

**SHEIKH SAOUD
AL THANI AWARDS:
CHARLOTTE COTTON
IN CONVERSATION
WITH ADRIANE AGHATA**

Adriane Aghata: After reading all of your experience and background, it really made so much sense the reason why you're here. Sometimes we meet people and don't know anything about them but we know they're here working on big projects. When I did the research, I understood ok, this is why she's here, it's not just any person. You select a person that will actually bring something extremely positive to the festival and then everything just made sense, then I started researching everybody and it was really amazing! So I wanted to know, how do you think you can help with the festival and actually create something positive for the community that will probably outlive the both of us, and where from your own history you are drawing from?

Charlotte Cotton: I was 26 when I became a full curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, where I worked for 12 years. Then head of programming at The Photographers' Gallery, head of the photography department at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I sort of fell off a cliff in about 2012, and suddenly I'm Curator-in-Residence here and somewhere else, moving around really fast. The connection between curating in so-called prestigious museums and galleries, and these fast-turn practices of rethinking for an institution, all goes back to the Victoria and Albert Museum. When I first started, it was the "beleaguered" V&A. It was too expensive, the roofs leaked, it had too many objects inaccessible in storage, etc. But it was a period for me and other young curators with great ideas - if we could make something happen with very little funding, in the most neglected spaces of the museum, nobody was going to stop us. It was wildly creative. Back in the mid 1990's we started doing late night programming, artist and creatives taking over the museum - animating public space with glorious things.

So quite innocently, that is a sort of "guerilla tactic" curatorial practice that was genuinely responsive to what is going on in the creative world, becomes a repeated pattern in my life. Sometimes, it's the best of things, better than anything for me, and other times, it goes badly, when an institution might look to me and say 'oh she's the person to bring in to shift this up, make it work, you know, bring some energy and thoughtfulness into what we're trying to do', and then I get there and they're like, 'oh no, we didn't want to change that much!' That can be really miserable for me. And then there are moments - like this moment on Doha - where everything is at play, everything is possible. When I first met Her Excellency, her description and very embodiment of what culture can be and do was utterly inspirational, I thought, 'I want to be part of this!' Tasweer ushers in change and that comes with its complexities. As does a project that is fast and developed mainly during a pandemic. When you add these militating factors together, it's actually very understandable why we have a long way to go before we've reached a point of convincing all and everyone but you have to develop a strong capacity for absorbing the pain of these kind of precedent-setting cultural exercises. Sometimes, rejection in-process is exactly what you need - you are constantly having to answer to criticisms and doubts and they make your ideas more robust. To a degree, it's true of any ambitious project that is future facing. I have learned to be a really consistent and determined guardian of the reason why we're even attempting to do cultural things.

My definition of being a curator is really simple - it's doing things for other people. I work with a lot of artists who use the curatorial mode. That's why I really like working with artists who create their own structures, such as Photo Art Qatar. It's like, 'we're going to put these chairs in a circle, will you come join us?' we'll

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provide all the intellectual and physical nourishment you need so that we can go on a journey together and that is the promise of Tasweer. We are at the very beginning of a journey and it's really specific and local on one level, and the challenge is that Tasweer stays that way but continues to respond locally, regionally and globally. It's a really interesting moment in this specific place. We'll call each other in 10 years' time and either we will say, 'Have you seen what they did to what we made so beautifully?!', and we'll be outraged. Or we'll see that the seeds we planted have really thrived.

I want Tasweer to be all-embracing in its vantage point onto the field of photography. Photography is highly implicated in everything that it was mapped out to be from its very beginnings; simultaneously, it is an art form, a creative industry, the vehicle of most of our visual communication, it bears witness, it is closely positioned in our daily lives, at the service of politics, surveillance, Imperialism and capitalism. As a young curator, being in the context of the preservation and curation of all manner of material and visual culture, I was free to embrace all facets of photography. By nature, I don't want to build another hierarchy that might put some people above others because it's what we share that counts and, frankly, our intelligence is all we have left. So, we better get together and learn how to edit and sequence and tell stories with images. We better be really well equipped for what this world is and is going to throw at us.

When it works, the magnificence of what you can achieve as a group of people in a pretty horizontal network is amazing. When you think together, when you're aiming for the same thing, it is astounding what human beings can do. There's very much that energy here, which is why even now, when I'm getting about 3 hours sleep a night, I just count my blessings that I'm here at this particular moment. Even down to this moment, sitting here with you, I just think, 'isn't life amazing'.

Adriane Aghata: What stood out for me was accepting rejection. I think everything is linked when you talk about your journey and how you would do things to shock people so that they would instantly reject. That actually put you in a place that brought you to where you are now and to create your own path. When you're rejected you have freedom.

Charlotte Cotton: It's fairly relatable for an artist, isn't it? It's like, "oh, I know that feeling."

Adriane Aghata: So you can do whatever you want and this is basically what brought me to what I'm doing now because I started with photography, maybe 3 years ago?

Charlotte Cotton: Wow, only 3 years ago?

Adriane Aghata: Yeah. So I kept trying something that wasn't for me and I kept being rejected and I thought, why am I being rejected? Everyone is getting proper jobs, going to offices. Why am I not getting this? So I just gave up and I tried something different and now I am so much more happy with where I am now, so I think everything is really linked. Also the idea that when you have this institution, sometimes it can be so big that it overwhelms the local creations, you know what I mean? People think, oh, I cannot get there. I cannot do this. I cannot create.

