



TWO *of a* KIND

Friends, comrades and mutual artistic pioneers – Amir Fallah and Asad Faulwell both show in Dubai in early 2014 from their roosts in Los Angeles, California. Discussing their respective practices, friendship and thoughts on showing in the UAE, Stephanie Sykes sits in with the pair as they prepare to unveil their latest bodies of work in the Emirates

Amir Fallah taps his finger on a nearly-finished painting. 'Are you going to leave in these pencil lines?'

Asad Faulwell cocks his head and gazes thoughtfully at the canvas. 'I wasn't going to, but sometimes it's nice to reveal process. What do you think?'

Amid preparations for their respective solo exhibitions in Dubai, the two Los Angeles-based artists have welcomed Harper's Bazaar Art to one of their frequent studio visits, offering a lively glimpse into their art-making methodologies.

Fallah is no stranger to the UAE, having exhibited in Dubai for nearly a decade. His first solo show debuted at The Third Line in September 2005, yet his practice remains tenaciously fresh owing to constant shifts in his aesthetic approach. Fallah's new exhibition, 'The Collected' (on view at The Third Line until January 23rd), smartly subverts the standard course of gallery sales in which artist creates work, artist shows work, collectors judge work, and collectors buy work (inshallah). Instead, 'The Collected' is comprised entirely of commissioned portraits pre-arranged by the gallery in early 2013. The collectors, while collaborative in the preliminary phases of the portrait process, surrendered all creative authorship to Fallah, whose paintings were not revealed until his opening this December.

Typical of the artist's recent foray into figural representation, the subjects' faces and torsos are obscured by large swathes of fabric, and their identities are alluded to only through a staged assortment of their possessions, ranging from sentimental volumes of literature to a rubber duck to a ruthlessly splintered iPad. Ornately patterned strips border

and transect Fallah's densely saturated canvases, with hints of his background in both design and graffiti becoming apparent through the strips' graphic overlay.

Faulwell, meanwhile, is a newer face on the Dubai gallery circuit. While his work has been included in a smattering of group shows, 'Bed of Broken Mirrors' at Lawrie Shabibi (January 11-February 12, 2014) is his first solo exhibition in the Middle East and features new paintings from his ongoing series 'Les Femmes d'Alger'. The extravagant compositions portray women - often overlooked by history - recruited by the Algerian Resistance between 1945-1962, in response to French occupation. Many of these women, who fought alongside their male counterparts as equals during the Algerian War of Independence, were captured, convicted, and tortured by the French; though most were pardoned after the war, their return to Algeria was met with initial adulation followed by almost immediate social alienation.

The hauntingly grey flesh and blank expressions of Faulwell's women betray the vivacious application of pattern and colour exploding around them. Kaleidoscopic ribbons of pigment radiate from the figures' faces, hands, and hair, while black and white photographs appropriated from Faulwell's research are collaged onto the paintings' surface. The stylistic contrast highlights the polarity of the women's enigmatic condition. They are at once commanding in presence yet ghostly; heroic yet tragic; celebrated yet shunned; strong yet broken.

Nestled within the colourful backdrop of Faulwell's Southern California studio, Harper's Bazaar Art speaks with both ➤



Asad Faulwell:
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artists about their current bodies of work, exhibiting in Dubai, and the next step of their careers.

Having just been to Amir's studio and now Asad's, my obvious observation is that pattern has become hugely prevalent in both of your practices. What can we attribute this to?

Fallah: For me, it was my background in graffiti, graphic design, and illustration. Also, being Iranian, I grew up surrounded by Persian decoration. All of these things have a heavy-handed, embellished quality to them, so from an early age, I've been guided towards a maximalist approach. I've always been attracted to covering every square inch of the canvas.

Faulwell: The work I was doing in graduate school was much more minimal and not at all pattern-based. When I started working with photographs, the way I'd place the images would result in repetition, which then led to collage. I eventually became interested in creating repetition through painting as well. And, like Amir, I grew up around a lot of Persian patterns. Fallah: Iranian culture as a whole is not very minimal. We're excessive in everything we do.

