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### Masters of the desert

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An intimate showcase of the life and lifestyles of the Bedouin

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WEEKEND REVIEW



Image Credit: Supplied

Scarlett Coten lived with the Bedouins of Egypt for two years to capture their way of life in her photographs

Scarlett Coten's grandmother was an amateur Parisian

photographer. During holidays spent with her, Scarlett was shown her grandmother's archive of images that depicted her youth in the 1930s. Such early initiation inspired the little girl to feel what it would be like to freeze a moment in time.

"[Even at] 13 I couldn't resist the charm of the lens. I still remember the days my granny and I spent talking about photography. I felt my attention drawn to it and decided to make it my profession," Coten said. "I enrolled for three years at the National School of Photography in Arles."

Coten was born in Antony, France, and has been exploring the world for ten years. Her images have been showcased in France and other countries.

Asked why she was interested in capturing daily life, she replied: "Probably because of its spontaneous rhythm — nothing planned, people walking in the crowded streets. So, in my view there's nothing better than these details."

"Discovering people and their style of living and finding more information about who they are and how they live life are important to me as a photographer. For example my present exhibition, *Still Alive*, details the way the Bedouins of Egypt live," Coten said.

*Still Alive*, a show with 35 diptych coloured pictures, is accompanied by a Coten's photo book which details the time she spent with the Bedouin, "who treated her as a daughter".

In the spring of 2000 and the summer of 2002, Coten decided to venture into the heart of the desert. Her artistic philosophy is to play between reality and fiction to unveil in other ways the subconscious of mankind in

the 20th century.

"I lived almost two years with the Bedouins, considered one of the first tribes to settle in the Sinai, followed by 20 others, disseminated in this vast terrain. According to theses, almost 5,000 Bedouins of the Arabian Gulf are today settled as nomadic pastoralists, while attempting to preserve their ancient culture, which is threatened by globalisation.

"Although conservative, they accepted me as I am. They never restricted my freedom when I lived with them." Asked why she named the project Still Alive, she said: "Still Alive is a testimony to the enthusiasm, the humour and the modernity of this unknown nation, forgotten, neglected but alive."

Coten admires the American School of Photography. "I love their style. Many of the photographers have caught my attention. They capture daily life and travel that describe societies and people."

The French photographer admires Arabic photography as well.

"I think it has succeeded in leaving its mark at an international level. Europe is witnessing a number of promising Arab photographers and their reputation is not restricted to photography galleries but has also been recognised by European societies," the photographer said.

Asked about her photographic philosophy, she replied: "I think photography is similar to writing, both are narrating a story. The photographer authorises his or her lens to convey his or her point of view while the writer allows his or her pen to present his or her

perspectives," she said.

Coten's next project will be in Morocco. "The story of my photography in Morocco will revolve around Arabic land. I'm greatly touched by their lifestyle, generosity and acceptance of others. The foreign media has been airing a wrong image about the Middle Eastern people, but when you travel and discover the culture of others, you realise our media has exaggerated the issue," she said.

*Still Alive is on at The Empty Quarter Fine Art Photography until April 25.*