

Leila Alaoui: An Artist to Remember



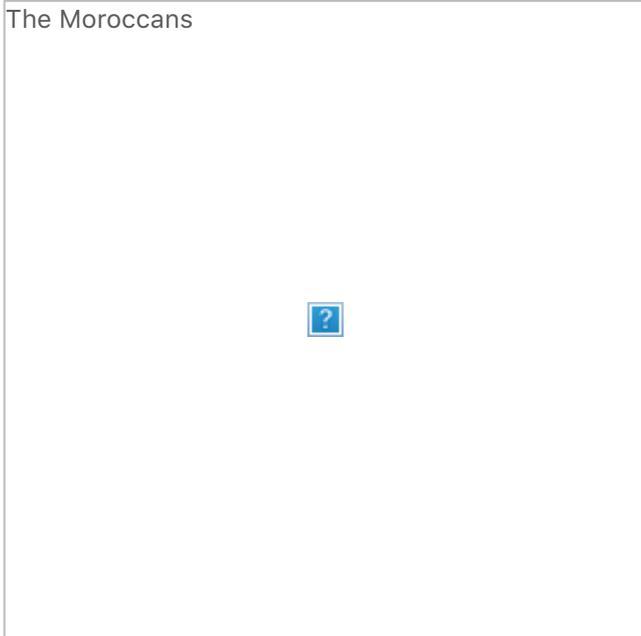
On January 15th 2016, gunmen from Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) attacked a lively neighbourhood of Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou. The 33 years old photographer Leila Alaoui was among the 30 people who fell under their bullets. Leila, who was in the country for a project on women's rights mandated by Amnesty International, embodied the exact opposite of the terrorists' obscurantist and intolerant world view.

Born to a French mother and Moroccan father, Leila understood the fluidity of cultural markers. How passing from one country to another, from one language to another, enriches one's life and identity. A daughter of both Europe and Africa, she was particularly empathic with those who, unlike her, are not allowed to cross borders between continents. Her 2008 series *No Pasara* documents the life and dreams of young Moroccans who wished for a better future on the other side of the Mediterranean, while her 2015 video project *Crossings* aims to convey the traumatic experience of Sub-Saharan migrants who embark on makeshift boats to reach European coasts. In both cases she tried to analyse how the utopian paradigm of the old continent is constructed in the African popular imagination.

Already affected by the difficulties of voluntary migration, Leila felt deeply the tragedy of forbidding entry to people who had no choice but to leave their homeland. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, she travelled to refugee camps in Lebanon,

Jordan, and Iraq, to bring forward the personal stories lying behind the statistics of the forced diaspora. While sombre at times, the power of Leila's work lies in avoiding the trap of victimisation. She preferred focusing on people's forceful characters, on their determination and pride in the face of absurdity. Looking at her pictures, one does not feel pity, but rather a sense of respect and admiration towards those she portrayed.

The Moroccans



This is particularly true for her series *The Moroccans*, for which Leila road-tripped through her paternal country in a mobile studio, where she invited men and women from different communities. The life-sized images captured on a black background highlight the beauty of their facial features, the sophisticated aesthetic of their dress, and the rich cultural traditions they stand for. A representation flying in the face of the traditional orientalist portrayal of Moroccans as an archaic people living in a rudimentary dusty

environment. Through this project, and all others, Leila Alaoui seemed to aim for the same social impact: one deconstructing the idea of hierarchy between culture and people.

The Fondation Leila Alaoui

Moments after Leila was revealed as one of the terrorist strike victims, tributes arose from across the world. Artists, institutions, and public figures, expressed their sorrow to see a young talent disappear in the full joy of life and creativeness. "Leila was a promise of which we just began to see the realisation," writes her mother, Christine Alaoui, in the letter introducing the Fondation Leila Alaoui, "this promise was stolen from us in the most intolerable manner (...) this tragedy, however, should not stop but inspire us. This foundation, over which I preside, will ensure it. I promise you."