Faulwell: I also wanted to reference religious artwork and put the women in my paintings in the context of a shrine-like environment. Religious artwork also tends to be gaudy and over-the-top in its applications and textures. That inspires me to experiment with how much density and pattern I can pack onto the surface of a painting.

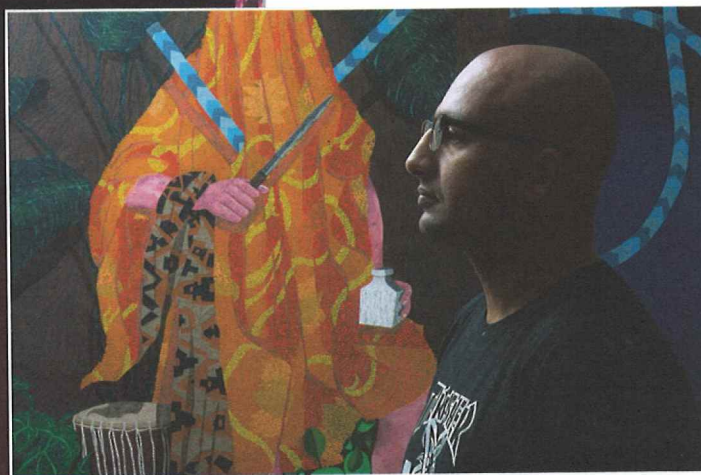
You two are very familiar with each other's work, in part because of your friendship and largely because of your frequent studio visits. Can you describe what these are like?

Fallah: Asad, our mutual friend Wendell Gladstone, and I have these informal caravan studio visits. We've been doing it for about two years. It's very organic and casual, but it has become something we do often. They came about because we work from home; we don't have shared studios with other artists, so when we started, our practices felt a little isolated.

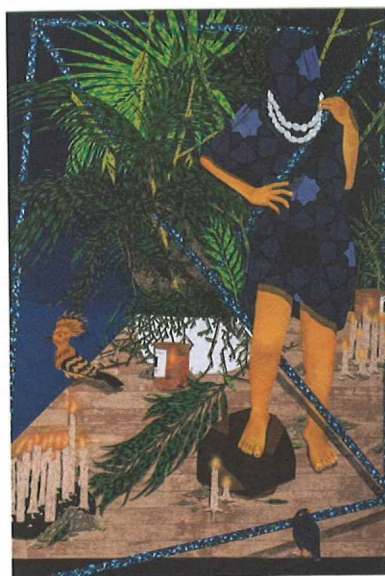
Faulwell: It's necessary. It's nice to get someone else's take on my work, especially because Amir and Wendell have seen it evolve over time. They can see subtle differences that I might not have noticed.

Fallah: The three of us have different aesthetics, but there's a lot of dialogue amongst our work. Sometimes I don't notice it until later. *How does this consistent dialogue influence each other's practices?*

Fallah: I know it has informed my work, but I can't put my finger on how. For example, Asad and I both use dots on our paintings. About six months ago, I was flipping through a book about Wendell's work, and I realised he did a series of paintings full of dots five years prior. I had seen them before, but I never made that connection, so I suppose he subconsciously influenced me.



(This artwork) Amir Fallah 'Rays Of The Eternal Union' (Courtesy The Third Line) Top, right: Amir Fallah. Right: Amir Fallah 'Birds Of Paradise' (2013) (Courtesy The Third Line)





Amir, what shifts have you observed in Asad's work?

Fallah: His work used to be more abstract. When he showed me his first figural piece, it was a harsh contrast to what I was familiar with. He went from a saturation of abstraction and patterning to a figure floating in space, which pushes all that ornamentation back and gives it a more three-dimensional quality.

Faulwell: That was huge for me. I had Amir and Wendell over separately, and they gave me more confidence to show this work to other people. That first painting was very clumsy. I like it for its unpolished quality, but having that dialogue pushed me to make another one, and another, and another.

