

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Vahap Avşar's 'Lost Shadows' debuts in NY



Artist Vahap Avşar displays 15 postcards created out of an archive of over 15,000 photographs taken between 1977 and 1982 from the image archive of the postcard company AND in his exhibition "Lost Shadows, [AND Museum]," running until Dec. 13 at P! and Protocinema in Manhattan.

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Vahap Avşar's "Lost Shadows" collection is the gift that keeps on giving -- a photo archive whose exhibition potential goes into perpetuity. It also conjures up the secrets and mysteries of Turkey's recent past.

Avşar, in his "Black Album" show at RAMPA in İstanbul in 2013, offered a collection of sculptures, paintings, videos and photos which harbored profoundly enigmatic elements, giving viewers a curious journey through modern Turkish history as evidenced through Avşar's own psyche.

His 2015 "Lost Shadows" exhibit at **SALT Beyoğlu** in August -- a selection of 50 enlarged photographs from 25,000 images he had purchased from the now-defunct AND Publishing Company -- was not as personal, but those documentary materials still harbored a spooky backward glance into Turkey's time machine.

That exhibit, the first of potentially many, clocked in over 84,000 viewers in six weeks, recorded as the most successful exhibit there. The photos, shot between 1977-1982, were originally intended to become promotional postcards of Turkey. This was an era when there were no cell phones or Internet, and a major means of communication was postcards and letters.

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Now, the second installation, "Lost Shadows, [AND Museum]," is running until Dec. 13 at the P! exhibition space in Manhattan. This version, co-produced with Protocinema, is showing 15 photos from his purchased archive, some of which were never published, printed as postcards. None are duplicates of the images used in the SALT installation.

All of the 15,000 photos and 10,000 illustrations in the archive carry a similar, if not more potent, quality of mystery. The cryptic postcards at P!, for which only 6,000 were printed, will remain through to the end date -- or until all of them are sent in the mail: the project's built-in ephemeral nature is designed with that in mind.

Illusive images

Speaking at the opening on Nov. 8, Avşar described these postcards as a lifelong project. "At the age of 10, I painted [by copying] these postcards. That's how I learned to paint. Later, when I went to Istanbul, I went to AND's print shop and bought their rejected images. Three months later, I went back to buy more. They had shut down their shop, but I found the owners. They had two rooms full of postcards in the basement. I wanted to try to save this archive. I felt I'd discovered something really big. They needed to be cleaned and organized. I found many stories in the envelopes."

Those stories, the identifying markers of people, places, objects and -- most importantly -- the dates they were taken, are what transform the images into an enigmatic puzzle. "If the photos don't have any documentation, then it leaves it up to the imagination. It becomes a mental exercise," explains Avşar. "At SALT, people demanded labels, and they were writing letters to me: 'You have to tell us where this is!'"

Avşar reveals the information, clue by clue. At first glance, they look like ordinary tourist postcards with standard scenery and generic locations. Though most may show a single person or a small group of people, some are aerial shots of crowds in town centers, village pageantry and curious groups of unidentified men. But the context, upon further investigation and some knowledge of 20th century Turkish history, changes the experience from ho-hum to haunting.

"Many of the photos were taken during the height of the civil war; others were taken after the military coup of 1980," explained Avşar. "During that time, people didn't want their pictures taken because they were so paranoid. These views [of small towns, military zones, public election rallies of former Prime Minister Turgut Özal and more] hide a lot of secrets. The info within is codified; there are clues in the photos about people oppressed by the state. If you lived during that time, you'd know exactly what was behind everything. At that time, the government had a secret police force that traveled around collecting people in their white Renaults [a French car]." In several photos, a white Renault is parked somewhere in the scene, as in one particularly ominous shot of a single white car parked on a road in a mountainous Black Sea area.

Postcard of a postcard

Other scenes include a street parade commemorating World War I in the town of Sarıkamış, but the forlorn street is brown wet mud and the parade is a thread of veterans dressed in 1915 clothing led by a horse-drawn cart on a chilly winter day. "I'd like to know why they shot this, and why didn't they print it?" queries Avşar. "That's my interest. There's a tension between the intention and the shop's decision [to print or not]."

A lone soldier sitting atop a steep hill overlooking the old town peninsula in Isparta's Lake Eğirdir is perhaps the most curious. "He's sitting on a place called The Eagles' Nest at the mountain commando school," explains Avşar. "He's wearing a blue beret, which means he's on one of the elite swat teams. They didn't want to publish images of the military. So the age-old question of who controls the image is still valid."

Avşar's show at P! is a collaboration with Mari Spirito of Protocinema, a non-profit art organization, and P! gallery's Prem Krishnamurthy, a curator and graphic designer who has also collaborated with SALT on various occasions. The three met to discuss recontextualizing these images when Spirito discovered what looked like a postcard in the soldier's hands. "Maybe it's one of these," Avşar mused. "This is the genesis of the P! show, actually."

But the add-on for the **New York** show is the interactive request for attendees to take the postcards and mail them to people all over the world. "That's part of the artwork," says Avşar. "I sent one to Cuba yesterday."

