

Address by Sheikha Lulwa Al Khalifa
Participating I AM artist from The Kingdom of Bahrain
Opening Program of I AM at Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery
August 30, 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests. It's a pleasure for me to be here in Nashville to speak to you today at the prestigious Vanderbilt University. Thank you CARAVAN and Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler for inviting me. My name is Lulwa Al Khalifa. I'm a painter. I am a Muslim and I come from the Middle East. The "Middle East" - that's a loaded definition almost too broad to exist. It is impossible to refer to the Middle East as one block ... we are a group consisting of diverse countries, languages, cultures, histories and religions. We cannot be painted in one color or put in one box.

I come from a tiny Island nation called Bahrain. It is roughly the size of Manhattan, with a population of about 1.5 million. It is a 40 min plane ride from Dubai and a 30-minute drive away from Saudi Arabia via a causeway. It may take you 2 to 3 hours to drive from tip to tip during which you will encounter many accents and dialects. Locals speak Arabic but some also speak Hindi, English and Farsi, among many others. Our women are educated. They are empowered. They occupy top positions in both the private and public sectors. They are ministers, ambassadors, CEOs, educators, entrepreneurs. Women represent half our work force and most families in Bahrain are dual income families. Women are payed equally to men. They vote. They dress however they want and they drive. Driving is less of an issue now that Saudi Arabia has allowed women to drive but women in Bahrain have been driving since the 1940s. And yes, sadly, we have the same lame women driver jokes that you have here. We have freedom of religion. We have mosques, of course, but we also have churches synagogues and temples. How many misconceptions and stereotypes have I just broken in this short time that I've been speaking to you.

It is difficult not to assume, not to believe the stereotypes. We are bombarded with them in the news, by the media, in movies and tv shows, both in the East and the West.

But what would happen if we muted the narratives, if we just saw each other as people, as human beings. The same things make us happy: the love of family, personal achievements, our pets. The same things make us sad; loss of a loved ones, illness, our favorite team losing, *Game of Thrones* ending.

We share so much yet we focus on our differences... There is no "other" . . . there's just us.

I am here today thanks to the beautiful efforts of CARAVAN whose aim is to build bridges of understanding and enlightenment between the Middle East and the West through art. Art is a disarming non-didactic way of spreading awareness throughout our world. I stand before you today as a representative of my fellow artists in this exhibition showings works by 31 artists from 12 countries. We have different backgrounds, different languages, different religions, different cultures, different stories.

This is what you'll see when you walk through our exhibition; familiar stories expressed through art, and nuanced stories that reflect the artists that produced them. Each work has an artist statement about the work and the inspiration behind creating it. Some works are political or have an underlying message behind them. Some works are just depictions of life in its many facets, or depictions of beauty . . . works that aren't region or gender specific.

Hopefully you will resonate with the works on a human level because our humanity is the undeniable bond that unites us all. Thank you very much.