

LAURA EL-TANTAWY



Her love of colourful photo stories with a personal connection have brought Laura El-Tantawy to the attention of picture editors all over the world. Keith Wilson finds out more about her distinctive visual storytelling...

LAURA El-Tantawy's life so far has been like a travelogue of overseas postings reminiscent of a diplomat working for the British Foreign Office. Her early forays to distant shores were largely determined by her upbringing.

Born in England's Midlands to Egyptian parents, Laura was raised in the UK and Saudi Arabia, then went to university in America's deep south before starting her working life as a newspaper photographer in Milwaukee and Florida. With so many contrasting cultural experiences during her formative years, and now based between Cairo and London, I'm intrigued to know how her changing circumstances have shaped her personal perspective as well as her photography...

So Laura, which culture did you identify with most? I imagine it has changed over the years...

It's a really good question because it's definitely changed and even now from where I sit today I think it's still changing. It's more about how I've decided to shape

01 OUR BLOOD ON OUR HANDS

An injured man is treated in an alley near Cairo's Tahrir Square during the revolution of 2011

Lens	Canon EF 28mm f/3.5
Exposure	1/125 sec, f/3.5, ISO200

02 FACE IN THE CROWD

Night-time in Tahrir Square, the main gathering point of protestors in Cairo during the revolution

Lens Canon EF-S 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6

Exposure 1/6 sec, f/4, ISO800

03 ALMOST DEAD

On the first anniversary of the 2011 revolution, a wounded man is carried away by fellow protestors who were demonstrating against the military government that succeeded Mubarak

Lens Sigma 17-70mm f/2.8-4 DC Macro OS

Exposure 1/4 sec, f/16, ISO200

04 WOMEN OF TAHRIR

Waving Egyptian flags, women join protests in Tahrir Square in June 2013

Lens Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM

Exposure 0.3 sec, f/4, ISO1600

myself and I even remember earlier in college, when I was in the US, I had to make choices about going out with my friends. Athens (Georgia, where she went to university) was a very well-known party town, people drank a lot, and for me it was always a choice: if I'm choosing to drink I'm doing something that doesn't belong with the culture and traditions I grew up with, but it's part of the experience, so I always had to make these choices that were shaping who I was as a person. Back then I probably identified more with being Egyptian and now, after all these years, I probably identify with both cultures, but not so much with any particular one. I'm quite an amalgamation of the two.

When you returned to Egypt from America in 2005, how did it feel?

It felt shockingly unfamiliar, it felt very scary at the time. Coming back to live in 2005 was quite a shock to the system because first I realized, 'Well this country has changed a lot, like I can't live here', and then it dawned on me that I've also changed a lot, so it's really about narrowing the gap and finding a place for me to fit in this country where the

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people's voice and sense of identity in the country is changing. On top of all that, I've also changed as a person.

How did photography help you in this instance?

Photography was a really good way for me to navigate the streets and familiarize myself with what's happening. In the same way that I felt back in college that the camera was a good way to discover the world, it became a good way for me to discover my country again, and even my own family. It was very scary and it still is even today, because when in Egypt I don't feel like I fully belong, and when I'm back in the UK I don't exactly feel like I belong, and I haven't had a real relationship with the US now since 2005, so I definitely

don't feel like I belong there, I just have memories of the US now.

What took you to the States in the first place?

I went to study at university. I was studying in Cairo for a degree in computer science, and it wasn't working for me because my mind isn't one that can comprehend in binary numbers! We went to visit my sister in the US, she was doing her masters degree there, and I decided to apply to universities and got accepted at the University of Georgia. I was studying initially for a business degree, but it wasn't tapping into my passions. Then I switched to political science and I started to find my own path, because politics is something that's very much part of our



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being as Egyptians – politics links into everything that we do. Then I also did another degree in journalism, so it was a marriage of the two, expressing myself in words and an interest in politics.

At what point did your interests turn to photography?

