On the eve of his latest show in Bahrain, Camille Zakharia talks to Lisa Bull-Lechgar about his passion for photography.

This could be the year for Camille Zakharia. Recently short listed for the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Jameel Art Prize, the Bahrain-based artist-photographer is planning his first ever solo show in Dubai. In Manama, his pieces can be found in the current exhibition by the British Council at Beit Al Qu’ran, while at Al Riwaq Gallery this month’s collective exhibition includes a retrospective of his work.

The full time father, engineer and artist puts his success down to good planning more than anything else. Modest to the hilt, he is not driven by ambition or money, just a desire to share with others. “If I have the talent to do something others cannot, I feel it’s a sin not to use it because you’re depriving others of the benefit you can give. That’s my philosophy,” he says. “It is my obligation to share. If I want to be selfish and not create, it would be wrong.”

To explore Zakharia’s works, series by series, is a journey that takes the viewer through a torrent of emotions, times and places. It is an experience that enriches and informs. For Zakharia, photography has helped him understand life in a broader perspective. “It changes you,” he explains. “It has had a very positive impact on my life and that of my family.”

Like many subscribers to the power of artistic practice, he believes that art is an important bridge between cultures and eras, and as such, deserves to be given greater credence (something that the Middle East and Arab world has woken up to).
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Paris at the end of the turn of the 20th century didn’t do it for him. He wanted to capture the moment that would be otherwise missed. By presenting different approaches, techniques and subjects, the participants began brimming with ideas. ‘The workshop was such a dynamic environment,’ he gleams. ‘People were asking questions and taking notes. Because of their differences, the common link between the participants was that they were seeing Bahrain seen from varying perspectives.’

‘Sharing Experience’ is a part of his own practice but always keen to learn from others. Zakharia has recently embraced the idea of running workshops more and more; sharing his experience and knowledge with others as well as emerging artists. ‘I love to share what I know and people here are so ready. The younger generation need someone to push their buttons; to respond to them and encourage them.’

Zakharia’s own artistic career emerged from pure personal interest. At the age of 17, the young Lebanese bought his first camera and began documenting the world around him. When he left his parents’ home to move to Beirut, he used his camera to document the impact that the country’s civil war left on the buildings and on people’s lives. ‘I never thought it would mean more to others,’ he recalls. ‘For years, I photographed simply for myself, but then people started looking at my work and encouraging me to exhibit.’

Zakharia held his first solo show in Greece in 1987 and by 1991, he had moved to Bahrain and transformed the kitchen of his Umm Al Hassan apartment into a dark room. Once in Canada four years later, he began to take his talent more seriously and yearned to engage in an academic process that would push his work further. So he enrolled on the Bachelor of Fine Arts programme at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. His latest series, one that caught the attention of the judging panel for the inaugural Jameel Prize, demonstrates the abstract line of enquiry Zakharia is currently pursuing. Nevertheless, his roots are still implanted in the spirit of documentary practice. His application of collage, mosaic, and patterning has been with him since the early 1990s, when he left his parents home to move to Beirut, he used his camera to document the impact that the country’s civil war left on the buildings and on people’s lives. ‘I never thought it would mean more to others,’ he recalls. ‘For years, I photographed simply for myself, but then people started looking at my work and encouraging me to exhibit.’

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The series entitled ‘Markings’ as well as ‘Division Lines’ are composed of irregular geometric designs in such a fragmentary composition. ‘It’s about boundaries. Being displaced, place and space and boundaries have been of great importance to me.’

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Kingdom Stimulus

There is no doubt that Bahrain has been Zakharia’s muse, ever since he first walked the alleyways of Muharraq 18 years ago. ‘I am privileged to be in this part of the world,’ he says. ‘I nurture my artistic practice and this is a place that gives me beautiful inspiration. Being here is very good for me because I understand the place. I am able to analyse it better than if I was in a place where I do not feel connected.’

Zakharia is one of the many artists of Arab origin who exist within the global diaspora, whether inside or outside the region. ‘In the beginning, when you are deprived from the right to belong, you feel alienated,’ he says. ‘In my 24 years away from Lebanon, my philosophy is to build roots no matter how many times they are cut. Photography helps me connect; to belong faster wherever I stay. Your presence and the interaction with others make you who you are. You are part of the construction of the place around you, whether you originate from there or not.’

‘Transformation of Memories’, a group photography exhibition led by Camille Zakharia, opens on Sunday 5 April at 7pm and runs until the 20 April at Al Riwaq Gallery, Al A’ali Shopping Complex. Until 20 April, see his work at Beirut Riwaq in ‘My Father’s House’. His solo exhibition at Art Sawa, Dubai, opens on 23 April.