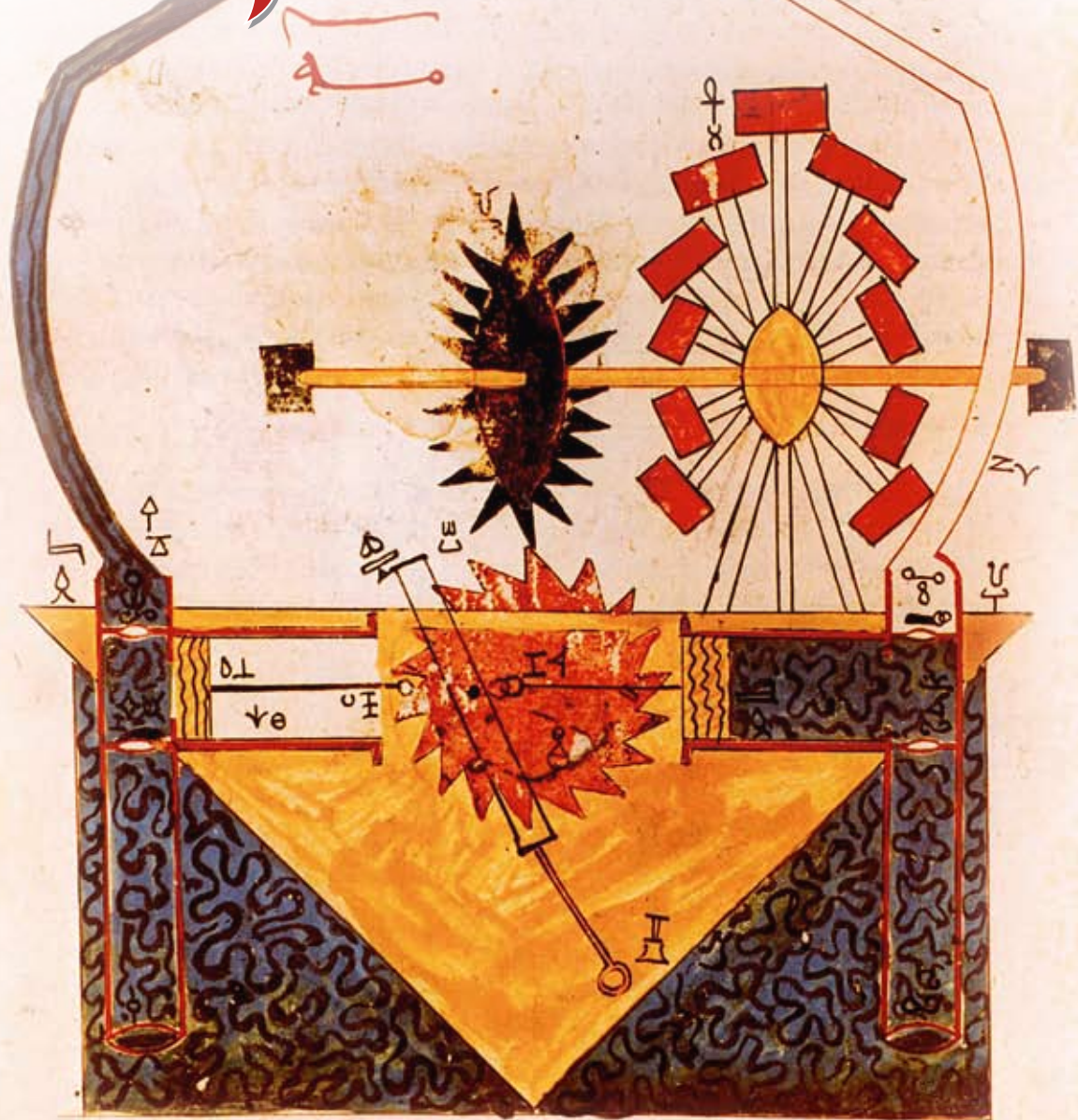


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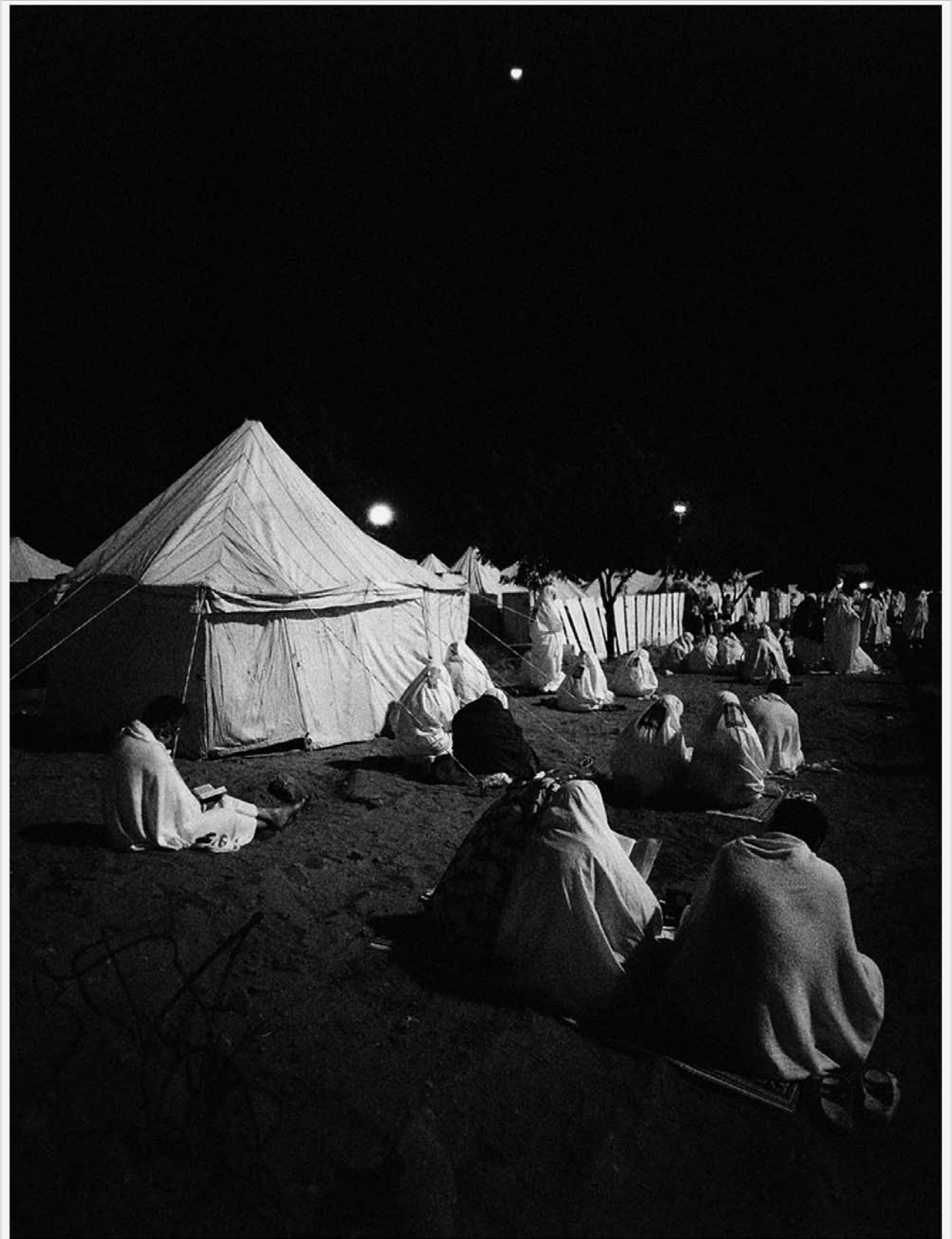
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Princess Reem Al Faisal

A Princess and a Photographer

Princess Reem Al Faisal describes her fascination for photography in this exclusive interview.

Siraj Wahab

When you hear the words “Saudi princess,” the image that comes to mind is probably not that of a talented artist. That’s why when you meet Princess Reem Mohammed Al Faisal, granddaughter of the late King Faisal, it is a pleasant surprise because she challenges such preconceptions. The princess is a photographer and her work has been exhibited for more than a decade. Working always with a roll-film, medium-format camera and always in black and white, she has sought to capture images that play with light and shadow and also tell stories at the same time.

Princess Reem first tried to capture the essence of the streets of Paris and later focused on the port of Jeddah. In one of her recent exhibits, she shared a body of work that tries to capture the essence

of the Haj, an ambitious undertaking that required three years of photography to realize.

“In Reem Al Faisal’s world, all solidity is a reflection of the light which gives it form and content,” wrote one critic. “The orb is round because of the light that curls around it. The archway is tall because of the light that streams through it. Color is only a distraction. By working in black-and-white, the artist sees and renders to us the divine light of her vision.”

During a recent interview in Jeddah, the princess explained the motivation behind her exhibit, called “Al Hajj.”

