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January 5, 2023 - Yemeni-American artist Yumna Al-Arashi was born in Washington D.C. and currently lives in London. Self-taught as a photographer, she has a Bachelor's Degree from the New School in International Politics, with a focus on the Middle East. Her work combines photography with extensive research and writing, focusing on human rights, feminism, sexuality, nature, and the Middle East.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2264 words.

Tags: Photography, Inspiration, Multi-tasking, Anxiety, Process.

On staying focused

Artist Yumna Al-Arashi discusses being your own best teacher, ignoring the distractions of social media, and maintaining your creative focus at all costs.
How has being a self-taught photographer affected your approach?

The creative part of your photography is constantly evolving. Art is a means of transmitting ideas, and in my opinion, that can't be taught. It's something that is learned and acquired over time. It's based on your current state, your previous work, and the things you liked and didn't like about that work.

I started taking photos long before I was heading into college, in early high school or middle school. I've always been the person that hates rules and regulations—anything that's constricting or telling me what's right and what's wrong. Formal processes are difficult for me most times because I choose to ignore what people say is the right thing to do, or I just try to do the opposite.

When I was applying to school, I was like, "There's no way I'm going to art school; it could ruin what I love so much about photography." The technical side of things is, I'm sure, interesting to some people, but for me, I was already there, so I didn't want it to be damaged by school critiques or asshole teachers.

My focus in college was on the Middle East. I wanted to do the other thing I was passionate about and that I respect. I wanted to learn how to read, write, and be critical about things I'm absorbing in daily life. I also wanted to have a formal historical background on the things that I'm interested in understanding, psychologically even.

Northern Yemen

I was at the New School, one of the most amazing schools, in my opinion, for Liberal Arts. They never gave me any tests and all of my classrooms were maximum 30 people. That fit my way of learning and my rebelliousness when it comes to learning. It was perfect for me, because our ways of evaluation were speaking to one another and having proper criticism of daily news or understanding what is actually going on in the world in that moment in time… and writing essays and really understanding the readings we were assigned every day.

I used that training to process and develop the ideas I'm interested in pursuing now. I use my degree in politics every day. A lot of my work is grant based. I get a lot of funding from different organizations or even corporations. In order to do that, I have to be critical about what's going on in the world and also be able to convey my ideas properly and have sound research and the ability to do that kind of work. It's super useful.

Look at the world we're living in right now. Everyone's a photographer, and everyone's capable of taking a fantastic photograph that could, 20 years ago, have been something that would have been in museum exhibitions. Today any good photograph is just okay. Nobody cares. There's no interest in pretty photography anymore. People want substance. The art world has been so overwhelmed with imagery. Not just the art world… the *entire* world has been overwhelmed with imagery. We live in an image-based society, so taking cool photos is just the tip of the iceberg for what I want to do in my life and in my art.

Did you establish your aesthetic on your own, or were you part of a larger community?

I was usually just shooting stuff on my own. In the early days, I was doing a lot of internships. I did a lot of crappy commercial studio work because I had the skill and needed money at the time. I would do anything. I usually hated everyone's style that I worked with, even my mentors throughout the years. I was more interested in their process and ability to use their voice in a technical way. I developed my style on my own.

You're influenced by the things that you're surrounded by, and the things that you and your friends love in the world.

And the world around you is constantly changing stylistically. It's very apparent when you're shooting. You always realize how quickly you start to see things in a different light by analyzing what's cool looking or not.

Do you think your work can stand on its own without the context?

Something I value strongly is making beautiful things. The things that lure me in are the ones that are the most beautiful. They don't have to be beautiful in some idealistic sense of beauty, but just well put together. The ability for something to stand on its own as an object of beauty is its greatest power, for any art form or idea. I try my best to do that as I create my work.

I read that when you first shot your Northern Yemen photos, people weren't interested in them, but a couple of years later, everyone came back and was interested. Nowadays, as people who generally weren't thinking in any kind of political terms suddenly are thinking in political terms, do you find that's happening with the work? Where people are suddenly focused when before they would just be like, "No, we just want cool looking things. We don't want to think too deeply about stuff."

This has always been my problem. I'm always throwing things at people. "Guys, this is really important for you to start talking about or for you to be publishing on your sites or on your papers or magazines." Everyone's either a little too terrified to do it or doesn't really see why it's important. The series you're talking about, the Northern Yemen series, is where the women were draped in hijabs, and at the time everyone was just like, "What's so cool about this? Why is this interesting, and why do we care?" Then, the Olympics came around and of course it became the biggest issue to talk about.

At the time, it was kind of shitty… I had shot that series two years before it started getting any press, so I thought it was just something that would never be published or see the light of day. That was also really helpful in understanding that just because somebody's not interested in using something I've made in that moment, it doesn't mean it's not good. It's just maybe not the right time. Timing is always really important when you're putting out work and seeing how the world reacts to it. You want your work to have the most impact on people's lives, right?

