Displaced from his homeland in 1985 by the civil war, the Lebanese-born Canadian photographer Camille Zakharia set out on a series of travels to diverse destinations, many of which served as temporary homelands. Photography remains the one constant in his life. The visual record Zakharia captures through his photographic work spans three decades and various locales including the United States, Greece, Turkey, Canada, and, most recently, Bahrain where he currently resides. But his images go beyond an autobiographical documentation of places occupied at specific moments throughout his life. The thousands of individual images that have resulted from his migrations are used as building blocks to construct larger and more compelling visual forms with a degree of complexity that is impossible to capture within a single frame. While the technique is constructive—no doubt informed by his training as an engineer as well as an artist—the outcome of the
process is a set of visual metaphors about identities formed and refigured through encounters with changing urban transnational environments. Photographic montages and collages of people and places, of transformed architectural facades and interiors, function as visual equivalents for spaces created by the displaced ‘self’ for the commingling of memory and desire.

*Cultivate Your Garden* (catalog II) is one such work. This five-meter long photo-mosaic completed in 1999 is a visual diary embodying over a decade of experiences following his departure from war-torn Lebanon. Photographic fragments drawn from an extensive archive of images taken in Lebanon while a student at the American University in Beirut, and scenes from various countries explored while completing engineering projects, are combined with vignettes of Canada where he settled in 1995 to enroll in the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. The title of this work is inspired by Voltaire’s *Candide* who, like Zakharia, must struggle to overcome disappointments, banishment, and other misfortunes in order to come to terms with the world. In his quest for happiness, Candide eventually realizes “that we must take care of our garden” and share a simple, yet full, life with friends.\(^1\) For Candide, the garden not only symbolizes his surrender to and acceptance of the injustices of the world, it also becomes his refuge where he finds solace. The garden is a circumscribed space for working, which allows him to find contentment in productivity. The moral of Candide’s journey, according to one Voltaire scholar, is: "Don't rationalize, but work; don't utopianize, but improve. We must cultivate our own garden, for no one is going to do it for us."\(^2\) Zakharia transforms this literary message into a tangible visual equivalent.

Photography is to Camille Zakharia what the garden was for Voltaire’s Candide. He wrote that “My art has been constantly my refuge. It has sustained me in so many ways, and forced me to venture outside the safe haven that I have created for myself…”\(^3\) Zakharia’s photographic garden is as labor intensive as any actual garden. Here thousands of images were selected, reprinted, hand cut, and carefully pieced together like the *tesserae* of a mosaic. The surface has the fractured appearance of an image passed through a prism before being extruded onto a planar matrix. The frieze-like assemblage of urban facades and natural elements with minimal human presence evokes a modern-day Pompeian wall painting. But here the emphasis is on creating a Candidean space for nurturing memories, cultivating the idea of a new life that is both realistic and illusory, and fostering desires for happiness. A stacked perspective system, similar to Persian miniatures, is used in place of a more illusionistic linear perspective system to reveal levels of meaning through the process of layering. Each stratum of the planar composition contains visual references to more than one culture, time, and place. For example, Modigliani-like portraits of close artist friends he met in Canada flank a self-portrait of the artist standing next to an easel supporting one of his artistic photographs of Bahrain (catalog II d and e). These figures, which dominate the foreground, are juxtaposed with vividly colored blocks of geometric patterns taken from a tribal carpet Zakharia brought to Canada; a material reminder of migration. Incorporating these figures within this context of the Old World / New World and past/present raises another Candidean analogy. According to Zakharia, “I included them in my work because I believe all artists find refuge in their art world. This is where they fit best, in a world often misunderstood by others.”\(^4\) Behind the

\(^3\) Camille Zakharia’s artist’s statement, personal communication with the author.
\(^4\) Personal e-mail communication entitled “Questions about *Cultivate Your Garden*” between the author and Camille Zakharia on 24 April 2006.
figures is a second stratum created through the repetition of surface textures that one might find in the details of stonewalls and streets of any urban environment (catalog II). This level serves as a horizon line that is topped by a patchwork of architectural facades associated with the urban environment of Halifax. Column-like rows of barren trees sprout from the earth to support decaying Roman arches and Turkish frescoes. Ruins from devastated Lebanese cityscapes rest on top of a rocky acropolis. It is a diminutive composite view placed high up in the composition suggesting a receding memory or, at the very least, a physical distance from the present reality. A clear blue sky is dotted with the colors of autumn leaves interspersed with menacing blackbirds sitting on leafless branches. These images equate with changing seasons as well as shifting geographical locales that--especially for someone from the Middle East confronting a Canadian environment for the first time--would strike a tone of unfamiliarity. However, photographing the head of a Greek statue hanging on top of a bathroom in an open air restaurant by a cliff on the island of Santorini seventeen years earlier stands in the artist’s memory, he says, as if it happened yesterday. In *Cultivate Your Garden*, the mask-like face of this terracotta statue appears in multiples suspended in a form reminiscent of necklaces worn by Arab women (catalog II e-f), thus using one cultural memory to trigger another. This pattern of conjoining diverse cultural memories is repeated throughout the photo-collage. The artist also deftly embeds minute reminders of the Islamic world--in the form a minaret--and Orthodox Christianity--in the form of an icon of St. George--within an overwhelmingly secular scene from the Western world replete with stoplights, billboards, and street signs. Zakharia essentially invents a new reality from the memory remnants--or what might be called contact zones--of other places and times. The artistic self finds contentment

