

CONVERSATIONS A PHOTO ELYSÉE PODCAST

EPISODE #3 – RAHIM FORTUNE 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.

Rahim Fortune is from the American South, a fact that infuses his artistry as a photographer. He also enjoys working with his hands. And using traditional analog processes to produce images is an important part of his work. He's been nominated for the Prix Elysée with a project titled *The Cove*, which delves into his family's archive and relationship to a specific military town in Texas. We talked about the dark room, what he thinks Americana means to Black and Indigenous people, and the influence of the family album.

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

Rahim Fortune

Yes. My name is Rahim Fortune. I was born in Texas and raised between Texas and Oklahoma. I work as a photographer and a filmmaker, mostly known for my photographs depicting the Black Life in the American South. I've published two monographs of photographs through the French publisher, Loose Joints, and have displayed my work in various museums and institutions in the US, as well as a few institutions in France. I'm really excited to be working with the Prix Elysée.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I was curious, Rahim, if you could talk a little about what your relationship to images or more broadly to visual culture was when you were growing up.

Rahim Fortune

As I said, I grew up between Austin, Texas. And then when I was in maybe third grade, I moved to Oklahoma, where my mother's family is from. And so, I grew up in between this city life of Texas, but also these extremely rural surroundings of Oklahoma. And I had an older brother who was a considerable amount older than me. He graduated high school eight years before me. And so, I had a lot of exposure to, I think, a visual culture that otherwise I maybe wouldn't have had so much access to through things like hip hop music and popular culture of the early 2000s, which was very influential on me. I also grew up in a quite musical family as well. So, music

has always been a big influence on how I've shaped visual culture and thinking about the connection between music and the sonics of music and the way that influences storytelling, and then as well as the family albums and the family images that I grew up with. So, you know, I always think that the car window was my first frame of the world. And I think that a lot of my early photographs mirrored this idea of driving around the Texas and Oklahoma landscape looking out the window and being very curious about the places that I was seeing. When I became an adult, I was able to explore these places with the camera and really learn more about where I grew up and gain the greater idea of who I was through my surroundings and the music that I was interested in. But I think it's also ever evolving because I've been a student of photography for 10 years now, so I've been very steeped in the photographic history, particularly in American photography. So yeah, it's an introduction to my love for visual art and visual language.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I love this idea of the car window being the first lens, one of the first lenses that you're observing the world through. For people that might not be familiar with Texas, Oklahoma, the American South in general, could you maybe describe a little bit what you were seeing through your car window as a child, or maybe some of the things you were seeing that particularly resonated with you or have just stuck in your memory?

Rahim Fortune

It definitely would come to mind is the landscape between Texas and Oklahoma, which fades between more recently developed sites as well as these vast open landscapes. And so, there's this kind of constant juxtaposition of the old and new. And in particular in Oklahoma, it's a barren place, but very vibrant in its seasonal changes. So, the landscape looks different from one season to the next. And so, observing those differences has always been something that's very interesting to me. And also living in a place in Oklahoma that is experiencing a bit of an economic decline, being interested about where the people went. The area where I grew up was more populous in the '70s. So, by the time I'm growing up there, a lot of the houses have turned into just shells of old homes. And so, I was really interested in retracing the steps and, in a way, figure out what had happened here. It's a very wide-open setting. So especially for people who come from the city, and they come to Texas, one of the first things they just notice is the sky feels very expansive. I'm not sure exactly why that is. I'm sure there's a scientific reason why that phenomenon is experienced. Maybe it's just the lack of tall buildings. But there's a very unique quality to the sky and to the light. Just beautiful examples of just light and natural beauty. So that's one of the real big indicators, as well as just the mix of cultures that you have here between the African American impact on the South, but also, I guess, it's particular to state that Texas and Oklahoma, to some, is also considered the West. It's kind of the corridor to the Western part of the US. So, there's this interesting emergence of the American West with also a more Southern political landscape in the way that the states have treated legislation. But then you also have this blend coming from Mississippi, Louisiana, that has also impacted. So, it's really many things

at once. And it's something that is difficult to pinpoint as just one existence. It's a very unique part of the country, and a lot of people who come to visit here definitely fall in love with its beauty and its slow pace.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Rahim, you like to say that you use photography to ask fundamental questions about American identity. How would you explain exactly what that means to someone who's not from the United States or who doesn't know that much about America?

