

VOGUE

MAGAZINE

Another Vogue

DI VOGUE
23 AGOSTO 2019

In September, the Maison Européenne de la Photographie will give Hassan Hajjaj carte blanche to turn the whole of the Parisian museum into the "Maison Marocain de la Photographie"

The Arab Issue by Ekow Eshun

Shot in London, Marrakech and indeed, anywhere that he can throw up a patterned backdrop on a wall to create a makeshift studio, Hajjaj's photos offer a unique view of the interconnected modern world.

Hajjaj's photographs are characterised by an exuberant melee of colours, patterns, appropriated brand logos and found objects such as the Sprite cans and tomato soup tins he works into his picture frames. Signs and symbols and people from around the globe collide without hierarchy or the presumed superiority of a Eurocentric worldview.

In his images, the world is a place always in motion, alive with contradiction and possibility.

His art is less to do with Middle East meets West, so much as a desire to reimagine the world on his personal terms as a place in which no-one is on the margins; anywhere can be home; and where everyone might be a star.

For Hajjaj, identity is never fixed or singular. It is always fluid, always multiple. Hajjaj cites the work of African studio photographers such as Seydou Keita, Samuel Fosso, and in particular Malick Sidibe, as an influence. Sidibe's photographs captured the vibrancy and optimism of independence-era Mali as the nation and its people cast off French colonial rule and asserted their own identity instead. Hajjaj's photographs articulate their own form of liberation struggle too. Hassan Hajjaj photographs his subjects as he would like the world to see them - stylish, charismatic, and deserving of celebration, irrespective of their status or occupation.

At a time when Britain risks turning inwards in pursuit of a national identity based on an idealised past, Hajjaj's portraits make an urgent, timely case in favour of hybridity and multiculturalism. As Hajjaj says, 'I've always had an eye to mix things up.'

MAISON MAROCAINE DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

CARTE BLANCHE À HASSAN HAJJAJ

MAISON EUROPÉENNE DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

11.09.2019 - 17.11.2019

An interview with Hassan Hajjaj by Chiara Bardelli Nonino

If life is what happens while you are busy looking somewhere else, Hassan Hajjaj tried very determinedly to distract it. Over the years, he has been a shop assistant at a records store, he was a club promoter, stylist and music videos



assistant; he has opened various stores and set up a label called R.A.P. - Real Authentic People. At present, he is an artist, director and photographer and, come next September, the Maison Européenne de la Photographie will give him carte blanche to turn the whole of the Parisian museum into the “Maison Marocain de la Photographie”.

Born in Larache, a harbour town in Northern Morocco, he moved to London with his family during the 1970s. Aged 13, his first impression of the British capital could be summarized in three words: gloominess, sadness, loneliness. Hassan dropped out of school at the age of 15, and with no formal qualifications, he began to do random jobs, which somehow introduced him to the London artistic scene. During the 1990s, in Marrakech, a friend asked him to help him with some English: an important American magazine was organizing a fashion shoot at his riad. That's when Hajjaj realized that Morocco was being used only as a pretty backdrop and that the resulting images never conveyed the richness and vibrancy of the Moroccan landscape beyond stereotypes.

Thus, despite having no formal artistic background, Hajjaj decided to portray his own version of Morocco – a country that marries ancient traditions and youth sub-cultures, a highly colourful and vibrant world that Western society knows close to nothing about. It is this void – or better, against this void – that Hajjaj decided to take action.

How was it to enter the art world as a self-taught artist?

A slow and difficult process. You know, I grew up on a council estate and the art world was the furthest away from my everyday life and experience I could imagine. My friends and I were almost afraid to enter museums and galleries; it felt that those places were not for us. I never imagined I would become an artist; I simply wanted to create something that celebrated my culture. The positive aspect was that I had nothing to lose and this led me to create and experiment more freely.

When did you understand that you could take it seriously and that art could become a job?

At the time of my first solo exhibition at Alessandra Lippini's Ministero del Gusto gallery in Marrakech. They called me to inform me that some big name from Italy wanted to purchase my works. It was singer Pino Daniele. A few months later, I received a phone call: Pino wanted to use one of my photographs for his album cover. That's how I found myself in Rome. While we were discussing the details of the cover, I had an Aha! moment and thought 'Perhaps it can be done. Maybe I can make it'. If you asked me to isolate the moment I started to believe in it, I would say that was the one.

Observing your works what emerges is a representation of the Arab world as one in constant evolution. Is that so?

When I started, at the end of the 90's, there weren't many international Arab artists. In a sense, I found myself at the start of a new era and I was extremely lucky. Then, September 11th happened and it changed everything, starting from the way the West saw us. Then a second revolution occurred, though of a different type – that of social media. Now you no longer need the support of a gallery: the new generations of artists can skip the traditional platforms and this means, among others, greater freedom of action.

You were born in Morocco but grew up in London and your works mix Pop Western elements and the Moroccan artistic traditions: how do you make these two aesthetics co-exist?

I believe that were I raised in only one country I would have never been able to do the job I do. At the beginning it was difficult to make two such different worlds co-exist but in the end it's only a matter of learning to be at ease in one's own skin: I am both Moroccan and a Londoner. I don't make any comparisons. This is simply how it is.

You often portray friends and acquaintances and create long-term relationships moving from one project to the next, as in the one featuring Karima who, after Kesh Angels, ended up becoming the protagonist of your first feature. How do you choose your subjects?

Everyone I decide to shoot must have some kind of special energy, a story that transpires from their very being. It doesn't matter what they do, whether they are boxers, henna girls, fashion designers or belly dancers. They still ought to have that energy and special strength.

A section of the exhibition at MEP will be titled “Vogue – The Arab Issue”. How did the idea come about?

The exhibition will be partly a retrospective and partly the presentation of new or previously unseen works. The idea is to chronicle my journey from the beginning up to now and obviously, fashion is part of this journey. Creating an Arab Issue for Vogue is a way to show an international Arab world, one that comprises other cultures and is open. A way of showing in one platform the richness of the Arab diaspora. It's a project about how culture, art and fashion are something fluid, permeable and constantly flowing. They do not segregate and do not divide: they unite. Or at least they should.