

## **THE ROLE OF ART AS BRIDGE BUILDING**

by Alia Ali

“I AM” exhibition opening hosted by Caravan Arts  
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*Assalamu 3alaykum*

First and foremost I would like to extend my deepest gratitude and congratulations, to Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, founder of Caravan Arts, Janet Rady, the curator of “I AM”, Claire- Marie Pearman, head of production, and fellow artists with whom I have the honor of sharing this platform. Thank you for bringing this very intimate, raw and genuine exhibition across borders. Thank you to His Excellency Shaikh Abdullah bin Rashed Al Khalifa, ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain, and the Bahraini embassy for your support and involvement. To the Middle East Institute for all that you do, and of course, Jack Rasmussen and your wonderful team and the Katzen Art Center for hosting this exhibition. It is a privilege of speaking to you all this evening- thank you for your attendance.

In Arabic we say “peace” at least twice in a meeting, once at hello and the second at good bye, *salamu alaykum, wa alaykum al salam* and for goodbye, *ma'al salama-* with peace. Peace... this is what it's all about, isn't it? Or is it war? Or is it power? Is it possible to be powerful without war? I wonder sometimes, would peace even exist if there was no conflict? Would conflict even exist had the need for power not been an integral element in what makes us all human. If power is the root of all evil, then I say it is also the root of all good.

This is what I do as an artist. I deduce, I ask questions, and rarely do I find any one answer. I process these questions and along the process I create bodies of work. When exhibiting this work, I pose the same questions to the viewers. This leads to more questions, more answers, and hopefully more bodies of work. Art, making it and engaging with it, feeds my curiosity. I take inspiration from personal experiences, from language, that's a big one, from interactions with people, traveling to places and almost always from current events. In fact, current events is what takes up most of my time and energy these days. However, it can take its toll as most current events are fueled by hate, anger, violence, war, conflict, disaster and pain.

I come from two countries that no longer exist- Yugoslavia and South Yemen. I am the child of two linguists who, between them, speak seven languages and share only one, English. When I was a child, my family and I experienced the violent civil war in Yemen that was meant to unite two artificially created countries and many ancient tribes. It was in Sana'a where we were told that we could not be evacuated because we were not on the list. The list of evacuees included Americans, French, British, Germans, Swiss, Italians... In any case, where would go? The other side of the my family was trying to survive the genocide of muslims happening in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

My most vivid memory was when my father returned home with the news that we wouldn't be evacuated and with supplies, two of which were guns. He gave a gun to my mother and a gun to my brother, and to me, he gave a knife. He took them all to the balcony and started to teach them how to load and shoot in fear that they might need to use it to protect us. I was furious. Why did everyone else get a gun and I only got a knife? I want one too! He sternly refused and I was quickly put in my place. I was only seven. What I realized now is that I wasn't given a gun so that they could protect my innocence and my childhood. The guns were never used, but what was used a lot, was a needle. During every war and conflict my mother would embroider a tapestry. The Gulf War, the Bosnian Genocide- there were a few for that, and for the several civil wars in Yemen, there were also a few for that.

For this war, my mother created a huge *petit-point* embroidery. It was of a woman sitting with a lion holding a flag to her right, and a unicorn to her left. They are in a garden where the ground is the color of burnt orange, there are animals, both of reality and fantasy peppered throughout. It is about one and half meters, which to a child, was huge. But my favorite part was the woman holding a mirror up to the unicorn who is looking at its reflection. The colors are rich, the content is plentiful and for me, it was a distraction, a feast for my imagination- with the backdrop of falling scuds. One of the corners is where I worked on it, and it is obvious. But for my mother, it was how we she processed her thoughts, her terrors and her emotions during such hostile times. It was also how she could keep me close. Years later when I was taking Art history at Wellesley College, this tapestry came up on a projection. I had forgotten about it entirely and was suddenly washed over by emotion. I would discover that it is a Flemish tapestry of the *The Lady and the Unicorn* from the 1500s- its a series that goes through all the senses, and my mother, she was embroidering a replica of the tapestry representing the sense of "sight."

