

CONVERSATIONS A PHOTO ELYSÉE PODCAST

EPISODE #6 – SEIF KOUSMATE 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.

Ten years ago, Seif Kousmate quit his corporate job, bought his first camera, and started traveling the world. After a decade of training his lens on the world around him, he's expanded from photojournalism towards calling himself a visual artist and examining subjects closer to home in Morocco. He's been nominated for the Prix Elysée with a project titled *Men vs Fathers*, which examines his relationship with his own father and more broadly to masculinity. We spoke about growth, gender politics, and seeing our appearance in a new light.

Hi, Seif. Why don't you take a minute to introduce yourself to people who might not be familiar with you, your background, and your story?

Seif Kousmate

My name is Seif Kousmate. I'm a Moroccan visual artist based in Tanger. I have done many works in the last 10 years. I started photography with photojournalism, and from that, I moved to something that we call now documentary photography. After a while of telling stories in a documentary way, I felt the need to just disconnect to any box out there and create stories that matters for me and tell them in a way that connects emotionally to an audience. So, in the last five years, I can say I found my voice down this road. And I feel now more of, let's say, a visual artist using a medium of photography to tell stories.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Seif, you have, as far as I understand, quite an interesting personal story in terms of how you got into photography. So, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about the moment when you really decided to move into photography and to try and make a career as an imagemaker.

Seif Kousmate

The beginning of my story with photography, it was through traveling. It was really a long time ago, in 2013. I felt the need to explore the world. So back then, I was in a corporate job, and I decided to just buy a camera and start traveling without having any background related to photography or to the arts or any creative felt. And I used

the medium to connect to different people. I found it quite interesting that the pretext of taking a picture will take you to places you will never go to. And from that, I said, that's interesting. I want to build something from that. And that's how I connected to photojournalism as a first connection to tenant stories with photography. And then, yeah, I start exploring by myself through the years until I found my voice. I can say that.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

It's quite interesting because I think many people have the fantasy of quitting corporate life to live the life of an independent artist. Has it lived up to your expectations?

Seif Kousmate

It was really tough. I had no expectations. I was just like, living the moments and trying to travel. I said, okay, it's taking me to places that are interesting for me. I was excited to learn about the industry, about the stories I was covering back in time, and I was young, enthusiastic about life. But it was hard. Trying to find your perspective in an industry full of great talented artists and photographers, it was really hard to keep pushing and to make a living out of it. The first year was really hard.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Do you have a memory of the moment when you really felt like you broke through?

Seif Kousmate

Actually, the moment I felt that I really broke through is once I disconnected from the industry. I don't care who is going to distribute the work. I'm just scared about telling the story in my way because it was really hard to try to fit in a box. I don't like the fact that if you are doing this work, you are a photojournalist, if you are doing it this way, you are more of a documentary. If you are doing it that way, you are a conceptual photographer. And I just had enough of all this defined box. I said, I want just to tell stories the way I want to tell stories. I still want to be connected to reality. I still want to send strong messages. And I don't feel the need to be somewhere defined by an industry who mainly know their Western perspective about the industry. And as someone coming from the global south, the vision, it was not aligned. You'd rather be that photographer. If you are in this territory, you have to cover these stories. It was too much. And when you have to travel to those festivals to meet those people and you learn about them, about what they are doing, their way of seeing the industry. I don't feel that it was the right place for me. But once I just decide to do the story in my way, people start being interested in my story and in my way of seeing it.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I'd like to hear you talk a little bit more about this because, as you said, travel has been an important part of your work and the story behind why you're a photographer. But also, you're from Morocco. Much of your work has focused on the

African continent. You've also said that you think that Africa is quite poorly represented globally. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about the role that Africa has in your work and the way that you think about yourself as an artist.

Seif Kousmate

I think we are in a really important time. The narrative is shifting. For a really long time, it was an African territory seen by the foreigners. Now, there is a new generation of people wanting to cover their territories with their own narrative, telling their own stories. Not only focusing on the bad things, focusing also on the positive sides of being here. Also, if there's something wrong, there's different nuances to the story. It's never Black or White. But when you are having a foreigner come in here, want to tell a story with really focus on an audience, for a magazine or for a newspaper, they have the end in mind. So, they're coming already with a conclusion. So, they're shifting their vision through this conclusion. So, they don't see all the small details that they make it gray in the middle. And I feel that now, as I said, there's really a good generation of storytellers, visual artists, trying to change the narrative, trying to build new narratives that help change the mindsets about Africa.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Could you tell me a little bit about a specific photography project that you've worked in on the African continent that maybe stands out to you as an example of what you're trying to do?

