

## ***Dream Zone, 2018***

In this current series of works, Azin Haghghi dedicates himself to exploring the narratives of peoples and places whose stories have largely gone underrepresented, perhaps even untold. This exploration of the state of being forgotten and abandoned is the unifying element, which runs like a thread through his photographic works, creating an arc between the thematically different subjects. Indeed, Haghghi's works can be understood as an archive of similar stories and similar fates, which the photographer has carefully juxtaposed and linked together to create a greater narrative of loss and forgetting. For example, the artist portrays mine workers in their dangerous working environments where they not only face the risks associated with their physical work – such as falling in the mine itself – but are also endangered by a set of financial consequences emerging from the privatization of mines in Iran and the uncontrolled import of coal from China and Australia. Both the livelihoods of the miners and their way of life are simultaneously at risk. In a similar vein, Haghghi captures landscapes and places facing threatening and often critical situations. For instance, he photographs Lake Urmia, the sixth largest saltwater lake in the world and an important ecosystem for this region of Iran, but one that is increasingly endangered due to salinization and drought. We might ask the question as to what stories and memories will disappear with this lake.

Also, in his photographic project *Dream Zone*, the artist reminds us of the connections between people even at the very “edges” of a society. Here, Haghghi depicts a nomadic people who reside on the border between Iran and Afghanistan and who have unique traditions and beliefs. The photo series *Dream Zone* consists of ten photos that capture the dry rocky landscape and sparse vegetation of the village of Darah, located in the southern part of Iran's Khorasan province. The first nine photos all depict a man positioned in the center of the image looking directly at the camera. Following the artist's direction, these men are either depicted standing next to large individual natural stones or atop a pile of natural stones reminiscent of a cairn. Following the pattern established in the series, we would also expect a similar visual scenario in the last photo; however, in the final photo the last person is missing. This absence is conspicuous and can be perceived as a blank space. According to the artist, the various men depicted are the owners of their stones, whereas the absent figure is a woman who had inherited her stones from her husband but is not allowed to be photographed due to the strong gender traditions of village life.

The stones represent a disappearing tradition of the people of this region. According to ancient custom, men are required to own such natural stones as a prerequisite for marriage. Stones serve as markers of land boundaries but also as evidence of land ownership and thus communicate values of wealth and recognition. Although there are no physical documents that provide evidence for land ownership, everyone is nevertheless aware of the property of others through the custom of stones. In this context, the arrangement of the stones in Haghghi's work seems to indicate something very deliberate. This stacking of one stone upon another to form a cairn can be understood in many cultures as representative of a collection of testimonies and evidence and may substitute for a document such as a deed in the context of a landed estate. Today, however, the lands have dried up and the various plots have

become largely worthless and thus the stones are meaningless in the sense of their original use. Nevertheless, the custom is still practiced.