Charlotte Cotton: I know.

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Adriane Aghata: So I think that, here, there needs to be some support for the people that don't feel like they fit in in these institutions. Because I feel like so many people are lost, you know?

Charlotte Cotton: Yes.

Adriane Aghata: And this is where the rejection comes, so you have a lot of rejected people and maybe Tasweer can work with these people that have been rejected.

Charlotte Cotton: Absolutely!

Adriane Aghata: They want to create something. They have a voice but they don't know how to.

Charlotte Cotton: I think it's a really interesting situation within culture and it manifests in different ways in different parts of the world - about who feels this is theirs and who feels that they're excluded. Whether it's in very visible ways, or emotional ways, or access to information. Really, it's about access, information and models to draw from. It's mind-altering for me to think that Tasweer is going to be there to support new ventures - to be the space to imagine setting up a magazine or a library or a community space or a store or a gallery. Just to be able to see what other people are doing and to get back to the ideas and the drives that everyone has, is really important. The times where I felt most depressed when I was working in big institutions where a passive resignation to wait until interesting new creative practices come loudly knocking on your door before paying any attention to it, and thinking that the institution's recognition of an artist or designer is in itself the defining creative act. Creative things are happening out there, all the time, everywhere and cultural work is about how do you engage with it in thoughtful and prescient ways. In a digital age, this reality check of who makes and defines culture is all there, plainly in sight. I think of Photo Art Qatar. You did it, you created a context - you didn't need anyone to do that for you because people find you within these kinds of horizontal worlds. The role of a place like Tasweer is to help you work out how do you scale that up as individuals, and as an organization. You may decide you don't want to scale it up and actually you're really happy it being something that's on a voluntary basis and you meet up when you can. But wouldn't it be great to have an organization like Tasweer, which really has your corner and helps you connect the dots? Would you set up a publishing press? That's where we could be really useful, honestly, just the support to access what's already within you.

Adriane Aghata: So how do you think that the Awards are going to contribute to that?

Charlotte Cotton: Well, I think what we learnt from this first year of these Awards was just how important it is for us to make direct support of artists a central purpose. What I didn't want to happen with the Sheikh Saoud Al Thani Single Image Award, which you juried and are curating, is the worst-case scenario of a disparate international board of jurors, who I couldn't be 100% sure looked at all of those images, and definitely didn't work together to think about what this collective cache tells us about photography. To have you jury and curate the award has left me wondering who are we going to find next year who is as brilliant as Photo Art Qatar?! We've set ourselves up! Who else understands so fully how something happens when photographs that were never intended to be together are given that platform, and will celebrate that photography is a collective act? Then

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your capacity to select out just a small number of single images was a revelation to me because I could see through your eyes. I knew you were taking the time to have detailed conversations with each other about what makes an image absolutely singular, right?

With the Sheikh Saoud Al Thani Project Award, that's set up specifically to be a grant award for photographers and in a world with dismally few grant awards. The grants are there to give encouragement to set the intention for what, creatively, you will do next. If you're involved in photography, you learn that you chose possibly one of the most expensive ventures there is. Even a very respectable grant award isn't going to cover the cost of your ambitions and the project grant is a way to validate selected photographers in their efforts. The jury deliberations focused not only on the awardees' articulation of who they are, but also really what they were asking the grant to help them do. The jury's selection is quite a wide range, which I'm really pleased about - focused on the next chapter in a large project with new technology, or assessing a very long-term project and bring it together in a book form, or requiring support to present a very timely project to a wider viewership. Tasweer will show the fruits of their labours at Tasweer 2023.

Adriane Aghata: I really think that new groups and collectives are going to come up after this because even for the Single Image, we received so many different photos, from locations and people we wouldn't even expect, so that was really nice. So maybe, even the fact that people saw that there was a small amount of money in the Single Image category to be awarded, they thought, 'ok, I'm going to give it a shot', you know, let me just try. You have this variety of images from people from so many different backgrounds and it's really cool and this is happening here but we don't know because for some reason it's so hard to link with people in such a small country. It's so hard and I think that in a way, this is how PAQ helps because it helped. I found them on Instagram and I messaged them, I was like, 'can I join you guys?' and this is how I met Ammar, this is how I met Shaima, this is how I met other photographers, because in a way, we don't know where to go. Where are we going to meet people? What are we going to do? Again, away from the institutions, where are we going to? So, we all meet somehow through PAQ. That's something that is really nice, even for Ammar and Latifa that came up with this, to have conversations in the future with people and say, ok, this person is here because one day they went to one of the meetings, one of the photo walks and they met other artists and they collaborated. For now, I can only see PAQ but I'm sure that this festival somehow, is going to help other photography groups come up. right?

Charlotte Cotton: Yes.

Adriane Aghata: I think it's a way for people to say, "I can apply, I can get there. If I don't get it now, let me apply in 2 years." So it becomes kind of like a challenge, in a way.

Charlotte Cotton: I have to say, the calibre of the applications was fantastic. Tasweer is obviously dedicated to photography and photographic journeys but it's also really clear that it's about how photography can be an absolute joy. Photography can mean sanctuary from your children and a meditation of some sort. Or photography can mean your only way to communicate who you are - your selfhood. All of this lived experience that photography inhabits is part of the story of photography and its urgency of photography and what it provides all of us. I feel that Tasweer

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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.