While I was in journalism school, I decided to take an introduction to photography class. That was the beginning of this revelation of the power of photography and how much you can say in an image. I had no idea that you could tell stories with pictures, that you could even engage with the world on that level. Like most young people at that age, what really struck me was that the camera can be a way to experience the world; you can travel, tell stories and show what the world is looking like. This had huge appeal to me.

You described *In the Shadow of the Pyramids* as “not a book about Egypt, it’s about Egypt through my experience”, so what compelled you to do it?

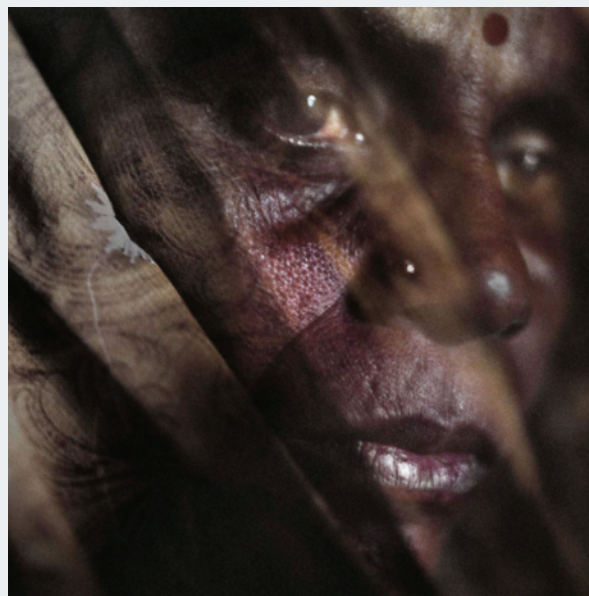
Two reasons. One, I was going back to Egypt with all this experience and with my college degree, and I thought ‘I’m coming back now to plant my feet here as

STORY BEHIND THE SHOT

OPENING DOORS

The hardest part of Laura’s award-winning series, *I’ll Die for You*, was gaining the trust of the bereaved...

“I think a big reason people gave me access is because I am a foreigner. People are more willing to speak to you because they think you are more likely to help them. A lot of the time they feel completely failed by the local system, so there’s this resistance to open your door to another person that might come and exploit you, but somehow they feel a foreigner won’t. In a way, I was happy that happened, but it was also a huge burden because when they open the door I always felt there was a responsibility that I really need to do something with these pictures, it really has to mean something, that somehow I have to change something for them, which I could never do, and I’m not in a position to do that. So, I was very honest and I told them, ‘I’m here, I read about this and I’m interested to talk to you, but I can’t promise that anything will come from it.’”





05 FACES OF THE REVOLUTION #5 HOPE
A man gazes at the crowd during mass protests against the verdict in the trial of Hosni Mubarak, 5 June 2012

Lens	Canon EF 75-300mm f/4-5.6
Exposure	1/250 sec, f/8, ISO200

06 FACES OF THE REVOLUTION #7 SAFEYA'S TEARS
Safeya Sayed Shedeed grieves for her son a year after he was killed by police on 28 January, 2011, a day locals dubbed the 'Friday of Rage', and three days after the start of the protests that eventually led to the downfall of president Mubarak

Lens	Canon EF 75-300mm f/4-5.6
Exposure	1/500 sec, f/7.1, ISO200

“ I never predetermine visual outcomes before I go to a place. I like the place to inspire me and the people also to inspire me”

a photographer and start my career here professionally.' But I was also thinking personally, 'This is my home, I want to establish my connection here.' So, that was the idea and photography was the way, the language, I was using to familiarize myself with the country again. It was also a good excuse to give myself a working project because I didn't have a job, I didn't have any clients, so it was something that kept me going.

How did you change as a photographer, because you went from press photography in America to doing something far more personal?

Yeah, I changed a lot and the reason I changed was because I set myself free of expectations that I really need to get assignments; that I need to get connections with editors; I need to get published. This was a liberating moment because I let go of the idea that photography has to come with an outcome of some sort, beside the photograph obviously, it just has to begin with me, with what I want and with what I have to say, and then I worry about the outcome afterwards. This lifted a lot of pressure off me and has given me a lot more confidence as a photographer in

that I've understood myself better as a person. I've understood my weaknesses, I've understood what my insecurities are, what my triggers are, and how to negotiate them and my anxieties.

