

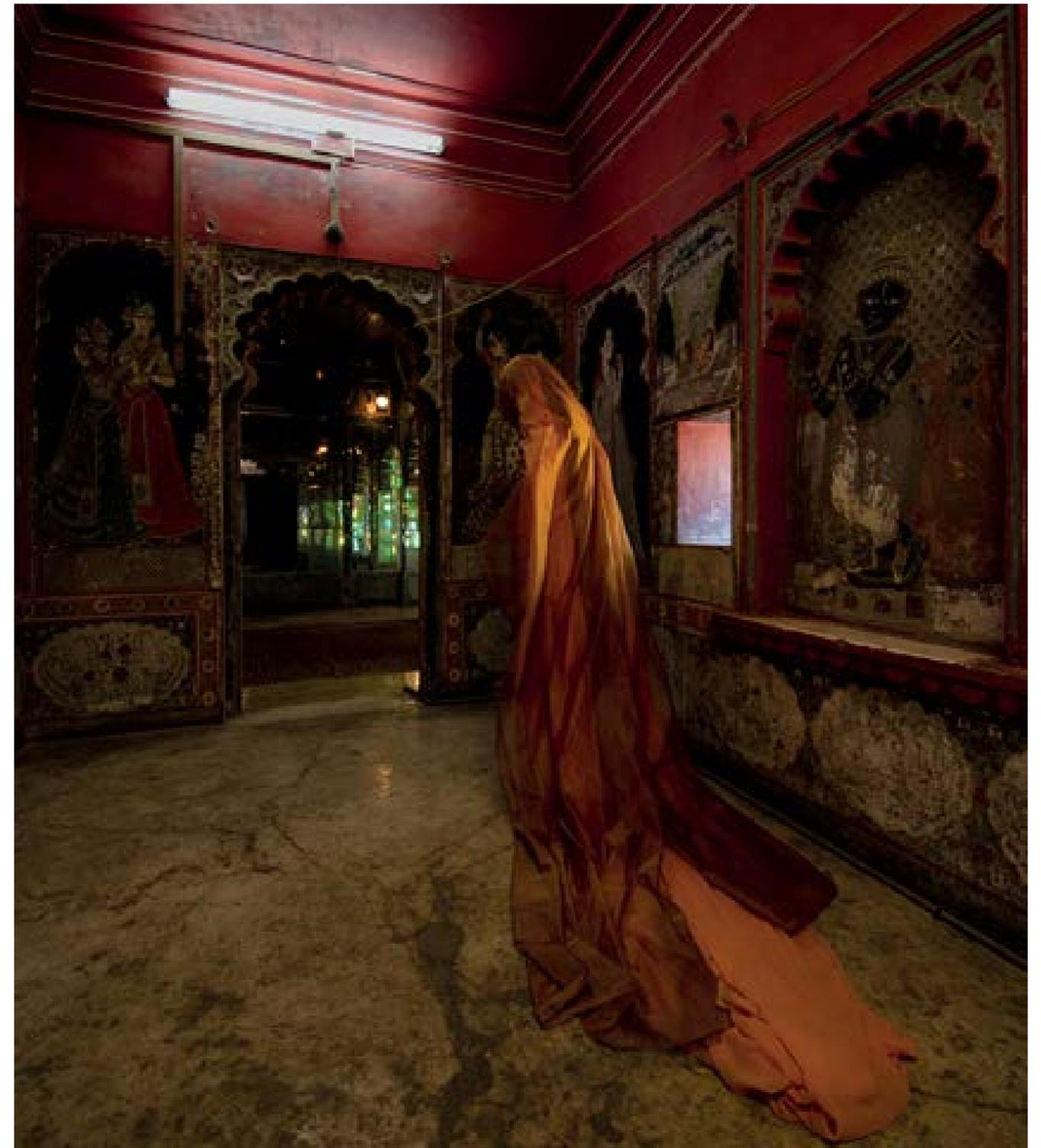
THE SPACE FOR ART - AGED PLACES AS CONTEXT FOR INSPIRATION

By: Dr. Zoltan Somhegyi

Old places, aged spaces, run-down buildings and crumbling edifices attract many people. Interestingly, even if recently we can see a growing interest in the discovery of these places - like the current fashion of urbex, i.e. urban exploration and its Japanese version, haikyo - it is not a completely new phenomenon. Actually we might face some difficulties when trying to define "the beginnings" of the interest in ruination. When talking about ruins as signs and symbols of beautiful decay, today we instinctively think of classical Greek and Roman buildings, and so we admire these several millennia-old buildings a great deal exactly because of the temporal distance between them and us. However, in the classical Antiquity many theoreticians were already examining the architectural and artistic remnants of even earlier cultures. Nevertheless, the modern history of the appreciation of ruins started in the Renaissance, in the period that was particularly keen on the Graeco-Roman heritage in all of its forms, appreciating even the smallest fragments, and often directly imitating classical forms or indirectly getting inspired by them and re-elaborating them in new works. In the visual arts, the representation of ruins in this period was mainly still only a kind of reference to the admired heritage, or - like in the case of some beautiful woodcuts from the late 15th century "bestseller", the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, an allegorical novel published in Venice - they served as background to create ideal and sometimes almost dream-like surroundings. It was rather from the 17-18 century on, and especially in the 19th century Romanticism when old spaces and ruined sites started to have a strong emotional load that made them an ideal motive to raise awareness of the passing time and of history. As a matter of fact, this "history" can be interpreted in different ways: history and the passing of time can be felt and even "touched" when visiting ruined sites, as we can really consider the great amount of time needed to render the originally intact and well-functioning building into a ruin. Thus "history" as an often hardly definable concept becomes rather "concrete" and perceivable. On the other hand, in the case of disintegrated edifices, the term history can also refer to the examination of another, perhaps "smaller", but still notable scale: a building has its own history too. This history can be

connected to the (hi)story of people using the building and living in it, and especially to the reasons why it is not used anymore.

Actually, as for the unused buildings, when their decay starts, their history starts to become a kind of "fate" too. This fate can be caused by totally different types of reasons, sudden natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes or avalanches are among the most common ones. Apart from these, we can add another often occurring cause of destruction, deriving from human aggression: wars, revolutions and military invasions time and time again lead to the wrecking of buildings, thus making them impossible to use. The edifices will then just exist as dangerous, useless and unaesthetic mementos of the violent events. The process of ruination can also start of the gradual (or sudden) abandon of a place, for example due to epidemics, lack of proper living conditions or the termination of a certain work opportunity that provided the major income for the area - these factors easily result in uninhabited settlements, that will then quickly start to decay because of the lack of maintenance. Just as the initial reasons of the ruination can be quite different, the same way the aesthetic value and the grade of our appreciation can differ very much too. Traditionally we consider old and noble ruins as "real" ruins that have proper aesthetic attraction - even if, in fact, this aesthetic attraction is often turned into touristic attraction too, thus the site serving as center of the mass travel business. Still, these sights offer a pleasant view and can be in the center of our interest for various reasons: we can admire the beauty of the surviving architectural elements we can imagine the former grandeur of the original and originally intact building. Or, just the contrary, we can get fascinated by the way the decay appears, and how the power of Nature through the centuries is manifested on the edifice. Of course, we shall not forget that besides these "classical" ruins, there are buildings that certainly have less pleasing aesthetic qualities, actually, we cannot even consider them as proper ruins, and are more in the category of rubble. A pile of debris of the collapsed building will not easily help us feel the "presence" of the great past.



