

Photo Exposition Aurore Belkin: Dubai Women



A short introduction into the photography of Aurore Belkin

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1. How we met

It all started when I met Michael Schindhelm first – I think it was in October 2009 – he said to me:

**„You will meet Aurore one day.
She rarely talks about her background.
But somehow it speaks out of her“**

I had no idea what he meant but I found out soon after.

I met Aurore first in Rome, where she is living since 2009, after 11 years in Dubai. It was in early summer last year, we were talking on her terrace. I was surprised. I had never seen her before but had the instant feeling that I had known her for long.

Later, in September 2010, we travelled to North Korea together. North Korea is one of the over 30 countries Welthungerhilfe is working in. We are the only German aid organization allowed permanently in the country, working there since 1997. But that is another story...

Aurore was the pro bono photographer for Welthungerhilfe and was part of our delegation. I was a bit concerned because taking photos in North Korea is a highly sensitive issue. As you know **North Korea** is the most **strictly controlled** country in the world. Our German colleagues, our Korean “counterparts” – our controllers, so to speak - and ourselves were on constant alert to make sure that we would not endanger our work and the status of our colleagues in the country by interfering with the strict rules. We had to be extremely careful.

But when I saw Aurore at work in North Korea, under these extreme conditions, I all of a sudden understood something that I regard as key to understand the photography of Aurore Belkin:

It's not only me who had the feeling to have known her for long. Everybody who meets her gets this feeling instantly – and inevitably. (She calls it the “Zelig-Syndrome”)

Is it the way she looks? The way she moves? Is it her smoothness and her modesty? I don't know. But I know what I saw. I saw her moving over the strictly controlled Kim Il Sung Square as if it was Petersplatz in Rom, or Theaterplatz in Bad Godesberg. Nobody stared at her in surprise or fear. That is what I witnessed again and again.

Surprisingly our Welthungerhilfe colleagues in North Korea even managed to organize a visit in the subway of Pjöngyang, a rare chance for foreigners. We were even allowed to travel one stop in the

Subway of Pjöngyang, from a station named “Triumphant Return” to station “Blooming Light”, reminding very much of the famous Moscow Underground.

Everybody seemed to know who we were, everything seemed to be arranged, taking photos was restricted. Our Korean guides were nervous. But then I saw Aurore taking photos – on the platform. I believe she took hundreds of photos in this highly tense situation. To my surprise, none of our guides complained. The passengers neither. People took it as normal although it was assumingly the most abnormal situation they had witnessed for long – photographers hardly ever enter North Korea, and almost never are allowed into the Subway station.

In a way I had the feeling that Aurore’s smooth movements – like a duck takes to water - and her discreet kindness even relaxed the whole strange scenery.

What, I was asking myself, what it is, that gives this photographer her very obvious and extraordinary gift of melting-in?

In university I was told we should not try to interpret the meaning of art – and these photographs are works of art too – by investigating the artists biography. Maybe. But works of art to me become even more meaningful and magical when we appreciate the cultural and social forces that may have influenced the artist. When we know the story of his – or her – life. Or at least some key elements.

This definitely applies for Aurore Belkin.

2. Her Life

So, Aurore, please allow me to talk at least a little bit about your fascinating background.

Aurore’s father is Gerald Belkin, a very special Canadian documentary filmmaker, Aurore’s mother was photographer on the film sets.

Gerald Belkin captured the life and agrarian culture of the Massai in Tansania and later in Haiti – by the way, these are both countries in which Welthungerhilfe works today.

He had his high time in the 1960 and 70s, the golden age of documentary filmmaking, and therefore could afford to follow a strict rule in filmmaking: He never started shooting before he was able to speak the language and had lived with his family on location for a while.

This is why Aurores first language was Swahili. And why she also learnt Creole. When she was 6, she moved to her Grandmother in France where she returned to French culture and language. She studied Russian which allows her to speak this language with Michael Schindhelm once in a while (Michael studied in Voronesh in Russia). Aurore lived in Dubai for 11 years with her son and they learnt some Arabic. She lives in Rome since 2009 and she speaks Italian. My conversation with her is in English (which is the only language I speak besides German and some Latin...)

It is not only that she speaks so many different languages and that she has lived in so many different environments and. From her early childhood, Aurore has learned how to melt-in into the most diverse cultures. She has learned how to read people's faces and how to understand their culture. She belonged – wherever she lived. This is why she can come very close to people.

However, I assume that parts of her still kept a little distance, were watching, watching with compassion, with a high sense for detail and for the meaning of moments. So becoming the compassionate photographer that she is – was in my eyes the most natural move for her. It is even more that a profession, it is her mission. **It is always the human relation that interests her most, the connection she can make with people.**

3. Her photos

It all began when she took master classes with veteran war photojournalists Jack Picone and Philip Jones Griffiths with whom she discovered her talent and developed a strength for reportage and portrait photography.