---

5 Ibid.
in the task of continuously shuffling memory-saturated images in an effort to cultivate his own garden.

Zakharia carries forward the idea of the Bauhaus photographer Moholy-Nagy that photography is of inestimable value in educating the eye toward a ‘new vision’. In his writings about the process and potential of photomontage titled *Painting Photography Film*, Moholy described the piecing together of various photographs in an experimental method of simultaneous representation, combining visual and verbal wit, imitative means and imaginary spheres that can tell a story more veristic than life itself.\(^6\) This describes the essence of what Zakharia achieves in *Cultivate Your Garden*, yet leads us to question the degree to which the artist intentionally uses the medium to guide the viewer toward a specific understanding of image content.

First, it should be noted, Zakharia is well versed in the history of photo-collage and photo-montage techniques starting with the composite negatives used by Oscar Rejlander in the nineteenth century to the exploitation of this process by the Berlin Dadaist in the early decades of the twentieth century and, more recently, the joiner photographs of David Hockney.\(^7\) He is also cognizant of the symbiosis between medium and message and the fact that a formulaic approach to creating montages undermines their potential to resonate with meaning. Stylistically his oeuvre is wide ranging from a representational postcard mode, seen in photo-collages created from tourist views of Berlin and Paris (figures 1 and 2), to geometric abstractions (figure 3) that evoke associations with Mondrian’s mature De Stijl paintings. Zakharia works in a systematic and precise manner, nurturing his ideas to a sophisticated level of maturity. On a daily basis he photographs the city, the landscape, and elements of his

---


\(^7\) These are among the artists Camille Zakharia presented in a lecture at the College of Fine Arts, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, February of 2006.
surrounding environment. Periodically, selections are made from this image archive for reprinting using an intuitive sense of relatedness that may or may not bring together images from the same time/space/place location. Fragments of these images are treated as objects to be shifted around on a flat surface like plays in a game of chess. Once a proper strategy is adopted, the fragments are fixed to a flat surface. These studies are collected into a remarkable set of sketchbooks that serve as the foundation for developing large-scale works. Figure 4 shows the artist reviewing some of these sketchbook studies for a series titled Division Lines.

At first glance, the Division Lines (figures 3 and 5) series appears to be a disinterested play of non-objective patterns detached from anything found in nature or the city. However, according to the artist’s statement, this series is the result of a five-minute photo shoot of the manmade street markings in yellow, blue, and white dividing a parking lot in Halifax Nova Scotia in April 1997 at the exact moment when heavy rains washed away a covering of snow. Through the repetition of forms, Zakharia minimizes the identity and particularity of a picture as a representation while enabling it to function as an essential structural element of the whole. The problem the artist sets for himself is “What can be done with the most mundane of images?” He begins--without definitive planning--to construct a small image. Once this, in the artist’s own words, is “born as a unit”—for example, the cross and square motif--he works toward reshaping it to live in harmony with other parts of a bigger puzzle. This series, like all of Zakharia’s work, explores the theme of identity, but in a more introspective manner. He relates his interest in the process of photo-collage to the fragmentation of his identity as an immigrant; a point that is clearly articulated in the following statement about Division Lines:

---

8 Interview between the artist and the author, April, 2006.
A marriage of different cultures, starting with Byzantine iconography and its complex mosaic application, the marvelous Islamic geometric pattern, the intricate carpet making, and my appreciation of Abstract Expressionism, notably the Color Fields of Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock’s Action Paintings, were the influences that lead me to create the *Division Lines* photo-collages, assembled from street markings in a repetitive manner that reflect the embracing of another culture while not forgetting one’s own. While these collages hold an abstract characteristic on the surface—an art form attributed to the West—one can still sense my Middle Eastern roots. This could be detected in the intricate patterns embedded in the carpet making for which the region is famous, and in the application of the photo pieces, reminiscent of Byzantine mosaic art. The finished works consisting of irregular geometric shapes echo the sense of fragmentation of immigrants who left their homelands to find a new home somewhere else, aspiring towards a better life.

