

# MAKING HISTORY

*A university project becomes much more than a school assignment, as it rewrites the history of the Emirates through the real lives of its citizens*

Words **TAHEREH SARIBAN**

A photograph showing a group of children celebrating Eid with the handwritten tag “we were wild, ate sweets and dressed like Scarlett O’Hara”, sits alongside a glass box showcasing a well-worn leather briefcase with the caption “photographs were kept in briefcases, ready to be moved in case of a fire”. A video plays, featuring a burqa-wearing Emirati grandmother recalling the simple life of pre-unification times. On the surface, *Lest We Forget* displayed until June at Warehouse 421, the capital’s newest art space, is a multimedia exhibition retracing 40 odd years of Emirati history through analogue photography and photographic memorabilia belonging to ordinary citizens. A book of the same title, an artwork in itself, compiles the photographs of the exhibition along with the hand-written memories associated with them.

Away from the aerial shots of the Trucial States taken by oil companies, the official portraits of prominent Bedouin families or the photos captured by foreigners passing by, *Lest We Forget* offers a window into the lives of the people of the Emirates - an endeavour as remarkable as it is unusual.

“This project started in 2010 as part of a university course I was teaching at Zayed University. The eight female students registered for the course were initially reluctant to bring actual photographs or physical mementos into class” explains Michele Bambling, Creative Director of the *Lest We Forget* initiative. “Cultural sensitivity aside, they didn’t yet grasp how their family mementos



As real as it gets, inside images of *Lest We Forget*, donated by Emirati families



Visit the Les We Forget exhibition until June 18



could be of any significance. One student once asked: how would anybody care about a picture of my sister and her first tooth?" For a country often imagined to lack tangible remains of its history, Bambling had an inkling that these untapped materials and the questions they raised could plant the seed of a unique enquiry into the past. At the end of the first year, the Lest We Forget initiative counted 14 photographs, shared by the eight students and their families.

Word got around Zayed University that Bambling's Curatorial Practice course was cool. 23 students registered for it the following year, each adding new photographs and new items to the project until a qualitative leap was accomplished. Students began establishing similarities between the photographs: the same autumn leaf background, the same enthusiasm for picnics in the desert, the same shots of make-pretend telephone conversations, the same ruffled dresses sent by family members living abroad, the same Eid candy bags remembered by all so fondly, the same love of family. The students recorded trends and established shared memories, enriching them with their individual feelings

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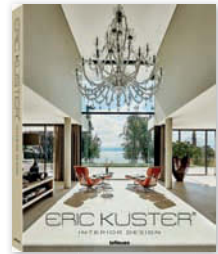
and emotions. A project that had started out with a handful of hesitant students flourished as they realised that their individual efforts were creating a story that was bigger than the parts that composed it. Says Bambling: “They started telling the story of the past”. And this is indeed what adds a deeper texture to the incredible work of archiving and storytelling on display at Warehouse 421.

For Bambling, the project was always much more than “gathering all photographs that Emirati citizens took between 1950 and 1999”. It was about delving completely into the curatorial practice: developing the willingness to look at old things with a new eye, formulating and owning the memories surrounding the various pictures through use of the first person voice and finding liberation in agreeing to share what had become, by the end of the fourth year of the course, a slice of Emirati history in its own right. Bambling remains humble about her role, preferring to credit the students themselves with the courage to be curious and think outside the box. “So many women worked so hard and so many families became a part of this. The exhibition and the book are entirely theirs, I merely helped mentor the process,” she says.



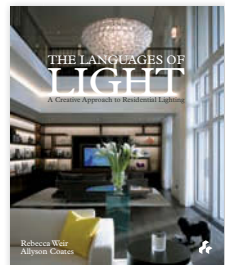
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