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Moroccan Photographer Mous Lamrabat on Finding Success While Thriving Through the Warmth of Women

by MYRNA AYAD

Moroccan Moustapha “Mous” Lamrabat – [this issue’s creativity cover](#) photographer – finds success by following his gut while thriving through the warmth of women.



Models Patrice K and Athiec Geng photographed by Mous Lamrabat

The logo for VOGUE ARABIA, featuring the word "VOGUE" in a large, gold, serif font, with "ARABIA" in a smaller, gold, sans-serif font positioned to the left of the "G" in "VOGUE".

Every summer of [Moustapha “Mous” Lamrabat](#)’s 37 years were spent in his native Temsaman in northern [Morocco](#), save for this past “corona summer” of 2020 when, at once, the world faced a double pandemic – Covid-19 and its viral angst. “People were on edge, you could feel it everywhere – online, in the news, on the phone,” recalls Mous, as he’s been nicknamed since childhood. “When I feel bad or anxious, I go to my mother, who always helps put everything in place. I felt that the world needed a big hug from its mother.”

It was this sentiment that inspired his poetic photographic contribution to [Vogue Arabia’s message of hope](#) and love during quarantine, for the September 2020 issue: in the middle of a field of wheat, a woman stands facing the sun, her red veil falling over her shoulders and onto the blue djellaba on which a Superman shield beams from her chest. She is the mother; his, and everyone else’s, and she has superpowers.

VOGUE
ARABIA



Photographed by Mous Lamrabat

If there was a trifecta of Mous's personal passions and pillars to his practice, it would be the power of women, the senselessness of [racism](#), and the beauty of Africa. Sometimes in his photographs, these three anchors are rolled into one. Raised in Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, he saw how people stared at his veiled mother in the supermarket and on public transport. "Racism doesn't make sense to me. It's a computer error," he says. "I don't understand how you can feel as if you are better than someone else."

VOGUE
ARABIA



Photographed by Mous Lamrabat

One memorable incident occurred in 2009, when Mous graduated with a bachelor's degree in interior design from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Ghent; it was both the first time the institution welcomed a veiled woman to its commencement exercises, and the first time his mother attended a graduation ceremony. "Everyone was done clapping and there was my mom, the only one standing in the seated audience, still clapping," he smiles.

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In every slide of the movie reel of his life, there is Mous, amid a sea of judgmental eyes, turning his gaze towards his beloved mother and consistently seeing resilience, strength, and spirit. “My admiration for women began with her and my sisters. The kindness in women is something you rarely find in men. They have incredible power and I wish I could do the things that they can,” he shares.

Mous is honest to a fault, with a kindness and authenticity about him that is instantly palpable. His sincerity manages to breach Zoom’s cold digital barrier, and there are several immediate takeaways from the first few minutes of our chat: he is driven, passionate, and eager to learn more and do more. Mous is also extremely proud of his heritage, and like many a diasporic life, experienced how the question of identity pushes and prods until it is answered. Between Moroccan and Belgian, Mous initially chose the former. “I grew up in a white city where I felt there was a long list of unwritten rules,” he says matter-of-factly.

VOGUE
ARABIA



Photographed by Mous Lamrabat

The artist did a lot of soul-searching when he turned 30 in 2013. By that time, he understood that a career in interior design would entail “about a decade of being an architect’s assistant and no room to express ideas.” The creative itch tingled, and then he came across coverage of French street artist JR’s work, which was aimed at reframing perceptions of the suburbs of Paris. One secondhand camera from Antwerp later and Mous began increasing his travels to Morocco, by now convinced that photography – the kind that sits in the poetic space

VOGUE ARABIA

in-between art and fashion – was his calling. “I listen to my gut. I don’t do anything else. It’s my GPS,” he says frankly. Mous got a kick out of the limitlessness and speed of photography; the medium unraveled a plethora of possibilities, and, even better, served as a documentary. “I want to show you where I’m from, not the way it’s shown in brochures,” he says.



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The trips to Morocco brought on a realization: he didn't identify as a citizen. While on a trip to Ethiopia two years ago, the Ethiopians didn't recognize him as Moroccan, but Arab. "In Dubai, I was told I am African, not Arab. So, I then decided that since I was born in Morocco and Morocco is in Africa, I am African," he says. It is not surprising then, that Mous is allergic to clichéd, tired terms – or rather, descriptors – such as 'East meets West.' Exhaustive and reductive, using them, he says, "is giving a name to something because you can't think of anything else to say, because actually, you don't know."

One thing Mous doesn't know is how to label his work, but he is comfortable being unable to put a finger on it. "I spent my youth not being able to belong or fit in and my work is a continuation of that," he explains. "But this is me and I believe in doing my best and being genuine." In 2019, he staged his first solo exhibition, Mousganistan, a title at once a jibe, but also a retort, in Sint-Niklaas. "It brought a diversity of people together and I thought, hey, this works!"

