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Interview with Hafid Lalaoui

Hafid Lalaoui

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Interviewer: Catherine Fisher
Interviewee: Hafid Lalaoui
Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine
4.25.2015

CF: We're here at the Portland Public Library for Makers @ PPL, a makers fair. It's the 25th of April, year 2015. I'm Catherine Fisher and I'm here with Hafid Lalaoui. Hafid is a beautiful photographer and very creative soul, and you, Hafid, are going to share with us a little bit about what you make.

HL: I'm a photographer. I do photography. An image maker, if you can call it that. We all, as human beings, because we're created by an act of creation...therefore, within every human being, there's a need to create. I don't care if it's photography, painting, craft, writing, poetry, drama, dancing...It's within us. The human species. It is really within us. And I find that it's very magic. It happened to me when I started, when I was looking for the medium to express myself, when I was young, photography just came to me as a way of expressing my feeling, who I am, my relationship to life, to people, to the world. Photography turned out to be one of the most magnificent things that had happened to me in my life. I had no idea what I was doing. I was just a kid, so I was lost in trying to find myself.

CF: How did you first get your hands on a camera?

HL: I was in Europe, in Belgium. I was in Brussels. That's where it started, where I fell in love with it.

CF: But you're originally from?

HL: Morocco. Born in Marrakesh. But I was living in Casablanca, also. And that's when I started it. Just playing around, doing a little shooting here and then there. Setting up my darkroom. Learning how to print.

CF: Who inspired you or taught you?

HL: I think I was inspired by an American couple who used to live in Brussels. They were a working in a *New York Times* bureau in Brussels. The husband was a photographer and the wife was a writer. I had a chance to meet them, to be friends with them. So I think it was a nice initiation. Then back home, I started doing shooting here. Then I began to be attracted to the documentary style of life. People, anthropology, stuff like that. Before I knew it, I began to work for local newspapers. Slowly, I began to do wedding photography. Slowly, I became a little known around the art school in Casablanca. And then I had my first art show in 1979, I remember.

CF: What was that work like?

HL: It was magnificent! I couldn't believe how the public was responding to it. It was black and white. Real black and white. It was mostly about the Berber tribes. Native, indigenous Berber tribes.

CF: Your mother was a Berber, right?

HF: Was a Berber, yes. I guess that's why I got...you know, life is a mystery, is beyond times. While I was having that art show there, and I spent all my money framing. I was broken. And then it was the president of the School of Visual Arts in New York tried to have contact with the Minister of the Department of Culture to have an art exchange. So he read about it in the article in the newspaper. He came all the way to look at my work. And I was like, "What the hell do you want to do with this stuff?" So he offered for me to come to New York City on a full scholarship. At one of the biggest art schools in the country. So that's where photography took me. To the United States.

It was so fascinating that I was surrounded by top-notch American photographers, like Art Kane, like Duane Michals, like Robert Frank, you name it. I had no idea what I was surrounded by.

CF: Just all right there for you.

HF: It's just the universe, there's something, to us, that is beyond. Of course, I fell in love with New York. Very new things to me. I had to struggle with learning a language and da da da da da. I did a lot of good work about New York City. I did an incredible documentary about Chinatown. OTB gamblers. I am a street photographer. Pretty much. We used to call ourselves street photographers. That was the term in the early '80s. Just like Henri Cartier-Bresson, like Weegee, like all these guys. So that's how it started.

CF: How did your work change while you were in school?

HF: I had conflicting ideas with my teachers because of where I came from, the culture where I came from. I didn't want to be 100% of what they wanted me to do, what they were raised to do. But I have that background in me that is still in me. "Now you stay, you do this, just keeping do this." I got a BFA degree from that school. After finishing my workshop, then I had to stop, work on my English, and go back and do my humanities.

CF: Am I right that you work in series sometimes?

HF: In series, yes.

CF: Want to talk a little bit about what some of those series have been?

HF: Again, while I was in New York, I was going back every year to this village called Chefchaouen. It's a Moorish town. It's six, seven hundred years old. Beautiful little Moorish, typical, intact...Now look at that house, like holy...Somebody has to document this before it's gone. And every year, I would go and shoot. Turned out that I had a great series that I exhibited in Brussels.

CF: You follow your heart.

HF: Exactly.

CF: You feel compelled to do it and you follow it.

HF: And you just do it. And you just keep doing it no matter what everybody says. Because you know you feel something inside that's telling you, "You have to do this. This is right." Even, in the beginning, you may not believe in it. But sure enough, in the end, it turns out to be the right thing to do. It's just mind-boggling!

CF: I remember you left Portland at one point to go to Africa.