In today’s digital age it is no longer necessary for artists to engage in labor-intensive practices to execute their concepts. As Moholy-Nagy predicted nearly a century ago, it is now possible to work mechanically with the aid of projections and new printing processes. The fact that Zakharia continues to gravitate toward the hand construction method is indicative of the importance that he places on the materiality of the photograph as an agent of meaning. “Thinking materially about photography,” according to Attfield, “encompasses the process of intention, making, distributing, consuming, using, discarding and recycling, all of which impact on the way in which photographs as images are understood.” In other words, photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience. If, as Barthes argues, the image and referent are laminated together, then photographs have meanings as objects and images that are the outcome of intentionality. This is the reason that the materiality of Zakharia’s collaging and montaging techniques matter. It creates an inseparable, yet ambiguous, bond between image and form that are the direct product of his intent to explore the experience of migration.

---

9 Camille Zakharia’s artist’s statement, personal communication with the author.
In a recent study of the materiality of photographs, titled *Photographs Objects Histories*, Edwards and Hart state “Materiality is closely related to social biography. This view . . . argues that an object cannot be fully understood at any single point in its existence but should be understood as belonging to a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning. As such, objects are enmeshed in, and active in, social relations, not merely passive entities of these processes.”\(^{11}\) Two forms of social biography related to the materiality of photographs are identified. One considers how image content is altered when its material form is shifted from one medium to another; for example from a lantern-slide to a print. The second model seeks to find ways of going beyond the analysis of ‘what’ is represented in order to focus on the image’s ‘exchange value’ when it moves from one context to another; for example, when a photograph is pasted into an album and passed along as a gift. A third model of social biography, what might be called the object/author relationship, can be articulated using the work of Camille Zakharia. The sequence is as follows; the artist photographs a particular place, this image becomes part of a visual diary tracing his mobility, the image resides in the artist’s archive for some time before being selected and incorporated into a set of images, the same image is later (re)contextualized into another cluster of images. In light of the studies of the materiality of photography, these migrations of the image create a social biography of the object. If the (re)contextualization of the image is determined by it relevance to the photographer’s memories of migration, then it can be maintained that the social biography of the image mirrors the social biography of the image-maker.

A suite of photo-montages, titled *Stories From the Alley* (figures 6-7 and 9-10), describes a journey through Muharraq, an older district of Manama, Bahrain’s

\(^{11}\) Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds.). Ibid. p. 4.
capital city, where Zakharia was sent in 1991 to work on the construction of a sewage system. The artist recalls having mixed feelings about the project due to media-based associations with this place and events linked to Desert Storm, but he quickly bonded with the people and the ambience of this part of the Arab world. Manama is a relatively modern city, yet Zakharia prefers to photograph its older districts like Muharraq (Figure 11), because it is here that changes wrought by globalization are most apparent. He is drawn to the stark beauty of the decaying architecture, its associations with diverse traditions, and the people he met while wandering through the alleys with his view camera (figure 6); but the metamorphosis captured in the photo-montages also function on the level of personal biography. A written account of his first contact with this new environment accompanies this series of photo-montages. Dates, times, street names, conversations with a local woman who reminisces about the past and offers words of wisdom to the newcomer are presented in detail. The artist with his camera and the veiled stranger discuss the music of a famous Egyptian singer whose voice wafted from a house in the distance, they engage in a friendly banter about the changes that are taking place in the neighborhood, and the artist remarks on how candidly the woman speaks while he remains guarded in his comments out of a sense of political correctness. Upon parting, she tells him to get married soon for the sake of his parents, if not for himself. The Arabic script in the photo-montages transcribes portions of the lyrics from the song sung by the Egyptian singer along with poetic references to love and passages from the Qu’ran (figure 9). The veiled woman who appears in several of the scenes in Stories from the Alley is Sulaf, a Bahraini woman who became his wife and muse (figure 10).

This melding together of text-based stories and visual narratives represents a reconfigured autobiography. It highlights moments of a life, reconstructs a timeline of
memories, and provides a mirror and prop for imaging the self. Zakharia’s photo-montages serve to elucidate the social (auto)biography of the artist, not only through his contact with, and exploration of, other immigrant experiences, but also through familial ties. The Lebanese writer and academic, Noha Bayoumi, conducted a study of “Motherhood Biography on the Borders” in which she examines the style and content of the letters that Alice, Camille Zakharia’s mother, wrote to her son following his departure from Lebanon. Through these private letters, Alice laments the situation that has scattered her family, recounts mundane daily activities to encourage his sense of connectedness to home, and offers reassurances that his migration will enable him to be successful in his career. Alice is not unique in assuming the role of Motherhood that fills the memories of the son with information about family life in an effort to keep him rooted to his homeland and sustain hope of his return. The son, however, seldom corresponded with his mother, preferring instead to use the letters, which he sometimes translated into French and English, to construct replies in the form of collages. Bayoumi views the content, presentation, and style of Alice’s letters as similar to collages, thus forging a visual/verbal dialogue between the mother and son, but a key difference in these modes of expression is characterized by the private nature of the letters as opposed to the public nature of the artwork. Nevertheless, the son, through his artwork, recalls his past and expresses his desire to give life to the values of Motherhood by rebuilding his identity in a new place. Bayoumi maintains the artist fulfills the desires of his mother by building a creative self that is free from borders, yet there is no apparent response to the desire, or need, to return to the land.

