

Opening Speech
by Sheikha Marwa Al Khalifa of Bahrain
Exhibition VIP Opening of CARAVAN's "I AM"
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Washington, DC

It's an honor to be here with you all today, at the third stop of the CARAVAN's "I AM" Exhibition. The opening in Amman, Jordan ushered me into a world of diversity that shed light on who we are as Middle Eastern artists. Each of us as diverse as the other, and with our own unique stories to tell.

What does "I AM" mean to me? And what do we want to communicate as a group? Well personally, I am Marwa, a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother. All of the women featured here today are also significant in many different ways to many people. But who are we collectively? And how do we communicate that with you today?

I realized yesterday, as I listened to some of my fellow artists on the panel discussion, that they were using their words to describe their art. *However*, the art itself actually does the talking for them... if you're willing to listen. Our art speaks. Which is why inviting us, artists from the Middle East, into your museums, your galleries, your homes, allows us to dialogue in the most natural, most beautiful conversation.

Let me tell you a bit of my story as a woman, by telling you how I came to bring the Bahraini Pearl to today's exhibition.

As a mixed media artist, it was difficult for me to choose which medium I would use to tell you the essence of who I AM. At first, I thought I would utilize LED lights, to showcase the light bound up within a woman. Not always seen, but always there. I conceptualized a piece that would showcase beautiful beams of light, which I likened to the light of our souls piercing through the darkness. And we know, in these dark times between east and west, that light can best bridge the gap. Unfortunately, this piece was too heavy to transport.

Next, I decided I would create a piece built upon my wood collection about women - a collection that portrays a woman's complexity, including her innate strength and vulnerability - simply by using old cargo boxes. One features the word "fragile" another "handle with care." After submitting the work, I was gently reminded the work size had to be no larger than 100 x 100 cm!

And there I was, yet again, faced with the same dilemma, what to submit? Just as I was thinking that maybe it wasn't meant to be and that I should gracefully pull out of the exhibition, I received an email from Paul Gordon happily informing me that Janet, our curator, was interested in my new body of work that she recently had seen.

My pearl collection

And that's how the famous Bahraini pearl made it to the "I AM" exhibit. Jiwan, the name of my artwork, is derived from the English word g1 or grade one, a term used to describe the most lustrous, superior and beautiful of all Bahraini pearls. These pearls personally represent to me different kinds of women, each and everyone of them special in their own way. Like pearls, none of us are entirely the same. In fact, our little flaws and idiosyncrasies are what make us wholly unique.

Looking back now I see that the pearl really is the perfect metaphor for our dialogue here today. What people see of Middle Eastern women is usually very closed and covered, like the shell of an oyster. Even rough or unattractive. How does one get close to an oyster, of course until she's opened up. There you find the soft living creature and the valuable treasure she holds within.

In conclusion, as Arab women, we are empowered to make a difference in the world through our various fields. I have continually been inspired, not only by the women in our midst today, but by the trailblazing and brave ones who came before us. They paved the way for us to venture down our own paths, into new and uncharted territories. East to West, one long and lustrous string of pearls.

I believe this exhibition will further shed light on the potential and power of Arab women, dispelling old and tired stereotypes about us, simply by displaying who we truly are through our diverse artwork.

These pieces all work to push us beyond the stereotypes attached to Arab women, who are sadly in this day and age still pitied as helpless and submissive on the one hand, and labelled as threats on the other.

For me, as a woman, an Arab and a Muslim, I take this issue personally. I am not weak, and I am not a threat. Today we are working to heal those stereotypes and bridge the divide between East and West through our hopefully fruitful collaboration. It is through these amazing cultural exchanges that we can properly eradicate ignorance, and promote a better understanding of our different cultures.

We are not weak, we are not silent, we are strong clear voices of change. Remember the art you are about to see is our collective voice. So join us in the conversation.

I would like to thank the supporters of CARAVAN Arts for bringing us together on this powerful platform, and I look forward to viewing the response it gathers, as this exhibition continues its tour throughout the US.

Thank you