There were plenty of anxious times in Cairo's Tahrir Square during the 2011 revolution, so how did you respond as a photographer?

I didn't feel like I was carrying the responsibility of saying or expressing visually what's happening on the streets to a particular audience. I didn't have an assignment from somebody, I wasn't with an agency, so I didn't feel that I have to photograph in a particular way. I was very free. I talked to people, I met people, and I was very free in what I was photographing and the choices that I was making at that time.

Were you scared, or did you feel that you wanted to be part of the moment with your fellow Egyptians?

I don't remember a lot of fear during those days from the 25th January to 11th February (2011). I remember there was a lot of excitement, a lot of euphoria. I found the sense of unity in a lot of the



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stories that people were telling me in the square. Everybody was there, fighting for that sense of Egyptian identity, so even though I had left and come back 10 years later after living in the US, people who had never left felt the same way, that sense of unity.

Your recently awarded series, *I'll Die For You*, is an intense subject, about the suicide of farmers in India. Why did you feel this was something you had to cover?

I was really curious to understand why people were committing suicide in India. In a way, I kind of channelled my own grandfather, who was a farmer in Egypt's Nile Delta and I never met him, so to find a way to try and connect with him and build a picture of who he was as a person by meeting these farmers. Then I went to India but didn't have any idea visually of what I wanted to do. I never predetermine visual outcomes before I go to a place. I like the place and people to inspire me. So I just got out there!

But there must have been something you knew that you wanted before going?

I knew that I wanted to try to photograph on film and I wanted to meet the people,

that was it. Every visual layer that you see is something that happened while I was there. I decided to focus on the faces, the portraits of the women, because they were the ones who survived the men and suddenly they were left with the burden of taking care of the land, having to repay the debts that they were now left with and having to take care of the children. It was very important for me to give them the face and hopefully by that way give them the voice. Also, I would ask the families of the men, 'Can I see a picture of your father, husband, or son who died, so I can take it and photograph it?' It was all happening with not that much thought, sort of creating these layers and not realizing at the end exactly what the outcome was going to be.

There are also images of details and close-ups...

There was this idea of doing the details of the land and the people, and again this happened while I was in India. I remember we were sitting on a doorstep with one of the families and there was an elderly woman sitting in front of me, I was on the step behind her so I could look down and I could see her beautiful hair and her skin. I thought, 'Wow, this looks so much like the land that we're

"It was all happening with not that much thought, sort of creating these layers..."

sitting on.' I asked her permission to photograph her hair, I felt really rude and invasive. She was like, 'Yeah, okay, if you want to do that'. I photographed it and this became the visual piece of this series, because it shows the closeness of the people to the land, that they almost become one.

It's an ongoing series, where else is it taking you?

I then realized I need to go to my own grandfather's village and photograph there in a way to honour him: if he was somehow in any way an inspiration behind this series, then I need to honour that and see where he lives and photograph the community there as well. This opened up the series to what became now kind of global in a way, trying to track this relationship between the people

07 I'LL DIE FOR YOU

Laura's image of a photo of 34-year-old farmer, Praveen Shaligramji Bumbhar, who died after setting himself on fire when no-one was home

Lens	Canon 35mm f/2
Exposure	1/200 sec, f/11, ISO400

08 ACCESS DENIED

Fayek Mohamed Mahmoud Anabousey, 77, reflected in the water irrigating his West Bank land. Over a period of several months he was denied access by the Israeli military who used his land as a training ground, without his consent.