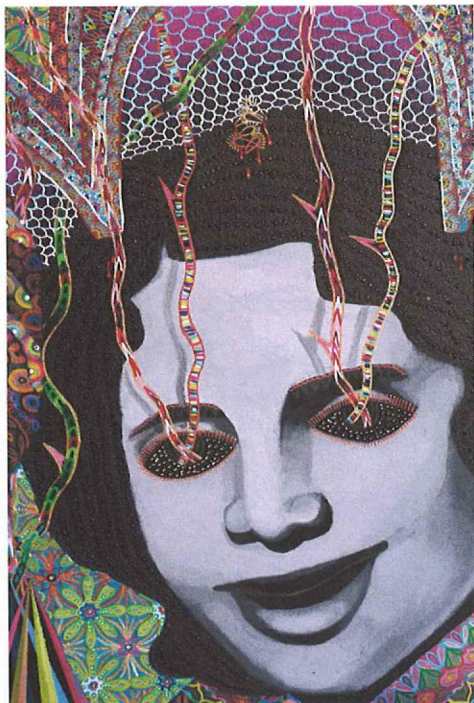
Fallah: I remember coming to Asad's studio, and he said he was trying this new experiment he wasn't sure about. It was so different, I wasn't initially sure how I felt about it, but the more I looked at it, the more it made sense. It's a good thing, that startling shift. It means someone is pushing the envelope. Asad's use of colour the last three years has gotten more complex. That's an organic outcome of making a lot of work, getting used to materials and getting more comfortable stylistically. Before, his colours were straight out of the tube; now there's a lot more mixing, a lot more gradation. Now I see a strong connection between our work in terms of these little painting techniques.

And vice-versa, Asad? Amir's work has changed very dramatically over the last two years, also owing to the introduction of figures.

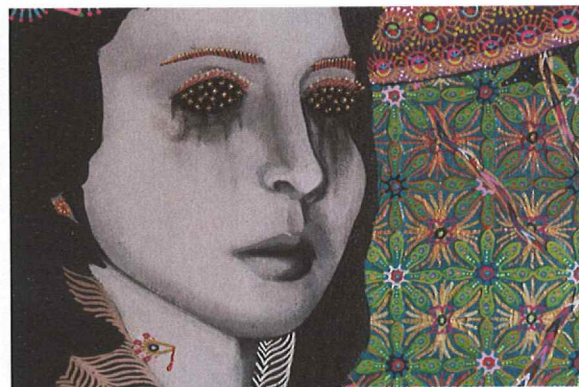
Fallah: Yeah, I suppose that happened at the same time.

Faulwell: I've noticed two big shifts in Amir's work. He moved from more abstract patterns that had more depth, perspective, layering, and gradation to hyper-minimal figural work in which the figure sat in empty space. It felt like a psychological rejection of the crowded works before. Since, he's moved into this new body of work that feels like a combination of two: the figures are now paired with his older aesthetic. He introduced the figure and once he explored that, he reached back and appropriated his old techniques. That took his work to the next level. It's very satisfying. Amir, I know you didn't like those early figurative paintings.

Fallah: I destroyed almost all of them! They were imaginary, figurative, cartoonish paintings. At a certain point - because they were fictitious - I could see twenty paintings ahead and realised that I was going to hit a wall. That's when I began the first



Opposite page and details (left and below): Asad Faulwell 'Les Femmes D'Alger #33' (2013) (Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi. Photo by Elko Photography) (below) 'Les Femmes D'Alger 32' (detail)



representational, photo-based work.

Digressing from your work to your exhibition experience, you have both witnessed the growth in LA and Dubai's respective art scenes. Both cities have experienced similar shifts in terms of how the global art market views the credibility of their gallery communities. They've been catapulted to the status of global art hubs, yet they're both places often disparaged for having a dearth of academia, criticism, and a general dearth of intelligence. What are your perceptions when holding these cities in tandem?

