

EMAN ALI

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“No one can tell the story better than you”

Eman Ali is a photographic artist. In 2019 she authored the photobook *Succession*.

This interview is part of a series of conversations I had between 2018-2021 with individuals from in and around the photobook ecology. They initially helped inform my PhD research, and subsequently my working towards the publication *Photobooks &* (2021, Onomatopoe). I sought to speak with students, librarians, researchers, curators and makers in all their guises to hear a variety of perspectives regarding the interaction of photography and the page. Now, a selection of these interviews are presented at www.photobookclub.org/photobooks& with the kind permission of the respective individuals in order to contribute to our collective discourse regarding the contemporary photobook.

The conversation presented in these pages has been edited for cogency and clarity. Any citations made should include the interviewer and interviewee as well as date of publication (2021), details of interview locations, format and date are given on the cover.

Eman, I think a good place to start might be in hearing a little about how you came to know that for *Succession*, a page-based output was the thing to work towards?

The book was inspired and based on a collection of newsletters titled Oman which were given to me by my father. This publication was published by the Omani embassy in the UK in the 70s and 80s to inform people within the diplomatic circle what was going on in terms of the development of a new modern state because Oman had entered a new ruling sea with the accession of Sultan Qaboos bin Said to the throne. It served to let people know what was going on in Oman and who this new 'renaissance man' was. I was immediately drawn to these publications because they served as a time capsule, a record of an era coming to an end. The images themselves were so arresting that I knew I had to collect and preserve them somehow. It was interesting to put a face to the names of all the influential political figures at that time because although I had a vague idea of who they were, I didn't really know exactly what their role was in building the modern Oman, so a visual documentation was fascinating to me.

I scanned these publications in order to create a digital archive because as far as I knew, my father is the only one who had the complete collection of these newsletters. At the same time I took photographs of certain images that caught my eye using my iPhone. I just went with my gut feeling when it came to what I was drawn to. I think the idea to make a book just seemed like the natural thing to do because there was a lot of material to work with, and I wanted to do something that was challenging and new to my practice. I always had it in my mind to make a book but never felt I had the right project to do so. With these images I collected I felt like it needs to be put together in a book because I was looking to explore the relationship between the images and how, through

juxtaposition, you can create new meaning between images on a spread. I was interested in playing with ambiguity within the book spread. It's really the ideal format if you want to explore how to manipulate the conversation between images, creating something that lies somewhere between fact and fiction. I put the book together purely with my gut feeling. I didn't overthink it. I had images all over my studio floor and wall. It was chaotic but my extensive research and my own personal history informed my pairing decisions. As I child, I would hear stories about important people and events. These stories guided me in organising my images.

The book works on a psychological level, so it's really how the viewer puts two and two together. How we create meaning between images based on our own personal experiences is a fascinating thing to explore. It's based on the understanding of the power of images, their influence and how new meaning can be created. Paying attention to, and playing with, the sequencing of the images and the pace to create a rhythm was an essential part of the process. I used the structure of a film to guide me; putting the book together with a loose beginning, middle and end. **When I present a spread to you, you can only look at those two images that I have on that double-page spread. So I'm kind of forcing the viewer to look at just those images and try to figure out what it's all about.** I intentionally didn't use captions because I didn't want to give much context to the images. I wanted the viewer to work on exploring the images and finding their own connections. It's not necessary for you to know the history of Oman to appreciate the images for what they are, an understanding of the history helps, but it's not essential to the reading of the book.

I'm thinking now of looking through the book and the control that you exhibit with, as you say, 'forcing' the viewer to look.

If I compare this to the representation of the work that you have online, it's very different — is that where perhaps you expect people to undertake a very different style of reading?

I think with the book form it's a lot more intimate, and it's tangible. You're holding it in your hands and so it's your experience. The experience of reading a book is very different from going through something

online so the way I present the photographs online definitely doesn't have the same method as in the book. I'm not exhibiting my work online in a way that has to be read each image next to each other. Also I gave a lot of context to the images online but with the book I just give a little bit and not much else.

So the book reader needs to bring more of themselves to their reading — they are only given some pieces?

Yes, and with the book format of course you can take time and each time you look at it you might see something new. What I find very exciting about photobooks in general, is that every time you pick it up it's a completely different experience.

