

ART IS POWER

speech by Alia Ali

“I AM” Exhibition, Caravan Arts

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Assalamu 3alaykum

First and foremost I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Caravan Arts and congratulations to 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 St Mark’s Episcopal Cathedral for hosting this important exhibition. Thank you to you all for your attendance, it is a privilege of speaking to you all this evening.

In Arabic we say “peace” at least twice in a meeting, once at hello, *assalamu aleykum*, “may peace be upon you,” and once at goodbye, *ma’al salama*- “with peace.” Peace... isn’t this what it’s all about? Or is it war? Or is it power? Is it possible to be powerful without war? I wonder sometimes, would peace even exist had there been no conflict? Would conflict even exist had the need for power not been such 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.

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, and in this order, 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 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-three 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 my 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. An ambassador of peace, however, does not mean to forget, sometimes it means to remind.

Today, I stand before you still as a Yemeni, as a Bosniak, and also as an American. And so, from here, from Seattle, I look towards West Asia and North Africa:

I see my family in Ta'iz, 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. In Yemen I see an average of 130 children die... each day. This information was collected in the latest report released by Save the Children.

I look at Syria and watch the seas of people, and people in seas, seeking refuge.

I look at Egypt where houses of prayer are being vandalized and bombed because they have a cross on them.

I look at Afghanistan, the longest war that the United States has been engaged in, seventeen years and counting. Children, families, innocent bystanders being carelessly bombed from remote controls far far away.

I look at Palestine and *know* families that are being kept in walled off communities, where clean water is scarce. I watch hundreds of people being killed, children being brutalized and forced into the judicial system that promises no rehabilitation or education... but instead promises torture, trauma and further tyranny.

And in all of these conflicts, I don't think only of my Arab Muslims, but of Arab Christian and Arab Jewish brothers and sisters too... everyone suffers.

But this is my American perspective, and so I will share my Arab perspective, as well. From West Asia, I look to the United States:

I look at black brothers and sisters being brutalized by those who are meant to protect them.

I look at houses of prayers being vandalized because they carry the symbol of a crescent instead of a cross. I look at Muslim sisters being attacked because they wear cloth on their heads.

I look at veterans who roam the streets homeless, rejected and forced into further trauma than they have already had to endure.

I *know* Dreamers, who are living and paying taxes, who's home is the United States... and yet, it is also their prison.

But the most painful is when I see the children. Children know no borders, and yet they learn them because it is there that they are being ripped from their families. I see Flint Michigan, where children have so much lead in their systems that it's considered a state of emergency. I see children being put into the prison system and they are not being rehabilitated they are being profited off of. And of course, the one that everyone seems to have gotten use to... children being shot and executed at their schools. How has this been going on for nineteen years. That's right, it has been nineteen years since Columbine?

We, too, in the United States, are a developing nation. The conflicts abroad are the same conflicts at home. It is dangerous to think of ourselves differently when we are not. Freedom is freedom is freedom and our freedom is just as vulnerable as anyone else's and we are not immune to tyranny, fascism or even genocide.

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, go to a museum, or get to your studio."

The more we integrate cultural events and dialogues the more empowered we will be. Art allows us to have intimate dialogues and experiences with each other and

ourselves. This is how we build our own allies, regardless of what's happening in Washington D.C., the Hague, Jerusalem, Cairo, Sana'a or Baghdad.

Our conflicts do not have to 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.

Right now is the time in which 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. The women in this exhibition have done exactly that. In their grievances and celebrations, they are sharing and they are exchanging. This exhibition is a testament that we cannot and must not judge cultures solely through their 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. They are simultaneously looking east and west and it is from them where I urge you to learn and be inspired, I know I have.

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, homophobe, fascist, and I promise you that I will break bread with anyone on this list, so long as the first course on the menu is respect and the dialogue is open.

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 support 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.

(With gratitude and peace)