CONVERSATIONS
A PHOTO ELYSÉE PODCAST

EPISODE #8 – ANASTASIA SAMOYLOVA
TRANSCRIPTION

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Welcome to C*onversations*, a podcast by Photo Elysée that invites you, behind the scenes of a photography project. In this series of episodes, we're exploring the work in progress of the eight artists nominated for the 2025 Prix Elysée, an international photography prize supported by Parmigiani Fleurier. I'm your host, Katie Kheriji-Watts.

Since she was a teenager, Anastasia Samoylova has been using the camera to explore what fascinates her the most. Landscapes and people. Trained in environmental design in her home country of Russia, she found a renewed interest in the intersection of human activity and the natural world while taking long walks in the streets of Miami, where she now lives. Her project, *Transformations*, for which she's been nominated for the Prix Elysée, focuses on successful adaptations being put into place right now in order to reduce the harmful effects of climate change. We talked about the difference between hope and optimism, climate anxiety, and what it's like to live in a flood zone.

Anastasia, I was wondering if you could start by just briefly introducing yourself people who might not be familiar with you and your work.

Anastasia Samoylova
I'm Anastasia Samoylova. I'm an artist and photographer living and working in Miami, Florida. I work between studio practice and observation documentary photography. Both of these approaches feed off each other. And then I publish books and do exhibitions.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
I was actually really curious to hear you talk a little bit about your first camera and what you did with it.

Anastasia Samoylova
Oh, there were a couple of firsts. My first film camera was a Zenith. That was Russian, and it was a faulty camera. So that camera did not survive my treatment of it. I was quite frustrated with it. It was just a disaster, a series of disappointments with that camera. I think that one put me off film forever. And as soon as the digital cameras became available in Russia in the early 2000s, my mother took out a one-year loan to get me one of the early ones, and that was a five-megapixel Sony 707. I remember it very vividly because that one changed my life, essentially.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
What do you mean by that?

Anastasia Samoylova
Having access to that technology at the time felt groundbreaking. It enabled access to the medium for such a wide variety of users, myself included. Coming from very little training in photography, it was entirely intuitive, incredibly user friendly compared to everything else, film processing that you had to deal with prior. It felt like child's play. It felt like you can just experiment and make lots of mistakes. And that's so critical in any artist's practice. You could just erase those images. So that was a game changer for me.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Do you remember what pictures you were taking with it in the beginning?

Anastasia Samoylova
All kinds of terrible pictures, mainly landscapes. That specific camera, which I think has become this collectible object now, had a particularly sensitive algorithm for rendering greens. So, the green spectrum was quite special in that camera. All the emeralds and spring greens and lime green, I remember it again very vividly, and color remains a major tool in my work. But the green specifically naturally led to my interest in landscape. So, the pictures were of places and landscapes. But in reality, the camera had practical use. I was a student in the Environmental Design program. And at the time, a university that I was in, Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow. They had a very strong bow house lineage. Everything was made by hand. We would build models of spaces out of paper and cardboard, and then we had to photograph those models. And the Zenith camera that I had, it was such a disaster. It was just frustration. You had to show those images for critiques. I had to deliver those files. That's why the digital camera was acquired in the first place. It's just once the word got out that I had it, I started getting gigs in photography, and that's where it began paying off.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Do you remember the first picture that you took that you really liked?

Anastasia Samoylova
Oh, good question. I had pretty low standards at the time. I liked many. Then once I started getting assignment commissioned work, I would photograph models, portfolios, actors' headshots. That was my early exposure to the immediate feedback because it's a digital camera, people were so thrilled with their portraits. That felt incredibly rewarding. It was very easy to slide into this people-pleasing mode, especially with models and actors, because everybody had to look good. It was rewarding, but I knew that ultimately it would be a trap for me because it was this slippery slope towards something very glossy and superficial that I did not want to pursue. So early on, I that there are dangers to this very slick technology.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
So, still no image that comes to mind of one that, just historical for you, an image that you said, I really like that one?

Anastasia Samoylova
I'd have to look on my old hard drives. No, it's always the next one. It's always the future one. That's my favorite.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Anastasia, as you mentioned, you grew up in Russia, but you moved to Florida eight years ago. I was curious about the ways in which living there has influenced your photography practice?

