

Images - *Lest We Forget: Emirati Family Photographs 1950–1999* courtesy of the Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation. **Writer** - Diana Chester, artist and educator.

Lest We Forget: Emirati Family Photographs

A Conversation with Susan Meiselas and Michele Bambling

Diana Chester (DS): I first met Michele Bambling five years ago in Abu Dhabi, and we have collaborated on a variety of projects since. Susan Meiselas and I first met several years ago at a coffee shop where we discussed the *Lest We Forget* project and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). I feel very honored to have participated in the interview that culminates in this article, and excited to share with you these exchanges on art and cultural heritage, as discussed between two brilliant women.

Lest We Forget: Emirati Family Photographs 1950–1999 is both the name of the Emirati vernacular photography book discussed in this article and the associated exhibition at the Warehouse 421 Gallery in Mina Port, Abu Dhabi. The book and exhibition utilize collective memory, interview, inter-generational response and creative expression as a means of developing and growing a collection of Emirati photographs and memory. *Lest We Forget* grew out of a project in Michele's class at Zayed University, where students creatively explored photographs from their family albums.

Kurdistan In the Shadow of History was the book that brought Susan and Michele together in their collaboration on *Lest We Forget*. Both books were made by American women who were living and working across borders, in collaboration with the communities featured in the books.

What brought the two of you together, and how did your collaboration on the book grow over the past five years?

Michele Bambling (MB): Thinking about the value this project would have beyond a classroom exercise, I realized there was only so much that I could teach and far more that I wanted to learn. I admired Susan's work in her book *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* and the *akaKURDISTAN* project. I wrote her to ask if she would consider helping us with the creation of what became the *Lest We Forget* book.

Susan Meiselas (SM): Michele initially sent me an e-mail about the project and approximately 200 images of the work in categorized folders. When the images first came in, there were so many I did not know how to respond to them. There was no narrative structure, just groupings. It was really during our first Skype call when Michele convinced me to work on the project, that I committed and then Skype and email became the connective tissue of our collaboration over the next years.

How did you decide on the design and form of the *Lest We Forget* book?

SM: This book is a very unique object. The physical object of the book, the aesthetics were expressed through every inch of how it was being conceived and created, both were tied to the shared values we discovered we had.

MB: This speaks to collaboration. When I took the students to the library they were not finding books that would tell them about the photographs. Grappling with a lack of secondary sources on the subject, I encouraged the students to work closely

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with the primary resource of their snapshots. They asked if they could explore their photographs through the use of artistic language. That is why it's an artist's book. The book reveals information through design—inspired by the interventions that the students saw in Susan's work. It consists of die cut circles, transparency overlays, employs penmanship and type, etc.—all stemming from their research process and a desire to engage the reader in interactive scrutiny of the photographs. The book is filled with singular, personal snapshots and stories while it constitutes a collective narrative. Their study of family photographs also resulted in the creation of multi-media works of art, which are exhibited along side the book.



The book comes in a box in reference to the practice of keeping photographs in boxes. The exposed stitching of the spine is integral to revealing our process of making the book. Like the labels of old photo albums, the book was typed on vintage typewriters from family homes.

How has collaboration informed this project?

SM: The premise of this project is collaboration, between Michele and myself, the students and us, the students and their families, and the students and their peers. Our collaboration was a process that unfolded over a long period of time. Michele and I come from very different backgrounds and experiences, and the richness of the exchange, in some ways, is based in that. Our collaboration is an organic process; it evolved, but it was risky. People always want to know what it is going to be, what it is going to do, how it's going to function, and why we are investing in it?

When you talk about community-based work, the deep value of the relationships you are building are important. In the case of Michele, it is the relationships she built with her students. Relationships are built on layers of trust along with the shared belief that this will become something—and that takes a leap of faith.

Can you tell us about your experience creating a book of vernacular photography in the UAE?

MB: This kind of investigation of vernacular photography had not been done before in the UAE, especially not collaboratively, and not with the intended aim of building a collective memory and a seminal archive. For the book to take shape there was a necessary slow process to undergo. The students involved needed to recognize what was important about the project for themselves and ultimately for the nation. It was not until the contributors felt the value of the project that it took off. The breakthrough happened when people began to recognize that a photograph from one Emirati family would be of interest to a fellow citizen, and how these personal memories are complementary to the official history of the Emirates. It is not an encyclopedic look at the Emirates, which some people may think it is

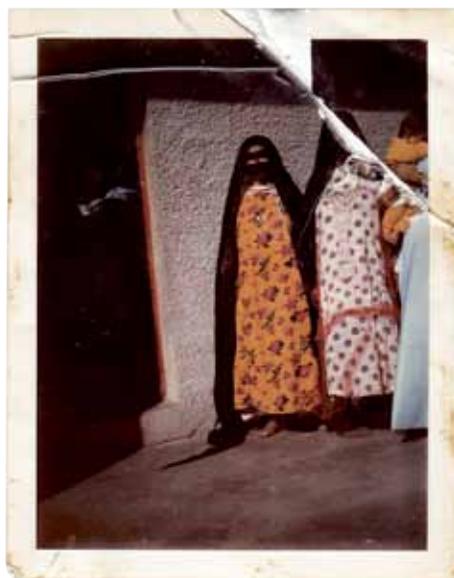
when they start to flip through the 434 pages. It's more about how the Emirates was experienced and captured by the Emirati people who took the photos for their own purposes over the course of the late 20th century.

What were your big take away moments while mentoring students through the process of developing a collection and book of their own cultural heritage?

SM: One of the first exchanges we had was about the object, the photograph as an artifact with borders, with tears and with muted surfaces.

