

**Galerie für Gegenwartskunst, E-WERK Freiburg i.Br.**

**Gallery I | Solmaz Daryani, *The Eyes of Earth (The Death of Lake Urmia)***

5 June – 14 July 2024

In her solo presentation, Solmaz Daryani addresses the impacts of politically influenced environmental exploitation using the example of Lake Urmia. Based on her childhood memories and the story of her family, the Iranian photographer shows the drastic consequences of the aridification of Lake Urmia for people, the landscape and the ecosystem. She has been documenting the lake and its environment since 2014. In the exhibition ***The Eyes of Earth*** she combines her own photographs with family photos taken at Lake Urmia between 1967 and 1987. By juxtaposing current and historical images, the destruction of this unique area is brought to light.

Lake Urmia is the largest lake in the Middle East and the sixth largest salt lake on earth. Its decline symbolises the water crisis in Iran and the man-made transformation of ecosystems. Located in the border area between the provinces of West and East Azerbaijan in Northern Iranian, Lake Urmia once covered an area of 5700 km<sup>2</sup>. The aridification of Lake Urmia has caused by staunching and diversion of its water inflows into dams and irrigation systems. After 1979, these projects were built to aggressively develop regional agriculture for food sufficiency.

Due to a lack of fresh water inflow, the water evaporates in many parts of Lake Urmia and turns it into a salt desert. Storms blow the salt into the surrounding area and destroy fertile farmland through salinization, leading to desertification. The salt and dust storms cause not only biotoxicity but also chronic diseases. Six million people living in the Lake Urmia region are therefore threatened by resettlement and environmental migration.

Alarmed by environmentalists and the public in the region, the Iranian government launched a programme to restore Lake Urmia (ULRP) in 2014.

The rescue plan supported by UNESCO is only progressing slowly. However, excessive rainfall in recent years (2018/2019/2024) has helped Lake Urmia to recover, at least temporarily and in small parts.

## **Individual Work Groups**

### **1 Lake Urmia**

The two photos from 2018 show Lake Urmia after extraordinary rainfall, which caused its water level to rise temporarily. Aridification increases the salinity of Lake Urmia even further. The rising salt concentration favours the rapid grow of the green algae. At high temperatures, evaporation and light intensity, these algae produce large quantities of carotenoids, which they release into the water as red pigments.

**1.1** Kazem-Dashi Rock is the most famous island in Lake Urmia. Throughout history, it has repeatedly offered the inhabitants of the area protection from attackers, for example during the First World War. Due to the sinking water level, the former island is now connected to the mainland. Holidaymakers can arrive by car.

**1.2** A woman walks along a dilapidated jetty for tourist boats. A carelessly discarded tyre floats in the water. Two people are bathing and others are enjoying the raised water level on pedalos.

## **2 Bridges**

Bridges have connected the cities of Tabriz and Urmia City since ancient times. Tabriz, with a population of around 1.56 million, is the capital of the province of East Azerbaijan in northern Iran. The city is the largest cultural centre of the Iranian Azerbaijanis. After the end of the Second World War, the Soviet-influenced Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan was proclaimed in Tabriz. The region has been part of Iran again since December 1946.

Urmia City, the capital of West Azerbaijan, is around 800 kilometres from Tehran and 600 kilometres from Baku. As one of the oldest cities in the region, it was already important in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Its name means city on the water (Ur = city; mia = water).

**2.1** The old bridge that connects the Tabriz and Urmia City crosses a dried-up riverbed that once channelled water from the mountains into Lake Urmia.

**2.2** The new bridge can be seen in the background. Its construction was started under the Shah in the 1970s, then stopped after the revolution. Resumed in 2000, the bridge was completed after 2008. For this new bridge a 15 kilometre long dam was built in Lake Urmia. As only a gap of 1.2 kilometres was left for the flow of water between the two parts of the lake, the bridge has considerably worsened the condition of the lake.

## **3 Family Photos**

A selection of family photos taken between 1967 and 1987 show Lake Urmia as an intact body of water with a huge surface area. Daryani's maternal grandparents ran a motel at Lake Urmia. One of their sons earned money by renting out pedalos to the tourists who flocked to the sea. The aridification of the lake since 1995 has led to the decline of tourism and the ruin of countless family businesses.