Today I am thirty-two years old and proud to say that I have never shot with anything else but my camera and the sense that I speak to the most is, indeed, sight. The language I have chosen to communicate with the world is through art, the visual language, and in opinion, the most universal.

Both sides of my family know war and for that matter, appreciate peace, absolutely. Many of us would find it in the United States. That peace came as security, education, and the power of being in control of our own lives. The power of being productive educated citizens and the power of being ambassadors of peace, not products of war.

Today, I stand before you still as a Yemeni, as a Bosniak, and also as an American. How Twenty-five years later I watch my family in Taiz, Yemen, enduring the most severe humanitarian crisis in the world and not being able to bring them here- not only because they are trapped, but because the door of this country, my country, our country, is closed to them. I see children, families, innocent bystanders being carelessly bombed from remote controls far far away. I look at Syria and watch the seas of people, and people in seas, seeking refuge. I look at Venezuela, Ukraine, Mali, Congo, Afghanistan- the list

goes on. All conflicts by humans. And then, there are the natural disasters. We can call them natural, but we, too, are culprits of this- Mexico, Texas, Nepal, India... and now, St. Martins and Florida.

My dear friend told me, "There is nothing else you can do but go nuts or go numb."

My response to her was, "Go nuts, go numb or go to a museum."

Our conflicts do not define us. I have come to believe that there are two things that are absolutely certain: One, as long as there is humanity, conflict is certain and, two, art will always be born from the sparks of conflict. In fact, art will always be born from the sparks of peace, too. Art is power.

This is where the artists: the visual artists, the composers, the musicians, the architects, the curators, the writers and the poets comes in. We are the keepers of the mirror in which society reflects on itself. It is here where ignorance and pain is processed into knowledge and beauty. We have dedicated our lives to this process. An artist is someone who submerges themselves in their surroundings, whatever that may be, in peace or conflict, drives it through their souls, hands, camera, instrument, paint brush and eventually expresses it into something accessible, something intimate, something vulnerable and something brave.

This exhibition, I AM, which I have the honor of presenting today, is no exception. It is a testament that we cannot and must not judge cultures solely through our suffering but through their beauty, their culture, their expression, their creation and their art. The work that you will experience today comes from women of West Asia and North Africa touching on themes that are central to these regions and yet, I think you will find are universal in their kind. Many are women who live on borders, with one foot in their respective countries and the other in their diasporic homes- they are productive citizens of both.

For this exhibition we were asked to create a new body of work in respect to the statement, "I AM." The term "I AM" is not prejudice and is not gender specific. In fact, it's a grammatical construction that acknowledges the state of being in the first person. Anyone can claim this phrase and on that note, I am inviting you to, as well. For me I have realized that I may never really figure out who I am, but I am, along the way, figuring out what I am not. I am not a terrorist, I am not an oppressed woman, I am not a xenophobe and I promise you that I will break bread with anyone, so long as the first course on the menu is respect.

I believe I share this sentiment with the thirty-one artists in this exhibition who are also travelers, chefs, doctors, journalists, diplomatic ambassadors, professors, political scientists, authors. They are also children, mothers, daughters, aunts, grandmothers... and there is one thing for certain that we all have in common: we believe in peace from dialogue through the power of art.

This exhibition gives you a glimpse, into how individuals in the region would complete this statement... thirty one perspectives, and counting. Today more than ever is a time

in which we must open our minds to the possibilities of the world and the endless perspectives within. If you come to a point in which you believe that there are only two ways of looking at something, visit a museum, attend an art opening or contact an artist.

Art, in conclusion, is a borderland. It is a space in which not only one person is in power- it is a place which is situated at the edge of politics, journalism, history, conflict and peace. It is a place in which people of all backgrounds and identities can come together to debate, discuss, engage and even be entertained. It does not require a passport, blue or green. Art is a territory of exploration that is available to us all, regardless of bans or borders. It is for this reason that I say that I and all of us in this room are in a great position of power- never underestimate the arts.

*Al-shukr wal salam.*