Lens	Canon EF 24mm f/2.8
Exposure	1/400 sec, f/22, ISO200

09 TREE BARK

For her *I'll Die For You* series, Laura made close-up images of bereaved farmers' families hair and skin, as well as landscape features, to show the resemblance to their surroundings

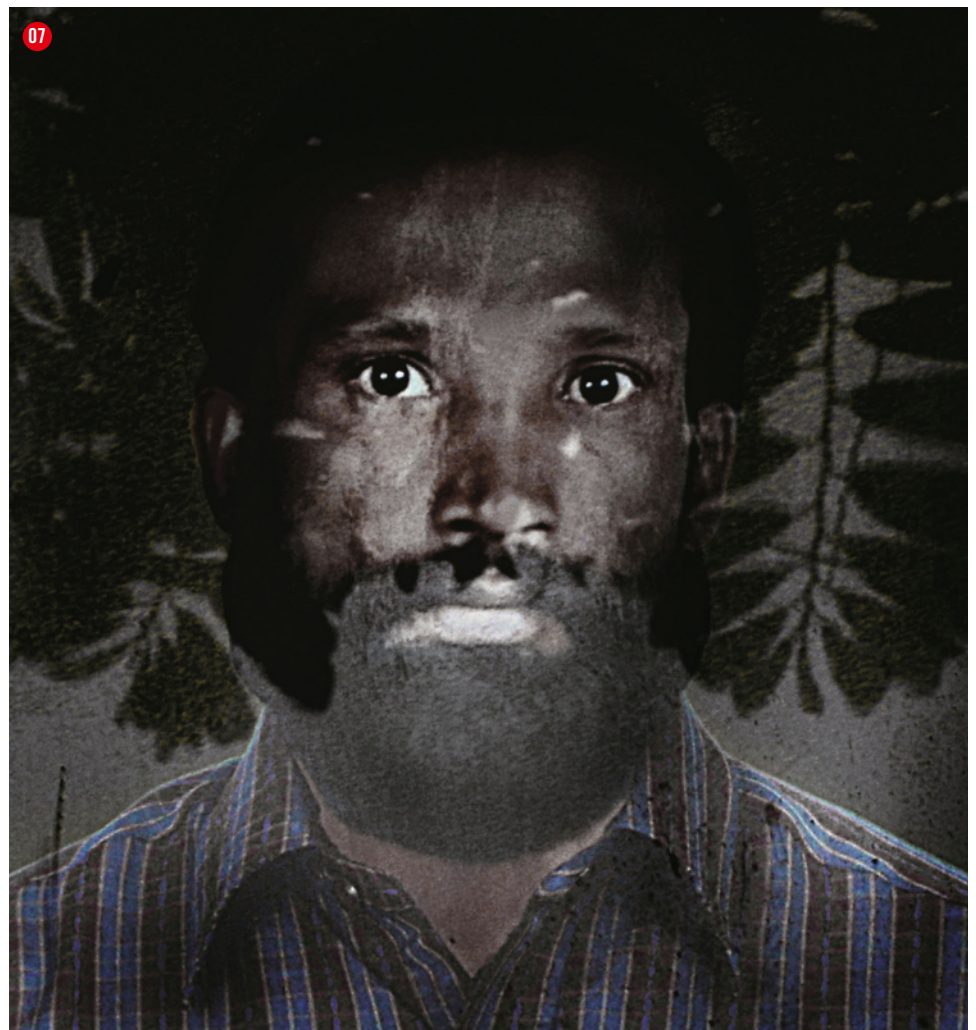
Lens	Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L USM
Exposure	1/1250 sec, f/5.6, ISO400

and the land: what's happening, what are the issues that they're facing, what does it look like, what does it feel like and how can I visualize it, without repeating myself, because I don't really like doing the same thing. I feel every region demands its own way of photographing, that I want to visualize differently.

***I'll Die For You* introduced you to film – it was shot on film as well as digitally, is that correct?**

Yeah, absolutely. I'm a child of the digital age. I've always worked digitally from my earliest newspaper days, so film is an exotic thing for me that you always hear people talk about, and I'm like, 'Man, I really want to do this sometime'. I wanted to do it with this series because people say film makes you shoot slower, it changes your connection with people and I wanted to apply that with this series, because it somehow felt appropriate. However, it was also a huge

"I think the world is vibrant and rich and difficult, and colour and light bring in this layer of curiosity for me"



risk because I didn't know what I was doing, I learned on the spot.