Her career is focused on the Middle East where she is represented by leading agency Arabianeye. She has shot reportage and features all over the world.

In 2007, she won an award at the Gulf Photo Festival and has been exhibited in Nooderlicht Photofestival with her work on Bangkok Fortune Tellers.

Her clients include renowned international magazines and papers like Business Week, NYT, Vanity Fair or Der Spiegel, to name a few, as well as prestigious corporates like Total or Abu Dhabi Formula One.

In 2008, along with renowned Art publisher Prestel, she has initiated and produced “In their Hands, 21st Century Embroidery in India”. Also here Aurore Belkin was focusing on the people and the villages – as always.

Tonight, we will focus on her Dubai years, 11 years in the city of constant change, in the epicenter of Globalization, as dutch architect Rem Koolhaas says.

There, she has been regularly portraying international political and economical figures and royals such as Benazir Buttho, Monica Belluci, Her Highness Sheikha Mayassa of Qatar.

And that's how she met Michael Schindhelm. She was asked to portray him for DER SPIEGEL, when he was the director of the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority.

So when Michael Schindhelm wrote his book “Dubai Speed”,

an inspiring memoir of 12 intense Months in Dubai, his unique diary, he could not have found a better co-author, than the photographer Aurore Belkin.

The book offers, and let me quote Architect Rem Koolhaas again, “a view of Dubai’s bewildered Emiratis as they construct, or have constructed for them, a unique 21st-century urban prototype. It is a record not only of how the writer tried to change Dubai, but of how Dubai changed the writer.”

The images of Aurore Belkin speak their own language, a congenial language that works perfectly well with the narration. The images complements the story, drive it, give rhythm, offer imagination and provide another rare insight in the widely unknown daily life of Dubai und its people. A City of 1.9 million inhabitants – 250.000 locals and 1.65 million immigrants, a city that is a temporary home for people of all possible nations. The biggest social experiment in the world.

The photos of Aurore Belkin again show her interest for the people of Dubai, the people who live in a city that has grown in highest speed, has lived through rise and fall, a city who’s buildings are known and mediatized globally, but who’s people are rarely shown.

Images that sometimes seem to be snatches of a dream, or stills of a fascinating yet strange film – images that allow you to immerse yourself into the secret world of Dubai. **You want to know more.** And that is the goal behind this exhibition: Aurore sees herself as an ambassador of the uniqueness of the Dubai social experiment and she sees the need for supporting its efforts. She herself is grateful for the personal and professional experience she could make in Dubai. With her exhibition she wants to give a positive representation of the women of Dubai, who, by the way, only sum up to 1/4s of Dubai’s population.. They are not the stereotypical oppressed Arab women – on the contrary: they are women with responsibilities and dignity.

Knowing all that, I was very pleased to hear from Dr. Thorn Wickert that she would organize for an exhibition for those great photos, with a special focus on Dubai Women. And thanks to her determination, her commitment and talent for organizing cultural events - here it is:

Dubai Women by Aurore Belkin!

When I saw Aurore’s Dubai pictures, Roland Barthes came to my mind. I remember that in his last book *Camera Lucida*, the French philosopher introduces two aspects of a photograph: it can be loaded with a message, aimed at the viewer, the idea behind the photo – a meaning we can read. But a photograph also can carry another kind of meaning that arises almost accidentally. Barthes calls it the *punctum* . Once the viewer observing the picture has begun to understand the photographer’s intentions (the *Studium*), the *Punctum* disrupts this idea. A small detail and captures your attention, and can even convey a contradictory meaning than the *Studium*. I find this differentiation is quite helpful in „reading the photographs of Aurore Belkin.

Aurore Belkin is certainly the most cosmopolitan person I know.

It is all in her: Canada and France, Africa and The Caribbean, The Arabic World, Russia and Japan.
And I am sure it is much more: **That is why Aurores uniqueness is her talent of melting-in - and still she remains a discreet and faithful observer.**

I would like to end my introduction with a short note on

The Name „Aurore“

Aurora, as you well know, is the [goddess](#) of [dawn](#) in [Roman mythology](#) and Latin poetry.

She renews herself every morning and flies across the sky, announcing the arrival of the sun.

Björk, singer-songwriter from Iceland, describes Aurora in her [Vespertine](#) track as follows:

Aurora

Goddess sparkle

A mountain shade suggests your shape

I tumble down on my knees

Fill my mouth with snow

The way it melts

I wish to melt into you

Aurore Belkin is an extraordinary photographer – and an extraordinary women, as are the women in Dubai.

If you like her photos I recommend to hurry up to buy your favorite ones – because in her next life Aurore Belkin will no longer be a photographer – she'll be a background singer for Leonard Cohen ;-).