

Interview with Karen Kalou: A Photographer

Hiba Mikdashi

Karen Kalou and I met in 2008, when we had both just returned to Beirut. We instantly knew we had much in common. I could feel her passion for the arts; we were both captivated by the city we live in and shared a funny feeling of wanting to change “things” in our environment.

Karen has her camera on her all the time. Walking down the street with Karen very often turns into a trip of its own. Breathlessly slowing down her pace, looking around, in a moment her scene is photographed.

From Beirut to Turin, London, and Brussels, Karen has exhibited very sensitive, atmospheric, and elemental photos that capture a slice of time in various situations. Even her commercial work brings fresh, organic, and real style to photography in the Middle East.

The following is an interview with Karen Kalou in order to gain insight on how she views her occupation and the path she took to professional photography.

Hiba Mikdashi: I wanted to talk to you about your inspiration as an artist. But for that I would like to know what first led you to photography?

Karen Kalou: For as long as I remember, I have loved photography. As a

child I used to go through all the family albums over and over, wanting to know the stories behind each photo. As a young teenager, I was always the one from my family and friends that was photographing: holidays, gatherings, and unusual moments. Then, at the age of 15, I picked up my father’s old Canon film camera and started to roam around Beirut with it.

After high school I attended the Lebanese American University (LAU) and majored in Communication Arts. Still, growing up in Beirut I never thought that photography is something I could study. At university I took the courses “Women in the Arab World” and “Representations of Women in the Arts and the Media”. It was then that I fell in love with this area of the Social Sciences. So I applied to the Women’s Studies program of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University in Montreal. I was photographing throughout this period of professional



Sample of Karen Kalou’s work.

growth, and experienced a whole new world on my own, from travels to road trips to walks in the rain and snowfall in a place I knew very little about. When I graduated from the program, I should have come back to Beirut, but I always felt that photography was something I just needed to do, so I applied and got accepted into Dawson's Institute of Photography at Dawson College. After graduating from its three-year intensive program, I worked there for a year and then decided that it was time for me to come back to Beirut.

H.M.: You said that when you were younger, you loved finding the story behind every picture. Were you trying to re-narrate?

K.K.: I've always felt that I didn't find photography, photography found me in some strange way. When I was about three years old, my mom would be woken up by me everyday in the early hours of the morning holding a photo album, and I'd ask her who is each person, where they were, what the stories were – questions a child would typically ask at that age. She recalls this, and of course I don't. Today, I have boxes and boxes of photos, negatives, albums, and scattered prints from different periods of my life – my own tangible memories, of loved ones and others that have come and gone in my life. And I do feel that being a photographer is a responsibility. As if I'm somehow the only memory keeper amongst all those I have met in my life. Once, I found a roll of film that had images taken years ago, and which I forgot to develop, when I first started photography at school. The smell of the air, the moment, the actual mood and feeling, I relived them when I developed it. All became alive again. You don't have this in digital photography because it is such an instantaneous camera and its images come in abundance. There's just a different depth with film than in digital photography. Aesthetically speaking as well, film photography has way more tonalities in color; the digital doesn't have that special breathing grain. I mean even when you see an old film shot in the 1970s, 1980s, or in the 1990s there's this richness that digital photography doesn't have today.

H.M.: What inspires you, in general, being in this creative field?

K.K.: Music inspires me. The sea inspires me. Light inspires me. And people who emanate light inspire me.

H.M.: How does this affect you when you shoot, specifically portraits, do you feel any creative difficulties? For example, the inspiration with female portraits, does it differ from a male portrait?

K.K.: No, there's no difference between male and female. I used to always enjoy shooting women more than men, but I've come to learn that men have the same amount of vulnerability and sensitivity as women. I think that doing a portrait of someone in the studio strips them of their environment, the place that they belong to; their comfort zone. In a studio you kind of have the same process of breaking down the barrier with all people. Every person responds to it differently, but the magic is really between myself and the subject, the process of photographing a person is, if not more, as valuable as the final image itself.



Portrait of Karen Kalou

H.M.: But the environment must be different outside of your studio? Have you ever been treated as a female photographer, and not just photographer?

K.K.: I had a client who found our portfolio to be a bit feminine. I've never thought of it like this. What makes it feminine? I guess it's the color palette, it's the way we have our portraits, have our subjects posed in the portraits. It's the aesthetics that has a certain kind of female energy. They just asked if we could do it more neutral, more sober. So it was the first time that it was brought to my attention that our work was a bit feminine. Also, I know that photography is a very competitive field, a very competitive industry. So, men often think they can succeed or dominate through aggressive behavior in some types of jobs. But overall, in the line of work I do, we do not experience gender inequality.

H.M.: Would you say there were any victories or challenges that you've faced, being a female photographer?

K.K.: I think, regardless of whether I'm a man or a woman – I think when you're very honest with yourself and with how you see your world, how you feel, that's when the work speaks the most. That is when there's spirit in the work. The only challenge I can think of is that it's a very hard industry to be in. And you can't be a passive person; you have to be very pro-active and very directive. Photographers running a commercial business need to be a bit firm, strict, honest and cut throat with some jobs. I've been told that's a lot to carry and the "male energy" is quite apparent in how I do business!

H.M.: How would you say your style has matured?