**3.1 / 3.6** Two family photos show Lake Urmia at a time when tourism was flourishing. Hotels, resorts, jetties and other tourist infrastructure have been built on the shores. The unique turquoise-blue colour, which sparkles so wonderfully in the water, makes Lake Urmia a symbol of identity for Iranian Azerbaijanis.

**3.8** Lake Urmia attracted holidaymakers from Tehran and other cities, including the family of Solmaz Daryani's father. They had a holiday home on Lake Urmia, where her grandfather (3.8) spent a lot of his time.

**3.3 / 3.9 / 3.10** The extraordinary landscape of Lake Urmia was a favourite backdrop for souvenir photos. Solmaz Daryani's mother poses in front of the intact Lake Urmia (3.3).

**3.2 / 3.4 / 3.7 / 3.5** In addition to tourism, the people of Lake Urmia lived from shipping (3.4) and agriculture (3.5). Daryani's uncle poses with his fellow sailors (3.7). Vines and olive groves once grew in the fertile area around the lake. In 1979 Daryani's grandmother (3.5) is surrounded by olive trees, of which only rootstocks remain in 2015 (7.5). After the revolution, it was no longer allowed to grow wine. Water-intensive fruit trees took their place, making irrigation systems necessary, which contributed to the drying up of Lake Urmia.

## **6 Salinization**

In many of Solmaz Daryani photos documenting the aridification of Lake Urmia, motifs from the family photos reappear. The comparison between the past and present clearly highlights the impact of the environmental destruction for people, animals and the landscape.

### **Wall image**

The large landscape photo shows the dried-up Lake Urmia as a salt desert. All that remains of the former shipping and tourism infrastructure are ruins that stand surreally in the landscape. At the end of the jetty, a former transport ship is stuck and rusting due to a lack of water.

Daryani's wide-angle shot turns the landscape, the weather and the clouds into protagonists of the image. The woman walking along the ruins of civilisation in the diagonal of the picture thus appears marginal and insignificant. With this image format, the photographer reminds us that human beings are part of a larger whole. If they want to survive, they must find a respectful way of interacting with it.

**6.1 / 6.2 / 6.3** The drying up of Lake Urmia is leading to its salinisation. Parts of the lake have become salt deserts (6.3), where birds are dying (6.2). New infrastructure projects have been abandoned (6.1) due to lack of water.

## **3 Some Hope**

The two photos from 2015 show the lake when it filled up for a short time and attracted holidaymakers. Heavy rainfall, as in 2015, in autumn 2018 and spring 2019 brought water back to the lake..

**4.1** Two young women pose for a selfie in front of a spectacular landscape backdrop.

**4.2** Grandparents picnic with their grandson by the lake, just like in the old days. To protect themselves from the sweltering heat, they cover their car with a white cloth.

## **4 Community**

The aridification of Lake Urmia has major economic and health related impacts for the local population. The drastically reduced water level is keeping tourists away, which is ruining hotels and resorts. The salinisation of the soil destroys farmland and orchards and leads to desertification.

**5.1** The sinking lake and the salinisation led to job losses in agriculture and tourism. Young people in particular have migrated to neighbouring towns such as Tabriz in order to find a living. The elderly are left behind.

**5.2** In these rural areas, people live in very basic conditions, often without schooling. Rituals determine everyday life. People wear black dresses for ceremonies such as funerals and coloured ones in everyday life.

**5.4** The lake was once of geostrategic importance. The railway line from Tabriz to Istanbul served a station at Lake Urmia. Due to the decline of the tourism industry, it is now disused. In the past, a large number of employees of the petroleum industry travelled to Lake Urmia to spend their holidays at the lake resorts.

## **7 Adaptation**

Many people have emigrated to the city of Tabriz due to the economic and ecological decline of the region. Those who stayed behind have to adapt to the new conditions. Some are trying to profit from the new situation.

**7.1** Tourists seek shelter from the sun in small tents.

**7.2** Due to the salinisation of the area, pastureland is becoming scarce.

**7.3** Former tourist resorts that were once located on the waterfront are withering away.

**7.4** Grass is enriched with salt for animal feed.

**7.5** Fertile land with olive groves has become barren deserts due to lack of water.

**7.6** Salt deposits are the result of the drying up of the lake. Salt is being mined as a new raw material. Chinese companies in particular are trying to enter the market. However, because Lake Urmia is a national park, salt mining is illegal.