

The National



Weird and wonderful: latest art in Dubai

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As a concept for a photographic show, “at home with the Bedouin” has a vaguely impertinent ring to it. When you’re dealing with a people so powerfully associated with a particular topography and a particularly romantic idea of nomadism, a series of intimate portraits shot in domestic interiors might seem like an attempt to deflate their myth: to sneak backstage, so to speak, and catch them out. Yet while it’s true that Scarlett Coten’s new show at the Empty Quarter is alert to the dingier textures of Bedouin life – the tatty rooms and ancient appliances, the jarring textiles and omnipresent fag packets – it comes across, in the end, as a celebration.

First there’s the title of her show: Still Alive, taken from the triumphant words that greeted Coten each time the French photographer met the tribal community that she spent two years following around the Sinai desert. Second, there’s the saturated colour of the images. A woman sits smoking on the floor, her dress a riot of black and white check, purple flowers, and bizarrely, crimson satellite dishes. In another shot, a draining rack full of dishes stands on a couple of barrels and a drape so red it glows like sunshine filtered through your own eyelid. When even a grim snooker hall is colour adjusted so that the green of the baize and maroon of the carpet pop out at the viewer, shots of traditional Bedouin finery – royal blue dresses, sequined veils – all but force you to duck.

Then there’s the fact that we never really get backstage after all. Throughout the show Coten’s subjects are posing for us, performing their versions of the “relaxing at home” tableau familiar from Hello! magazine. We see a family lolling contentedly on a rug. The wall behind them is filled with a strange sfumato mural of a jungle waterfall, apparently a source of justifiable pride. In another image, a young man in white khandoura beams as he drapes a proprietorial arm over the shoulders of his two wives, each of whom smiles behind her niqab. In their cheerful-under-fire way (“Still alive!”), Coten’s subjects have stage managed their scenes with her. We’re at home with the Bedouin, but as a guest, not a fly on the wall.



A photo from Scarlett Coten’s new exhibition at the Empty Quarter, Still Alive. The series of photos takes us home with the Bedouin, but as a guest, not a fly on the wall. Courtesy Scarlett Coten