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Reem Al-Faisal: Looking for the Divine Manifestation

Paul Michaud, Special to Arab News —

I wonder whether Reem Al-Faisal knows that the very day chosen for the opening of her exhibition at the Galerie Agathe Gaillard in Paris — appropriately titled “The Divine Presence” — was the birthday of one of the great world figures of photography, Brassai, the Hungarian-born French photographer.

Brassai liked to say he was born on “9-9-99,” for Sept. 9, 1899, and I wonder whether Reem Al Faisal realizes how appropriate it was to open on that very day her exhibition that is a homage to a man who, had he been alive, would certainly have appreciated her show.

This writer happened to work with Brassai — I was his neighbor in Paris for 25 years as well as his English-language secretary — and was very surprised to recognize in the work of Reem Al-Faisal some of the traits that marked the greatness of the man who became the “Eye of Paris,” in the words of Henry Miller.

I’m not sure if we could call Reem Al-Faisal the “Eye of Jeddah,” for that is where, according to her official biography, she is “based.” Not for anything is it that she says, “In my work, I like to show the signs of the Divine in nature and in man. For me, light is one of the numerous manifestations of God, that He projects in our path to recall to us His constant presence within ourselves and everywhere. Each photograph is a sample of light and of shadow.”

Interesting that she would stress how a photograph is not only a shadow but is also light and is white as well as black. It is a point that Brassai would also make, showing me how in his photos — unlike those of his archrival Henri Cartier-Bresson — white was as important as black and he would work very hard to find an absolute white that very few other photographers have ever managed to capture.

Never did Brassai ask a subject to pose nor would he manipulate the photo by computer or in the laboratory. But photo that he printed was the photo that he’d seen in his mind’s eye. The physical, indeed ethereal, brilliance of Reem Al-Faisal’s photos would indicate that she too first “snaps” the photo in her mind’s eye, takes it at the very moment when the subject manifests the “divine” element in all of us, in all things about us, and once the photograph is done there is little to do but print it.

I remember the summer of 1979 — a few days before his 80th birthday — when Brassai insisted on taking my brother, Marc, and me on a nighttime tour of the various sites in Pigalle, Montparnasse and Montmartre that almost a half-century before he

had made even more famous.

Stopping to catch our breath a few minutes on the steps leading up to Sacre-Coeur that Brassai immortalized in many of his photos, indeed on posters that today are common on the walls of students, Brassai acceded to my brother's request that he pose for a photograph himself.

Brassai watched attentively as Marc spent several minutes adjusting his camera, then looking through his eyepiece, before finally snapping the photo. Brassai, a very silent man who hardly ever spoke to anybody during the 84 years he lived, suddenly became loquacious, congratulating Marc, who was only 19, for having taken a photo in the very same way he would have done himself.

“You didn't make the big mistake made today by modern-day photographers of treating your camera like a machine-gun and shooting a dozen photos of the same subject. You took your time, you concentrated your attention, and when you snapped the photo, it was because you'd finally found what you had been looking for, nothing more, nothing less.”

I think that if Brassai were still here, he would have made the same comment about Reem Al-Faisal, for her photos also demonstrate a woman of patience, a woman who is certainly ready to wait not only minutes but hours to capture the photo she knows that she is looking for, for that very special moment in all things where the Divine manifests itself, where people and objects show their divine nature, but only to those like Brassai and Reem Al-Faisal who not only possess the rare gift of being able to recognize the Divine but also know how to wait for that very special moment.

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