HF: To go to the desert. To the Sahara. Sub Sahara. That was another fascinating experience. But political troubles started right there, so it was not really safe. I did a little bit and I needed to stay too long, you know, because you have to live in a place to feel it. You have to be accepted by these nomads that trust you. When you do this kind of photography, when you do people photography, you want to be non-intrusive, non-invasive. So you can get the real stuff, the real images for these people just the way they are.

CF: But it takes time.

HF: Of course it takes time. You have to take the time.

CF: Because they're more open?

HF: Well, they are more open. Then I realized that desert life sometimes can be very, very problematic for the equipment, for the lenses, for the glass, for the gears of the camera, because the sand is so fine. Anything can go inside, can damage. But I learned a little bit. I'd like to go back someday again, but ...

CF: I think you did a nightclub series. Is that right?

HF: In Portland, right now, I am working on another series. I have to print it and show it to you, to the public of Portland someday. It's going to come soon. I did Portland nightlife. It was fun! It was a lot of fun. I have some powerful images that I really want the public of Portland to see soon. But I'm still working on it.

CF: The way you phrase that, it makes me really think that you really want the public of Portland to see. Because then it really feels like you are reflecting back to people themselves. You're giving the people themselves.

HF: Yes, right, of course! Themselves. I'm giving back. I want to give back. I did, last year, a beautiful art show at Blue. Blue is on Congress Street. It's a beautiful, nice place for local musicians. When the lady who runs it, this beautiful lady, Therese...She's so...She was like, "Oh my god, I have to give you a show here! Oh my god! Oh my god!" So we did it. It was March of last year. Turned out to be just a great show. The *Portland Daily Sun* wrote such a magnificent article about it. I sold almost the whole art show! Everything was sold. People grabbed it! But that was about me saying, "There is where I came from, and I want to share it with the public." Maine. Because now I'm a Mainer. I want to share my culture, my background. People loved it. And it was about that little town, I told you, called Chefchaouen. Mind-boggling!

CF: And people just ate it up.

HF: This was like, "I want this, I want this." I priced it very cheap, for \$250 a piece. Framed. Mat board. Everything. Good, high-quality. And then I realized that the public, Portlanders, are really hungry for cultural exchanges. They're really hungry for it. They want to see the local immigrants' art, participating in what makes Portland now. Very diverse little town. I was so impressed. I'm digital right now. I'm finished with the whole negatives and all that.

CF: Is that, in part, because of economics? Because of printing?

HF: Well, Catherine, believe me, I hated digital the first time. I was against it, I hated it. But I have to change, we have to change. Change is life. Now I'm opening to digital, and I found it so liberating, and very effective.

CF: Is part of it the immediate feedback that you get?

HF: Yes. It's quick, it's easy. I don't have to buy films. I don't have to process negatives. I don't have to do contact sheets. I don't have to spend hours in a darkroom printing with the developer and the smell. So in a way, new technology has really improved the medium. So now I am back again, shooting on Portland. Street life. Soon. I just need a little time, a little money to put up a good art show for the public.

CF: In terms of money, you've done a lot of different things.

HF: Well, you see, I've done a lot of different things to survive, to support my art. Remember, we do what we like, what we love, not to make a living of it, but because we love what we do. So I have to find another trade to support that. Now people are buying my work, are paying me for it. And I'm like, "Great. Yes. That's cool, yeah." Again, digital is a lot cheaper than the old ways, so I can afford to...I bought all the digital equipment. The last equipment I need is a printer, a photo printer costs only \$400 investment, that's all I need. And then I will be on my own. Then I can start to print for cheap.

CF: The paper's expensive, though.

HF: No. Digital paper—Catherine, it's unbelievable! No, the quality of the paper has improved tremendously, and the cost is less. So I can make up a show, an art show. That's amazing. Yes.

CF: Well, you're a very important part of this city. You spread joy wherever you go.

HF: Well, I think we all have it! I always try to be part of what Portland is. I worked for the old *Casco Bay Weekly*. I've had my work published by the *Café Review*. They publish my work a lot. Portland has changed. It's just unbelievable, the way this city is turning around. I'm so pleased to see the diversities. I'm so pleased to see, to talk to Sudanese, to Somalis, to...I mean, it's unbelievable, what Portland is. I remember seventeen years ago, there was nothing.

CF: It was kind of hard for you to stay seventeen years ago, right?

HF: It was difficult. It was not easy. Too small and cold. [Laughs] Oh my god! These cold winters, you know?

CF: You made it.

HF: Yes, I made it! I think we are a survivor species, I guess. We survive. So that's the story, pretty much.

CF: Thank you so much, Hafid. Thank you for sharing that story with me!

HF: [Laughs]