

**SHEIKH SAOUD AL THANI
AWARDS: KHALIFA
AHMAD AL OBAIDLY AND
SHEIKHA SARA BINT
SAUD AL-THANI
IN CONVERSATION WITH
AMMAR ALQAMASH**

Ammar Alqamash: Tell us about the beginning of your journey in photography, and how did the artistic movement originate in Qatar?

Khalifa Al Obaidly: My start with photography was at a young age when my father took me to the Larry Electronics store in Souq Waqif to buy a Kodak 110 camera after passing the fifth-grade exams. From there, I took photography as a hobby until I enrolled in Qatar University to study marine biology. I met the university photographer Mustafa Omeira there and my journey in photography began. This journey started when I passed in front of an advertisement poster for a photography workshop in the student activities building at the university. I joined the workshop, and within it, I had to visit a Darkroom and learn to develop films. I remember how I fell in love with the place at first glance. The idea of being there in the darkroom where all the university's events pictures are produced excited me. I found myself enjoying the dim lighting, the smell of chemicals, and the calmness of the place. After that session, I volunteered to work in the darkroom as an assistant to the university photographer, Mustafa Omeira, so I can learn film development and the photography basics. One day the university needed the photographer, Mustafa Omeira, to cover an event while he was in the midst of developing some films. I proposed to develop the remaining films and then wrote a simple guide explaining the details of the development process. On the following day, the photographer praised the work I had done and rewarded me. I learned a lot from this unique experience which led me to make a career out of photography. He has always shared all the knowledge he had about photography and film development while I continued to work with him during my college years until I joined the Qatar Photographic Society in 1988. At that time, the association included a group of Qatari photographers, such as Ahmed Al-Khulaifi, Abdulrahman Obaidan, Hussein Al-Jaber, Muhammad Al-Mannai, and others. We used to meet weekly, and in every session, two different photographers present a set of their work to share knowledge and views. The experience and learning technique were different from before and so this was a new chapter in my journey with photography. After that, I met Sheikh Saud Al Thani, who, in my opinion, is one of the founders of the artistic movement in its current form in Qatar. Meeting Sheikh Saud was a huge step for me in the world of art and photography, as his accompaniment allowed me to meet the best international photographers at that time and draw from their experiences and knowledge through our joint meetings and trips.

Ammar Alqamash: Tell us about photography in Qatar during that period?

Khalifa Al Obaidly: There was a handful of photographers in Qatar back then. The photographers' community included a small group of artists each have their own unique style, such that by only seeing their work once, anyone can tell the work belongs to which photographer. One of the great advantages of this small group is the rapid circulation of knowledge and experience between them. During that period, I worked under the leadership of Sheikh Saoud Al Thani, one of the biggest supporters of various artistic movements in Qatar, in the National Council for Culture and Arts, which served as the Ministry of Culture and Arts in our present time. By virtue of my work in the National Council for Culture and Arts, I supported local photographers and allocated greater support for photographers to hold art exhibitions. We also established a photography competition parallel to the Doha Cultural Festival, which many consider

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ahead of its time.

Sheikha Sara Al-Thani: I remember the period that Mr. Khalifa Al Obaidly is talking about despite how young I was. In spite of the huge ambition of the Doha Cultural Festival and its great goals, my father was being blamed and criticized by society for holding some of these cultural events and futuristic art exhibitions. At that time, society did not accept any new and out-of-the-ordinary events or activities, to the extent that some described the festival's activities as extraneous to our customs and traditions. However, the confidence and support of His Highness the Father Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani was the only reason for the festival to continue regardless of the objections, which signaled a significant move in the Qatari cultural scene.

Khalifa Al Obaidly: Everyone in the region was amazed at the quality and fame of the Doha Cultural Festival, that some critics described it as a magical festival. During the festival days, Doha is graced with various exhibitions and cultural events all over the city. Significant artistic figures have participated in the different editions of the festival, such as the late famous Italian opera singer Pavarotti, the great singer and vocalist Fairouz, Leon Ricci, The Fire of Anatolia group, the famous opera Aida, and other dignitaries and international artistic groups. This festival reflects the great aspirations of the State of Qatar and those in charge of it, headed by the late Sheikh Saoud Al Thani. The success of this festival had a tremendous cultural impact on the population of Qatar by giving them a better understanding of the concept of culture and the artistic movement in the country.

Khalifa Al Obaidly: Sheikh Saoud was always keen to support artists in general and photographers in particular. Under his sponsorship, we organized a daily competition for photographers in Qatar to capture the Doha Cultural Festival. Most photographers in Qatar compete to present the photos that best describe the festival and win daily prizes. This competition was one of the most impactful initiatives of Sheikh Saoud as it contributed to enhancing the opportunities of local photographers in Qatar and giving them great potential and financial motive. Other than the festival, Sheikh Saoud once invited His Highness the Father Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani to the Qatari Photographic Society. His Highness, the Father Emir, increased the support and authorities granted to the society, which greatly recognized and motivated the local talents.

Ammar Alqamash: Tell us about the establishment of the Sheikh Saoud Al Thani competition and how it started?

Sheikha Sara Al-Thani: The competition began with the aim of supporting local photographers in Qatar. One of the initiatives of my father, Sheikh Saoud Al Thani, was to promote photography in Qatar, support local talents, and create a dedicated space for the evolution of the artistic community in Qatar.