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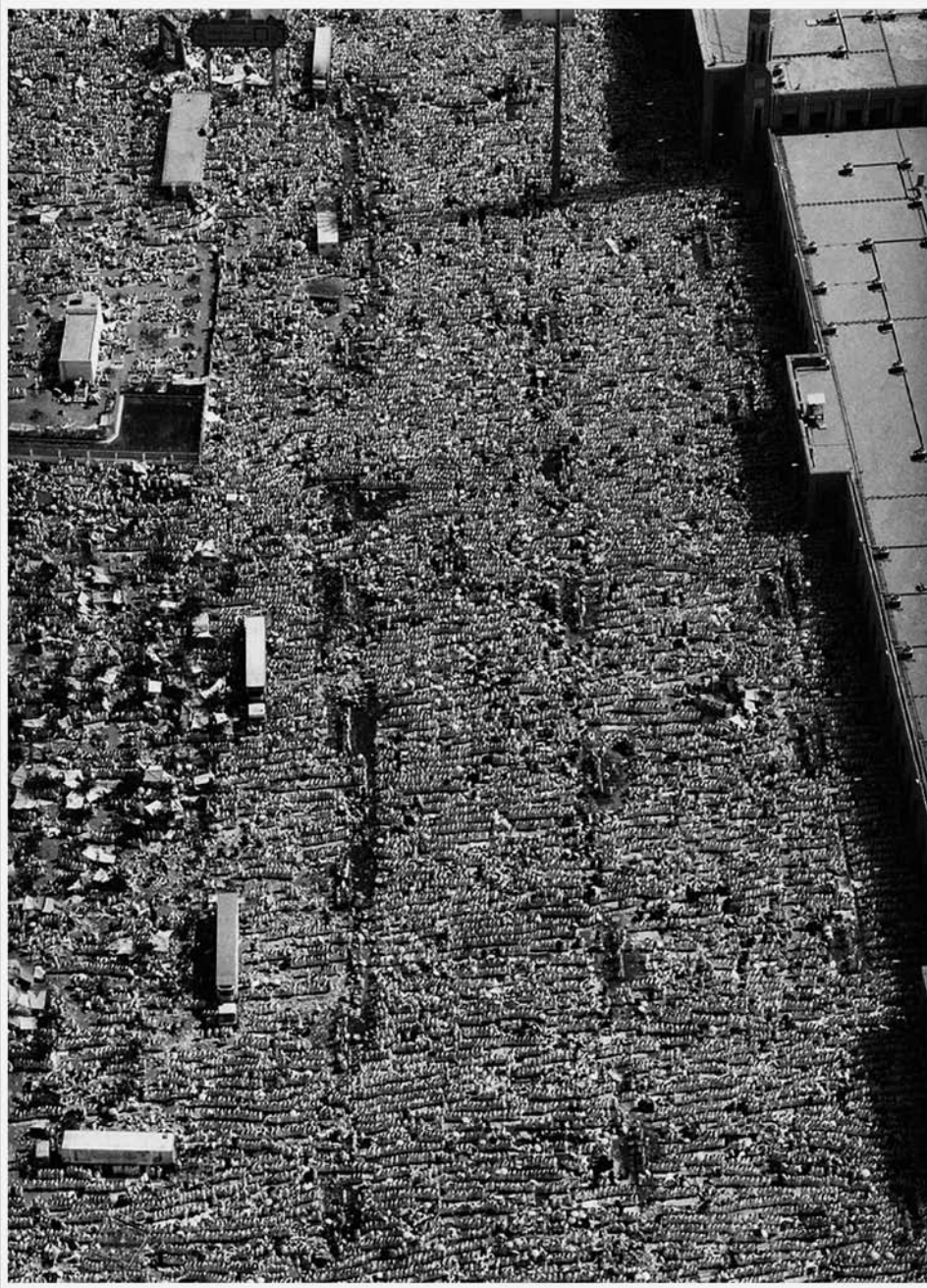
angle of humanity. I wanted to project how humanity deals with an intense situation — a dramatic situation,” she said. “The Haj is a religious ritual that goes back to pre-Islamic times, all the way back to the days of Prophet Ibrahim. It is an ancient ritual and has been performed through the centuries in one form or another. I see Haj as a ritual that really created the Ummah. This is the one ritual that has given Muslims an identity more than any other because it occurs every year, and Muslims from around the globe come here every year. It was my aim to show that.”

To get the images required the affable princess to join the throngs of pilgrims, accompanied only by her driver. The fact that many

people still have strong objections to photography and feel it is taboo made her task all the more difficult.

“The most difficult thing in the Haj were those people,” she said. “They come from all races — from all countries. Initially, I thought they were mostly Saudis, but that was not correct. These people take it upon themselves to defend their faith, and they were willing to do anything. They were willing to hit me and attack me... Oh yeah.”

