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## The Legacy of Leila Alaoui: The Late Artist-Activist Lives On through Powerful Images of Global Crises

Charlotte Jansen Mar 28, 2016 1:58pm   



Courtesy of East Wing, Dubai.

On Friday, January 15th, 2016, Leila Alaoui was parked outside the Cappuccino Café in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou. She was in the country (which was not considered to pose any risk at the time) on an assignment for Amnesty International, to produce photography for women's rights campaign "My Body My Rights." When an Al Qaeda affiliate terrorist group took siege on the café and the Splendid Hotel nearby, they shot Alaoui and her driver Mahamadi Ouédraogo multiple



“I met Leila in person just once, in November 2015, but we communicated via email quite a lot in this past year,” Peggy Sue Amison, Artistic Director of East Wing gallery in Dubai, tells me. “We were just beginning to discuss collaborating on a few events together. When I finally met her in November, I was struck by her incredibly vibrant and positive energy.” Alaoui is featured in the gallery’s current show, “If I Leave, Where Will I Go?” which is dedicated to her memory, and also includes work by photographers Tanya Habjouqa and Omar Imam. “I felt her loss deeply, even though our personal contact was mostly through the internet,” Amison adds. “She had this incredible charisma—and her positivity was wonderfully infectious.”



Installation view of Leila Alaoui's *Crossings*, on view for “If I Leave, Where Will I Go” at East Wing. Courtesy of the gallery.



Alaoui gave so much—and had so much still to give as an artist and activist. But her photographs and films leave an ineradicable legacy. Alaoui devoted her lens to telling the unseen stories of the marginalized, the people displaced by global conflicts and unrest, living in peripheral communities. She worked on many projects, but migration was a topic she returned to again and again in her personal work. Alaoui was profoundly influenced by her own heritage: Born in Paris to a French mother and Moroccan father, she grew up in Marrakesh, but was acutely aware of the freedom she enjoyed because of her Arab-European dual identity. It was only natural that her work persistently questions what it means to “belong” to a place. Her interest was prescient. With a fine art aesthetic and a photojournalistic working method, she was looking for a means to capture a more nuanced picture that expresses the many layers of a life lived—approaching the psychological, fictional, and factual sides to every story of transition. Migration, whether forced by climate change, war, or economic inequality, does not discriminate. The camera, for Alaoui, was an immediate and urgent tool for documenting and communicating these journeys and the trauma they inflict. But her images also depict human resilience in the face of adversity.





*From the series, No Pasara, 2008*

East Wing



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Before Alaoui's death, East Wing had started to work on an exhibition responding to the current refugee crisis. "If I Leave, Where Will I Go" includes her three-screen, seven-minute video installation *Crossings*. The video is a reflection on the experiences of sub-Saharan migrants that Alaoui spent weeks researching as a participant observer in migrant communities in Morocco. It's an immersive, cinematic piece, which recounts the harrowing experiences of individuals who embark on the dangerous journey to Europe, in search of a better future—a utopian narrative that too often turns out to be apocryphal.

"We wanted to create an exhibition that would promote dialogue in Dubai on these important and pressing issues as soon as possible," Amison explained of the genesis of the show. "Of course, when we first started talking about mounting this exhibition, we didn't expect that Leila Alaoui would be lost to us in January 2016. Her death hit both Elie Domit [director of East Wing] and I very hard and we wanted to commemorate her work in a way that could help us and our audiences



include *Crossings* in the show, at such a vulnerable and sensitive time for them, so soon after Leila's murder.”



