebanese live in cities, or that Lebanon recently emerged from civil war. Instead, many of the pictures consist of nature scenes, which see the photographer create a purely aesthetic Lebanon, drawing upon techniques reminiscent of Ansel Adams.

Photos with titles such as Mountain Path, Rocky Landscape and Cedars in the Mist – though not unappealing visually – seem like part of a campaign to convince viewers that

Lebanon truly is the Switzerland of the Middle East.

The exhibition also contains its share of high-quality tourist photos. Taken during the early 90s, when Richter-Ajhar was in fact only a tourist in Lebanon, photographs such as Souvenir Camel – which focuses on a camel, dressed up and chained to a wall – immediately give the impression that the photographer's view of Lebanon is not that of an insider.

Other photographs, such as Roman Temple, Arcade at Citadel and Temple of Bacchus again focus on an aesthetically appealing, purely historical vision of Lebanon, with ample close ups of Greek inscriptions and worn-looking walls.

It is in her photographs of people in the countryside that Richter-Ajhar comes closest to achieving something truly unique. "I find my Lebanon in the countryside, not in the cities," she said in an interview with The Daily Star. "I find in the traditional life more of the Lebanese character, in the cities Lebanon has become internationalized."

Her view that the "real Lebanon" should be found in the countryside is readily apparent in photographs such as Cowherd, Farmer Family and Old Couple in Grocery Store, in which she focuses on the lives of Lebanese in rural land-

scapes, often beautifully highlighting ordinary moments of women making bread, or men carrying figs.

The best of these photos were shot recently, and show how her perceptions of the country have evolved from those of the purely aesthetic into something more complicated and engaging. Yet again she seems unable to completely remove herself from what she sees. Rarely in viewing these pictures do we feel like voyeurs, peering into the intimate details of rural life. Instead, the subjects are almost always looking straight at the camera.

Yet there are a few moments in which the photographer succeeds in disappearing, and for these few moments it is worth viewing the exhibition as a whole. Boy Behind Shutters, a photo in which Richter-Ajhar catches a young boy, eyes closed, leaning out of the shutters of a window, achieves a rare moment of quiet intimacy. Little Ice Cream Seller, Apricot Vendor with Horse and Girls at Window, all depicting people in ordinary life, allow the viewers to feel as though they are peering in at the scenes from a distance.

It is in these moments that you feel you are not being coerced to view a certain vision of Lebanon. Here you see more than "her Lebanon" – and find the real Lebanon itself.



One of the best pictures on show: Little Ice Cream Seller, taken in The Cedars in 1992