This required some precautions. “I had one or two people constantly with me. The deal with them was that they would fend off anybody who came to attack me while I was taking a picture. It happened a lot of times; I was insulted and must have been declared an



apostate a hundred times.”

Princess Reem is quick to point out that this behavior wasn't only from men. “Women were equally harsh,” she said. “I was stopped at one camp by a woman. I just wanted to rest. She literally called the men and told them to get me out of there. I told her I wasn't going to photograph her and that I just wanted to rest, but she wouldn't listen; she was furious. She was a young woman and very well-educated at that. She simply kicked me out.”

Beyond that, there were the difficulties of becoming one in a crowd of millions. “The Haj is physically exhausting,” she said. “We were walking constantly — a minimum of 13 hours every day. We didn't have any tents like the pilgrims have. We would sit down anywhere, grab a bite and drink water on the go.”

Princess Reem's experiences, coupled with her artistic sense, also gave her some keen insights and a creative perspective about the Haj. “Arafat is the most dramatic. When the Hadith says that Haj is Arafat, it really is,” she said. “That is where you feel the intensity. One can feel the emotions of the Haj in the plains of Arafat. The energy is amazing. It is like electricity. In the Haj, humanity itself becomes an obstacle. You are

“Photography is a state of mind and being,” she said. “It is always there. It is like the volume — you turn it off and on. Sometimes it's very frustrating. I am sick if I am not able to go out and photograph. Photography is a way to praise God's glory in the universe.” She also says sticking to the older medium of film becomes part of the essence of her art. “Black and white is a more artistic form of photography,” the princess said. “Black and white is metaphysical. It gives you the metaphysical side of art. People can get distracted by color and forget about the image itself, but a black-and-white photograph forces the people to focus on the image.”

in a river and sometimes you are really swimming against the tide. A lot of times you can get crushed. On many occasions, you have to just drop out of the way. The crowd has its own logic. You really have to be on the edge.”

After her first year of photographing the Haj in 2001, the princess realized the enormity of the task and returned in 2002 and 2004 to complete the project — and gain a new understanding of the ancient ritual and its traditions.

“The Haj isn’t different, and that is what is fascinating about it,” the princess said. “The only differences may be some new buildings go up each year, but the rituals themselves never change. They have remained the same down through the ages. The pilgrims’ mode of transport has changed. The pilgrim may have come by camel or air or simply on foot. But everybody has to perform the same rituals. So the reactions are similar. I couldn’t capture it in one season. Between Makkah, Mina, Muzdalifa and Arafat, you just couldn’t cover it all in one year. It is not humanly possible. Each year you go more deeply into the subject.”

Princess Reem says she felt she succeeded in capturing an aspect of the Haj, but she now plans on turning her camera in other directions. “Photography is a state of mind and being,” she said. “It is always there. It is like the volume — you turn it off and on. Sometimes it’s very frustrating. I am sick if I am not able to go out and photograph. Photography is a way to praise God’s glory in the universe.”

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Princess Reem laments that Saudi Arabia does not have more interest in fine arts and said there were neither enough galleries nor critics in the Kingdom to allow the arts to flourish. She also laments that the importance of artistic expression seems to be overlooked by many in the Muslim world. “One of the basic ills in our society is that we think art is a luxury. I say art is not a luxury — it is a necessity. The beauty of the

Muslim world in earlier times was that art was an intrinsic part of society. Go to a village in Pakistan, for instance. Go into a mosque, and you will find that there was someone there who painted the mosque — who drew flowers on the walls. There is beautiful calligraphy. It doesn’t mean that the person had been through a fine arts school. It was part of society. It was a natural expression — down to the people who made the bowls, the chairs. The problem is we have separated art from utility, meaning what is useful cannot be beautiful. As a result, it is almost as if Muslim society no longer appreciates beauty.”

Princess Reem sees her perspective as an Islamic one. “The Qur’an in itself says you

have to appreciate beauty. Part of the Prophet’s miracle (peace be upon him) is that he fascinated the Quraish with the language of the Qur’an. They were genuinely impressed with the beauty of the Qur’an language. That is also an art. The way you dress is also a form of art. Perfumery is a form of art. Just go back 100 years and look at many things in the Muslim world: So much of it was a work of art.”

Interestingly, however, the photographer still has a few reservations about photography. “Let my work speak for myself,” she said when we asked to photograph her for this interview. “I don’t want to be in front of the camera; I am comfortable behind the lens.” ☑