

CONVERSATIONS A PHOTO ELYSÉE PODCAST

EPISODE #1 – HANNAH DARABI TRANSCRIPTION

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Welcome to *Conversations*, 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.

Hannah Darabi spent the first 25 years of her life in Iran, a country that remains the center of her work as an artist and photographer. From Paris, where she's been based for nearly two decades, she continues to be drawn to Iran's complex political past and present. She's been nominated for the Prix Elysée with a project titled *Why Don't You Dance?*, inspired in part by “Woman, Life, Freedom”, a recent nationwide protest movement against the Iranian government's restrictive laws for women. Hannah and I talked about beauty, her use of collage and dance as a means of resistance.

Hannah, so lovely to meet you, to see your face, to chat a little bit about who you are and what you're working on right now. I was wondering if you could start by just introducing yourself to people who might not be familiar with who you are and what you do.

Hannah Darabi

Sure. Hi, Katie. It's lovely to meet you, too. I'm Hannah Darabi, and I'm an artist researcher born in Tehran. I studied photography and contemporary Art at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Tehran first. And then in 2007, I moved to Paris and studied for a master at the University of Paris 8 Saint-Denis. And Since I'm based in Paris and working as an artist and researcher, mostly with the photography medium.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how images influenced your understanding of the world when you were growing up.

Hannah Darabi

Well, images shape for sure our understanding of the world. I was growing up in Iranian society when there is an understanding and use of images in everyday life. When I was growing up, we had the Iraq war, for example. At that period, the Iranian government used lots of images of the war to communicate their ideas, how they want the Iranian society to receive the war and how they also wanted to encourage Iranian society to fight for the country. So, I have a very complicated relation to the

documentary photography image, because on one hand, it can be also a tool of propaganda as it was used during my childhood. But on the other hand, it can be also something that reveals the same image that can be used for propaganda. In other contexts, it can be used for the opposite purpose of what it was used before. I really like this about photography. Even though we are in the age of AI, I think still the relation that the photography image has with the real and reality is very important, and it should be something that we still talk about. Because we don't use cameras, for example, anymore to make images, it doesn't mean that the documentary image is dead.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I was wondering, you were talking a lot about the way that Iran, where you grew up, the government there used images as essentially war propaganda. Is there a particular image that stands out in your memory from this time?

Hannah Darabi

Well, I worked on the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and I revisited my memories a lot for this project, which is called *Enghelab street, a Revolution Through Books: Iran 1979-1983*. One image really popped into my mind when I was rethinking the images of war at the time. Because I think also it's not me, it's the generation. I mean, my generation, I was born in 1981. We had this image of this boy who was 13 or 14 years old that was published in our schoolbooks. You see the image of the boy with a big gun, bigger than his own body, and he's in this war zone. This boy lost his life during the war, and he became a symbol and an iconic image of martyrdom in Iran, and his image was disseminated everywhere, especially in the schoolbooks, even on the paintings on the wall. This was one of those images that would be seen and be diffused all the time. I really wanted to find it, especially because the schoolbooks now have changed. There are other images in them. I had difficulty finding the schoolbooks from our time, but I finally found them.

This image is very much used in that project. The fact that at the time, it was so common for these teenagers to go to war. The thing was that it wasn't officially allowed for them to go to war at this age. But because of the propaganda, many boys of that age would feel the need to fight for the country, and they would go to war at a very young age. I was a girl of six or seven years at the time, and I would be thinking, even though I never really said it, thinking, what can I do myself as a person in this country? It was very effective. It really touches you on a very deep and special level.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Obviously, you were mentioning a lot about Iran, which is where you grew up, and Iranian society and history has remained your main subject as a photographer, even though you've been primarily based in Europe for more than 15 years. I was wondering how now living outside of Iran has influenced how you see and relate to your home country as an artist.

Hannah Darabi

It's a very good and interesting question because I thought about it a lot, especially when I started to work on this project about the Iranian Revolution or another project about Tehran. Those were subjects that I wouldn't be interested to working on while I was in Iran. Because, for example, giving the example of the Iranian Revolution, it's such a dominant subject in our everyday life that I think when you are in Iran, you really feel the need to forget it for some time and work on something else. The fact that I went to France in 2007, and I started this project on Iranian Revolution, we can say from 2016, something like that. It took me about nine years to have the safe distance with this subject because also I think that although I would have a very subjective point of view when I'm treating this topics, at the same time, I need to have a distant and as a researcher to be able to see different aspects of the same topic and not be influenced by my emotions and emotional thoughts. I think this distance from the home country and treating the subjects that are really close to me, because I grew up in Teheran, for example, working about the revolution is something that my generation had to deal with.

Also, popular music, one of the projects that I recently done was also something that I had very strong emotions towards it. It's a good thing to have distance. Now I'm working with the archives and I'm putting different archival material and text or music and with my own photography. All this, I think, became possible because of this physical distance.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Have you been able to show your work in Iran?

