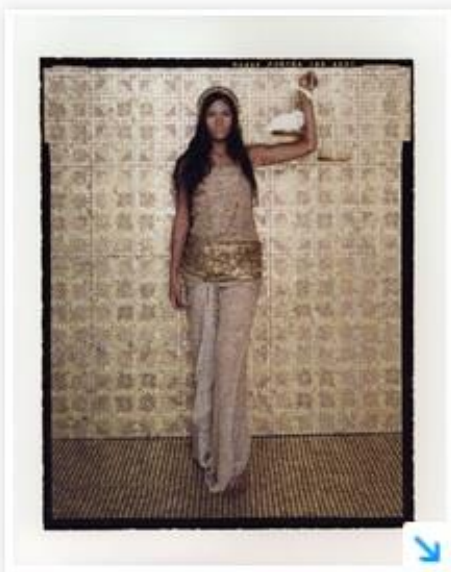


Vanderbilt exhibit 'I AM' combats stereotypes of Middle Eastern women

Melinda Baker, Special to Nashville Tennessean / USA TODAY NETWORK — TENNESSEE Published 8:00 a.m. CT Sept. 16, 2018



(Photo: Courtesy Edwynn Houk gallery)

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Last month, in a speech at the opening reception for Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery's latest exhibition, "I AM: Middle Eastern Women Artists and the Quest To Build Peace," participating Bahraini artist Sheikha Lulwa Al Khalifa succinctly refuted some common stereotypes about women in her country: "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. (They) represent half our work force and ... are paid equally to men. They vote.

They dress however they want and they drive ... and yes, sadly, we have the same lame women driver jokes that you have here."

Rectifying Western misconceptions about Middle Eastern women, particularly Arab and Iranian women, is essential to the vision behind "I AM," which aims to build bridges of understanding, respect and connection between the regions. The exhibition features work by 31 acclaimed established and emerging Middle Eastern women artists from 12 countries, including women of both Christian and Muslim faiths whose art tells the truth about who they really are, how they actually live and what they are doing to help build a more harmonious world.



Nermine Hammam (Egyptian),
"Oum Kalthoum," 2011, digital
image on Hahnemule paper
white rag, 29.5"x21". © (Photo:
Courtesy of the artist)

The entity behind the exhibition is CARAVAN, an international arts nonprofit with the monumental goal of building understanding and peace among the creeds and cultures of the Middle East and the West through visual art. Founded in Cairo, Egypt, in 2009 by the Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, the organization mounts annual art exhibitions designed to spark intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and connection among Middle Eastern and Western people.

The shows begin in the Middle East, then "caravan" to the west and are typically presented in museums and cathedrals to reach broad audiences. Guest curated by Janet Rady, a specialist in the U.K. in Middle Eastern contemporary art, "I AM" premiered in May 2017 at the National Gallery of Fine Arts in Amman, Jordan, under the patronage of Queen Rania Al Abdullah, and it will be on view at Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery through Oct. 10 as part of its 16-month U.S. tour.

How the West sees Arab and Iranian women is, as Chandler says, "one of the greatest areas that needs further understanding." He adds, "The West typically believes that all Middle Eastern women are oppressed, that they have less rights, that they're not influential in shaping their communities, that they can't assume leadership roles. This exhibition shows that not only are women making art, they're making current and contemporary art. They're also engaged, active, dynamic and they contribute significantly to the fabric of global culture. They are foundational in creatively evolving these new narratives that uphold their heritage, keep hope alive and embrace a future full of challenges."

Powerful, personal and deeply relatable, the works in the show range from painting and multimedia to photography and sculpture. They delve into themes like identity, culture, resilience, joy and freedom, and they celebrate the unique and profound ways Middle Eastern women positively impact their communities and the global quest for peace.



Maitha Demithan (Emirati),
"Mother," 2017, scanography,
39.4"x31.5", © (Photo: Courtesy of
the artist)

The positive and inspiring stories about women in this region are not typically shared in the West, Chandler notes. "A lot of exhibitions related to Middle Eastern women in the West focus on heavy themes and issues of oppression, violence or inequality. "I AM" does the opposite; it showcases their individuality, strength and their fundamental contributions to freeing our world from sectarian strife."

At the heart of the exhibition and CARAVAN's mission is the belief in the transformative power of art, which Chandler hopes viewers continue to seek out. "Art is one of the most effective ways to create understanding and respect, enable sharing and deepen friendship between those of different faiths and cultures," he says. "Art can do this not only because it humanizes

the 'other,' but because it addresses challenging subjects in an indirect way, so we're less likely to raise defensive walls, which, to quote the 14th century Persian Sufi poet Hafiz, helps us to see each other as 'partners straddling the universe.' "

If you go

What: "I AM: Middle Eastern Women Artists and the Quest To Build Peace"

When: through Oct. 10

Where: Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery in the Cohen Memorial Hall at 1220 21st Ave S.

Admission: free