MB: We did not work with photographs as objects until we worked with Susan. It was a significant turning point when Susan suggested, "Let's photograph the photographs and not scan them, so that the reader can discover the three dimensionality of the photograph through a shadow, or an upturned edge...."

SM: This contributed to the students valuing the photographs; the question is whether or not this translates to the reader. I think the other big moment was when individuals realized that they were contributing to something that was going to be part of a collective project. That was a key moment.



MB: One other lesson that came out of this process is that students began to discover by looking through the lens of the camera what interested the photographers, in other words, what interested the people making the pictures, rather than the subjects that the photos capture. The example of pairing; they discovered there was a predilection for capturing compositions of twos. This is quite different than subject matter categorization, like compiling baby, wedding or desert photos.



How is the book organized, and who made these decisions?

MB: It very much was a collaboration. Susan and I were both in the studio, but after we talked about making a visual narrative through association, we sat back, the student Raisa stood up and started pacing around the table, dropping a few of the photographs into a sequence. The other students, without being invited by her, slowly stood up of their own volition and put other photos in between; we were just watching them. It was very interesting, almost like a dance in the way they were moving in and around each other.

SM: Particularly because it was choreographed around tables that were all linked. We kept adding tables as they included the images that they liked. In some ways it was obvious that when they saw people holding their phones or standing in front of cars, there is a certain graphic connection. The thing that is interesting is that they were able to distinguish the really great pictures i.e. a particular man standing in front of a car was not just like every man standing in front of a car. So we saw them distinguishing or learning to curate by making a comparative evaluation, by looking at the photographs themselves.

How did the student's artistic responses to vernacular photographs become a part of the book?

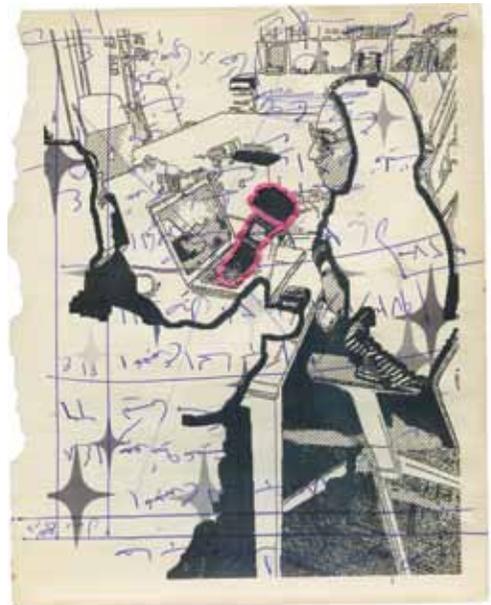
MB: This idea of documenting their process was really important, and that grows as the project goes on.

SM: The artistic response to what they found progressively led to the installations of the exhibition. It wasn't that you just find the photograph, you place the photograph, you tell a story around the photograph. It's inside this unfolding of history that is shared collectively that you have an even more personalized reading. And so some of the projects that you see in the installations don't actually translate back into the book. I remember at one point I was surprised that none of them—I don't think any of them, after seeing a photograph of a relative, wanted to go out and make another photograph of that place or that person. That really surprised me, because so often you have a then/now approach. Instead what they did was work with the computer and Photoshop to blur faces to see different generations. The stitching was a wonderful response to making something one's own artistically.

MB: So they were using art as a tool for investigation more than anything else.

SM: Which is a completely different dimension that this project takes, and that to me was exciting. That happened because they were young women in an arts program, and they wanted to make it something their own, not just a record of history. They wanted to make it something of their own.

MB: I think that's why people respond to this book and exhibition so well, because it doesn't feel like a heritage project, it feels like contemporary art and it shows how



the past is still relevant to this generation in authentic ways that one wouldn't expect to see.

Can you talk about the role narrative plays in development of the book.

SM: There are two layers of narrative going on here. One is turning the pages and progressing through the book as the reader, this takes you out of the headspace of being the maker who is creating something, and challenges the students to assume the position of being the reader of the material they are making. This was a very key moment, and kind of an exciting moment for them. It was then easier for them to start to eliminate what they didn't need, kind of like a path of stones between two points; how many do you need to get from here to there? And they started to have the sense of how to build the structure very intuitively.

The second narrative is of the photograph, not just what is in the composition but what is outside of it, and what they add in. That was a second stage of recognition, and it actually began very early on. We asked them, "Who"

is in this picture and what do you know?" And in many cases they didn't know very much, and they had to go back to their families and ask.

MB: And there is a third layer, looking at the photographs to see the progression of time. The photographs themselves speak to the history of photography, starting with the early black and white and sepia images, and ending up with the color photographs of the 1990's. Photographic history comes through simultaneously with vernacular Emirati history, captured in the images shot over time.

What is the relationship between the *Lest We Forget* book and the corresponding exhibition?

MB: When we spread pages from the book across a large table in the exhibition, visitors began to recognize people and places in the photographs, providing information about the photographs that we didn't already have. That's when collective memory—stemming from this collection—started to have real relevance and value for the larger community. Part of the story is the making of

the book, but with the book release, the collaborative process continues to evolve through community engagement and contribution to the collective memory of the UAE.

CS: The *Lest We Forget* book is a beautifully crafted, interesting and culturally engaging document that raises important questions about art, cultural heritage and collaboration. As Susan marveled during the interview, "This goes back to the idea of the author being privileged. When I think about what is going on in the discussions in art history today, the process of collaboration tends not to be valued in the same way. There are some institutions that value the curator as an identified author, yet very often the curator is anonymous. This is an area that begs more thought, not to mention arts practice that is community based, and its value or lack of appreciated value." Artistically speaking, I hope that this book will further the discourse on art and collaboration in cultural heritage documentation, while serving as an important reference for multi-generational meaning-making in present day collections development.