

Harrowing images of a nearby spring

The poignancy of photos in Alessio Romenzi's 'It's Happening Now ...' is inescapable

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HARET HREIK, Lebanon: You must see this. It's rare to issue an imperative with such confidence, particularly when it comes to an art show. Yet "It's Happening Now ..." up at The Hangar, is at once so relevant and moving it defeats ambivalence.

As the title suggests, Alessio Romenzi's images are contemporary. Having spent time shooting the Arab Spring uprisings of Egypt and Libya, the freelance photographer traveled to the Syrian towns of Al-Qusair and Homs in February of this year.

The exhibition materials quote Romenzi as telling Hanger co-founder Monika Borgmann that Syria "was quite different from Egypt and Libya. This time [I felt] a responsibility to do something for the people." This exhibition is that "something."

Far from mere photojournalism, the images on display move viewers through a range of scenes. Grief, desperation, brutality and tragedy are hung alongside moments of elation, excitement and seeming tranquility.

The Italian's work usually appears in newspapers and magazines. Displayed untitled and unframed as large (50 X 75cm) color prints and hung at eye level around the space, the works are thrown into sharper relief.

Maybe the simple fact of being mounted changes the reception of and interaction with the work, making the photos a focus of deeper contemplation or reflection. Perhaps it's because the onlooker is able to get closer to the images and appreciate their finer details – Romenzi shows particular skill in capturing the eye on the cusp of brimming with tears.

From the first photograph, in which a man crouches among improvised breezeblock tombstones in Talfanaz, you are compelled to dwell on these pictures' meaning. The events they depict are so recent, and the conflict they represent so near, that their poignancy is inescapable.

Then there's the composition of the images, the juxtaposition of mundane scenes amid horrific devastation.



Romenzi's work aspires to something more than photojournalism.

Although stripped of odor and sound, the war is enclosed within a room, intensifying all the pain and uncertainty it entails.

In one shot, a young girl screams in grief over the body of her slain father. If this image were printed in a newspaper, say, you'd see her loss but you might miss her attire. She wears a bright fleece top patterned with pink hearts. The power of girlishness – stands in stark juxtaposition to her bereavement.

Several shots later, a young man rides high, weapon aloft, amid a crowd of protesters, in the thrall of an entirely different emotion.

Elsewhere, Romenzi has split some of his frames into quadriptych – quartets of images. In one, he juxtaposes shots of a farmer working his land with others of a nearby Free Syria Army ammunition dump, underlining a

dichotomy in Syrian life upon which news reports do not dwell.

Another similarly divided frame takes one into the inner workings of a temporary hospital, showing a makeshift operating theater and a close-up of the sanitation technique for surgical scissors. They are dropped into a small, metal container on the floor, not far from discarded muddied shoes, and set alight.

Some of Romenzi's most potent shots are set within the interiors of such field hospitals.

One finds a surgeon standing above an operating table in Baba Amr, Homs. The back of his head and shoulders block our view of the table, but his green scrubs, the scarf serving as a surgical mask and bloodstained gloved hands held aloft reveal his profession.

The backs of his hands, their fingers splayed and tense, capture a world of

urgent, anguished hope. A hanging plant, in the top left-hand corner of the frame, domesticates, and intensifies, the scene with its incongruity.

A more unsettling image, from the corridor of the Baba Amr hospital, captures a man crying out as he crouches next to his badly injured friend, whose life seems to be visibly slipping away.

The next image, which turns the gallery's corner, is a serene shot of a minaret in Al-Qusair. It comforts viewers before the next harrowing sequence – more hospital shots, destroyed homes, abandoned toys, and one dizzying shot documenting civilians fleeing a sniper.

Romenzi tells Borgmann that the most difficult moment for him was when he left Syria.

"I decided to leave them there," he says. "I felt guilty for leaving."

Perhaps it was in a bid to alleviate this

guilt that the photographer approached The Hangar about hosting an exhibition of his work. The gallery hopes that, beyond its monthlong run in Haret Hreik, Romenzi's work will continue to be displayed as a roving exhibition.

Accompanying Romenzi's stills is a short slide show comprising additional shots from his time in Syria. A tender, almost mournful, soundtrack plays over most of the images, but overlaying the initial scenes is a recording the photographer made as he fled danger.

Against the percussion of panicked footfalls and heavy breathing, the voice of Romenzi's companion encourages him, "Come, come, my friend. Come, come, my friend, come."

"It's Happening Now ..." is up at The Hangar – UMAM D&R in Haret Hreik until July 29. For more information please call 01-273-881 or visit www.umam-dr.org.