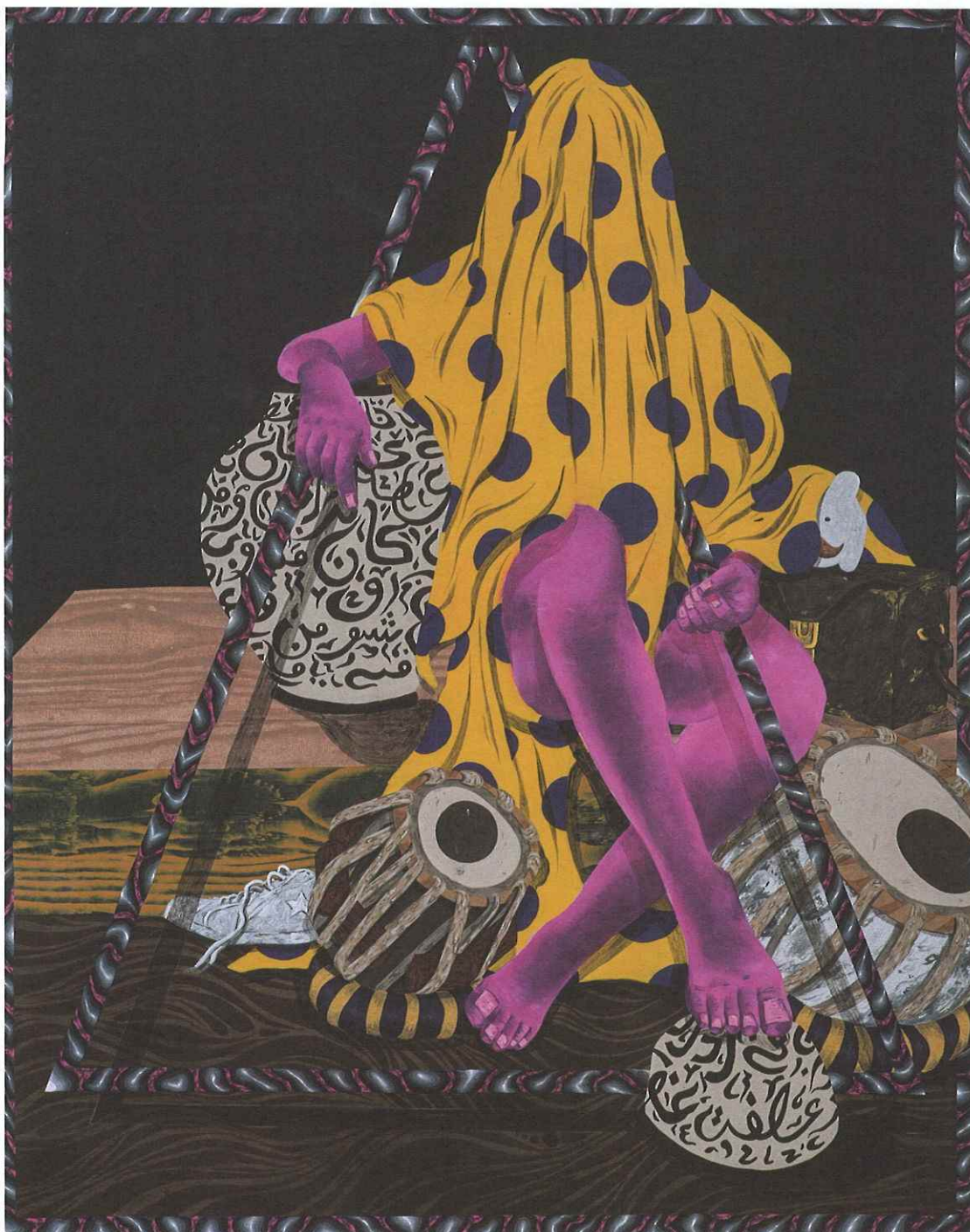
Fallah: When I first went to Dubai, The Third Line was still being built. I've seen everything come from the ground up, and the changes have been fascinating. When I first started showing at The Third Line, there was nothing around it. It felt like the Wild West. When I was in Dubai in February 2012, I visited Alserkal in Al Quoz, which didn't exist the last time I was there. It fosters a nice sense of community. It has been exciting to see it develop.

Faulwell: This exhibition is my first major venture into the Dubai market. My first time in Dubai was in 2012.

How did it meet your expectations?