Sirens

Do you get creative blocks?

It's weird. I never get a creative block. Everything I do is always a wormhole for another thing I'm interested in. I read so much. I consume so much literature and I do research. I spend so much time at libraries that it's impossible that I would run out of any sort of desire to reflect on or create something from what I'm constantly reading or interested in.

I see a lot of my creative friends who are going through creative blocks, and it's usually more from them being concerned about themselves and not their creativity, or concerned about how the world perceives them and not about actually putting out work based on what you're doing.

I think that becomes more and more of a problem now that social media is such a huge part of people's art. Social Media can destroy your creativity. People don't spend as much time focusing on doing research work or they're not consuming enough to make them feel like they've had enough brain food. They're just comparing themselves to other people all day long or feeling like they're not actually moving forward in any way. I always see that happening to my friends, and I just want to shake them and be like, "Stop. Get off of your phone. This is what's happening to you."

We all get in those zones where we realize an hour later that we've just been scrolling and don't even know how you ended up on some girl from Tanzania's page, like 50 posts in and who are you and why am I in this world? It's not good, but it's also such an interesting world that we're living in. That, in itself, is so inspiring to me. It does a lot of damage for people who are really interested in creating things though. Most of my friends that want to be creative and are suffering from creative blocks are people who are consumed with their ego and displaying the ego and comparing themselves to other egos in the world and not actually focusing on the work involved in creating.

Do you find that multi-tasking is a way to help you avoid burning out on a project, because instead of focusing all of your energy into one thing, you can finesse and move between different things and keep going?

It's kind of a nightmare. It's scary how fast things work these days. It's terrifying to me to see how many emails a day I have to respond to, and that's just the sign of the times. There's a constant need for output. I have to be able to have multiple things going on at once, because this is how I survive. If I

had a full-time job that was totally different from my artwork, then maybe I'd be able to have a slower process, and it would maybe be even better for me. But because I've decided to focus on this in all aspects of my life, I really have to have things going on all at once.

I usually try to make sure that everything I'm doing is in a different stage, so I'm not working on finishing five things at once. I'm starting one thing, finishing another, and planning it all so that I don't lose my mind.

How do you avoid burning out or getting sick of doing all these things?

I stopped reading the news. I don't use Facebook. I use Facebook only for messaging purposes, because it's important for keeping track of all my people. I have this wonderful thing installed on my desktop called Newsfeed Eradicator, so there's no social media world going on.

When I do any social media stuff, it's very limited, which is probably the best way for me not to burn out at this point. I have a lot of energy, and I'm obsessed with what I do, and obsessed with doing more of it, so I don't ever feel burnt out from the actual work. It's more the physical thing or the mental stability. The mental stability is usually tied to social drainage, which usually comes from social media.

Taking good care of my body, exercising properly, getting outside, and taking walks every day is important. Every single day I have to take at least a 20-30 minute walk or else I'll go nuts.

Because your work's considered political, you've had to deal with quite a few trolls. I can imagine that's also time consuming—if you're checking out people who are writing crazy things.

It's something I've had to chill the fuck out about, because I am such a defensive person. I'm also feisty, so if somebody starts picking a fight with me, I just want to be like, "You fucking idiot. No, you're stupid and this is why."

Online, the troll world is real, and they're super, super fucking annoying. They're not doing it for a legitimate conversation. They're doing it just to piss you off, so any sort of fuel to the fire, as I've learned, is really not the best approach. The same goes for reading comments on news or YouTube, or anything. You just don't do it because who's actually doing that stuff? Who's actually taking the time to write really dumb, terrible things on the internet to people? I mean, yeah, if I'm reading something that I'm really interested in, I'm not going to take the time to even really yell at somebody unless it's somebody I know that I'm like, "Hey, dude, don't write that thing." Not, "You're a bitch that needs to go to hell."

Who are those people, and why would I even care about what they have to say? I try my best not to care anymore. I used to.

Does photographing other people inform the way you photograph yourself?

I photograph other people the same way I would photograph myself. Most of the time my muses are people that I see myself in, so the people I'm photographing, or the people that are the subject matter in my work, are somehow a part of me. If I don't have anyone else to use as my subject, I'll just use myself, because most of the things I'm doing have a connection to who I am. But I'm creating a storyline of not just me—it's of my ancestry and understanding the history of where I'm from. From my artsy erotic work to self-portraiture to documenting women in North Africa, it has a connectedness to who I am.

First Self Portrait of 2017

Yumna Al-Arashi recommends:

Take a technology free walk for at least 20 minutes each day. Bonus points if it is at twilight.

Spend more time in libraries.

Write everything down.

"The Girl in the Red Beret" by Lina Mounzer

Listen to Alice Coltrane

<u>Name</u>
Yumna Al-Arashi

<u>Vocation</u>
Artist

<u>Fact</u>
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Yumna Al-Arashi

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