Rahim Fortune

I mean you know, descending from formerly enslaved people in this country, as well as being a part of a tribe that was relocated from our native land, which was in Mississippi and brought to Oklahoma in the late 1800s through a forced migration. So that was only five generations removed from me when my family went to Oklahoma. And so, I think there's these really complicated questions about what it means to be American as a black or as a native person. So, throughout history, we've seen examples of the postcolonial interaction with this idea of American exceptionalism. And so within my photography, I am interested in playing on these motifs of the iconography of Americana, while pairing it also with lesser known stories or stories that have been swept under the rug to really ask, like you said, more fundamental questions about who we are as a people, the way in which we treat various cultures that contribute so much to the larger identity as Americans. And so I'm always very fascinated with these juxtapositions as a way of interrogating and also within the norms of documentary photography, using the medium on itself and really thinking about the power of images, images that we are used to seeing in this collective consciousness around photographs and our preconceived notions about the country or about the people here.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You spoke a little bit about wanting to interrogate and play a little bit with this idea of Americana iconography. Do you have something in mind, specifically, when you say that, or could you give an example of what that might look like?

Rahim Fortune

Yeah. I mean, I always think about there's a quote from LaToya Ruby Frazier, where she says something to the effect of, I want to see the photograph that the migrant mother, Dorothea Lange, made her pictures of, the pictures that she would have made. And so, it's this change in agency as far as who gets to tell the stories. And so that's something that's always been fascinating for me, especially within this larger world of black and white photography in the States, particularly in the New Topographics movement. It's a lot of more or less white men making these pessimistic statements about the landscape. That was something that always I was interested in working alongside, but also pushing against some of these ideas. And this pessimism of the developed landscape, but also even thinking about something like the FSA, which photographed pretty intensely in Texas, people like Russell Lee and Dorothea Lange, who photographed a lot of the farm workers and various

community communities in Texas. There's such a vast archive of pictures being made here. So, it was really something to have, because I think so much of photography builds on each other. The visual canon is constantly playing and referencing each other. And I think that that's always been a thing. And so, I'm just in the latest generation of people who are interested in these same questions and these same conventions of making photographs. I typically work with Silver Gelatin prints and these very early practices that we've been used to seeing photographs produced as. So, it's really just a way of drawing visual similarities and contrasting ideas in terms that photographic audience is used to seeing. And so, there's an entry point for people to interact with some of the work that's not just a completely new idea, but maybe framing and posing things in a way that people aren't used to.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You've been nominated for the Prix Elysée with a project based on your family's relationship to a specific town in Texas. Could you tell me a little bit more about the original inspiration for the project?

Rahim Fortune

Yeah. So, my father and his parents passed in a one-year span from each other. I was the person as the family photographer who was left with these boxes of archival images. And so, I would sift through these, mostly just to recount memories. But after spending more time with the images, I really recognized that there was something interesting going on in a lot of the pictures that my father and my grandfather took. And so, I always really had this idea of working on something that was a little bit more process-based, mostly intended for installations, where I could work with these more vernacular and archival photographs from my family and think about their impacts on my work and maybe where some of my sensibilities within photography perhaps come from. And so, I think there's a lot of motifs in these images that highly impact the photographs that I've become known for. So, it's something that I had always been interested in working on, but it required having a physical space to show them. So, this prize was a great reason to get the project underway.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I believe that your project is titled *The Cove*. Can you explain a little bit about that title and what it relates to, what it means?

Rahim Fortune

Yeah. So, *The Cove* refers to a town in Texas near Kaleen called Copper's Cove, which is where my family ultimately would end up living after traveling around during the Vietnam War. They lived in Korea. They lived in Germany for a while. They lived in Oklahoma. They lived in California. It was a very interesting political time. It was during the Black Power Movement. Obviously, there's a great deal of resistance to the Vietnam War. And so stylistically and politically, there's so many things happening. And so, my family ultimately lands in this town, Copper's Cove. And this becomes where my grandparents have a house up until the end of their lives. And I also think of *The Cove* as a double meaning as well, because *The Cove* also implies

a place where things are hidden. It has roots back to pirates and a pirate cove. And there's just many metaphors within *The Cove* that to me was this promise of this Black middle-class life that was actualized on the back of combat in military service on the part of my grandfather. And so, titles are always the tricky part with making a new project. And so, this is the title that I've landed, and I feel good about it.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

As you mentioned, one of the themes in the project is really about your family's complex relationship to the military, and to a certain extent, the police. And I was wondering if you could start to talk about the link between this personal family history and the process that you've been using to make images for this project.