Khalifa Al Obaidly: The idea of the competition arose in 1998 when Sheikh Saoud asked for my suggestions for ways to support photographers in Qatar. One of the proposals was to establish an annual photography competition and award generous cash prizes to the winners. My personal suggestion was to allocate cash prizes only. Still, the Sheikh, with his vision, suggested cooperating with the well-known German camera company Leica to make an exclusive edition of their famous cameras and grant them to the first place winner every year. The rest of the winners would receive generous financial

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prizes. Leica has already agreed to make fifteen of its exclusive edition cameras signed by the late Sheikh Saoud Al Thani. The competition was limited to the photographers in Qatar in the first five years. The vision is to open the way for photographers in the Gulf Countries to participate in the next five years, and in the last five years, all photographers from around the world can participate.

In the first five years of the competition, when I headed it up, the competition topics revolved around local heritage, such as traditional costumes and jewelry, Qatari nature, and others. We were working in harmony with the competition to create a rich archive for the State of Qatar, adapted from the participating photos. After the first five years, I resigned from running the competition and suggested transferring the competition to become under the Qatar Photographic Society.

Sheikha Sara Al-Thani: The competition may have lost part of its special value with the changes introduced then, such as the increase in the number of winners. Still, despite that, the competition preserved its international reputation and legacy, hence, photographers around the world continued to participate in it.

Ammar Alqamash: Why is the competition back now after it was halted for so many years?

Sheikha Sara Al-Thani: I am very convinced that the right time for the competition to return is now, especially that it has received generous support from the Qatar Museums Authority. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani personally requested to bring back the competition under the umbrella of Tasweer festival. Since the year 2016, the intention was to bring back the competition, and we have already started planning for it with the aim to preserve the original spirit of the competition of supporting the local creative community in Qatar and involving them in the process, in addition to supporting the artistic movement, photographers and creative people in Qatar. We hoped that the competition would return with a new vision while preserving its spirit, and one of the approaches to achieve this is to divide the competition into two awards, the first award for single images and the second award for artistic photographic projects as grants. It was also agreed to establish an annual biennial to shed light on selected photographers from the Arab world. In fact, we are delighted by the projects that received the first grants and all the photos that we received in the single image contest.

Ammar Alqamash: In your opinion, does the award currently reflect the legacy of the competition and the influence of Sheikh Saoud Al Thani?

Sheikha Sara Al-Thani: Absolutely, because the competition in its current form has become an entire local creative platform, supporting local talents and welcoming various photographers in Qatar and the rest of the world. It's important not to forget that we are at a time when there is a greater local acceptance of art than before, which allows expanding the horizons of the competition and achieve bigger goals. For example, the creative arena in Qatar includes many creative women, and this is something that did not exist before.

Ammar Alqamash: From your point of view, why weren't women interested in photography back then?

Sheikha Sara Al-Thani: In general, there was no societal acceptance of women leaving their house for work and

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interacting with men in the past. Our society has transformed in a very short period - ten years - from a traditional conservative society to an accepting society that supports women and acknowledges their importance as a main participant in society. Formerly, female photographers faced great challenges as it was difficult to obtain a permit to photograph in specific areas or even to work there. I remember that my father wondered whether the society would accept his ideas and actions during his life, but we were fortunate with the future vision of HH the Father Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his leadership that paved the way for development in the Qatari society.

Khalifa Al Obaidly: I totally agree with that. One of the great challenges was that many of the female photographers were limited to a few photography topics due to the many difficulties at that time. Most of the subjects of their photos and artworks were still images or subjects that they could capture at home, such as photographing children. Hence they could not specialize in street or landscape photography.

Ammar Alqamash: The first edition of Tasweer festival is coming to life after a long wait. Tell us about your impression and aspirations for the festival.

Khalifa Al Obaidly: Since the establishment of the Qatar Museums Authority, Her Highness Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani has been aiming to establish a photography festival in Qatar. When the topic was raised in one of the meetings, she suggested delegating the management of the Tasweer festival to Sheikha Mariam bint Hassan Al Thani. And so, Sheikha Maryam took over the management and laid the foundations for the festival, and planned for it. Then, we formed an organizing team for the festival and brought Charlotte Cotton to be the festival's artistic director. After Tasweer festival was established as an initiative under the office of Her Highness Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, we worked on it for over three years. At this stage, we have a clear vision for the festival, and our ambitions are high. Despite the current circumstances that the world is going through from the Covid19 pandemic, we decided to launch the festival with its important pillars and develop it in the following editions. The first edition is divided into three main sections, the ancient houses program run by Sheikha Maryam bint Hassan Al Thani, the 2021 Sheikh Saoud Al Thani awards, and the accompanying programs such as art exhibitions that fall under the Qatar Cultural Year program. We have also decided that the Sheikh Saoud Al Thani Photography award, with its new vision, should take place annually. As for the coming years, we are all confident that the festival's ideas will be renewed in its next edition.

Sheikha Sara Al-Thani: Most of this year's artistic and commercial events have been postponed due to the Covid19 pandemic that the whole world is going through. However, we insisted on launching Tasweer festival this year. We are proud that the working team includes local talents in different fields united by the passion for photography and art, and we are thrilled to create a global festival that adds a lot to the art scene in Qatar and the region.

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is there as a context in which to grow and scale up, step up, network and move on to the next stage of your own vision for yourself. I think there's loads of room for that to happen within the Tasweer network, as it grows.

But I also think of it like, when I was 17, I went to London, and I don't know how I knew about The Photographers' Gallery, which is the only non-profit space dedicated to photography in London. I couldn't tell you how I knew the gallery existed, this was clearly a pre-Internet time. It had a cafe, with a long table that ran through one of the galleries, and there were photographers sitting, having meetings, looking at each other's portfolios. It's engrained in me now - that vision of seeing photo people being photo people together for the first time. I was a teenager so I probably went there to see what I should be wearing but what I actually saw that some people lived this creative life and it looked really good. For a young woman who lived in a family house in the middle of farming land, it meant the world to me. And that directly relates to why I am here, crafting Tasweer and thinking about who this is all for.