

super-private

In 2005, two dozen rolls of undeveloped 35mm film were deposited at the Arab Image Foundation. Stored in a bespoke wooden box, each film roll was carefully wrapped in protective foil and enclosed in individually fitted drawers. The donor had found them in the family house – carefully protected against Beirut’s dampness – and brought them in for conservation and preservation. The films were developed and small size prints organised in two archival binders. The photos were numbered in a chronological order that seemed to narrate a story that remained dormant until I arrived in Beirut, 10 years later in the summer of 2015.

Opening myself to chance, to find the totally unexpected, I asked the archivist for something with a twist, any sleazy or sexy material that might be troubling the archive. She brought two heavy grey binders labeled “EPS Collection”, named after the collector. It started like a family album, with pictures of family life in the first volume but then became a record of secret love affairs in the second volume. It was ‘super-private,’ I was told, and I might be forbidden to pursue the research any further. On contacting the donor for permission it was found to be no traditional family album, but rather the work of a Lebanese banker known as RS.

Born in 1904, RS was un homme flamboyant who remained a bachelor throughout his life. The family remembers him as a man who succeeded at everything he turned his hand to, be it bridge player, tennis champion, shooter, horse rider... or seducer. One evening during a dinner party, while coming down from his room to the dining room, he died of a heart attack. He was only 54. The people in his photographs were friends and lovers, creating a unique collection of photographs by an amateur photographer. His work in the 1950s anticipates the genre of intimate, diarist snapshot aesthetics that has become the hallmark of contemporary photographic art, a surrogate family album in its own right. The mysterious atmosphere in the photographs is beyond strict family conventions – it is that of a photo-roman noir including road trips, jet flights and secretive hotel room encounters. Was he following a script? Or did things just happen as life unravelled itself in a glamorous pre-war Beirut and Lebanon? What looked like a family album was nothing of that kind.

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