

”Becoming Van Leo” at Hammer Museum

Exhibiting Van Leo’s life & photography

By Ugne Giraityte

From 8th August to 5th November 2023, The Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles, exhibits “Becoming Van Leo”, the first international look at the work of the late Armenian-Egyptian photographer Van Leo. The exhibition traces Leo's career from his earliest encounters with the camera in the 1930s, when he used friends and family as models, to his self-portrait experiments in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as his studio work onwards, which extended into the 1990s.

The exceptionally talented Levon Boyadjian was born to Armenian parents in Turkey in 1921. The artist moved with his family to Egypt as a child and later settled in Cairo. There he achieved fame as one of the most well-known studio photographers in the Arab world between the 1940s and 1960s.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, Van Leo's studio turned into a spot for actors and dancers such as Omar Sharif, Sherihan and Rushdy Abaz. Many wannabe stars’ careers and public images were often defined by Van Leo's photographs. Hollywood was also a source of inspiration encouraging him to depict elegance and glamour. Van Leo’s work is heavily influenced by time, textures and instincts. His photography defies easy definitions of East and West and pushes the boundaries of art and craft. While numerous self-portraits represent the artist's exploratory approach to investigating self-identity, his alter ego, especially through Self-portrait, 1937, 1942 or Monday, January 8, 1945 (as exhibited in installations), all display the artist in different perspectives. His photography pushes boundaries and challenges taboo topics. Therefore, the artist is known to be a complex, compelling, transnational, intersectional character telling a diasporic and cosmopolitan storyline.

The Becoming Van Leo exhibition is organized by the Hammer Museum in partnership with the Rare Book and Special Collections Library of the American University in Cairo which stocks the Van Leo collection. Additional support and cooperation were provided by the Beirut-based Arab Picture Foundation. The exhibition is curated by writer and independent curator Negar Azimi.

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