

REEM AL-FAISAL
Interview by Henry Hemming
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Throughout history the production of art has been a panacea to loneliness. Not only that, it has provided artists and those around them with a way of communicating that is often more revealing and expressive than words or gestures. With time, making art can act as a crutch, allowing the artist to draw out parts of their character that might otherwise remain hidden. So it was with HRH Princess Reem Al-Faisal, the great-grand-daughter of King Abdul Aziz (the founder of modern Saudi Arabia), who began taking pictures aged seven using a Canon AE1, a camera she still has. She now finds it almost impossible to imagine her life without a camera or the pictures it allows her to produce.

Al-Faisal's first show took place in 1994 in Jeddah (the first public exhibition of black-and-white photography anywhere in Saudi Arabia) and she has since exhibited worldwide. She now divides her time between Paris, where her photographs are developed and where she studied photography (at Spéos), Jeddah, and the wider world: her practice is predicated on both travel and a desire to document manifestations of The Divine in man and the universe.

'I'm generally an extremely shy person, especially in crowds,' she explains. 'But when I have a camera I can stand in front of a huge group, get up on a table. I do things that I would never do without the camera. It's like I'm someone else.'

This is especially significant in the context of her work documenting 'Nation of Islam', an American organisation variously described as a cult, sect, or a religion in its own right. Thirteen pictures from this series shot between 1999-2001 have been selected for 'Edge of Arabia', including shots of 'Savior's Day' 2000, a landmark event in the history of NOI and the first time those attending had prayed *en masse*.

- So what is Nation of Islam?

'Basically it is a mixture of Christian, Islamic and Masonic influences. They have their own mythology, they believe they come from a superior race and that the white man is the son of the devil. They also revere Wallace Fard Muhammad who they see as the reincarnation of the Prophet Muhammad. There are elements of the history of slavery bound up in there. What was so interesting was the fact they called me white. They told me I was the first "white" person who'd been allowed to photograph them.'

As Al-Faisal explained, NOI also perform valuable work combating drug-use in predominantly black ghettos across America. Her interest in them stems from a desire to find and document photographically a truly American interpretation of Islam. This touches upon one of the key themes running through her work: the way heterogeneous communities around the world respond to the singular message of Islam. Although she is a devout Muslim she would never try and correct someone religiously. As a photographer she does not believe it is her place to do such a thing, something in itself indicative of the intellectual integrity that runs throughout her practice.

- You mentioned earlier that having a camera round your neck emboldens you, has it ever got you into trouble?

'Absolutely. From the very beginning when I was photographing in the port of Jeddah, from the age of 24, every day when I returned to the house my father would joke, 'Someone will push you into the sea one day if you carry on like that.' And he was right, in the sense that some Saudis strongly disapprove of the use of a camera in a public place.

'I've photographed in Saudi Arabia for nearly ten years now, on and off, and it is difficult. Culturally, it's unusual to photograph outside. You must be prepared to fight every step of the way. People either want to ask you questions, stop you or hurt you. In Saudi Arabia I would say that to come away with one or two photographs shot outside you need to work for maybe thirteen hours.'

'So it's very hard to locate the boundary between what is culturally acceptable and what is not. This is certainly a problem I've faced. Cultural taboo changes with time and place. So I'm constantly adapting. Wherever I go as a photographer, one person might be against me, the next will defend me. Both of these people are as

Saudi as each other. From a distance you have no idea which is which.'

Part of the problem faced by Saudi photographers is etymological. In Arabic the word *musawwir* means someone who creates things. *Al-Musawwir* is also one of the 99 names of God – God the Creator of beauty, the Shaper, the Bestower of forms, the One Who Fashions the world. Yet in a different context *musawwirin* means those who make false idols, and, as a number of recognised hadiths make clear, on the Day of Judgement these people will go to hell.

Originally in Saudi Arabia photographers were referred to as *aks-in*, meaning, simply, reflection. This makes sense. While a painter or sculptor has the ability to create something out of nothing, a photographer merely reflects an existent environment. However in recent years some Saudis have begun to use the word *musawwirin* to describe photographers. Herein lies part of the problem.

'So when I was taking photographs on hajj and a group of them shouted "musawwir!" They said I would go to hell because of these photographs. This happened in 2003, at Jebel Rahma – the Mount of Mercy, ironically. Half of the crowd was attacking me, half was on my side.'

- How did you defend yourself?

'In a situation like that you don't try and defend yourself. You run. I had all the papers and permissions but just then they meant very little. What's interesting was the variety of opinions and views I described earlier. Half of this crowd was with me, the others were against me. The Saudi character is hard to define. For you, being English, it's much easier. The English have been English for centuries so their identity is more concrete. Saudi is different. Our nation has advanced a great deal in a short space of time. My father would tell me about walking through Riyadh at night holding a gaslight. Can you believe that?'

