Arab photographers, it takes to heart the notion that tourism, just like travel, is signified by an experiential (and oftentimes geographic) departure from what we are used to seeing. In this sense, the recreational excursion into Bahrain is not only to be read as a diversion from habitual visual environments in terms of locale or of artistic practice, for the local as well as for the foreign artists, but it is simultaneously an attempt to literally (re)create an imagery of place, whether the artists are familiar or unfamiliar with that place. For many of the foreign artists working on this project, it was a first encounter with the island of Bahrain. Yet, looking at the bodies of work, it is difficult to make out who set foot in Bahrain for the first time and who has lived there for most of their lives. All photos complicate, to an extent, any representational images we might have conjured up of Bahrain, whether culled from news feeds, tourist ads, personal nostalgia or the annals of history. Together these photographs offer very personal takes on what could remain in and outside the frame, whether the photographers are "travelling" in their own country or "travelling" from abroad. In addition, the very subjective points of view of the photographers stress the complicity of the viewer within this visual dynamic. As a viewer, the desire to consume an all-encompassing image of Bahrain remains unquenched. Yes, clues are provided and hints are given but the nature of the project remains fragmented and sketchy, as if more questions were asked than answered. As such, there is a flirtation with the aesthetics of the tourist snapshot. Indeed, how can there not be? Yet there is also a refusal that they are not by frustrating the touristic gaze that wants to fully consume, appropriate and reproduce a certain visual representation of place.

In some cases, this produces particularly haunting imagery. Take, for instance, the series Interface by Palestinian artist Taysir Batniji where the artist has sought out sites where elements foreign to each other come together to form an interstitial space. Batniji’s photos are like objects found wherein the objects, surroundings or landscapes he shows us are filled with traces, incomplete or have lost part of their function. Piles of earth lean idly against a bridge, sit in front of buildings or at a construction site, testimony to some sort of labour. A comfy chair lies abandoned in the surf, and most strikingly, tire tracks in the sand suggest a past presence that has left an ephemeral yet physical imprint. There is a genuine engagement with form, texture and composition in these often desolate and at times even ominous images. A strangeness and sense of alienation permeates these images. Desolation is also to be found in the striking black and white photos of Bahraini photographer Ghada Kuhnji. Usually black and white photography renders an image timeless or of the past. In Kuhnji’s work, the grey tones emphasise and sharpen the contemporariness. Particularly strong are images where graffiti on walls has been blotted out by the authorities with thick black paint. The squiggly blackness highlights the presence of the texts even more, even if we cannot read them anymore. Another image shows a corrugated iron fence only featuring the word as-shaab (the people) in Arabic, either a reference to a revolutionary call or to another political statement wherein the people take centre stage.

Both Batniji’s and Kuhnji’s work is informed by a gaze that is predominantly observational and is defined by encounters of the strange and the familiar. Syrian photographer Hrair Sarkissian’s contribution is expressed in a similar vein, yet in his work there is also an estranging movement from a view on the micro-level to the macro-level; a close-up of an architectural scale model, palm trees and all, is juxtaposed with a close-up of a skeleton in a museum’s display or a billboard on the roadside. It seems as if the characterising features of place have been kept to a minimum to paradoxically articulate the specificity of place. This is quite different from the methodology of Lebanese photographer, and long-time resident of Bahrain, Camille Zakaria, who is a master of urban typologies and seeks to document variation in similarity. In Birds of a Feather, he explores the
phenomenon of gated communities in Bahrain, an urban
trait that aptly illustrates the rapid urban and economic
development of the island, not always to the advantage of the
social and environmental make-up. These homogenous-look-
ing housing units in Budaiya, Hamad Town, Tubil and Reef
Island vary in terms of scale, comfort and amenities but
their function is pretty much the same: housing a particu-
lar social and professional group. By showing us the fluctua-
tions in building types in a systematic way, Zakaria makes
a subtle but poignant comment about social class and social
mobility. In this case showing less is telling more. This is
also the case for Haya Alkalifa who, in her understated pho-
tographs, calls attention to the rapid transformation of Bah-
rai’s coastal areas. Voracious land reclamation has not
only disrupted traditional ways of life, like for example those
of fishermen, but also poses ecological challenges to marine
life. The battle between old and new Bahrain is fought out
most visibly on the waterfront; Alkalifa’s almost generic
and neutral images, are testimony to that.

Bahraini artist Waheeda Maluliah exemplifies the heter-
ogeneity of the Bahraini population in a series of photographs
that depict Arabic flatbeds with names of Bahraini vil-
lages and towns written onto them. As the sequence of pho-
tographs progresses, the bed appears torn up, the writing
illegible. On the one hand, this project can be read as portray-
ing Bahrain as a place where different populations interact
and intertwine with each other in one big (bed) melting pot.
On the other hand, the images also speak of fragmentation
and ruptures in the social fabric. However, not all projects
in Recreational Purpose take on a documentary or socio-pol-
itical approach. Recreation, of course, also lends itself to the
realm of the fantastical and the imaginary. This becomes
most apparent in the projects of Tunisian artist Nièhe Kos-
sentini and of Palestinian artist Steve Sabella. Kossen-
tini’s dreamlike black and white images present a place
suspended between the skies, fiction and reality blend
seamlessly and Bahrain morphs into a territory that is liter-
ally ungrounded, a place of magical possibility and whimsy.
Sabella’s compositions veer from the surreal depictions of
mirrored cityscapes and the iconic 400-year old Tree of Life,
to highly deconstructed energetic painterly collages reminis-
cent of cubist and fauvist paintings. In one collage, the col-
piled facades of buildings make up a completely novel cubist
and chaotic cityscape, with only windows, lanterns and sat-
ellite dishes as recognisable elements. It is as if Sabella has
stripped his Bahraini images of their specificity in order to
construct a composite image with layer upon layer of visual
information.

I commenced this essay by pointing out that the advance-
ment of photography as an image technology shares a his-
tory with the development of the tourism industry. With the
advent of digital photography and mobile phones, photography
has never been so accessible and democratized. Eman
Ali has capitalised on this sensibility and has used the dis-
cretion of her mobile phone to snap images of urban life in
Bahrain. Still, the people she captures remain anonymous for
the most part as she focuses predominantly on their shoes,
hands and backs. Caught up in the hustle and bustle of every-
day life, Ali has worked as an urban anthropologist, a partici-
ponent observer, who shares the heartbeat of her surroundings
with us. In contrast to Ali’s popular and contemporary usage
of technology, Saudi photographer Wed Abdul-Jawad uses
the classic technology of a handheld pinhole camera to cap-
ture the environs. This technique slightly deforms the image
and attributes to even the most contemporary buildings a
dated feel. Yet the most invasive usage of image technol-
ogy is to be found in Iraqi artist Jamal Penjweny’s series City
of Flowers where he has Photoshopped pink roses onto his
subjects. Bordering on the tacky, the roses become artificial
substitutes for chairs, heads, or shirt buttons. They completely
defamiliarise the photographs and in their very particular
hyperbolic way, make us see things anew. As such, Penjweny
has, like all other artists in Recreational Purpose, decided
to play with the double-faced idea of tourism and travel;