GulerAtes, Ruins of Eternal Maharana II, 2013, archival digital print, 26x23cm. Courtesy of the artist and The Loft.

Still, what is curious that any kind of old space, either with noble ruins or with wreckage might have influenced artists, in previous periods, as well as in contemporary art. Thus, the ability of a space to become an inspiring source for an artist is not necessarily connected to the traditional aesthetic qualities of the site, i.e. whether it "beautifully" represents the slow passing of time, or it suddenly became rubble due to a bombing or earthquake. In all cases these places will stimulate artists to use the vision in manifold ways. And, truly, it is manifold and very varied how old spaces can appear on artworks. Some artists put the amazing place in the center of the image, thus the space will be the main subject and subject matter of the picture. This will be quite diffuse in classical ruin paintings, where the picturesque beauty and the "exotic" character of the place are in the focus. However, we have to state that good artworks are never "only" documentaries. Even in classical landscape- and ruin paintings it is hard to find any work where the artist had not added extra pictorial considerations, special and subjective interpretations to the sight - at least through coloring, composition, the display or the hiding of certain elements etc. Just to quote an example, the traveling painter David Roberts (1796-1864) made a long journey through the Middle East in the middle of the 19th century, and once arriving back to London, published many of the sketches he drew during the trip, in the form of lithographs. Besides these multiplied graphical works however, he also made unique paintings, where the extraordinary place and the ruined Antique temples are depicted not only for their picturesque qualities, but as a kind of warning for the transiency of all man-made efforts. As we can read in the accompanying publication of *"Light of the Orient"*, an exhibition of the Sharjah Art Museum: *"Pioneering travelers were exploring further East around the Mediterranean, to Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Often situated in remote locations, the sight of these still-spectacular cities was made all the more poignant to Western eyes because they bore witness to the decline and fall of once powerful civilizations and could thus be interpreted as a warning from history"*. Thus, besides the showing of the classical beauty of the Antique ruins, it could also serve as a warning and alert that whatever we try to create and believe in its ever-lasting endurance, is still exposed to Nature's will in demolishing it. In this way perhaps the history of architecture could somehow be interpreted not only as erecting buildings, but also as a fight for maintaining these constructions against Nature. This approach is traceable not only in 19th century painting, but in 20th century and contemporary photography too. Even if the medium is different, for example in the works of Noor Ali Rashid (1929-2010) we can find a similar celebration of the resistance of buildings. During the over six decades of his professional activity as photographer he thoroughly documented both the everyday life of the Gulf region and the special moments: official celebrations of high importance, political visits and meetings. Besides these he was also very talented in portrait photography, managing to capture his subjects in a direct and at the same time characteristic way. What is the most important for us here now is that in his architectural photography, we are tempted to claim that on many images the old fortresses and watchtowers are "proudly" emerging from their surroundings, i.e. the buildings are rendered as if they were aware of their special importance in heritage and of their

