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 Contact: Emma Jacobson-Sive, emma@ejs-media.com

**Hammer Museum Presents *Becoming Van Leo*
 July 15–November 5, 2023**



(Los Angeles, CA)— The Hammer Museum is pleased to announce *Becoming Van Leo*, the first survey of the Armenian Egyptian photographer known as Van Leo (1921–2002), who rose to prominence as one of the Arab world’s most celebrated studio photographers from the 1940s to the 1960s. Known for his meticulous use of light and shadow, and informed by his longstanding fascination with Hollywood glamor, Van Leo became known for his striking black and white portraits that captured the mystery and magic of stars and everyday people alike. The exhibition charts his earliest encounters with the camera in the 1930s through his studio work up until the 1990s. It includes a selection of revelatory self-portraits, in which Van Leo portrayed himself by turns as Zorro, a prisoner, a beggar, Jesus Christ, or a generously lip-sticked woman, foreshadowing the role-playing portraits of Cindy Sherman, Gillian Wearing, and others thirty years later. Many of these images were never printed and exist only in negative format and will be shown for the first time in *Becoming Van Leo*.

Becoming Van Leo is on view from July 15 through November 5, 2023, and includes ephemera and some photographs printed from negatives for the first time.

“This exhibition is an opportunity to introduce Van Leo’s extraordinary oeuvre to people outside Cairo, where his archive is housed, and to take a more in-depth look at his influences and impact. Dedicated to working in black and white film, Van Leo’s photographs are dramatic, moving, and through his lens, the ordinary became extraordinary,” said Hammer Museum director Ann Philbin.

Born Levon Boyadjian to Armenian parents in Turkey in 1921, the artist and his family moved to Egypt in the aftermath of the Armenian genocide, eventually settling in Cairo. Compelled by an interest in photography and his fascination with Hollywood and the world of cinema, Van Leo left university to do an apprenticeship with an Armenian photographer. In 1941 he and his older brother, Angelo, set up a makeshift studio in their parents’ living room, where they captured a cast of characters drawn from Cairo’s Belle Époque society. Their first customers and subjects were the entertainers—dancers, stage

Image captions (L-R): Van Leo, Self-Portrait, Saturday, July 1, 1939 © The Rare Books and Special Collections Library at The American University in Cairo; Van Leo, “Shérihan. Actress. Photo before she was on screen.” Sherihan (b. 1964), Egyptian actress, 1976. Arab Image Foundation, Beirut; Van Leo, Self-Portrait, Sunday, November 1, 1942 © The Rare Books and Special Collections Library at The American University in Cairo.

actors, clowns, strippers—flown in from across the British Empire and the United States to boost the morale of marooned troops during World War II.

By 1947 the partnership between the brothers had soured, and Levon opened his own studio under the name Van Leo. By the mid-1950s Van Leo's studio was the most sought-after in Cairo. His portraits—with careful staging and props, and singular lighting—attracted dozens of prominent personalities from twentieth-century Arab cultural life, including a young Omar Sharif and the writer Taha Hussein, among others.

Van Leo also captured countless everyday people, and with his camera he saw the individuality and specialness of the anonymous sitters, portraying them as if they had transformed into film stars. Some of his most fascinating photographs are the private and playful images he took of himself between the years 1942 and 1945, many of which have never been seen before.

Through personal items from the artist, the exhibition highlights Van Leo's passions, anxieties, and dreams with letters, books, meticulous clippings from magazines, notes he wrote to himself, immigration forms for entry to the United States and Canada, bills, correspondence with girlfriends, and applications to the Art Center School in Los Angeles (which he never attended despite being accepted). The installation will also feature an extended interview of Van Leo by the artist Akram Zaatari. Based on a few days spent with the photographer in the late 1990s, the video captures Van Leo's flamboyant personality and, most poignantly, his increasingly precarious place in a world that has embraced the digital realm. Finally, a series of never-before-seen 16mm films of the Boyadjian family make vivid the artist's immediate milieu but also his fascinating partnership cum rivalry with Angelo, his brother and foil.

With the growing use of color film, Van Leo reduced his production in the 1960s and eventually stopped taking photographs altogether in 1998. The artist believed color photography sullied the cool elegance of black and white. By the time of his death in 2002, at the age of eighty, he had bequeathed a vast trove of images (including several thousand prints and negatives) as well as much of the ephemera included in the exhibition to both the American University in Cairo and the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut.

Becoming Van Leo is curated by Negar Azimi, writer and independent curator.

CREDITS

Becoming Van Leo is organized by the Hammer Museum with the collaboration of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library at The American University in Cairo, which holds the Van Leo Collection. The Arab Image Foundation in Beirut provided additional collaborative support.

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ABOUT THE HAMMER MUSEUM

The Hammer Museum is part of the School of the Arts and Architecture at UCLA, and offers exhibitions and collections that span classic to contemporary art. It holds more than 50,000 works in its collection, including one of the finest collections of works on paper in the nation, the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts. Through a wide-ranging, international exhibition program and the biennial, Made in L.A., the Hammer highlights contemporary art since the 1960s, especially the work of emerging and under-recognized artists. The exhibitions, permanent collections, and nearly 300 public programs annually—including film screenings, lectures, symposia, readings, music performances, and workshops for families—are all free to the public.

HAMMER MUSEUM INFORMATION

Admission to all exhibitions and programs at the Hammer Museum is free. Tuesday-Sunday: 11am to 6pm. Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Boulevard at Westwood, Los Angeles. Onsite parking \$7 (maximum 3 hours) or \$7 flat rate after 6 p.m. Visit hammer.ucla.edu for details or call 310-443-7000.