Hannah Darabi

I haven't and at some point, I also lost contact with the art spaces there. As an artist, if you want to show your work, you should regularly be in contact with the museums, the galleries. In Iran, it's a bit complicated because of the state museum, they change their politics each time the government changes. I can say that it's not very well supported by the government, and it's not the primary goal of the government to have those places active or they want them active, but for, we can say, propaganda art, and my art is not going in that category. Then for the private places, I showed maybe books or artist books, but at the same time, I never really invested in those spaces as I should. The one thing that I revisited in myself was the self-censoring. I wanted to be able to go further. And because I was living abroad, because I was able to express and say things that I wouldn't allow myself to say in Iran. And as you can imagine from our conversation, all these subjects also have some kind of a therapeutic value to me. And one of those also things that I wanted to be able to manage was not self-censoring myself, which is not that easy. I mean, you do it unconsciously, and then you should remove it consciously. That was also the reason why I preferred not to show some of those projects in Iran, for example.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You've been nominated for the Prix Elysée photography prize with a project that examines the role of dance in Iranian culture. Could you tell me a little bit more about your initial inspiration for the project?

Hannah Darabi

This project is in continuity of my last project, *Soleil of Persian Square*, which was around popular music among Iranian diaspora of Southern California. In this case, its dance, how this cultural element can change its value depending on the social and political context in which it takes place. This project, particularly, is inspired by three characters who are very known in the popular dance Iran. When I finished my work on the popular music because I was also watching all these clips, and in the music clips, you see also the Iranian dance, I felt the need to talk about also the dance and talking about not self-censoring. For example, I always was also interested in discussing the question of body, but it's a very hard question, not in the sense that I didn't want to go there, but because how can you really talk about the body without entering cliches, the subjects that are repeated every time and having something original to say about it? I thought dance is a very good place to do that because dance deals with the body all the time.

So, these three characters, one of them is Mahvash, which was a cabaret dancer from '50s. What's interesting for me in this character is her fictional autobiography entitled *The Secrets of Sexual Accomplishment*. For me, it was perfect because She's a dancer, but also, she's talking about a gender. She's talking about what is the norm of sexuality at her time. The second character, she's still alive, is named Jamileh. She's also a cabaret dancer. She also appeared in '70s, in a popular film in Iran. She owes her reputation for two types of dances. One of them is belly dancing, which is also common in other Oriental countries. The second one is "Jaheli dance", which is very particular to the Iranian social context. The third character is Mohammad Khordadjan. He is also a very famous dancer and choreographer. He chose to become a dancer as a career after he left Iran because of Iranian Revolution of 1979, and he went to Los Angeles. Once again, I go back to this Iranian diaspora in California. These were my inspirations for this project. There will be also three chapters because there are three characters. Each chapter would deal with one of the topics or the problematics that can be discussed through these characters.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

And what topics are you thinking about?

Hannah Darabi

Well, I can maybe talk about the first chapter of this work in progress, and it's called *Mahvash's Book of Pleasure*. In this part, pages of Mahvash's fictional autobiography are put in conversation with images coming from women magazine of '60s and '70s, and some photographs of my own and extracts of text also coming from different sources. For example, here, the goal is to reveal ongoing change of Iranian society mentality toward women, bodies from 1950s until today in terms of what is

considered modern and normal. Also in that regard, influence how women are primary target of the politics and the dominant ideologies of each time. One of the things that also made me more interested in doing this project, for example, is how Iranian women are using dance today as a tool of protest. We saw that during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement and how dance, which was completely non-political element in Iranian society, especially if we want to give, for example, the example of Revolution of 1979. No one would use popular culture or music as a tool of protest. One of the critiques towards this practice was that they are not political enough. But now we can see that in this context, special context, because also many things changed after the revolution of 1979, especially politics toward women bodies and how women should be seen and how they should also express themselves and to what limit they express themselves and how they should even wear what clothes.

So, all these also shifted how the popular dance and popular culture can become a tool of resistance, because that's where the Iranian women are expressing their womanhood and their bodies. That is something that shouldn't be seen according to the main values of the government. So that's interesting how something that was completely for entertainment is now becoming something else.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You were mentioning how this project you're working on, which originally had its inspiration in archival material, is really dialoging with this “Women, Life, Freedom” movement in Iran, which has been highly mediatized internationally. But for people who might not be familiar with that movement, could you explain a little bit about its history and what's going on with it right now?

Hannah Darabi

This movement started in 2022 when a Kurdish young woman, Jina, was killed by the morality police because her scarf was not tight enough or, I don't know, it wasn't as it should be. She was pushed to the ground, and because of that, she had an injury in his head, and she lost her life, unfortunately. It was not the first time that an Iranian woman had this kind of violent attitude from the morality police, but it was the first time that somebody got killed in this way, and it really triggered anger. I think it's normal that people were angry toward the government. So, women started, but not just women, but also men, started to protest toward this unjust behavior. And well, I mean, now it's very difficult to mobilize in Iran to do a protest because the police brutality is extremely high. People can really be killed. There are shooting going on during protests. At one point, there were these little protests here and there in different cities. But then as the police brutality became harsher, people started to express themselves through micro protests in a way, were just spontaneous.