being high-impact contribution to the creation of cultural identity. In the catalogue of a recent exhibition of *Noor Ali Rashid's* oeuvre a similar interpretation was formulated: *"Amazed by the similarities and fascinated by the differences in the architecture of his birthplace, Gwadar and Dubai, Noor Ali consistently photographed architectural elements in the Gulf and further afield. The windows, doorways, poles and opening often became frames for his artistic eye to capture what was beyond"*. What was beyond, or, we can also say: what is still beyond. He showed us the qualities that these sights, even if wracked or crumbling, still represent for us, and what we can learn from their still-standing. Therefore, these images are not simple documentaries, but rather photographic memorials to the monumentality of these architectural monuments.

In other cases, we can find works where the old space and place is apparently not the central subject of the image, rather an inspiring context for further layers of meaning. The artist gets inspired by the sight and/or needs the "patina" of the space for his aesthetic investigations. Among the ways that an old space can serve as a poetic context in the creation of complex works with multi-layered significance and aesthetic qualities, we can mention some of the recent series of Güler Ates. The Turkey-born London-based artist examines questions of identity and cultural positions and dislocation, as well as the role of religion, tradition and women in contemporary society. In a series of work produced during her residency in India in 2012, the artist made carefully staged portraits of a woman wearing a long veil that appears in the space with a refined, calligraphic elegance. The space in this case was a 16th century building, currently the City Palace Museum in Udaipur, Rajasthan, with impressively aged interiors, where the peculiar deep and dark colors - typical in the architecture of the old palaces of the region - were in an inventive and wonderful contrast with the intensive colors of the veil itself. In fact, this color contrast is what defines the work very much, but apart from the sensual and sensuous visual qualities, this contrast offers the key to reading the work. As Josephine Rout, Research Curator at V&A wrote on the works: *"The material basis of color, as well as textiles made using such dyes and pigments, were central commodities to trade between India and Europe. That these vibrantly colored silks and cottons were then sold to female consumers only functioned to further define 'the East' as feminine. But while these were novelty items in Europe, Güler Ates re-contextualizes these by situating them back within the Indian interior. Unlike previous work, in which the figure's relationship to the setting is ambiguous, in these works the figure blends so well that it almost disappears back into it, as if a return to the 'real', authentic environment only works to create a mirage. Leaving what the image appears to represent to the viewer"*. Therefore, we have a curious relationship of figure and surrounding, the first almost getting absorbed in the latter, allowing the veil to become a central visual motive. However, the old place is essential not only to create this intensive visuality, but to serve especially as a loaded historical context, departing from which, Güler Ates manages to investigate various questions related to Orientalism and the repositioning of tradition and cultural values. After these examples of the appearance of classical and aged buildings and



Vlajkovic Somji and Mohamed Somji, Substation #5, 2010, archival paper print, 70x100cm. Courtesy of the artists.