Rahim Fortune

My grandfather was drafted into the military at around 18. He was attending Florida A&M University. That's where he grew up, he was in Florida. And he would begin a pretty long life of military service. He did three tours in Vietnam and a tour in South Korea and had a Purple Heart. And so, we grew up very much this idea of our granddad being this hero and being this very valiant patriotic fighter for the US. And as you learn more about the Vietnam War and the things that were carried out, you start to recognize a bit more of the complexities of that war and of that time in history, and particularly Black soldiers who fought into the Vietnam War. It's still such a recent history in many ways. And a lot of my uncles and aunts would later go into either military service or into police work. And my father went into police work during the '80s. So, his archive as well is very complicated of this Black officer working in predominantly Black areas. And since neither of them are alive, I'm not really able to ask them many questions to understand the nuances, especially being a kid, you just get a very PG explanation of many of these things. And so, through their images that are these constant juxtapositions of the picturesque American family are paired with these quite violent images of mug shots or even at times prisoners of war. There are some pretty troubling images in these archives. And so, I was interested in interrogating that psychology a bit with this project.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

And when you say that this is a process-based project for you, can you explain a little bit about what that means?

Rahim Fortune

Yes. So, I'm making my own photos and pairing them with images from my family's archive. And so more or less what I'm doing is I'm taking the photographs and through an older process, I'm producing negatives with them. And so, I will take these smaller images, and I'll produce a 4 by 5 negative with the picture, and then I will print that in the dark room. And through the printing, I will work to make the image a little bit more expressive and try to bring it into a visual world that I'm used to working in, which is these tonally dynamic black and white prints. And so, I'm still working with an analog print. They end up as a 16 by 20 fiber print. And I'm thinking about what it means to be an image maker and what it means to be creating images at a fine art

level and what's the variation between context and technicality. So, it's really about imaging something that otherwise I couldn't make an image that would depict. But there are photographs from my father and from my grandfather that do depict these things or times that I've passed on. But through the images that I pick, the way in which I choose to pair them is where my voice as an artist comes in.

So, I hope that the work has a multitude of meanings. I think that's the beautiful thing about work is sometimes it's after you create the thing also that some of the deeper meaning also starts to present itself versus just an idea or a mockup on a computer. So, by bringing these prints into the world, I'm really able to observe them and build upon a narrative that otherwise feels somewhat like a closed chapter, given that my father and grandparents have passed on. And so, it's also a way of honoring them as well. There is an element of a critical lens on this archive, but also trying to find some understanding in the wholeness within them. It's been a really a joy to work on.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Could you give one example of maybe two images, an archival image from your family history and a new one that you have produced recently and what those images are and why you're pairing them together?

Rahim Fortune

Yes. One of the images is from Florida. There's a stack of what seems maybe like two rolls of film worth of prints that my grandfather made on a trip to Florida that seemingly is for a funeral. He made a photograph of the front of this home, which I don't exactly know the significance of the home, but I imagine it's somewhere that he grew up as a child. And it's this very deadpan, matter of fact, photograph of a Florida house, and there's quite a bit of foreground. I thought the way that he framed it felt reminiscent of a fine art landscape photograph. And he was probably just making this on either a disposable or a point and shoot camera. And so, by turning this into a print, it reads very much in step with the tradition of American landscape photography. And so, I'll go back and then rephotograph some of these sites or photograph details that are drawn from the emotions in which the image is produced for me. And so, it's this way of looking backwards and looking forward and hoping to find a resolution about otherwise a somewhat complex story or history.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I understand that there's also a video component to your project. Could you explain a little bit about the video that you're shooting and how you're shooting it?

Rahim Fortune

Alongside the photographs that my grandfather left, he also left a projector and maybe six to eight reels of film that he shot during the '60s. And I had these in my possession for a long time. And while working on this project, I went ahead and got them all digitized, and I wasn't quite sure what I would find. And the trouble with this project is that so much of it is at the whim of what is in the archive. It's like, I can't really fake anything that has been produced. Or if you start to work on it, and certain

images seem as though falling flat or not as dynamic was something that I was concerned with when I began working on this. But I got those films scanned, and I was really excited about what I saw when I had the films come back. They're Kodachrome, Color Transparency, films that depict the early life of my father and his siblings as this traveling family, going from, especially as a Black American family, being depicted in these foreign landscapes was something that I wasn't extremely used to seeing. And there's an element of just caring that my grandfather shot them with.

