

Remarks by Sir Derek Plumbly, Chairman of The Arab British Centre

(at the opening of CARAVAN's I AM exhibition in London at St. Martin-in-the-Fields on 3 July 2017)

It is an honour to be invited to say a few words in this historic place and on such a beautiful occasion.

It was my privilege to study Arabic and to marry and spend most of my working life in the Arab world. For the past year I have chaired the Arab British Centre which this month celebrates its 40th anniversary. The Centre was established to promote understanding of the Arab world and its culture in the UK. It hosts like-minded organizations in its premises next to Dr. Johnson's house off Fleet Street and runs events and courses and has a library there.



The Centre also organises activities on a larger scale - such as last year's Safar Festival of Arab Film at the ICA or the biennial Award for Arab Culture in the UK, this year's winners of which will be announced at City Hall in two weeks' time. If - stimulated by tonight's event - you want to know more about what's going in terms of cultural activity in the UK relating to the Arab world, do please visit our website: www.arabbritishcentre.org.uk

I am delighted that the Centre has been able to partner with CARAVAN in developing and promoting the I AM programme. I first met Paul-Gordon Chandler more than a decade ago in Cairo. It was obvious then that his enthusiasm and commitment to bridging the divide between cultures could not be confined within one city or country.

There has never been a time when such commitment was more needed than the present. Every day news headlines feed stereotyping and misperception and mistrust. There is no better way to dispel them than by engaging with film and literature and visual arts from the region and highlighting through them the diversity and vitality of its culture and people.

That is what the Arab British Centre seeks to do. It is what CARAVAN is doing in this exhibition.

A couple of other reflections. The first is that there is a long history of outstanding women artists in the Arab world. I claim no special expertise other than that of long enthusiasm for their work. But in Egypt alone, the 20th century saw brilliant woman artists like Effat Nagy or Inji Efflatoun, or a little more recently Gazibiya Sirry and Zeinab

Sagini. A trip across the bridge today will lead you to the exhibition in Tate Modern of the work of Fahrenissa Zaid, another outstanding woman artist from the region who startled the London art scene more than half a century ago.

The women artists exhibiting here have distinguished antecedents, but the geographical spread from which they come is broader. Represented here are artists from right across the region, from Morocco to the Gulf. The blossoming of the arts scene in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in particular recently is extraordinary. It encompasses equally both male and female artists, as was absolutely the case in those earlier generations too.

What is special about this exhibition however, indeed its *raison d'être*, is that the artists do not just happen to be women but that they are training their gaze on themselves. In doing so they illustrate -literally- just how far removed from the stereotypes women in the Middle East are, and how creative and diverse.

CARAVAN speaks of peacebuilding, using the concept in the broader intercultural, bridge-building, East-West sense - the field in which both CARACAN and the Arab British Centre work. However, I spent the previous six years of my life, often frustratingly, in peacebuilding in the narrower sense in which it is understood in the United Nations, seeking to address some of the intractable problems affecting societies which have endured or are enduring conflict.

In that context I can't resist saying that I was struck by the beautiful image which is the poster for this exhibition, the painting by Zeina Assi, which she has entitled 'al qowa fe yad al mar'a', 'the strength...' or as she puts it 'the force' 'is in the hand of the woman'. That is true in many ways and some of these images highlight it. But when it comes to politics, or conflict, or indeed conflict resolution, it is not, certainly not to any significant degree. Would that it were!

Thank you.