

# THE PAST WAS ANOTHER COUNTRY: TWO PROJECTS BY SINISA VLAJKOVIC

**Sinisa Vlajkovic**

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Serbian-born photographer Sinisa Vlajkovic's images are steeped in memories and imbued with a sense of time's passage. Picturing the disintegrating urban landscapes of Lebanon, Syria and Dubai, *Time Regained* is the culmination of a ten-year period when the photographer was living in the Middle East. As he explains in the accompanying artist's statement, these crumbling landscapes, etched with memories, began to echo those of the former Yugoslavia, where the artist grew up. Obsolescence is a key theme here and continues to inform his and Mohamed Somji's series *Substations*. Comprised of images of privately-owned diesel stations throughout the UAE and examples of an ephemeral, vernacular architecture, these images speak of another time – one perhaps lost forever – and forms of social interaction that for many have long since passed into memory too.

## TIME REGAINED – AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The photographs in this series are a personal reflection of my ten-year stay in the Middle East. After moving to Beirut in 2002, my initial aim was to portray everyday life in Lebanon but over time I became obsessed with discoveries of remnants of another time, a time that coincides with my childhood, in an entirely different corner of the world.



The pattern that was gradually emerging over the years was that of a personal journey into memory – an attempt to retrace my childhood lived in multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, socialist-yet-pro-western Yugoslavia of the 1970s, but in a different time and geographic space. The unusual mix of urban and man-altered natural landscapes, references to contrasting religious iconography and worship rituals, portraits of political

and patriarchal authority figures, vintage American cars, street scenes and period interiors are a testament to the prevailing spirit of the times.



Ten years on, it became apparent that the project was perhaps less about reliving childhood than the incapacity to escape it, wherever in the world I happen to be – a lament for Yugoslavia's 'golden era', the welfare state, the security and prosperity that people of my generation grew up with and lost in the break-up of the country and the ensuing devastation of economic, social, moral and cultural values.

Images: Sinisa Vlajkovic, from *Time Regained* series, 2003, series of photographs. Courtesy and © the artist.

## SUBSTATIONS

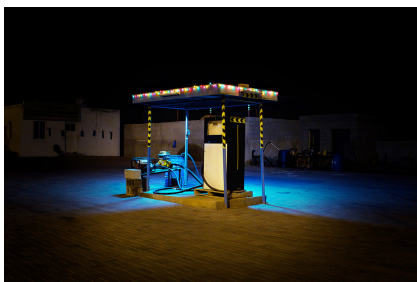
*Substations* is an ongoing collaborative photographic project by myself and Mohamed Somji that focuses on documenting privately-owned diesel stations in the UAE. Since 2007, the project has gained momentum as the photographers delved ever deeper into a subject that is unique to the UAE in sociological, economic and aesthetic terms.



The title was chosen for two reasons: 1) These stations appear as subordinate to the uniformed, modern petrol stations owned by the petroleum corporations; 2) There seems to be an entire subculture that revolves around them.

Privately-owned diesel stations are a rarity on UAE roads due to the fact that such enterprises are only legal in the emirates of Ajman and Ras Al Khaimah. Because their trade is restricted to diesel, they cater almost exclusively to the trucking community and can only be found on roads frequented by heavy goods vehicles.

What makes them unique in this day and age is the fact that they resemble the world as it once was, during the humble beginnings of the petrol trade in the UAE and the Middle East. Architecturally, the stations are a prime example of the vernacular style – a term used to categorise methods of construction which use locally available resources and traditions to address local needs and circumstances. One can clearly notice how the individual's creativity and innate marketing abilities are influenced by local building materials on one hand and the current local aesthetic parameters on the other, hence the imaginative display of colourful neon, blinking lights and illuminated signs among other elements.



The diesel stations play an important social role on a local level, as they are located mainly in remote corners of the country. The long-gone days of knowing the names of all the customers, offering them tea and biscuits over lengthy armchair conversations are suddenly alive and well.

Another aspect of *Substations* is their ephemeral nature - according to observations, their average lifespan is limited to just a few years, the main reasons for which being economic hardship, legal issues, changes in local development, changes in ownership, individual tastes and cultural influences, among others.

All of the above contributes to establishing privately-owned diesel stations in the UAE as a one-of-a-kind phenomenon, and since there is no legislation that protects them and/or classifies them as a form of local heritage, it is down to individual initiatives to document and preserve the memory of these particular structures.

In 2008, the first image in the series (*Substation 1-1*) was submitted to a regional photography competition organised by Corbis and won the first prize. It was subsequently submitted to the prestigious New York Photo Awards and FOTO8, the annual documentary photography show in London where in both instances it was nominated for the main prize. The first 10 images were exhibited at The Pavillion Downtown Dubai in September 2011.

Images: Sinisa Vlajkovic and Mohamed Somji, from *Substation* series, 2007, series of photographs.  
Courtesy and © the artists.



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## About the author

**Sinisa Vljakovic** was born in Belgrade, Serbia in 1969. He graduated from the University of Belgrade in 1994 with a Masters Degree in Regional Planning. In 1995 he switched to graphic design and advertising and has since worked as an art director for major advertising agencies in Belgrade, London, Beirut, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. From 1995 he has been working on personal photography projects. Solo exhibitions include: *Genius Loci*, Sikka-Dubai, 2012; *Substations*, The Pavillion Downtown Dubai, 2011; *Time Regained*, The Empty Quarter, Dubai, 2009; and *PE-LD*, CZKD, Belgrade, Serbia, 1999.