'ASAD'S USE OF COLOUR THE LAST THREE YEARS HAS GOTTEN MORE COMPLEX...'



Faulwell: On one hand, I knew it'd be very international - more so than LA - but on the other, the population doesn't suggest a sustainable buyer's market. Galleries have to rely on the global art circuit and art fairs to survive. In LA, it's more feasible for programmes to be sustained by LA-based collectors, though both cities are similar in that they're on the younger side of cultivating collectors and generating serious criticism. Something I love about showing in LA and Dubai is that when you have a show, you actually get press and social attention. In a place like New York, it's like a dogfight to get a two-line mention in a blog because of the over-saturation of the market.

Amir, that's something you've said as well. The attention you receive in Dubai is more focused.

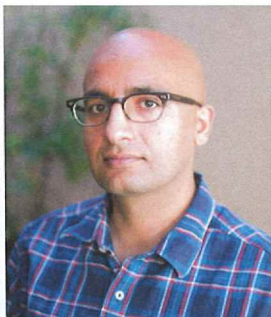
Fallah: Dubai is smaller and there are less people competing for press. When I first started showing in Dubai, there were no art

magazines; I was getting press in social publications. Over time it has become increasingly sophisticated. The general public has become more art-educated.

Do you think the pace of growth is sustainable?

Fallah: I used to think not, but the pace has mellowed out. When I first started showing in Dubai, everything would sell out before the opening. Now there's a little more competition, and people's expectations have become more sophisticated. The recession cooled everybody off. Now collectors are actual patrons of the arts rather than people making a quick buck and buying things for their house.

Faulwell: The same happened in LA. When the recession hit, half the galleries closed down and the market mellowed. Something nice about being an artist in Dubai is that it's easier to get access to major cultural institutions. You can meet curators from all over the world



(Far left) 'The Drumbeat From The East 1' (2013) (Left) 'Meditations On Future Relics 1' (2013) (Below) 'The Drumbeat From The East 2' (2013) (Courtesy The Third Line)



who would be willing to come to your studio; that doesn't happen often here in L.A.

That's a true but potentially problematic point. There's a dominance of MENASA artists showing in Dubai galleries. Do you feel that by meeting curators and gallerists while you're there, there's a danger of 'being ghettoised as a 'Middle Eastern artist'?

Faulwell: Yes, it's definitely something to be careful of. I feel more comfortable now that I have a solid foothold here in L.A. Galleries in Dubai need to draw in more international artists, not just Middle Eastern diaspora artists into their programs.

Fallah: At the beginning, regionalism was strategic because they were trying to cultivate a local audience. There can be a huge backlash if you start with importation.

What about you being pigeonholed, Amir? I've heard a few curators

of Middle Eastern art say your work isn't Middle Eastern enough, which I actually perceive as a compliment.

Fallah: That's something I've always been very conscious of. I try to combat people's expectations in the Middle East. When I started showing in Dubai, calligraphy was really big, so I started showing site-specific installations with debris I found in Dubai's alleyways. Career-wise, I don't know if that helped or hurt me, but it felt right to challenge expectations and the understanding of what Middle Eastern artists can and should be producing. American artists don't only make work about apple pie! Why can't Middle Eastern artists make work about anything and everything? I want my work to be more nuanced. The influences are there, but I don't want them to be the dominant aspect of my work.

What do you think of the work coming out of the region now?

Fallah: It's getting more sophisticated. It used to comprise



calligraphy and geometric patterning. It felt like every artist was doing that and making hundred and thousands of dollars. Now I see more diverse techniques and concepts, and it feels much healthier.

Faulwell: I didn't start looking at galleries and artists there until relatively recently. I don't have the history with the region that Amir does, but I think the work is becoming more sophisticated too. Some artists are really pushing boundaries and producing work that is visually compelling but conceptually aggressive.

Anyone in mind?

Faulwell: I love how unafraid Ramin Haerizadeh's work is. He's willing to tackle any subject matter despite how thorny it may be. He does this without being heavy-handed, which I think is his greatest asset. His work is intensely serious and outrageously humorous at the same time. He avoids being didactic while presenting the world as the complex, tangled mess it is.