Anastasia Samoylova
Oh, there's been a few moves prior to Florida. From Russia, I moved to the United States 17 years ago. That was in early 2008. Most of my adult life I have spent in America. The first move in my life was from a small town in Southern Russia, where I was born, to Moscow. I was five or six. And that was a major transition. And then moving from Moscow, actually first to Midwest. I moved to Midwest. I moved to Peoria, Illinois. Not many are familiar with the place, but some have heard of it as the headquarters for heavy machinery manufacturer. It's very much agricultural. It's between Chicago and St. Louis. Then having spent nearly eight years in Peoria, I moved to Massachusetts to teach at Bard College, Simon's Rock. Then from there, I moved to Florida in 2016. There's been There's been several transitions and cultural adaptations that came with that.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
How has being in Florida, specifically, helped you evolve as a photographer?

Anastasia Samoylova
It is such a sensory overload. I keep mentioning that, but it's true. Having come from quite modest landscape of Illinois, so imagine flat lands, often uninterrupted, or perhaps with a barn on the horizon line, coming to Florida with its incredibly lush natural flora and fauna was quite overwhelming, and I was immediately seduced by that landscape again. But in an effort to understand my new surroundings, I began walking around and documenting everything I was seeing. Initially thinking, I would be putting these images together into my collages, which is the practice that still remains with me. It runs in parallel to my documentary photography. So, I would just shoot speculatively anything I was seeing with no preconceived agenda or any streamlined narrative behind it. It was just to accumulate enough material to make sense of this place. And it didn't help that the first apartment we moved to was a tiny studio apartment, very dark building. So, I wanted to spend as much time outside of it as I could. Previously, my studio was always inside of my house with a little bit more space. It was an art of walking and getting lost first, and then of observing and recording.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Can you tell me a little bit about the first work that you made that really felt based out of your time in Florida?

Anastasia Samoylova
The first work, that would have been 2016. So that summer, I moved to Florida, to Miami Beach. It was a lifelong dream to live by the water. I've lived my entire life landlocked and going to the sea. I think I saw the sea the first time in my late teens, and I don't think I've seen the ocean until my 20s. Imagine the thrill of being in Miami Beach. Another thing, it was very easy to blend in with the tourists as a photographer, while in Midwest, people would be a lot more alert and reserved in front of my camera, so I didn't attempt any portraiture and hardly any documentary photography. In Miami Beach, it felt quite organic. Everybody was photographing something all the time and themselves. It was quite easy to blend in. I think the first image that made it into the cut of my *FloodZone* book is a picture of this roots encircling a manhole in a park. The root scale is quite large by contrast with that manmade object. So, I loved that contrast. That's one of the early ones. And then another one was a silhouette picture of my son, Mark, sitting on a tree branch in Key Largo. That's towards the end of that book. Actually, the title of the book came out of a very frenetic research I had to do that year, whether our apartment was located in a flood zone or not. And it was, the entire island of Miami Beach is a flood zone. So, I just started hashtagging my pictures when I would post them on social media as #FloodZone. And that's how the title of the project came to be.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
So, you made a book called *FloodZone*, really based out of this first experience being in Florida. And it was meant to designate something about the fact that where you're living is a very climate sensitive area?

Anastasia Samoylova
I think if there's one designation for that book is to help me channel my climate anxiety. Everything is personal. It's incredible that it landed in so many institutions and publications, that project, I mean. But initially for the entire year from 2016, when Miami got hit by a minor hurricane, it was coming as category four. Then it got dropped to category 3. And we were all okay. I started hashtagging my pictures #FloodZone, but I was still making paintings and collages in the studio. I still have them. A couple of those are included in my newest book called *Adaptation*. But for an entire year, I was walking around on a weekly basis and photographing speculatively. Also, that coincided... Well, it was a deliberate decision to leave academia. I used to teach full-time for seven years, undergraduate college photography program. That was quite intense and incredibly time-consuming. Undergraduate teaching is very different from graduate teaching. I had an early tenure, and then I moved on to a different institution. I was quite consumed by that. Being able to photograph full-time as an artist felt like an incredible privilege. I shot a lot. It was thousands and thousands of images that then had to be edited down to a succinct presentation for a possible book pitch. So that's how it came to be.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Was it the first time that your work had really had a climate element to it?

Anastasia Samoylova
No, because 20 years prior, I studied environmental design and architecture back in Russia. I thought I would be an architect working with sustainable materials. That was the idea.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
And then you're finding 20 years later, this topic is coming back into your visual arts practice.