Located in Marrakech, the Fondation Leila Alaoui has a threefold mission: to perpetuate Leila's artistic work, promote cultural and artistic creation in Morocco, and, above all, give access to arts and culture to young people. "Since January, we have honoured the commitments made by Leila, with institutions such as the Marrakech Biennale or the Dak'art Biennale, and responded to numerous requests for the organisation of tributes in Morocco and abroad," explains Leila's brother Soulaïmane, "Leila had also finished

two major projects in 2014 and 2015, which have never been shown, that we plan to exhibit in the coming years. In the meantime, we are working on the development of programs and awards that will give life to the three axes of our mission.”

The foundation is led by the Alaoui family, along with actors from associative and cultural environments, such as the artists Mahi Binebine and Mohamed Mourabiti. The plan of action is yet to be defined, but one thing is clear to all those involved: the Fondation Leila Alaoui needs to become an important player in social and cultural mediation in Morocco. One that will create new opportunities for locals as well as promote links with international institutions and artists. In the same way Leila was doing with her own natural cosmopolitanism and activism.

She was President of the Association Bladek Bladi in Morocco whose core mission was to fight racism against Sub-Saharan migrants. She also worked with the Noujoum Association that provides support to children with cancer. In Lebanon, where she lived, Leila worked with many NGOs, including the Danish Refugee Council and Search for Common Ground. Linking art with social action was a natural combination for her, one which called for the creation of the foundation.

The Photomed Festival

Among all the honours and exhibitions dedicated to Leila Alaoui, the one by the Photomed Festival stands out as particularly intimate and profound. Founded in 2011, on the French coast town of Sanary-sur-Mer, Photomed Festival invites photographers from around the world whose work shines a light on a detail of the cultural mosaic that is the Mediterranean. Put next to one another, photography projects highlight the similitudes that bound together people from Greece to Italy, from Algeria to France, Tunisia to Spain, as well as the specificities making each culture unique. After successfully exporting the festival in Lebanon, Photomed wishes to implement itself all around the maritime area to create an active network of contemporary artists in the region.

Leila Alaoui and the organisers, Philippe Heullant and Philippe Sérénon, met randomly in the street of Beirut, “the compatibility between our project and her work was evident at first glance,” remembers Philippe Sérénon, “we created our festival to emancipate the Mediterranean area from the clichés through which it is often depicted. Those stretch from the fabricated ideal of the touristic booklet to nightmare fuelled headlines reporting cases of violence, religious radicalisation and poverty, with seemingly nothing in between. Leila, on the other hand, gave a dynamic, creative, humanist, and

caring vision of the region, exactly what we aim to broadcast." The Festival exhibited her series *The Moroccans* in 2014, and presented her video *Crossings* in 2015.

The relationship between Philippe Heullant, Philippe Sérénon, and Leila Alaoui went far beyond professional connivance. A true friendship linked the organisers to the photographer and her family. Heullant and Sérénon joined Leila's relatives in Marrakech, a few weeks after her passing, to share memories as well as perspectives on the future of her legacy. It was soon decided that instead of dedicating Photomed to an entire country, as is usual practice, the 2016 edition would be dedicated to Leila. But having already shown much of her work, the organisers and family members searched for an innovative and meaningful way to pay her tribute.

[Christine Alaoui](#)



At that moment Leila's mother Christine evoked her own photographs. Just recently, she had let her daughter go through her personal archive and select 16 pictures. Leila had finished editing them while she was in Ouagadougou, and told her mother she should look for other shots in order to make an exhibition. But, the Photomed Festival and Christine Alaoui chose to show only those 16 shots, in order to make Leila the posthumous curator of her mother's first public exhibition, entitled *Blended*,"going through this experience without her is extremely painful for me," admits Christine Alaoui, "but I feel like Leila left me a sort of will and testament, and I need to come through for her." Taken in the 1970s while she was living between New York and Morocco, Christine's pictures embody a caring outlook on life from one side of the ocean to the other. A transcultural celebration of humanity which makes a stirring bond with her daughter's work.

Hannah Kugel

Born in Paris, France. After studying contemporary history in London, she works as an independent journalist and filmmaker.