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Action 147: Friday April 25, 2003 at 07:55 (2015) by Reza Aramesh. Courtesy 1x1 Gallery, Dubai.

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International artists come together for The Poetics of Absence exhibit at Alserkal Avenue

[Anna Seaman](#)

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Upon entering The Poetics of Absence exhibition, the mournful sounds of Chittrovanu Mazumdar's audiovisual installation hit you first.

A slow and melancholy ballad, coupled with a woman's whispers, creates a haunting atmosphere. The film projection on the wall shows a barren landscape overshadowed by churning dark skies.

The artist describes the work as a "lament for a life left behind in a land that will forever be memory and myth".

Although he does not specify this, one is tempted to connect this with the artist's own life. He was

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born in France but moved to India when he was a child and perhaps fantasised about a homeland that no longer exists as he remembers it.

It is a key work in an exhibition that explores distance, travel, and what it means to live far from loved ones.

The curator, Cristiana de Marchi, is also an artist and writer who was born and raised in Italy, but has lived in Beirut and Dubai since 1998. She says the show deals with issues that have affected her personally.

"Living in the Middle East, you are really exposed to the idea of travelling and being away from the place you belong, so the idea of memory – and strategies that you build to preserve memory when you are away – surfaces through art," says de Marchi.

"It is also connected to my own practice and several artists I know and follow, so I felt it was relevant to bring them together and build a dialogue between them."

Mazumdar's video poetically explores the difference between memory and reality. This theme is also picked up in Lamia Joreige's photographic series *The End Of*.

Made from several images layered upon each other until the picture becomes unclear, it is a visual reminder of how hazy our memory can become and how we can distort things in our mind over time.

This is complemented by Emirati artist Afra Bin Dhaher's video installation featuring an empty chair facing a panel of window screens, upon which a pair of closed eyes is projected. The viewer can sit and dwell upon how we think when we are asleep or daydreaming, and put distance between events and our memories of what has happened.

One of the most moving projects in the exhibition is by Japanese artist Tomoko Hayashi, who uses human tears and sugar to cast pieces of jewellery.

"Tears are a private, intimate and mysterious substance that we shed from our eyes, and the reasons and emotions behind tears mostly derive from our memories and stories," the artist explains, adding the tears are sourced from the emotional people she gains inspiration from.

"I use this mysterious substance in my work to tell stories."

De Marchi says she chose this artwork because it is such a beautiful metaphor for the preciousness of our memories, as well their delicacy and transience.

Also on show is Singaporean artist John Clang, who attempts to crystallize the internet-video conversations now so common between far-flung relatives, into artworks. He uses projectors and Skype to create family portraits of people in various locations.

Some of the more powerful works in the show depict absence as a presence in its own right. Iraqi artist Nedim Kufi places photographs of himself as a child alongside parallel images from which he has removed his presence, to make a strong statement about being forcibly removed from his homeland.

Mohammed-Said Baalbaki's painting of a pile of luggage – items usually associated with travel – is a stark reminder of all you must leave behind when you flee your home as a refugee.

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Reza Aramesh's sculpture of a pile of discarded clothes is a visual representation of the person that wore them.

This artist's work is inspired by news stories, in this case that of two men accused of stealing in Baghdad who were forced to walk naked through the streets as a punishment. It is a sign of his skill that such a notable human absence can nonetheless signify such a great presence in the work.

Complementing this are Tarek Al Ghousein's photographs of the windscreens of labourer's buses. The vehicles are empty but the details in the images – such as a prayer mat or a water bottle – give a hint of the labourers' presence.

"He is addressing the fact that these people are part of our society and build the infrastructure here but they have no space in our society, and is a very touching way of showing it," says de Marchi.

Historical threads also run throughout the show, most notably in Polish artist Monika Weiss's *Sustenazo (Lament II)*, another large video projection in which she revisits an event that happened in Warsaw during the Second World War.

Iraqi Wafaa Bilal also revisits war in his *Ashes* series, through photographs that show destroyed buildings notable for the absence of human life.

Incredibly detailed, the images seem like documentary-style photographs but are actually made from reconstructed models of bombed-out buildings that the artist made and then sprinkled with small amounts of human ashes to reflect the presence that has been removed.

Just as Bilal's images are not what they seem, so Alia Lootah also investigates – with her painted works titled *Relative Perceptions* – the ability in photography to crop a scene so that it tells a different story.

Egyptian Youssef Nabil, who has a totally different aesthetic, is also interested in exploring the border between photography and painting, as he paints photographs using a technique appropriated from Egyptian cinema.