12 Noha Bayoumi, “Sirat ummuma ‘ala al-hudud: rasa’il um ila ibna’ihi wa khuruj an al-samt (Biography of Motherhood on the Borders: Letters from a Mother to her Son and Break the Silence)”. Bahithat II. Beirut: Al-markaz al-thakafi al-‘arabi, 2005-2006. (Forthcoming); translation provided by Sarah Al-Sheik.
of his birth. Indeed, the artist appears content to explore his identity through the new locales he experiences.

In works such as *Lebanon-Canada Via Bahrain* (figure 11-13), a photo-collaged dimensional billboard, we see familiar images of Sulaf, Bahrain, the text of letters, and even fragments of *Division Lines* further (re)contextualized, thus confirming that the formation of social biographies for both the object and the author is an ongoing process. This work has been characterized as nostalgic, implying a sense of melancholy associated with prolonged absences from one’s homeland or a sorrowful longing for the conditions of the past. One particularly apt description of nostalgia is “memory’s cataracts—clouding our vision and causing us to see things that were never there.” In this view, Zakharia’s work represents something other than nostalgia. *Lebanon-Canada via Bahrain*, I would argue, represents a cathartic fictional fantasy, inventively juxtaposing memories in a non-linear fashion. The scale is unexpectedly large. Billboards, signs, and walls tend to be flat but one surface of this freestanding form is dimensional; once again challenging expectations. Sulaf appears as both a mysteriously veiled woman from the East and a liberated Western woman lying on a carpet (figures 11 and 12). Landscapes and cityscapes from both sides of the world—the Middle East and North America—are brought into physical proximity. Fragments of letters from home are gathered into the same frame as the artist’s own geo-abstract photo-collages. Thus, the past is mined using an acute visual memory that assumes control and knowingly rewrites its own history while simultaneously affirming the experiences of real places and people.


14 Quoted in [<http://www.ww2poster.co.uk/events/publiclist.htm> For further reference see footnote 5 of the text published there.]
The memories portrayed in *Lebanon-Canada via Bahrain* are the artist’s own capturing, like snapshots in a scrapbook, pastiches of a life lived in transition. However--as so often happens with people who leave their homelands either through forced or self-imposed exile--Zakharia also explores the experiences of other migrants as a means of interrogating his own identity. *Elusive Homelands* (catalog 12-24), executed between 1999-2000, is one such series that is based on the lives of Lebanese migrants living in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Zakharia enters into their private world, listens to their stories, observes the constellation of objects they surround themselves with, and photographs the people *in situ*. The resulting collages convey the contradictions that migrants experience between their expectations, desires, and realities of relocating to a new place. Observe, for example, Albert Hajj’s confident, optimistic pose as he stands in the Canadian landscape just weeks following his arrival (catalog 12). The text that accompanies the images in the *Elusive Homelands* series is both illuminating and mysterious. It presents the viewer with thought provoking stories about families and individuals—for example, an accountant reduced to working behind the counter of a pizza shop (catalog 18) or a priest who was chased out of his country for the “un-Christian” act of helping Muslims (catalog 23)—but the artist is selective about the details he reveals related to others’ lives. While the artist’s life is apparently enriched through these interactions with compatriots, some bonds are too deep, too sensitive, too wounding to expose. Still, enough is communicated about the human condition through these text/image configurations to elicit feelings of empathy from the viewer and promote a sense of shared values. We all seek a better life for ourselves, and our families. We strive for success, and to a certain extent use our professional lives as a measure of that success.
Our hopes for the future are shaped by memories of the past, especially our childhoods. Camille Zakharia’s oeuvre is diverse. He uses black and white as well as color, montage as well as collage, and works in a range of scales. The style may vary from straight photography to abstract constructions, sometimes using stand-alone images or pairings of text and image. It is the theme of humanity that unifies his work. Even in abstract composites or architectural scenes seemingly devoid of figures, the essence of the subject portrayed is linked to the presence or absence of people and the marks they leave on their inhabited environment. Zakharia’s work has been presented to audiences in the Middle-East, America, and Europe; and they never fail to be engaging, whatever the cultural context. I would argue that the apparent ‘universal’ appeal of Zakharia’s work emanates from the fact that the medium as well as the message has been passed through, fragmented, and reassembled by the prism of life. Camille Zakharia will, no doubt, emerge as one of the stronger and more articulate voices within the Middle-Eastern art scene.