

## *Kafila*

M'hammed Kilito

September, 13 - November 11, 2023

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Courtesy the Artist and Gowen, Geneva © M'hammed Kilito



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GOWEN is delighted to present *Kafila*, a solo exhibition by acclaimed Moroccan documentary photographer **M'hammed Kilito**. This is the very first presentation of M'hammed's work at the gallery and includes never-before-published images from his multi-award winning, ongoing comparative study on the ecosystems of oases. Born in 1981 in Lviv, Ukraine, M'hammed Kilito is a major figure in the field of international documentary photography. Throughout his career, he has produced work not only based on a strong artistic commitment but, crucially, from a humanitarian, social and environmental standpoint. He has won the highest honours in photojournalism. He is a *National Geographic Explorer*, a *Magnum Foundation grantee*, a *World Press Photo* winner, a *Prince Claus Fund* and *AFAC Grantee*.

*Kafila*, meaning 'caravan' in Arabic, brings to the fore the complex and multidimensional issues of oasis degradation and its impact on the traditions and livelihoods of the local population. Encompassing the WANA (West Asia and North Africa) region, the exhibition includes images taken in M'hammed Kilito's home country of Morocco, documented in *Before it's gone*, as well as works from his recent series, entitled *Untold tales*, a continuation of the broader project which specifically refers to his photographs of the AlUla desert oasis in Saudi Arabia.

Witnessing a world on the verge of transformation, M'hammed Kilito is particularly concerned with the efforts to preserve, enhance, and sustainably develop its deserts' oases, seeking to portray the stories of their communities as actors or arbiters of change. A silent and inquisitive observer, he retraces the encounters and discoveries of his accumulative explorations through his photographs, capturing authentic impressions of these sites and their singular societies, manifold specificities, rich heritage, and abundant resources.

« Over the past few years, I have visited many oases, where I have made strong connections with their inhabitants. I was able to understand this rich environment but also its glaring realities. I realized that desertification, recurrent droughts and fires, changes in agricultural practices, overexploitation of natural resources, rural exodus and the sharp drop in the water table are all imminent threats to the existence of oases. My aim is to highlight these multiple concerns rarely covered by the media and largely unknown to the general public. » - M'hammed Kilito

An ecological mainstay against desertification and critical marker for climate health, oases are a refuge for biodiversity, constituting an original ecosystem based on the balance of three elements: the abundance of water,



soil quality and the presence of date palms. These indigenous trees, with their parasol-shaped foliage, create a humid microclimate, providing protection from the wind and favouring other plant growth fundamental to its state.

As warnings on the effects of global warming and human intervention on oases gain urgency, Kilito's veracious, evocative, and cautioning photographs document the evolving existence of these natural havens. In his latest works, developed during the Oasis Reborn Residency program, he seeks to record and relay the beauty of AIUla with alternative representations to those idealised images of ancient, preserved tombs, sandstone outcrops and canyons routinely diffused into the public domain. Working on a temporal axis that encompasses the oasis-city's past, present, and future, he intends to capture perceptions of its material and immaterial heritage, reflections on its ongoing societal, cultural, and economic transformations, and aspirations for the future that may soon be defined through the construction of new architectural megaprojects.

Through the prism of diverse subjects, ranging from seasonal work to abandoned locations, urban neighbourhoods, archaeological remains, farms, and luxury hotels, M'hammed Kilito unites several facets of AIUla, presenting them as a comprehensive and immersive narrative.

*Kafila aims to show that there are inhabitants, farmers, scientists, and citizen associations on the ground « who are fighting to preserve these islands of greenery in the middle of the desert and to end this project with a message of hope. »*

Around twenty works are included in the exhibition.



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## Recent accolades for ***Kafila (Before it's gone)***

2023

- *Louis Roederer Prize* for sustainability, London, UK;
- Open Call Winner Belfast Photo Festival, Belfast, Northern Ireland;
- *World Press Photo Contest, Africa Long-Term project winner*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands;
- *The Sheikh Saoud Al Thani Project Award Winner*, Doha, Qatar;
- *Prix Pictet* nominee, Geneva, Switzerland;
- *The Hopper Prize Winner*, Dover, USA.

2022

- *Getxophoto 2023 Open Call Winner*, Bilbao, Spain;
- Winner of the *Emergentes 2022 - International Photography Award Encontros da Imagem*, organised by Encontros da Imagem International Photography and Visual Arts Festival, for the Best Portfolios in Contemporary Photography, Braga, Portugal;
- Recipient of the *Visura Grant for Freelance Visual Journalists 2022*, New York, USA;
- *Leica Oskar Barnack Award (LOBA) 2022* prize shortlist and accompanying exhibition at the Leica Camera Ernst Leitz Museum, Wetzlar, Germany;
- *2022 Winner of the Fondation François Schneider Contemporary Art Prize*, Wattwiller, France;
- *Misk Art Institute grant winner*, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia;
- Winner Open Call "Home: A State of Transition" Kranj Foto Fest 2022, Kranj, Slovenia;
- Selected to the 9th annual New York Portfolio review, New York, USA;
- *Pro Helvetia Cairo, On The Road Again grant*, Project with Collective 220 and KOZ Collective, Cairo, Egypt;
- Finalist of the *Environmental Photography New Writers Award*, La Gacilly, France.



**M'hammed Kilito** (b.1981, Lviv, Ukraine) lives and works in Casablanca. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Montreal and a Master's degree in Political Science from Ottawa University. He is currently participating in the two-year VII Mentor Program. His work has garnered awards and grants, including: *World Press Photo Regional Prize*; *Louis Roederer Prize for Sustainability*; *National Geographic Society Explorer Grant*; *CAP Prize*; *Photography Prize of the Fondation des Treilles* and *Sheikh Saoud Al Thani Project Award*. He has also been a finalist for the *Leica Oskar Barnack Award* and nominated for the *Prix Pictet*.

His photographic works have been showcased at various festivals and venues worldwide, including: the Leica Ernst Leitz Museum (Germany); Sharjah Art Foundation (UAE); 1:54 Art Fair (France); Tate Modern (UK); PhotoESPAÑA Festival (Spain); National Museum of Photography (Morocco); Addis Foto Fest (Ethiopia); Format Festival (UK); Bosnia and Herzegovina National Museum (Bosnia and Herzegovina); Photo Vogue Festival (Italy) and Misk Art Institute (Saudi Arabia). His work has also been featured in publications such as *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The British Journal of Photography*, *Vogue Italia*, *L'Express*, *Liberation*, and *El Pais*.

Together with three other Moroccan visual artists, Kilito co-founded KOZ, a collective dedicated to telling compelling stories through long-term projects.

M'hammed Kilito is represented by GOWEN CONTEMPORARY.