Seif Kousmate

It's one of the first projects I worked on. It was in 2015, '16, '18, '19. It took me four years. It's a story about African youths trying to find their way to Europe. But my focus, the story I was trying to tell, is how this young generation is trying to fight against the struggle. I was focusing on their way of seeing Europe. But people from outside were seeing this because there's a lot of Black migrants. That's another story about migration, trying to cross the border. I didn't see the nuances that I spent four years following this group of amazing young men who are struggling in their hometown. In my case, it was in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. I met the group in Morocco, and for four years, I have been following them. Some of them were deported back to their home country. Some others, they were still struggling in Morocco. Some of them succeeded in crossing. And the project was to compare those different destinies. And even for those who succeeded, they were still struggling. But from the outside, people were seeing it just as migration. They couldn't see the life behind those stories.

I don't know if it was the wrong timing because migration back then was really intense at the borders, and people had enough hearing stories about migration, but it's never this or this. There are always stories in the middle.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

And you got connected to them because Morocco was a transition point between their home country and Europe.

Seif Kousmate

It's a struggle point. It's easy to cross, let's say, four or five borders, but last border, really impossible to cross. So, they find themselves in an environment they didn't choose to stay in. So, then it becomes a huge struggle, mental struggle, physical. It's a whole situation, and only a few can make it true.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

And you were following only men?

Seif Kousmate

Yeah, the group, because I was focusing on the borderlands. The story was about the borderlands, how they were living in the forest, and they're trying to cross the border with hooks. They made it feel like it's physically hard to cross this border. So it's mainly men going through this road. Women, they choose to cross by boat, mainly. So yeah, my story was only on men.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

This ties quite interestingly into some of the themes on the project that you've been nominated for with the prix Elysée Prize, which is a different form of masculinity, a project based on the idea of fatherhood. Would you tell me a little bit about your inspiration for the project?

Seif Kousmate

For this project, it's really particular for me because it's the first time I'm focused on my personal story. I was in a really weird relationship with my father. I'm the oldest of four kids. He was considering me as an adult, even if I was still 10. And I was really struggling with this relationship. The first time came when I went away from home to study. And the second time when I got married five years ago. And lately, when we start talking with my partner about if we want to have kids or not. And it's something like it came up from inside, all these emotions. And I decided to try to talk about it in a more of an artistic way, try to rebuild the new narrative using different medium and explore also the relationship to fatherhood, what we are carrying with us, what will we pass to the next generations, and also how our masculinity is shaped in a society like Morocco. I want to create something that starts with my personal story, that will resonate with a larger audience.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Speak a little bit more about what it's been like for you. That's a big transition, it seems to me, to go from looking outside of yourself and documenting other people's stories and what it's like to, I guess, turn the lens more towards yourself, your inner life, your personal history, maybe what's coming next for you. Tell me what that shift has been like for you.

Seif Kousmate

Actually, I just feel confident enough about my vision as an artist, and I have learned a lot from the different stories I have covered in the past 10 years, and they filled out the right timing. Those stories helped me to grow, to become who I am today. At this stage, I'm looking for more growth. The only way to go through this is by focusing on yourself. Try to learn who you are, where you come from, what you are carrying with you. That's my first reflection on this.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

It's very interesting to me that you bring up the word growth because I think that potentially the idea of bringing a new human into the world is very much tied to growing a new generation. You presumably won't be the person to carry the child, but there's also this idea of growing a new person physically. How does growth feel to you as an artist? How does it feel to be part of the process of growing?

Seif Kousmate

I'm only doing this for growth. All the stories I have covered before because I was looking to achieve something personal. I want to understand. I want to help. When I was covering the story about migration for four years, it was for me just a way of being a part of the solution. When I'm covering a story about climate change in Moroccan ways, it's my way of acting positively on those territories. For me, it starts with a big question, how can I understand more, and then how can I share something. That was just to leave a positive impact on something. If I'm not learning anything about, I'm not interested in the issue or in the subject, I will not spend three or four years covering this. It's only a matter of growth. Everything I'm doing in my life, is about growth, how to become a better human being, how to understand humanity more, how to be an impactful human on this planet.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I'd like to tell what you just said back to this theme of masculinity, because your project for the Prix Elysée that you've been nominated for, which is titled *Men vs Fathers*, really does have this very strong theme of masculinity and how it shapes society and your personal relationship to it. So, I'd like to hear you talk about this a little bit more and how you're planning on bringing this idea to life in images.