Anastasia Samoylova
Absolutely. It's always been there. It's a thread that remains throughout all of my work. I feel like even though I'm not constructing buildings and doing urban planning, which was the initial impulse to get into it, I'm addressing it from a different angle, but the themes remain the same.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Speaking of this topic of the environment, you've been nominated for the Prix Elysée Prize with a project that focuses on climate adaptation. Which is really about adjusting to the effects of climate change in order to reduce harm. Tell me a little bit about your inspiration for the project.

Anastasia Samoylova
Oh, there were so many. As I mentioned, the first book that I published was called *FloodZone* in 2019. Prior to that, there was another indie publication called *Landscape Sublime*, just to give you an idea that landscape in place has always been the thread in my work. *FloodZone* book was followed by the *Floridas* project and publication. And then I did a project on the cities, so *Image Cities*, all the while closely examining the subject of environmental adaptation, urban planning, how places shape us and how we shape landscape and places around and what it means in this era and in this heating climate that we occupy. It can get quite depressing, of course. Living in Florida comes with so much climate anxiety that we all share over there while also appreciating this undeniable beauty that's all around us there. In Florida, it really feels like nature can take over anytime. I'm in New York City right now, and you sort of don't question it here, especially where I am currently, uptown. You do question it downtown where they're building this giant sea wall. But I read quite a bit on the subject, and every project comes out of a lot of research. One of my favorite writers on the subject of climate change is Rebecca Solnit. Her recent book, it's an anthology of writing by other authors. It's called *Not Too Late*. It's a longer title, but I'll quote this one here. This is probably my favorite statement from the book where Solnit says, “Hope is not optimism. Optimism assumes the best and assumes its inevitability, which leads to passivity, as do the pessimism and cynicism that assume the worst. Hope, like love, means taking risks and being vulnerable to

the effects of loss. It means recognizing the uncertainty of the future and making a commitment to try to participate in shaping it". I thought it was profound. The book served as the structure for this project. The way that climate is presented to us is predominantly through the lens of disaster. It's both visualized that way and contextualized that way, and it is important. Again, we can't deny the urgency of action needed to mitigate and adapt. But we also need to acknowledge all the efforts that are being made towards better practices. Otherwise, it's too easy to slide into this sense of despair. Of course, you know the statistics now that the younger generation, Gen Z is pretty much resigning emotionally, but we can't allow that to happen. So, it's important to visualize the efforts on a grand scale and on a micro scale towards mitigation and adaptation.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
How are you visualizing that, actually? What does it mean to you in terms of practice and shooting images to shift from despair to hope?

Anastasia Samoylova
It starts with mapping the locations that might be of interest. And of course, the way photography operates, and my photography operates specifically because I do documentary photography as opposed to photojournalism, where there might be a long statement next to each image that would provide the context, and the image is of equal measure, if not secondary to the text. The way I work is images come first, and the goal is to make them be conclusive in their own statements while avoiding didacticism and remaining open for interpretation. That makes it really challenging, and it's the challenge that I'm willing to take on. It takes me quite a bit of immersion into the subject to accomplish the results, but it starts from mapping. I'm actively seeking locations, practitioners, objects, and structures that can serve as a testimony and as an illustration for climate action. You see the news being so devastating week after week. Just this week, I opened my exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. But just days prior, I had to book four different flights just to get out of Florida, where we got hit by yet another hurricane. We escaped but again, these accommodations – I had to book and cancel all these flights and just to get out to make it in time for the installation of my show. Obviously, I can't complain people have lost their homes.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
I understand that *Transformations* is a work in progress, but I was wondering if you could still speak to maybe some of the images that you've already made, if there's one or two in particular that really visualize, symbolize to you this idea of positive change or progress on the issue of climate?

Anastasia Samoylova
Yes, absolutely. As all of my projects, the *Transformations* project began years ago, it's always cumulative research and preliminary location scouting that leads to a more immersive and structured approach later on. So, some of the images that I submitted are from 2020, 2021. There's an image of a controlled burn in Florida where