And so, I think about these films being made in times between his active duty of fighting in the war. And so, there's a loving looseness to the images that he made that I was just really, really drawn to. But I was left the films. I was also left the camera. And so similarly with the photo practice where I'm going back and I'm trying to walk in their footsteps and think about where we are now. My father's passed away. He left behind three children and three grandchildren. So, there's very much the story is continuing in our family. But my grandfather also, he left me the camera that he made these films with. And so, I'm also shooting new film to pair with him. And I'm not exactly sure in the final iteration how these films will be used, but they are part of the material for the project that if awarded the prize, would be what I'm working on.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

What's very interesting for me is how you're dialoging between analog processes and digital, moving fluidly back and forth between those. Is there a link for you between moving through that and somehow continuing the visual archive of just your family's history?

Rahim Fortune

Yes. I mean, the only digital process within the practice is scanning of documents. It's not really that much of digital manipulation involved. Most of it does happen in a dark room. So, I don't know how much digital a part of it is, because for me, all the images that I'm making are just straight from negative to print. I'm not really someone who likes to fuss with computers too much. So just working in a more physical and tactile manner has always just made the most sense for me. I'm really inspired by, like I said, the history of photography and thinking about print as an object that lives on, and especially within an addition to print that is made in a limited number. And there's this unwritten contract between the artist and collectors of what creates value within prints. I'm really interested in that. And so, in my own work, I produce silver prints in addition of seven, only available in one size. So, I just really enjoy that process. And especially as it goes into making the images, there's a lot of consideration put into how the film is exposed and how the film is processed.

And this is something that's always fascinated me about photography as much as a psychological and social act. It's also this scientific chemistry that is involved, but it's all more or less a means of producing a feeling and getting as close to the emotion that you want. And so, you're constantly battling with the elements to produce that. And so, if it's a social interaction of how to get the portrait sitter to convey the

emotions that you want, there's so much that happens outside of the camera. And so, for me, that's always been how I work. And I think that there's a lot of care that goes into that and a bit of rigor of producing clean negatives and producing flat scratchless prints. It sounds simple, but there's a lot that goes into it.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

For me, it ties into this notion of care that you find in your grandfather's images. I'm feeling it also in the way that you're talking about what it means for you to be a photographer and an imagemaker.

Rahim Fortune

Yes, absolutely. The care is really important. I mean even when photographing in my own practice, photographing maybe strangers or people who are chance encounters. It's not something that I can just shoot 20 pictures of them on a digital camera and then just hit print. There's a film, every shot cost money. The equipment that I use requires quite a bit of upkeep and consideration. And then especially when it comes to the development of the film, I have different recipes for different styles of pictures that I make. And so, for me, it's like a reverence for the people and for the intentionality or seriousness that you have for what you're doing that is ultimately, hopefully paying respect to the people and not something that you just feel as though you can take. And there's a lot that you're also giving. I'm definitely not alone in this style of working. So, a lot of the people who I look up to really have inspired my way of thinking about this.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Rahim, what do you hope to gain from being a Prix Elysée nominee?

Rahim Fortune

I'm excited for the exhibition at Paris Photo and to work on a small sample display of this work and to learn about the other nominees and about the committee and hopefully have my project supported and be able to bring this vision that I have to fruition.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

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

Rahim Fortune

What excites me the most about the creative process is just going out and making photos and not overthinking it too much. It's one of the best feelings when you figure out a new project where something is working out and you can go out and make some new photographs that can fit into whatever it is that you're working on. Because there's a lot of uncertainty in the beginning when you're working on a new project where you're trying out different things and you're seeing what works and what doesn't work. And its objective at times when you realize, okay, this isn't working, this is working. Maybe some things conceptually need to be moved around

a bit. But once you turn that corner and you understand how the images are functioning, it's really a good feeling to get out and to make new pictures and to wait to see the film. And it's definitely something that gets me the most excited to keep making photographs. And I don't really enjoy working on commissions that much because I really love the freedom of being able to fail and to being able to try new things. It keeps me excited to get off the door with the camera.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Rahim, thank you so much for taking the time to talk about your project, your process, and what inspires you. It's been wonderful to talk to you, and I wish you the best of luck.

Rahim Fortune

Thank you so much.

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 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.