K.K.: Before photography school I was an uninhibited photographer. I didn't know any rules, I just photographed what I felt needed to be documented. I was exploring everything. Then, in photography school there were a lot of rules and guidelines, and you have to follow them. I became somewhat more inhibited, and I hated that. I felt like I lost my eye, my touch, my voice. I lost myself in these strict photographic rules, but, in retrospect, all the things that I learned I took with me and mastered. Once you know the rules, then you can start breaking them because everything becomes more purposeful and intentional.

So, shortly after school I was kind of lost, wondering where to start and what I have to say. You kind of need to re-find your voice. For most of my life I loved photographing people. I think my portraits, even back in school, were somewhat emotional portraits of people, which is really a reflection of myself. I wanted to bring out that side of them. When I graduated from photography school my mood changed, and that period also overlapped with my move to Beirut, which was a huge change for me.

I think landscape photography is a good example of this process of maturity. Ten years ago, landscape photography was not an interesting subject for me. I used to be obsessed with the city – but that within itself I was learning about the city – I was an 'urban girl' and all I wanted to do was stay in the city. Upon my return to Lebanon and having been influenced by the many trips I took in North America, I started to feel the need to leave the city and take drives down south, the Bekaa – areas that were rural and simpler in life and aesthetically. This has translated into me wanting to do more landscape, and understanding it. So I think it's similar to that. The way my work has matured: it's simpler than few years ago, it's a cleaner composition, with softer lines, colors and contrasts. That's my personal aesthetic today. It's more intuitive. It's a way of drawing the divine and sacred from incredible simplicity. You can be emotional without saying so much – it could be a landscape of light and an object graced by light in a home, to actual open landscapes of fields, touched by air and light.

H.M.: Speaking of maturity, what would you say photography has taught you?

K.K.: It has taught me discipline, organization, perfectionism – because I was never the perfectionist type of person. It taught me a way of seeing the world, past its first level of meaning. You start seeing things a little bit differently. Photography is a disciplined art, very precise. It has taught me to shoot, and translate my feelings visually. Being strongly connected with yourself is pivotal to the process of creating imagery.

H.M.: Do you have any favorite photographers? Are you influenced by any female photographers?

K.K.: Yeah, in terms of commercial photography,

I love the work of Annie Leibovitz and Arnold Newman – for their portraiture. There's the French landscape photographer, Marianne Hugonnier, and also Cig Harvey, who is a self-portrait photographer who does a lot of commercial work using herself in all photos. I also absolutely love the intimacy of Elinor Carruci's work – about her life and family. There are so many photographers I respect; hard to name them all.

H.M.: Who's your ideal viewer?

K.K.: I've never asked myself this question actually. I don't think my work is directed towards one community over another. Since my work carries a great sense of emotion, I always hope it can communicate and reflect how others might be feeling too – and perhaps show them another way of seeing their everyday world. I always hope that my parents can read my photos and understand me better through them. In life, like most people, I may put up a lot of fronts and keep a distance sometimes with different aspects of my life – my photography aims to bring the viewer right inside my heart and spirit.

H.M.: You mentioned your preference for analog photography over digital. With technologies such as Instagram becoming popular, how do you feel this is changing photography and how people view it?

K.K.: I don't think it's a bad thing. I love mobile photography. I do it myself. I have an Instagram account. I think it's a great tool because it teaches people to see things in their lives. I think the act of constantly sharing photos of your life does take away from the sacredness of the photo, of special times. That's what digital photography is too. With analog photography people used to carefully tuck away the negatives, the prints, and you might want to show them only when special friends come over. However, in a world like Instagram, it shows that everyone has a unique way of looking at life. I love going through the work of regular people taking images of their everyday life. Some have incredible visions.

H.M.: Is there any challenging photo shoot you can think of that helped change the way you view or conduct your work as a photographer?

K.K.: I'll never forget this. I was in photography school working on studio portraits. I chose to

photograph a friend of mine who was very bubbly, charming, and just a bundle of joy. In the first half an hour she was very giggly, but that's also a defense mechanism somewhat, she's trying to maintain that front. And after 30 minutes or so she started crying in front of me and the camera. She suddenly felt extremely vulnerable and exposed. I learned there and then, that I needed to assure her that she is safe with me. I needed to comfort and soothe her through the process. After that the portraits were so incredibly powerful; she was even more beautiful in this vulnerable real state. It wasn't like 'let's pause' and 'now move your chin this way and that way'. I was photographing her soul.

I find it to be very sacred, connecting with people, reaching them as they reach you too.

H.M.: I'm always eager to ask this to artists: What is beauty for you?

K.K.: Beauty is anything that has a spirit, anything that is multilayered. Beauty is anything that has the elements of fire, air, water. This is beauty for me. I think beauty is a process; everything we go through in life.

H.M.: What are you working on now?

K.K.: I'm working on a series that would be exhibited in a group show that's taking place at the Beirut Exhibition Center. The theme of the show is 'Journeys through our Heritage: Revisiting the Modern Artists'. It's a series of landscapes of light seen in intimate spaces. The curators intended for us to pick an artist born before the 1930s – and base our creations on those artists we've chosen. I drew inspiration from Helen Khal's paintings and private letters. Going through her work, I connected with her vision, and her published private letters really touched me.

Karen's work can be viewed at www.karenandjosssette.com and <http://khalou.blogspot.com>

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