The Ruya Foundation is pleased to announce the first UK exhibition of Iraqi photographer Latif Al Ani (b. 1932) at the Coningsby Gallery in Fitzrovia. ‘Latif Al Ani’ will run 4 December – 16 December 2017. The exhibition will include over 50 works surveying the artist’s practice from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Considered the founding father of Iraqi photography, Ali Ani was prolific in documenting everyday life in the country, from the 1950s to the 1970s. His photographs provide a unique record of mid-20th century Iraqi experience. By the 1980s his work had fallen into obscurity and it is only recently that the artist has been rediscovered by an international audience. In 2015 his work was featured in the Iraq Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale and earlier this year Hatje Cantz published the first monograph of the artist’s work, which won the Historical Book Award at Les Rencontres d’Arles 2017.

The majority of Latif Al Ani’s work was produced over three decades often referred to as a ‘golden age’ for Iraq, a period of increased cosmopolitanism and openness in the country. From the late 1950s until the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Al Ani captured the social fabric of the country. Modern and multicultural, the images may appear surprising to audiences today, subverting stereotypical perceptions of Iraqi experience. Using a Rolleiflex 6x6 and 35mm film, the artist produced contrast-rich black-and-white photographs recording daily political, social and religious life. Images of trains, bridges, rivers and mosques sit alongside depictions of schoolchildren, shoppers, soldiers and tourists. The exhibition will also include a number of images of classical ruins and antiquities, highlighting Al Ani’s interest in archaeology as well as modern life, and how architecture served to bring the two together in Iraq.

Al Ani made photographic tours of Iraq and was the first photographer to shoot aerial views of the country. The exhibition will include aerial views of Liberation Square and the Mirjan Mosque, both in Baghdad, and ruins at Ctesiphon, the ancient capital of the Parthian Empire. By the 1960s, when competing groups were struggling for power in Iraq, Al Ani was exhibiting his work in America and Europe, as well as throughout the Middle East. A number of works on display will depict a trip the artist made to Berlin to exhibit his work in 1965. By the 1980s, the increasingly authoritarian atmosphere of the Saddam Hussein regime made it impossible to photograph in public and Ali Ani stopped making work.

Global exposure to Al Ani’s work was revived in 2015, when his photographs appeared as part of the exhibition ‘Invisible Beauty, the Iraq Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. There his work received international acclaim and, subsequently, Al Ani was made a Prince Claus Laureate. A jury statement said that ‘Latif Al Ani (was) honoured for
creating an extraordinarily rich, multifaceted archive of unique historical photographs of Iraqi society.’ Further recognition came in 2017 when Hatje Cantz co-published with the Ruya Foundation the first monograph of the artist’s work. In bringing the exhibition ‘Latif Al Ani’ to London, the Ruya Foundation seeks both to promote Al Ani’s work further on an international stage and also to re-introduce visitors to a forgotten part of Iraq’s history.

Tamara Chalabi, Chair and Co-Founder of Ruya, was responsible for bringing Al Ani’s work back to light after years of neglect. She has said:

“I am delighted to be able to restore attention to Latif Al Ani and the dedicated work he produced for so many years before falling into obscurity. It is particularly exciting to introduce the work to a London audience for the first time.”

- ENDS -

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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Latif Al Ani
4 December – 16 December 2017

The Coningsby Gallery
30 Tottenham Street
London
W1T 4RJ

Opening hours: Monday – Friday, 11am – 6pm; Saturday, 12pm – 6pm
Private view: Monday 4 December 2017, 6pm – 8pm

Image credit: Latif Al Ani, Hellenic statue, Hatra, Nineveh, c. 1970s, B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art Paper, 25 x 25 cm, © the artist and the Arab Image Foundation, courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

About Latif Al Ani

Latif Al Ani (b. 1932, Kerbala) is an Iraqi photographer who lives in Baghdad. Al Ani started his career as a photographer for the Iraqi Petroleum Company in the 1950s. There he received his photographic training and most of the work he produced before 1958 is still owned by the IPC’s surviving associated companies. In the 1950s Al Ani made many photographic tours of Iraq and was the first photographer to shoot aerial views of the country. In 1960 he established a photography department within the Iraqi government’s Ministry of Information and Guidance, for which he documented the social, industrial and agricultural life of Iraq and organised a unique archive of this material. Much of the work in this archive was destroyed during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Al Ani worked across the Middle East, Europe and the United States, having solo exhibitions across the Middle East, as well as participating in group shows internationally, including the fourth Be Photo exhibition in Berlin in 1965 and a 1963 exhibition of Iraqi photography in America organized by the American Middle East Friends Association. In 1964 he also studied colour photography in Brussels. In 1972 an exhibition of his works entitled ‘Iraq Today’ was held in Berlin. Al Ani continued to work in journalism throughout this time, becoming Head of Photography at the Iraqi News Agency.

Latif Al Ani stopped making work in the 1980s, after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. His existing archive, of over 1,500 black-and-white documentary slides provides a unique historical record of daily life in Iraq from the 1950s to the 1970s.
About the Ruya Foundation

The Ruya Foundation is an Iraqi registered, non-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 2012 with the aim of aiding and enriching culture in Iraq, and building cultural bridges with the world. Ruya’s initial goal is to promote culture in Iraq at a time when priorities are focused elsewhere and to build a platform that will enable Iraqis in the arts, the young in particular, to benefit from and participate in international events. In addition to supporting local projects, Ruya’s aim is to create a network of intercultural events that can contribute to the development of civil society in Iraq. It is also committed to nurturing a multicultural dialogue through the arts. Ruya initiates and commissions creative projects in the visual, audiovisual and performing arts.

Ruya’s flagship project is the National Pavilion of Iraq at the Venice Biennale. The Foundation has been the commissioner of the Pavilion for the 55th, 56th and 57th Venice Biennales in 2013, 2015 and 2017 respectively. The 2015 Pavilion exhibition, ‘Invisible Beauty’, transferred to S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art), Ghent (2016) and the Erbil Citadel, Iraq (2017) and was accompanied by the publication of TRACES OF SURVIVAL: Drawings by refugees in Iraq selected by Ai Weiwei (2015), produced in collaboration with renowned contemporary artist Ai Weiwei. The 2017 Pavilion exhibition, ‘Archaic’, was curated by the Foundation’s Chair and Co-founder, Tamara Chalabi, and featured Iraqi antiquities that had never before left Iraq.

In March 2015, Ruya launched the first drama therapy project in Baghdad, supported by the Prince Claus Fund. Ruya has also co-produced films by young and emerging Iraqi filmmakers, including Furat al Jamil’s Baghdad Night, Sherko Abbas’s Music in the Bush Era and Luay Fadhil’s The Scribe. In 2017 the Foundation launched a new educational publishing initiative, Ruya Notebooks, and also co-published a monograph on the work of Iraqi photographer Latif Al Ani.

Following its mission to support and promote culture within Iraq, Ruya holds an extensive and unique database of artists working within Iraq, spanning all disciplines from visual arts to theatre and music. Established in 2016, it was the first publically accessible online database of contemporary Iraqi artists and the Foundation continually strives to promote these artists through collaborative efforts with cultural institutions globally.

In addition, the Ruya blog is a live platform for Iraqi art. Interviews with emerging and established artists both in Iraq and the diaspora are published regularly to encourage dialogue, the exchange of ideas and promote the possibility of collaboration.

www.ruyafoundation.org