

al.arte. magazine

(<http://www.alartemag.be/en/>)

ART AND CULTURE FROM MAGHREB TO MASHRIQ
AND BEYOND

BY ROEL VEYT ([HTTP://WWW.ALARTEMAG.BE/EN/AUTHOR/ROEL-VEYT/](http://www.alartemag.be/en/author/roel-veyt/)) /
NOVEMBER 21, 2014

**'THE WORLD
BECOMES MORE REAL
= WHEN YOU LOOK AT =
THINGS FROM UP
CLOSE'**



INTERVIEW WITH ART PHOTOGRAPHER MASHID MOHADJERIN

m always curious about the reality versus the imagined,” says the Iranian-Belgian art photographer Mashid Mohadjerin about her latest project on female political activists in the Middle East. She wants to put women in the Arab revolutions in the foreground, but at the same time – and that is inherent to the work of Mohadjerin -, she is digging deeper and reflecting on the visual representation of Arab women and their political struggle.

Last summer, her work was hanging on the walls of the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp. Her work focuses primarily on migration, identity issues and *la condition humaine*. Mashid’s work has taken her to Central Asia, West Africa, the Middle East,



Mashid Mohadjerin – © Roel Veyt

“ I Europe and throughout the United States. She was based in New York from 2006 to 2012. Currently based in Antwerp, Belgium, she is working as a freelance photographer and working on a research project in the Middle East.

Tell us about your new project on female political activists in the Middle East.

This is linked to a research project at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, in collaboration with the University of

Antwerp. I am turning my camera to young female activists and their political struggle during and after the recent revolutions in the Middle East. In my research I focus on concepts such as representation, gender, ethnicity vs. identity and power vs. struggle. In the recent revolutions women and social media received much attention in the press. That was not always the case. Everyone is familiar with the iconic images of revolutionaries such as Che Guevara, Lenin, Mao ... those images are very stylistic and idealistic, yet of a very masculine nature. There are exceptions such as female Cuban fighters, the French Marianne, who was the female hero symbolizing a heroic civil strife.

You focus your lens on women in the Arab world.

There are often stereotypes at work with regard to women in the Arab world, including their role in the recent revolutions. In the West, Arab women are either portrayed as submissive and hidden, or as westernised and thus ‘rebellious’, because that is considered sexy by the media.

That prompted me to want to create something that was more complex. Of course, I had a picture in my head as well, but that is constantly changing as I talk to activists. So far I photographed Egyptian women who were active in the recent revolutions, and I photographed women who are politically engaged in Tunisia. I am making portraits, but I take them out of the context of the demonstrations. I want these portraits combined with photos of public spaces that symbolize the revolution: for example in Egypt the political murals are an important creative outlet for ordinary Egyptians since the fall of Mubarak.

What is your stance on the Arab Spring?

The term Arab Spring is hardly used anymore these days, but in my project I don't take a stance. I am portraying activists from different groups, ideologies and backgrounds. Political activists have a very hard time, whether in the Middle East, or anywhere else in the world, whether men or women. Of course there is the physical violence against political activists, but the story goes much deeper than that. The media itself has

undergone major changes in recent years. The Iranian revolution in the late seventies was the most *'televised revolution'* in the Middle East till that point, but thanks to Aljazeera and others, the recent Egyptian revolution was a *hyper-mediatized* revolution. Each step was followed not only by the professional cameras but also by the participants themselves, the *'citizen journalists'*. There was such an overwhelming amount of visual coverage that we almost felt that we were there: the revolution became a spectacle, almost a soap opera. The role the media plays in the way we perceive such events is both fascinating and frightening.

Yet it is too early to draw conclusions?

Yes, I'm still in the middle of my project: every time I make an observation, the next day it can be altered again. So I try not to judge. I am more driven by curiosity about the reality and the fictional. The beauty of photography is that it allows you to look at the world from up close.

Through your photography you speak about identity, migration, minorities and socially vulnerable groups. You have chosen universal themes. Was that a rational and deliberate choice?

No, that happens intuitively. I want to visualize the things that bother me in the world, or the things that engage me. It is my way of exploring the world. I try to focus on themes that are universal so that my body of work can continue to grow. If I switch from one topic to another, I feel like I am losing focus. As a freelance photographer who often works independently I'm on a tight budget (laughs). But my subjects have one thing in common: they touch me personally. When I went to Italy in 2008, I wanted to tell the story of despair: the story of the refugees, crammed into a small boat, who take the greatest risks in the hope of finding a better life. Oftentimes migrants are lured by promises of a smuggler who is earning thousands of dollars on every trip. In this series I wanted to show the fears migrants have. I was looking for a way to touch people again, people see these kind of images every single day and become immune to their intensity. I also photographed mundane objects left on a migrant boat (after everyone was quickly taken to detention). I wanted to show the viewer: this could be you.

With your photo of Lampedusa you won the 2009 World Press Photo award. Yet you prefer to keep a low profile about it.

Of course it is an honor to win that award and to get recognition for your work, but I don't like to constantly mention this and that award. The work itself and the urge to become a better photographer always prevail. The award is an encouragement to continue the search and develop more ideas. But the struggle remains, because as a reportage photographer you put yourself in potentially dangerous situations, especially since you work alone. You need to be resourceful. Twenty years ago, newspapers sent staff photographers out, today freelancers often go without even an assignment, making all their own arrangements, without any backup, often without anyone knowing exactly where you are. And when you come back with your story, you might hear, 'very nice

story, but this is no longer in the news'. As a photojournalist you are never in a comfortable position. Even though nowadays I am getting mostly assignments that fit my style, still the amount of time to cover things is limited, which is why I prefer to work on my long-term projects.

Because you prefer working in a thoughtful way?

When I started out as a photographer, I had a very wide range of subjects. Everything was interesting, but I quickly learned that it's hard to find an interesting narrative that way; not all subjects are equally interesting visually. I am not a photographer who takes photos all the time. I don't walk around every day with a camera around my neck. I work on specific projects and it often takes me a while to find the image I was looking for. I stick around for a while, looking for that image, that one sketch that is already in my head. At other times the image comes intuitively, and the shot is there immediately.

Mohadjerin's latest work in Red Star Line, Home Sweet Home:

(<http://www.alartemag.be/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/FotoHSH©Mashid-Mohadjerin-2.jpg>)

(<http://www.alartemag.be/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/006-2.jpg>)

(<http://www.alartemag.be/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Foto2©Mashid-Mohadjerin-1.jpg>)

(<http://www.alartemag.be/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/007b.jpg>)



Comments

1 Comment

Sort by **Top** ▼



Add a comment...



Narafi Foto

Interview met Mashid Mohadjerin, die tot vorig jaar haar passie, kennis en visie op fotografie deelde met onze fotografiestudenten op Narafi. Parels voor de zwijnen? Of, het beste is niet goed genoeg voor onze studenten? Wie zal het zeggen?! Maar Mashid is altijd top!

Like · Reply · 2 · Dec 18, 2014 12:31am

Facebook Comments Plugin

This post is also available in: [Dutch](http://www.alartemag.be/art/de-wereld-wordt-pas-echt-als-je-de-dingen-van-dichtbij-bekijkt/)(<http://www.alartemag.be/art/de-wereld-wordt-pas-echt-als-je-de-dingen-van-dichtbij-bekijkt/>).