On your website you call *Succession* an artist's book, the connotations there perhaps are around a certain freedom in your output, and a lot of control over production, are these particularly important to you?

Definitely yes, I mean if you're creating a photobook then ultimately you want to have control over it, and the story you tell. No one can tell the story better than you. Of course having a conversation with a curator or publisher helps as it's quite challenging to put a book together. Sometimes it's good to get a second pair of eyes to look at the work but for me personally, with this project, it's not something that I feel somebody could've helped with because it's so personal. I've put the book together thinking about the historical and the modern Oman and certain people and stories that I've heard as a child and things I've read on WikiLeaks... and so the connections that I've made can really only be made by me. In my opinion the book definitely allows you that level of control regarding how the reader is engaging with the work and at what pace. There is a huge level of control.

Succession was made in a run of 300 and sold for £30... are these figures a by-product of what you want to do with the book, or are they front-and-centre when you start making the book and decisions are made with those points in mind?

This book was commissioned by a gallery in Wales and if I remember correctly they had chosen 300 which was the minimum print run maybe. As for price, I decided this by doing research on other books that I was buying and enjoying. Most of them cost between £25-£50 and I wanted to make sure I didn't go too high because I think at £50 people will really need to think about it, whereas I think £30 is more of a middle ground. It's affordable and maybe if you go to a bookshop you could buy two books if you really wanted, it's not such a daunting price. I think in this way the book is very democratic as it's accessible to a lot of people. You can get your work in the book format across to a lot of people. For a long time I've been working in the constraints of the gallery space and it's one thing to display your work up on the wall, and it serves a purpose, but I think with a book you can just say things differently.

The book is now sold out, but you note on your website several libraries where the book can be read. These are in big metropolitan cities but it's still interesting to see. I wondered how important it was to you to retain access to the work in book form even after selling out the edition?

It goes back to being a student and for me the library was the place to be. I love libraries — it's always the first place I want to visit when I'm in a new city. I like to spend my money on books so personally £30 is a good amount for me to invest in building my photobook collection but for some people this amount can be a lot, and it certainly can be unaffordable for many.

We come here also maybe to the fixity of the book... the book is a fairly stable medium, so the idea that someone could go to the library in thirty years and access this book and still operate it...

Yes that was really important to me. Obviously selling my book and selling out is wonderful and I'm really glad that that has happened but ultimately I would like my books to be available for research purposes and for it to be read along with history books about Oman. My book was a way to

question my own understanding of the modern history of Oman, to explore the unreliability of memory and to show the important role photography had in reinforcing a new national identity.

One last area that I wanted to touch on is what happens to the book once it's out into the hands of readers, and how much you pay attention to reviews or different people's readings and things like this... do you seek out reflections?

I presented the book in Oman when the former ruler had passed away. It was a sensitive time and I wasn't entirely sure how people would respond but their reaction turned out to be both positive and very inquisitive. To be able to present the book to people who understood the history of Oman was interesting because that background knowledge influenced their reading of the images. For a western audience this information is unknown which gives them more freedom to make connections, focussing on the photographs themselves.

In terms of engagement, when it comes to reviews and things like that, I was the one approaching certain people and magazines that I liked, I put it out there, I shared the work with them. It's been wonderful just engaging in different ways with people that are interested in the book. What maybe you'll find interesting is that while I presented the book in Oman I did approach magazines in the Arabian Gulf about possibly featuring the book or reviewing it, and nobody was interested. I didn't get one reply. I don't know, maybe it's the subject matter because here when it comes to talking about or showing things of a political nature you have to be very careful. In places like London and elsewhere there was just a lot more interest in the work because it's about Oman which to them is an unknown place. So they were able to appreciate the book in a different way. The older generation of Omanis who I showed my book to looked at the work and thought 'what's the point?', 'they're just archival images of

people at particular a moment in time; they don't understand the concept behind the work which makes them less interested in it.

Are those demographic responses in line with what you want the work to do in the world?

Well, I would like the work to resonate on both sides, especially in Oman. The younger generation were really excited about it and I sold quite a few copies there and I was asked really intelligent questions which was wonderful. It's mostly the older generation who simply didn't get it.

This interview is an extension to the publication ***Photobooks &: A critical companion to the contemporary medium*** by Matt Johnston (Onomatopée, 2021).