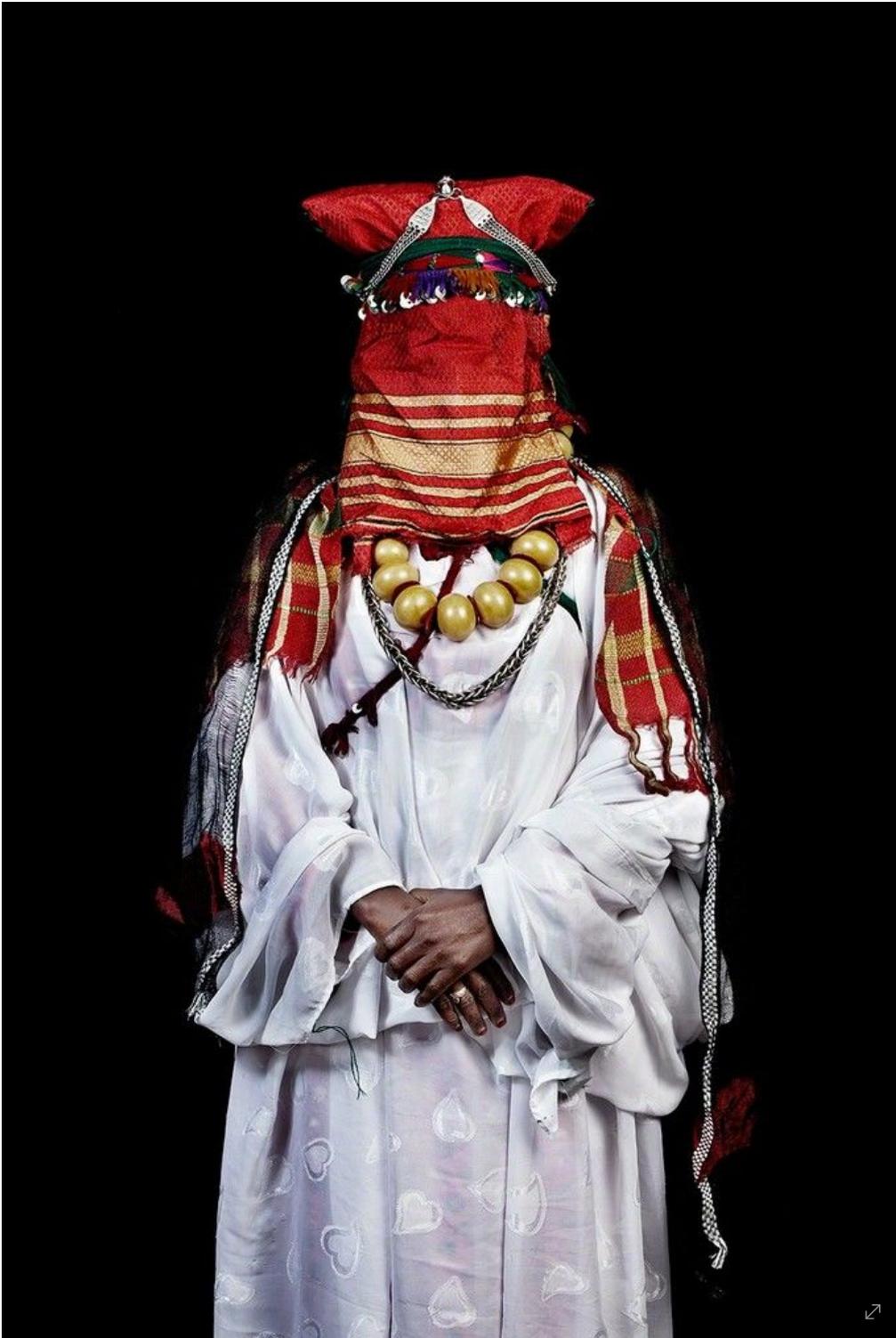
*Crossings*, 2013  
East Wing

Today, the assumed truth of the photographic image is more ambivalent than ever. How can photography still contribute to social change? Leila consciously adopted the ambivalence of the camera, using it to expose a harder, more complex and confusing truth about the human condition—neither archetypal nor moralistic—to represent the fact and the feeling of individual social realities.

This vision is emphatically clear in her acclaimed body of work “The Moroccans.” Recently shown at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, the series of life-size portraits depicts diverse ethnic and tribal groups. To take the photographs, Alaoui traveled all over the country with a mobile studio. The images, with their penetrating gazes and a sense of respectful fascination, are direct responses to foreign and colonial representations of North African and Arab identity. “Rather than being objective, the series adopts the subjectivity of my own position as both an insider and native Moroccan, and simultaneously an outsider as the critically informed documentarian,” the artist wrote in her statement on the series, which was inspired by Robert Frank’s “The Americans.” She understood the importance of providing a more nuanced picture than the Arab visual clichés that commonly circulate—especially in the current age of terror. Her photographs are an attempt to penetrate the experience of living in difficult times: the scope of her



all extremely direct and sensitive in their narratives,” Amison asserts, and adds, “Her honesty will stand the test of time, I am sure of this.”





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*From the series, 'The Moroccans', Khamlia Bride, ...*  
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*From the Series, "The Moroccans", 2011*  
East Wing





*From the Series, "The Moroccans", 2011*

East Wing

Perhaps this is the ultimate legacy of Alaoui's art: The camera no longer needs to be a weapon used to divide and rule. Alaoui put subjectivity back into the frame. She is part of a new generation of photographers who mix documentary, photojournalism, and activism with a more subliminal sensibility. Alaoui went out into the world with a fearless conviction to take her photographs, and to give her subjects back their own voice and identity. She showed us that a photograph not only speaks a thousand words, but a thousand different languages.

**Charlotte Jansen**

*"If I Leave, Where Will I Go?" is on view at East Wing, Dubai, Mar. 10–Apr. 7, 2016.*

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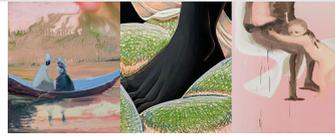
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