Although it might be tempting, from a distance, to imagine that some of the difficulties Al-Faisal faces stem from the fact that she is a woman, it's actually easier and safer to take pictures outside in Saudi Arabia as a woman. Al-Faisal has heard of men who have been beaten up for taking pictures in the street. Rather than feeling restricted by her gender, the principal inhibition she knows stems from her religion – she will do something only if she knows it is

permitted by Islam. This is more important than whether or not it is restricted by society or tradition: being a photographer is certainly not a role that traditional Saudi society ascribes to women.

- Would you describe your work as Islamic Art?

'Yes. For me Islamic Art is anything made by a Muslim artist that is sacred, from an Islamic point of view. Art that is an illumination of a path to God. Islamic art leads towards the absolute, not the ego. So I reject the idea of the artist as a supreme creator who uses tools to create artwork. God is the Creator, not the artist. The artist is a tool, and without aiming to perfect themselves, sublimate their soul and discipline their ego, their work ends up being a reflection not of the Divine, but of their ego.'

Islamic Art is also predicated on the use and influence of light. You can see this in its architecture and calligraphy. With photography – itself derived from the Greek *phos* and *graphé* meaning, literally, 'drawing with light' – Al-Faisal feels she has found her ideal form of expression. She also likes the fact that this medium limits the amount of 'her' that appears in her work, something she feels strongly about.

'If someone was to view my work and think to themselves, "these photographs reflect this woman's life as a Saudi princess taking photographs around the world, this is her early period, her late period, her..." And so on, then I have failed.'

- Surely your photographs of the Nation of Islam are a direct account of *your* experience at that conference, what *you* saw as a result of the access *you* were granted. Are you not being too severe on yourself in gauging the success of these pictures like that?

'No. I believe that I am just a tool. I don't think of myself as an artist – I feel much closer to the artisan in the sense that I'm interested only in perfecting my craft.'

Part of this stance on the way people interpret her work is born of Al-Faisal's experience as a female Saudi artist exhibiting internationally. Again and again Western audiences have tried to find evidence in her work to suggest that she is attacking Saudi society or that she is a feminist in the Western understanding of the term.

'Once they realise that I am neither they tend to ignore me. I have no time for the Western feminine ideal. But you see as a devout Muslim woman I am already a feminist, in the non-Western sense. The Western feminine ideal stems from the Christian tradition – so for them, whether they acknowledge it or not, the ideal woman is Mary. She's a virgin and she's divine. Women take that as their point of reference. But this archetypal vision of what a woman should be does not allow for the *humanity* of a woman. It sets her up on a pedestal. She cannot make mistakes or be a woman in the wholehearted, vivacious sense of the word. We, on the other hand, have multiple references to women from the time of the Prophet Muhammad who were not like Mary, women who were strong, active and powerful, yet feminine at the same time. Take Aisha, wife of the Prophet, who commanded the Muslim army at the Battle of the Camel, who was politically active. Then you have Khadeeja, the first wife of the Prophet, who was a wealthy businesswoman twenty years older than him. Then you have Fatima, who was equally strong. The list goes on. I imagine very few in the West know about these women.'

- Sure, but are the stories of these women at the forefront of how young girls are educated in Saudi Arabia today?

'Well, to answer that you need an understanding of the history of Saudi women over the last seventy years. In Riyadh during the 1940s, the sisters of King Abdul Aziz held their own salons. The King even referred to himself as "the brother of Noura." That's how proud he was of the women in his family. In rural areas women would dress colourfully. They'd work outside. Yet with the discovery of oil, Saudi society began to change dramatically. One of the consequences was a degree of confusion, and in that confusion, women got lost. The reaction of most men to this dramatic change was to impose more conservative moral codes on their homes, meaning their wives and their daughters were kept inside. Now I think the pendulum is swinging back. We have gone from a traditional society, to a nun society, and I think in the next two generations we will end up somewhere in between.'

- What was the first piece of art that really mattered to you?

'A poem by Al-Ma'ari. He's an 11th century poet from northern Syria. He was blind from a young age and became extremely bitter. His poetry, basically, was existentialist. For much of his life he was angry against God for making him blind, then he realised that there

was no point in being angry like this, that he had other skills. So he wrote his famous thesis which is a voyage through the heavens during which he meets the different prophets. Perhaps this is an inspiration for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Al-Ma'ari is a poet and a philosopher. He tells us to tread softly on the earth, because it is made up of human remains. He talks about the permanence and futility of human beings. I'm also deeply inspired by Sufi poetry, as well as Shakespeare, Blake and Donne, or the work of Al-Hallaj, Sa'adi, and the story of Qays and Layla – the 7th century precursor of Romeo and Juliet.'

- How would you describe your work?

'I don't know. I'm neither traditional, nor modern. Nor contemporary, nor old-fashioned for that matter. Perhaps the best thing to do is say my work is a sign of love.'

- Love of what?

'God. My only artistic ambition is for someone to look at my body of work and say, "Isn't He beautiful."'