Seif Kousmate

This is an image emotional approach. It's not only photography approach. As I said, I feel more connected to this way of telling stories. So basically, in the first, for the first, I just used video to observe the society and how masculinity is shaped in the outdoor. The second step, going more intimate, more inside the houses. For that, I'm using my family archives. I'm collecting all the pictures of my father, how he transitioned from a young teenager to a young man, to a man, to a father, to a partner. I'm observing those images. I'm trying to understand these different stages of his life and learn something new from it. Also, I'm using fabric from the traditional living room. It's a Moroccan traditional living room. It's quite unique in its kind. I think it's North African. There's this living room with the different mattress and pillows

decorated with these nice fabrics. Each family will choose, mainly the women, the fabrics to cover this space and make it nice. It's a space made by women, where men will take control, control over the family, over the decision. I'm using emotions and memories from the past to rebuild this space in my way, in a contemporary way. Basically, I took different memories of fabrics that I was trying to find here in Morocco, and I created different patchworks, literally destroying the fabrics and creating a new shape with the fabrics to I create a new space in my head.

The last piece is photography. Here I'm using photography to reconnect with the territory, the environment I grew up in. I'm using it also to reconnect to my father. Lately, we spend a lot of time together taking pictures and just trying to observe him. Now he's old, he's quite old, he's 68. He's different than the man I used to know when I was 17 or 18. I was literally running away from my hometown, from my family for the last 18 years without knowing why. And with this project, I'm learning to reconnect to those emotions and to try to understand them and create a new safe space in this environment. Because in the last 18 years, I lived in different countries. I traveled the world, literally, and I built a new story with a new personality. I'm totally different than the young kids from this tiny city in the south of Morocco. And it was quite conflictual in my head because I wasn't connecting to what I used to be. With this project, I'm trying just to be a little bit more connected to my roots and to accept where I came from, who I am, what shaped me in the past, and what I become. I'm using photography just as a medium to create a new narrative.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

How has working on this project made you reflect on what the father you might want to be?

Seif Kousmate

It's a big question. Maybe, but it's not the main reason for me. I'm just trying to understand and reflect masculinity in general first and create a piece of work that helps people question themselves about what they're carrying with them. That was the main reason. I'm trying to just learn how to be, not how to be a father, but I'm just trying to understand my father. I'm trying to understand him. Maybe something happened in his life. I don't know. I'm trying to understand humankind. I'm really passionate about humans, and so I love observing, but it's really difficult to observe your own family and observe your own self and learn from it. But it's quite interesting to do that.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Could you tell me about one image that you've shot so far that you just really like from the project?

Seif Kousmate

It's not one... It's a set of images. I spent the day with my dad on the beach during the summer, and I was really focusing on his skin and details from his skin. I was passionate about all the details from his hand, from his shoulder, from his neck, small

details, like something I couldn't see in the past. And now I feel that helped me be closer to him a little bit. I took a couple of images, and I chose one of them to be in the project. We cannot see his face, but we see just the side of his neck, his hair, his skin. It's connecting to him in an emotional way without talking that much.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

That's beautiful. What about the Elysée photography prize makes it a good fit for you at this stage in your career?

Seif Kousmate

It's always a good opportunity to have support to produce new work, especially when you are trying to tell stories that are a little bit different. It becomes harder and harder to find support for stories that took time, that need time, that need to reflect. It's not like shortcut stories. It's really long term. You need to spend a lot of time reflecting on the images you took, to tell something very personal and different. It was a huge opportunity to have such great support with such a good platform like prix Elysée.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

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

Seif Kousmate

I really like just the moment that you start in getting the idea, but you are excited about trying it in real life, like opening doors, as much door as you can. I love this stage when you just open doors, just trying to write down your ideas. It's something spiritual about the creative process. And then you start testing the first idea and you build up and you doubt. You start again. I love the period when you're doubting a lot about yourself, about your work, because that makes you grow again and push limits.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Seif, thank you so much for doing this interview. It's been wonderful talking to you.

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.