spaces in recent photography and their being a source of inspiration for contemporary artists, we can mention some other captivating photographic works with the occurrence of ruined spaces from the immediate past i.e. places and buildings that are relatively younger, but for certain reasons their ruination has started, and artists use them in their projects. In these works, a further layer is added by the fact that in "normal" cases recent constructions are less often ruined, thus if they are so, in many cases it looks more sinister than classical decayed edifices. One of the most complex examples for this is the joint project of Sinisa Vljakovic and Mohamed Somji, titled *"Substations"*. During their collaboration, the two artists made a series photographing no-more-used diesel stations around Dubai. The images were shot at night, thus these run-down service stations shine out from a somehow disquieting thick darkness that frame the vision. Actually, one might have a similar impression of "resistance" that we saw above with the fortresses immortalized by *Noor Ali Rashid*: the diesel stations are about to get merged in and by the dark background - in fact, quite in parallel with what is really happening with them, the gradual but definite disappearance by the rapid development of technology. Similar thoughts were summarized in the artists' statement of their project: *"Resembling the first stations that were built several decades ago and started the region's diesel trade, these isolated stations are a distinct contrast to the Middle East's high-profile petroleum sector. It is an exhibit of vernacular architecture: constructed with scavenged materials, they are maintained with simple amenities and local hospitality. They challenge the city's impersonal modernization with a reassurance that there is always time for tea and an armchair conversation. Unlike their urban equivalents - sprawling corporate conglomerates that function as roadside cathedrals - consumer capitalism, complete with fast food restaurants, convenience stores, promotions, prizes, and uniformed staff - these stations are individually owned and frequented by truckers. Makeshift structures of found objects, colorful neons, and strings of festive lights, the diesel stations are some of the last remaining examples of a culture around which the Middle East evolved"*^[2]. That's why the feeling of resistance might arise - just like classical ruins struggling with the elements of Nature for their survival, in a similar way these early fueling stations try to persevere, to be still-standing visual documents of the surpassed recent past.

Personal and cultural memories, as well as issues of heritage and conservation are stunningly intertwined in a recent photograph of Tarek Al-Ghoussein. In the picture we can see a partially demolished mosque from inside. In fact, evidently demolished, or better to say, on its way of being demolished: unlike classical or natural ruination, when a building gradually loses its constructing elements, here part of the dome is completely opened, letting the sky enter the interior, while the other half is still intact for a short while, but, as a matter of fact, the (de)constructing machine, also seen through the entrance door, is frighteningly present. What distinguishes this representation from other works documenting the decay of buildings is on the one hand the fact that it immortalizes the literally last minutes of the building instead of just taking a snapshot of the long, sometimes even endless procedure of slow decay. On the other hand, a distinctive feature on

the image is the appearance of the artist himself in the middle ground of the picture. This can be interpreted as showing himself in the classical position of an observer, meditating on the wreckage, however, a further layer can be added to the interpretation of the image: the mosque, just like the artist, was named after Tarek Ibn Ziad thus, the observation of the necessary decay is transferred onto a personal level too. The final result, i.e. the photograph of the not anymore existing interior of the *(again not any more existing)* mosque is thus a kind of a double image, portraying both the building and the artist, meditating on its destruction, and with his available means i.e. art documenting it, hence somehow providing its survival. A particularly intriguing example of inspiration of the ruination is what we can observe in a work of the Algerian-born, Paris-based Fay al Baghriche where in one of his 2012 photographs titled *"Mecca"*, that the public could recently see in several art fairs, a desert area represented, with an abandoned cinema set showing a replica of the most important holy sites of Islamic culture. The original set was used for the shooting of a film, directed by Bruce Neibaur in 2009 with the title *"Journey to Mecca. In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta"*^[3]. The left over set then obviously started to disintegrate, and thus actually, the photo of Fay al Baghriche raises curious questions: on the one hand about the problems of de-contextualization of the holy site, and on the other hand about the process of ruination itself. Just think of the overlaying and intertwined temporal and aesthetic perspectives: it is the ruination of a fake building. Real and imaginary gets mixed as the place, that used to be a copy of the real, for the days of the shooting, gets destroyed, and now, in fact, even if only a couple of years old, is more ruinous than its original from centuries ago. These and other works then clearly and beautifully show that old spaces are not necessarily useless ruins and insignificant spaces to be demolished and modernized, but can still serve as significant source of inspiration for the most varied artistic questions.

About the Writer:

Dr. Zoltan Somhegyi is a Hungarian art historian, lecturer and writer and is an Assistant Professor at the College of Fine Arts and Design, University of Sharjah, UAE. As a researcher of art history and aesthetics, he is specialized in 18th-19th century art and art theory, having written his PhD-dissertation on German Romanticism. His other fields of interest are contemporary art and art market trends, with a special focus on the MENASA-region. He curates exhibitions, participates in international art projects and lectures on art in Europe and in the Middle East. He is a consultant of Art Market Budapest (International contemporary art fair). Dr. Somhegyi is the author of books, artist catalogues, and more than two hundred articles, critiques, essays and art fair reviews. www.zoltansomhegyi.com

End Notes

^[1] Quotation from the catalogue of the exhibition at Sharjah Art Museum: Lasting impressions, Noor Ali Rashid, The Royal Photographer, Edited by Shamsa Noor Ali Rashid, Motivate Publishing, 2014.

^[2] Quoted from the exhibition's Press release - 2011 in The Pavilion Downtown Dubai.

^[3] <http://www.campagne-premiere.de/artists/faycal-baghriche/work-overview>, last retrieved 15.01.2015



Tarek Al-Ghoussein, Masjid Tarek 1, 2014, digital print, 90x135cm. Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line.