Fallah: I like Shahpour Pouyan, who shows at Lawrie Shabibi. I also think Rana Begum - who shows at The Third Line - is an interesting figure. Showing minimalism in Dubai is courageous. When the gallery first picked her up, I was sceptical that her work would sell, but it's doing so well. When I first started showing, everything had to refer to the Middle East, so she felt very radical at the time.

How do you feel Dubai has developed your career?

Fallah: Every time I go, I present a completely new body of work. People probably don't know what to expect from me. In a sense, I'm keeping them on their toes - at least, I'm trying to.

After your exhibitions close in Dubai, what's next?

Fallah: We've been working on these shows for about a year, so afterwards we both want to take time off and experiment to figure out what the next body of work is. We want to pause without the pressure of deadlines.

Faulwell: This is the first chance I've had to step back in three years. I need a few months to try something new... maybe to move in a completely different direction. I've had the opportunity to grow my practice within 'Les Femmes d'Alger', but I haven't had the chance to work on something and completely fail. I'm really looking forward to that, even if it's a complete disaster.

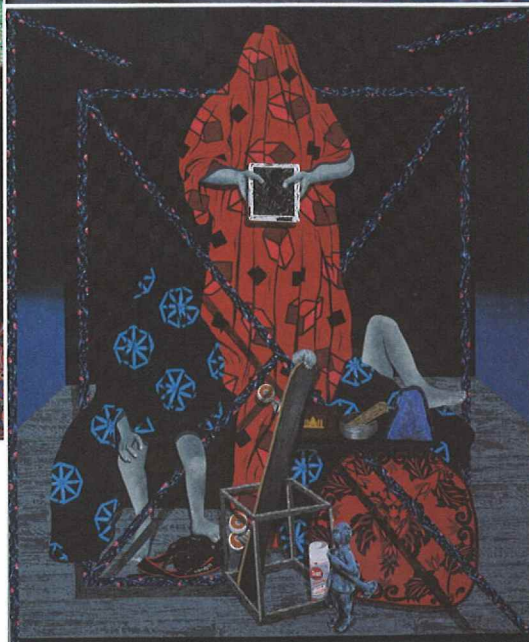
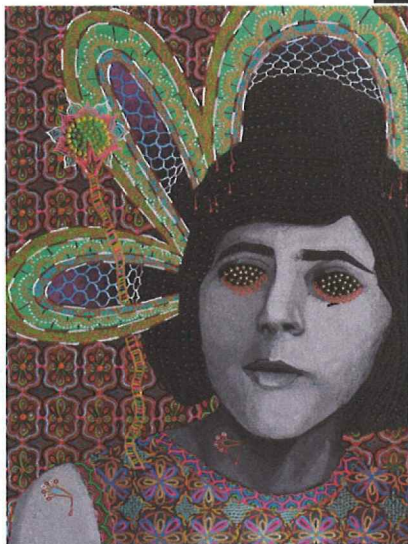
Fallah: I'm going to continue the two bodies of work I've shown this year, but I want to experiment on the side as well. I like to start each body of work by experimenting and making five or six bad paintings to lead to a good new series. I'll probably make some work that will never get exhibited but will serve as an experiment.

Asad, has Amir offered any helpful advice about exhibiting in Dubai?

Faulwell: ...

Amir, do you have any wise career insights to share?

Fallah: Al Reef Bakery! You have to go to Al Reef Bakery! **HBA**



(Above) Asad and Amir in full flow. Opposite page)
'Les Femmes d'Alger #31' (2013) (far left) 'Untitled' (2013) Asad Faulwell (Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi)
(Left) 'The Triangle In The Shattered Square I' (2013) (Courtesy The Third Line)

Amir Fallah 'The Collected' is on view at The Third Line, Dubai, until January 23rd 2014 www.thetbirdline.com

Asad Faulwell 'Bed Of Broken Mirrors' is at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai between January 11th and February 12th 2014 www.lawrieshabibi.com

With special thanks to Elko Photography, Los Angeles, California