For example, a dance in the street, a group of friends that wanted to start a protest. They would just dance in the street. Somebody who would just take off her scarf and do a walk just to show “that's my body, that's my choice, and I do it”. It's really beautiful, and it still goes on. Personally, I'm not in Iran, and I'm very impressed by the courage of this young and old generation because everyone is doing it. This civilian

disobedience, which is also an answer to when you can do anything else, like a political mobilization, is very interesting and it's very creative. But also, I say that it started in 2022 because that's when the movement really became a movement. I believe this is one of the points of this project, it's that it's not just today. The Iranian feminism has been there for more than a century. It's coming from far. Today, it's just manifesting itself. We are very happy about that because women had very big roles in several revolutions in Iran, like constitutional revolution, revolution of 1979, and each time they were put aside. And even in the revolution of 1979, they became the first victims in the sense that the first constitutional laws were kind of considering them as half of a person. So, I think it's very interesting that now the Iranian society, because once again, it's not just women, men are also participating in it, understood that if we want to talk about freedom, we should start talking about women rights. This thinking can be interesting for every society. I think there's a lesson to learn from this.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Hannah, I understand that collage is an important part of your practice. Does that somehow dialog with this idea of collective movement and people coming together?

Hannah Darabi

Collages became important, especially in this project, because I thought that there is this multiplicity of materials that can be put together. But I thought that for me, it's also, I should go back and forth in time, and the collage would give you the possibility to do that, to put images from '50s in conversation from images from '70s or recent images. It can create a theater, a scene, where you invite all these ghosts from the past to come and to have this conversation altogether. When you're talking about history and sometimes different histories because there are different accounts of one, for example, in the case of Revolution of '79. Collage, on this project was a very good solution for me because I could put all these different elements in conversation altogether. When I was working on this autobiography of Mahfaj, I also understood that I needed also a form that is a little bit playful. It can go from serious to something playful because that's how the book is written. The book can discuss very serious matters, but at the same time, she's really playing with her identity all the time. We see, for example, I chose specifically the pages of the book that has an image of a woman.

She's pretending that those are her images, but every image is a different person. There is her image on the cover and at the end of the book. She knows that no one would believe that all these women are her. But at the same time, she's just playing with the idea that these women, which have also, for me, a very specific body type, they are very much adapted to the beauty standards of the time, which was mostly the Western European woman as a model for modernity in Iran. She's kind of very aware of that, and she's playing with that because her body type is totally different. I think it's very revealing how photography can mislead you, but also at the same time reveals something else. For me, it was also this playfulness that I wanted to

keep, and I thought, collage is a good form. We can have these mixed forms altogether.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Hannah, what do you hope to achieve through being a Prix Elysée nominee?

Hannah Darabi

I had the idea of this project for a long time. I needed a push to start, to be honest, this project. Being nominated for this award was very helpful in the way that sometimes you have all these ideas, but we have always a million ideas, and you should work as an artist to gain your life. You need support that will push you and let you to be confident that, okay, now it's the time for me to start a project. I would have done it without this, but the thing that it was chosen as one of the projects gave me extra confidence to go through with it. Because sometimes as an artist, you feel that you are building things in your head, and you want also to test and to see how the real world would react to such a thing. Is it just you or is there a bigger echo than what you are thinking? So, this was for me, for sure, a very good moment to start the project and the financial support which came with it was also very important. I mean, every artist can tell you that those are the moments that you can be a little bit more relaxed and focus on just one project instead of 10 things at the same time.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I have one final question for you. What excites you the most about the creative process?

Hannah Darabi

When you have difficulties economically as an artist, you think: "oh, wow, I chose a hard path. I chose a hard career." But every time, when I start working on a project, I couldn't be happier. I mean, sometimes I really think that I'm a very, very lucky person because I don't know how many people can say when they go to work "I love my work, and I love what I'm doing". Sometimes I'm just doing stuff, for example, on my computer, or I'm just putting for these collages, for example, I was putting objects on a table to photograph them again. I can't describe it. I mean, it's a moment that you really create something, and you think that it was necessary for me to give life to it in a way. Sometimes people say that my book is my baby. I can't understand because when you're creating something, it's not the physical creation, but you're giving life to something that is in your head, and it's very abstract, and then you're bringing it out, and it's very exciting. I think also it's a human thing. That's what we humans do. Other animals won't create stuff.

But I think we are creating all the time in our mind, and sometimes you need to just to put it out there. And that's what we, artists, do.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Hannah, thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me.

Hannah Darabi

Thank you, Katie, for the interview and for your interesting questions.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You've just been listening to *Conversations*, 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 Dörner 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.