



INTERVIEW WITH FETHI SAHRAOUI

PART 1: INTRO

I'm glad to be here, and my name is Fethi Sahraoui. To be honest, like, I've never tried to qualify myself as an artist, like the word photographer works for me very well. I'm a self-taught documentary photographer who was always fascinated by the visual universe. Like, when I was young, I remember that I used to cut pictures from the newspaper, from local newspapers, and to collect those pictures, then I started collecting car magazines and then watching a lot of movies, so I'm basically self-taught.

I was studying at university, but it felt like, since the beginning, that was never my thing. So, since the beginning, I've used photography as a way to approach my entourage. I would say I am someone who is a bit shy or timid, so I use photography to approach people.

So, how do I sustain? Like, I try to spend as much time as I can with my entourage to hear their stories, what they are going through, and at the same time, by traveling, too, because it can be inspiring. So the idea is to find the balance with all what's happening abroad and what's happening in my country.

I keep growing up and I'm understanding that Algeria is a very complex country. It's like the biggest country in the Arab world and in Africa, but sadly, we don't know much about it for so many reasons. Colonialism is something really real, and then in the nineties there was this civil war which lasted for ten years, and it was devastating. So I think that all these factors put this country somehow backwards, but now there is a whole new generation who are trying to document their country with their proper eyes and lenses.

So, first of all, the idea of the triangles belongs to my publisher. By the way, I'm a part of a small family of photographers, which is the 220 Collective. We are like five photographers based in different parts of Algeria, and one of the members, who is Youcef Krache, got the idea of launching this publishing house, which is La Chambre Claire. So, basically the box contains two projects, and he knows my works, my body of work, very well, so I was always saying to him that the projects—the two projects that are there in the box, "Stadiumphilia" and "Escaping the Heatwave"—can be related to each other. And we've been trying to figure out a solution for this, like how to present these two projects together. And I do remember that we've been working in the streets of Algiers, and when he mentioned that we are going to present the book in the form of a triangle, I was like, I wasn't that tempted, to be honest. And then he showed me a first prototype with lesser pictures, and I was amazed, and the adventure started since then. It was like May or June 2018.

I think so, then one of the things that puts me to use an iPhone is that I'm not obliged to use a viewfinder, and I think that when I have a viewfinder on my eye, I think more technically, and for me, photography is more about emotions than techniques, so I don't think that I'm a technical photographer, and when I'm with the iPhone, it's just a matter of feeling. I'm walking and trying to shoot. Or I would say it's all about finding the balance with the heart and the eye and the mind.

At the same time, I insist on the fact that I don't want to be labeled as the iPhone photographer because it's just the tool that I feel comfortable with, and for example, with this project, it permits me to have the access to the universe of supporters. Otherwise, for the anecdote, I think that after spending a lot of time with those supporters, at one moment they have noticed that I am not there to take selfies or to take some souvenirs. They've understood that I'm there to work on something consistent.

PART 2: STADIUM

In these two projects, who are basically about the youth of my region—the first one which is “Stadiumphilia”—and basically, it's a project about youngsters who are not allowed to get to the stadium because they're under eighteen. I think this law is valid everywhere in the world, like, when you're under eighteen, you need to have someone who's an adult with you. So, we have these youngsters or teenagers who do everything possible to get there, obviously because they are passionate about their football clubs, but there is one thing that I've understood later—it's that because there is a serious lack of places of entertainment and all, so they've made out of the platforms, or the benches, I mean the benches of the stadium, like a platform to express their thoughts and feelings. And I would add that this project helped me to develop a special link with what's happening now because there is a historical popular uprising taking place now in Algeria, and at least for me, I feel like the youngsters that are in the stadium, they are the ones who are trying to orchestrate this popular uprising.

So, if there is one thing that I need to mention, it's that the atmosphere inside the stadium is like, is really strong and there is a lot of passion. And we have these youngsters who basically, the pictures unintentionally—the pictures that I've been making looks like a protest—but this is not a protest. These are just some group of people who are trying to express their thoughts and feelings. They have a lot of signs, a lot of tifo. Tifo is like, it's a jargon from the world of supporters. I think the origin of the word is Italian, and it means like a huge sign or a banner. More or less they are not all the time related to football, but they're related to other things. Like for example, this is a poster of a martyr who passed away during the Algerian War of Liberation. So for me, it has nothing to do with football. But the name of the stadium—the stadium is named after the name of this martyr.

And if I can talk about this pictures, too, this is one of the early pictures that I did from the project, and it was like a push forward to keep working on this project because it's still like a long-term project that I've started in late 2014 or the beginning of 2018. And it's developed gradually, like in the beginning, I didn't have a title, or I didn't know what I was doing, because out of boredom I went to the stadium to witness what's happening there. And by the way, when I was a youngster like them, my family wouldn't permit me to get there. So, this project is like it was a late discovery of this universe. So, I went there and the child inside me was trying to discover what was happening there, and I was talking about the chants and all of these supporters, and one more time, they are not merely about football, but they're about the social landscape and what all these youngsters are witnessing. So, it can be about their love stories, because the stadium is mainly a manly world. We don't have girls. It can be—yeah, this is the martyr, who is Zougari Taher.

And the chants can be also about illegal immigration. We call it harraga. And it's about those people who are trying to cross the other side of the Mediterranean with the death boats, so like, they try to pay tribute to their colleagues or to their friends who passed away. And there are songs that are highly political, too. And, by the way, the modern national anthem—it's not officially—came of this popular

uprising, came from the stadium. It's like a song that came from the stadium, and which is a song that, or chants that, criticize this government.

But for these youngsters, I would say that they have been betrayed by their own politicians, which are my own politicians, too. Like, they've been all under their regime and their control. So, from a political level or angle, I think that these youngsters, they have managed to create in the stadium, like, their own political party. They have made out of their gatherings in the stadium as their political rally, which is happening in the surroundings of the stadium.

Like first of all, they do exist, and so many people have been considering these youngsters as thugs, or something like that. But they have managed, they have proved to us that they have this precious political consciousness, and I think that this is the biggest thing that they have proven to us: that they can be conscious. They can be determined to do something. And now, by the way, most of them, they are more in the street and not in the stadium.

PART 3: HEATWAVE

So, basically, "Escaping the Heatwave" is another long-term documentary project about always the same youngsters that sometimes we can find in the stadium, but here it's in another season, which is summer. The temperature can be unbearable, and always with this lack of places of entertainment and here, I'm talking about swimming pools and all. These youngsters, they have managed to invent or create their own places to entertain themselves. And here I'm talking about, for example, there is a picture of an abandoned pool, a really beautiful one, in the downtown. So we can find these youngsters, these or those youngsters, going through an abandoned water tower or irrigation channel, where the conditions, honestly, can be somehow risky, but one more time, my intention wasn't to show risk, but to show the creativity of those youngsters who are creating their own places to entertain themselves.

I spent a lot of time shooting on this project, so, like, it has chapters between the water tower and the irrigation channel, and then there is somehow, like, a second chapter, which is a train. So, there is a train which is operational only during summer days and dedicated to vacationists, and this train links between a location and one of the biggest beaches in Algeria. So, we have these youth, too, who most of the time, they don't have even the price to pay for the ticket or to take the train. But one more time, they do everything possible to spend the whole day at the beach.

CITATION INFORMATION

For the transcript:

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