

RIAD

On August 10, 2016, the New York Times Magazine devoted an entire special issue to the Middle East and its recent history of conflict and violence. One notable article — the only article in the entire issue, in fact — featured a comprehensive timeline of the tumult the region is infamous for. From the Six-Day war of 1967 in the Sinai peninsula to the freeing of Palmyra from Daesh last summer, the in-depth account is a critically acclaimed and objectively remarkable piece. Its ability to synthesize and clarify some of the most complex issues in the region — and of our time — deserves the highest of praises. Yet, the article is also at its very heart the epitome of an evil that has pervaded the perception of the Middle East in the West for longer than my lifetime. Ever since the mid 90's, the region — and by association, all Muslim cultures — has chiefly been documented or represented in contexts of violence, religious extremism, war, bigotry and so on. Such depictions were of course necessary, and remain so today, as catalysts for world mobilization in the face of human tragedies. Nonetheless, these representations have become so prominent that they have all but dwarfed all other aspects of Middle Eastern, North African, and Muslim cultures in Western mainstream media. Ask the average American or European about Islam and the first image that pops into their mind is likely that of an unidentified dark veiled figure in a starkly deserted and sandy ruin — strikingly similar, in fact, to the first photographic illustration of the NYTM's special issue. Somewhere, somehow, something went wrong and these grim images erased all other representations of the Muslim world. They flattened abundant histories once considered amongst the cultural jewels of the planet. Our knowledge and attitudes towards Islam have been patterned by exposure only to extremes, story after story, one news report after another.

This partiality — collective ignorance — has spawned a brand of fear and rejection we are all too familiar with; however, the issue is not simply one of misinformation. If the Middle East, North Africa, and their cultures are almost exclusively pictured in dire conditions, factual enlightenment cannot — will not — suffice to change the occidental ethos.

Passion, on the other hand, can move mountains, and I do not know how to be more passionate than when telling my own story, reflecting on my own experience. Growing up in Morocco, I was fortunate to be surrounded by some of the most wonderful people I know to this day. Incredible matriarchs, unapologetically unique characters... these women and men shaped my upbringing — most are my relatives — yet it is hard to find felicitous enough epithets to describe them without engaging in the very discourse I denounce. To qualify a woman as 'strong' implies refuting that she is weak, frail, a victim, thus giving credence to that default assumption. In too many photographs, women are too often represented as soulful and resigned, sitting, holding their heads or praying — while men are more more likely to be shown standing and

combative. Likewise, epithets such as ‘proud’, ‘free’ or ‘courageous’ immediately cast a rigid dichotomy. An argument could be made that such adjectives, as language, are necessary to build comprehension — and empathy — but this lexical polarity has no validity outside the West. When a culture is entirely described by an outsider’s codes, and is therefore fully understandable to them, it becomes entrapped in frameworks of thought that are not its; it becomes owned by an alien entity. The empathy is colonial.

As a young adult who has been educated in Europe and the U.S., I have no legitimacy whatsoever to discuss a ‘general Muslim experience’ — should such a blanket notion ever have carried any meaning — but by expressing my own vision, photographing people I am intimately familiar with, I attempt to shift the paradigm and bring diversity to a Western-centric conversation that largely revolves around anonymous representations of pain and submission. Too often, singular identities are mischaracterized or even uncharacterized — stripped from their own representation. In *Riad*, the figures are inherently embodied and identified, never anonymized: my subjects are exclusively my relatives and myself, and we are all pictured in the ancestral home of my great-grandfather, in Marrakech. Through the construction of a deeply personal visual syntax, I try to dissociate these individualities from preconceptions embedded in traditional Western imagery. The seminal rejection of such codes may seem opaque to the non-oriental viewer, but the analog photography practice is meant to foster visual intimacy and empathy that transcend cultural boundaries.

The world of *Riad* is a self-contained environment, a reality of its own, an island of autonomy and power in which the audience can perceive a sliver of Islamic culture the way I did and still do in Morocco.

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