How did you work between the two mediums?

I identified what I would shoot digitally and what I would shoot on film. The portraits were always captured on film and everything else was digital, so the details of the land, people's skin. You can see that with the format because it's more like 35mm, whereas the portraits, the women, are all taken on 5x7 film.

How would you compare the two? Is there something about film that you really liked?

In photographing the families who were impacted by the suicides, I always felt like I was intruding on them in the rudest way possible, and I was always surprised when people let me in. I think the camera I was working with, a Mamiya RZ67, broke the ice a little bit. It's a big camera, it's quite bulky and it's kind of like a Hasselblad where you have to look from the top, and people were so intrigued by the tool that they started to ask me

questions. It distracted them for a minute, just took away from the tension of that exact moment. I'm happy that it worked out, but I really wanted to capture the emotion of what they had just told me about what happened; the intimate details about their finances; how much money they owed; the situation they were in; the shame they felt in the community; I had to capture that somehow in the photographs. It was difficult.

Speaking of cameras, how exactly do you tend to work?

I'm a bit more traditional when it comes to photography, I like to keep it simple. I've always worked with Canon cameras, except with the situation where I used the Mamiya film camera, of course. Typically, I work with one wide-angle zoom lens, one fixed lens, like a 200mm prime. For the farmers' series, I had a macro lens that I was using to get close to the details and the landscapes of the project. Also, for that series I was doing a short documentary video, so I had a small video camera and some audio equipment. In terms of my actual camera tools: one



PROFILE

LAURA EL-TANTAWY

Documentary photographer

Born in Worcestershire, Laura was raised and educated in the UK, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United States where she began her life in photography working as a press photographer. After turning freelance in 2005, she moved to Cairo and began what became her seminal book, *In the Shadow of the Pyramids*. Laura is the first Egyptian and Arab to be awarded the prestigious W. Eugene Smith Memorial Fund Award, which she received for her long-term series *I'll Die For You*. In 2016, she was among the four artists nominated for the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize, awarded to a photographer who made the most significant contribution to the photographic medium in Europe during the past year. Laura's work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *Afar*, *Le Monde*, *Wall Street Journal*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, and the BBC. In 2020, she became a Canon global ambassador and now divides her time between Cairo and London. www.lauraeltantawy.com

Next issue: Clement Kiragu, award-winning wildlife photographer & Canon Ambassador



camera and another one for backup, and just keep it as simple as possible.

What Canon cameras have you used and are you using now?

I've used Canon EOS cameras including the 30D and 400D in the past. In the last few years I've been using the Canon EOS 5D Mk III, now I'm on the 5D Mk IV and I have a new one, the R5, which is on its way, but that's the one I'll be using next.

I find your use of colour very striking. Have you ever attempted black & white?

No. I've only ever done black & white when I was in university, I did one story about a man called Albert who lived in a care home and that was the only time I'd

done that. For me, it is very difficult to see the world in black and white. I think the world is vibrant and rich and difficult, and colour and light bring in this layer of curiosity for me. But there's also this layer of positivity, life, something that is vibrant and moving, that even with all its challenges and all the difficulty and everything that is happening, there's still something positive, there's a possibility there, and for me colour is all of that. I would like to attempt it at some point, but I think there's a lot of other people who are much better at doing black and white than I am.

So, what's next for you?

I'm working on an exhibition, hopefully for Somerset House during Photo London

(in September 2021), and I'm working on a new publication as well. I have the Eugene Smith Grant which gives me the funding to continue the work on farmers and land in the US, so I'm just hoping to travel to do that, and maybe there will be more chapters after that, maybe something will happen and I will look for another location, another country. And dabbling a little bit more in film and audio as well. I'm really interested to see how I can see the world that way and articulate the world that way. Having spent more time in Egypt since last year, I'd like to plant a seed here, to establish a more solid base.

Things are beautifully poised...

Yes, in a very scatterbrained way! 💎