VOGUE
ARABIA



Photographed by Mous Lamrabat

Spontaneity is at the heart of his practice. He saw a decorative assembly of red fez hats on the wall of a Marrakech riad and promptly piled them on a model's head for this cover shoot. From his stash of props brought from Antwerp, Mous attached a large red silk heart to the model's torso; an image so striking it became a cover. There is no single explanation for a work, rather, they are many parts of a whole. Props carried from Antwerp to Marrakech, perhaps? Mous laughs, and admits he's a hoarder. "I'm also a hoarder of ideas," he quips.

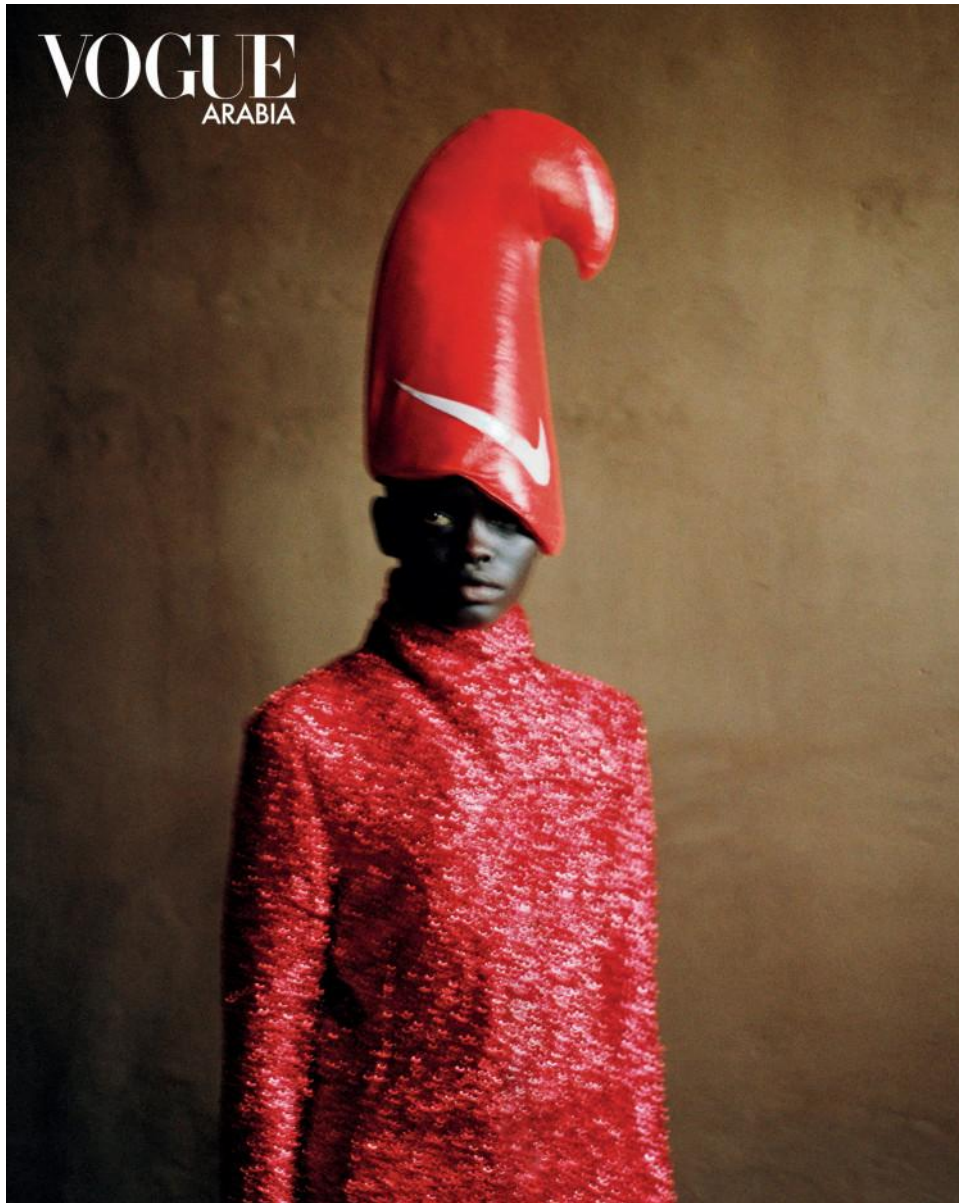
VOGUE
ARABIA



Photographed by Mous Lamrabat

Humor, the kind that is laced with wit, is also inherent in his practice. In one image, a young man holds a watermelon carved into the infamous Nike swish. It was a spur-of-the-moment idea: Mous's father had walked in with a watermelon, which Mous promptly took away and carved and handed over to his younger brother Youssef. And then a photo commenting on Moroccan culture was shot. "In Morocco, everything is branded," explains Mous, citing the veils, shoes, trucks, barrels, and so many more items marked with brands. "The only thing that's not branded is food."

VOGUE
ARABIA



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Some of Mous's photographs feature the iconic golden arches of McDonald's, and one would be forgiven for thinking that he has a quasi-obsession with the fast-food chain. He had worked there in his late teens and took a liking to the arches, since it's the same as his name's initial. "It's handy to have these things that you're obsessed with used in your work," he says. Indeed. But Mous's use of brands in his work is not branding. Nor is it endorsement or advertising. It is a cultural exhibition. And he's incredibly proud of it, too.