

Recording stark, delightful signs of the Divine

By Habib Shaikh Saudi Gazette



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“I would be honored to do the interview and you can ask as many questions as you want on any subject,” said Princess Reem when approached for an interview.

As for the photos, she said, “I will make the selection and tell my printer to send it to you.”

Reem Al-Faisal is not only a born and bred HRH Princess, but also a princess among photographers, by training, talent, experience and achievements. It is a tribute to her sheer grit, determination and abundant initiative that she excels in a profession that even most men find hard to follow.

Princess Reem’s chosen genre is black and white (B&W) photographs and her photos not only speak more than a thousand words, they have an ethereal quality, exude piety – whether it is that of a palm raised in prayer, Hajis (pilgrims) in singles, twos or in multitude at any of the holy sites such as Mina, Arafat, Mina or Muzdalifah, crossing the Makkah Haram courtyard, or a rural scene. Each of her photos conveys individuality as well as universality.

“My entire work turns around one large subject which is the manifestation of the Divine in our world. I only photograph in B&W. I follow no rule except those of Islamic philosophy in art. I do hunt for a picture by walking for hours,” Reem said.

“I like to define myself as a Muslim artist, sprung from my native Saudi culture and history. In my art I am seeking to show signs of the Divine in nature and in Man. For me, light is one of the many manifestations of God, which He casts in our path through life to remind us of His constant presence in ourselves and in every place. Every photograph is a pattern of light and shade. For me, my photography is a way to praise God’s glory in the universe,” she explained.

Since color photography has come to be associated with commercialism, serious photographers have preferred B&W photography. Color photography is related to amateurism and popular magazines and has been considered to debase aesthetic appreciation. Color is emotive while black and white connotes formality. The absence of color allows the photographer to focus on shape, which requires intellectual engagement from the viewer. Photography, in its simplest definition, is the recording of light. The photographer has to imagine the subject in black and white and pay close attention to the quality and direction of light. All the considerations for B&W photography, such as viewpoint – the first and most important consideration of any photograph, the subject, what is it that the photographer wants the photograph to say or show – use of light, how much light, source of light, is the light source natural, is the subject directly lit by the primary light source (sun, flash) or is it lit by reflection of light from clouds or off a large bright object, quality of light, and direction of light, can be discerned in Reem’s photographs.

Granddaughter of the late King Faisal, Reem is a photographer with an international reputation, and said that she started photographing from a very early age; however her professional career started around 20 years ago. She had to face many problems because of her social position as a member of the royal family, and being a woman and in a socially conservative country. “There never were any problems from my family,” she stressed. She graduated from Manarat High School in Jeddah, and studied Arabic literature in King Abdul Aziz University, before leaving to study photography at Speos School in Paris for a year.

One of the few women who have covered the Haj extensively, Reem said it is difficult to

capture the Haj in text or visually since the Haj is larger than any possible description. "No book or photograph can ever give the Haj its due. Even those who perform the Haj can never fully comprehend it," she said.

She said that photographing Haj has changed her vision of the world and of herself. "I was able to gain great insight into the human psyche and racial differences. It allowed me to gauge both my physical and mental abilities.

Other than being in a war zone there is nothing more strenuous than the Haj. One has no way of knowing beforehand what to expect from the people one is photographing or those who are working in the Haj," she said.

While taking Haj photographs, she faced every kind of difficulty "the worst is human ignorance."

Her next project is just to photograph as much of the world as she can. Asked if she would like to photograph the Taj Mahal, Reem said. "I do very much want to photograph India, not just the Taj Mahal."

An exhibition of her photographs was held in London in October, followed by one in Canada in November, and Riyadh in December.

After that, at the end of this year, or the beginning of next year, she plans to travel for a month or more around India photographing.

She is interested in photographing the simple daily life of Indians as well as the other spiritual life in India. "I will be returning many times to India as I do to China. They are two countries which are just too vast to discover in one trip," she added.

Besides Saudi Arabia, the exhibitions of her photographs have been held in Dubai, Bahrain, Egypt, Palestine, China, Singapore, Korea, Spain, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United States.

In the first exhibit ever by a Gulf artist in Palestine in 2002, Reem's black and white photographs received a lot of attention. The exhibit featured photographs taken in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Hong Kong, and Ireland.

Reem was one of the 17 Saudi artists whose works were on display at the Edge of Arabia Exhibition that was held in London in October.

She also chaired, with Henry Hemming, the discussion on the role and position of Saudi artists against a backdrop of an increasingly powerful and polarizing media, titled The Artist's Voice in the Media Age.