they're managing new growth in the forest to prevent wildfires, one of the, again, measures in climate adaptation. There are also some of the more obvious images of destruction. There's one from last year in Fort Myers, Florida, of a destroyed house. This was, again, a hurricane. I'm looking at the image right now of the pool that's remaining after that house got knocked down. There are also images, more recent one from this year that I made deliberately for this project is of a rookery on East River. So, you see birds right there in the foreground, while the middle ground is the dense city, so it's Tudor City neighborhood in Manhattan, and the contrast is quite stark. Another one is of the sand dunes in Long Island. So, the dune management, it's very careful on the island. There's another object that stands out as this *Energiebunker*, if I'm pronouncing it right, but energy bunker in Hamburg. I was quite impressed. It's a World War II building. It was a shelter at the time, and now that's being reused. And there's solar energy sources, and there's wind turbines in the background, and really dramatic shadows on the façade of the building that's reminiscent of the Bauhaus lines. Another recent object that I photographed a location is the Javits Center in New York. And there's this grid of dots on the window that's overlooking their solar paneled roof, so their energy is solar in the building. But the little dots are to prevent birds from crashing into this window, which is a major problem for both birds and bats. So, the window prevents the birds from dying in those crashes.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Has working on this project made you feel a greater sense of hope when it comes to climate change?

Anastasia Samoylova
Absolutely. And again, even though this is a research project, everything is personal and comes out of my very desperate need for that hope. So, I seek out locations that would give me that. And meeting people along the way has been remarkable. There are not many portraits yet in the project, but there will be more as I expand my geography, hopefully through the grant.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
How does being a Prix Elysée nominee fit in with essentially what's happening in your career as a photographer right now?

Anastasia Samoylova
As a full-time working artist who does not work editorially and does not really work commercially, it just so happens I wouldn't take on those assignments, but I'm mainly in the fine art world where everything is so unpredictable. It all depends on the art market of the year. So, year after year, I depend on my print sales and grants. And in terms of my career, it's been 20 years working in photography and in art. That was my first degree. I'm 20 years ago over more than that. And that was environmental design. And then there was an MFA. So, it's a long journey, but it feels like sometimes I've emerged overnight. I know why. I have a kid who is now a teenager, so now I can travel a lot more extensively than before. And of course, thinking of his generation,

so he's turning 14, they are very aware and listening to his perspective and what they think about it. And of course, keeping that generation in mind while raising awareness of the issue now.

Where it fits in my career? Well, as I mentioned, I guess I'm in between this emerging and mid-career artist. So, I just opened a solo show. Well, it's with Walker Evans' Archive at the Met. I'm also opening a survey exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London. So, I have the entire second floor of the gallery to show all of my projects from a very playful breakfast with photo books. I love photo books, and I collect them. So, I would lay out my little breakfast items over a photo book. So, we have that shown for the first time. And then my *Landscape Sublime* series that's quite premediated and this construct. And then *Floridas* and *FloodZone* and *Image Cities*. And then, yeah, working on the *Transformations*. This project, I can't pull off on my own. It's simple as that. You need multiple international partners in this. So, I'm actively seeking anyone from community activists to corporations who are tangibly making a change, a positive change in their operations and how they do their business and how they build. Anything from community gardens to the green roofs off a major convention centers and things in between, floating houses. There are numerous objects of interest. So, I hope people will reach out with their suggestions.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Anastasia, I have one final question for you. What excites you the most about the creative process?

Anastasia Samoylova
The adventure, of course. Collaboration. So, the *Transformations* was also inspired by the research into "Climatopias" by a scientist, Alizé Carrère. I hope to maintain that relationship with Alizé, who might contribute her text to this project. Yeah, it's these two, the exploration. And in terms of the greater purpose, our attention is currency. We're so overloaded now with visual stimuli. There's always something trying to sell us something else. So, in that ocean of images and footage, it's hard to grab somebody's attention towards something that's important. But I believe climate is the most important issue of our time. It is so urgent that if we don't change our ways now, we won't survive.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Creativity and survival somehow seem to be linked.

Anastasia Samoylova
That fits.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
Thank you very much.

Anastasia Samoylova
Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me, Katie. And thank you for your great questions.

Katie Kheriji-Watts
You've just been listening to C*onversations*, a Photo Elysée podcast produced by Louie Creative – the content creation agency of Louie Media. If you liked this series, please comment and give us a rating. I'm your host, Katie Kheriji-Watts. All episodes were written by me and produced and mixed by Gautam Shukla with the help of Anouk Solliez, with music by Pierre-Antoine Wucal. This series was produced by Eloise Normand, with the help of Lola Lellouche, in close collaboration with Photo Elysée. Special thanks to Julie Dayer, Lydia Dorner and the entire museum's team as well as the photographers who generously shared their stories with us. The Prix Elysée is the result of an exclusive partnership between Photo Elysée and Parmigiani Fleurier. Photo Elysée, Museum for Photography, is a Museum of the Canton de Vaud managed by the Plateforme 10 Foundation.