Navigating Culture And Context: Arab Artists In The West

Kelly Carmichael in conversation with Diana Al-Hadid

Throughout the world the continual fracture and displacement of people is a historical fact, and the question of identity a complex one. This interview with Syrian-American artist Diana Al-Hadid came from an interest in the expatriate experience – either voluntary or via political diasporas – and how, or to what degree, the resulting dislocation from geographical situation, national identity and cultural convention informs the objects and disjunctive spaces of an artist's practice. A major facet of the Modernist project, the "spirit of expatriation" as Duchamp describes it was a theme central to the work and life of cultural exponents such as Duchamp, Gertrude Stein, Hemmingway and Picasso. Almost a century on, and what seems like a world apart, how is the expatriate experience negotiated by artists of Middle Eastern background now living and working in the West?

KC: You came to the US from Syria as a young child. I imagine that like within many immigrant families you grew up with a divided identity – one inside the home and one to the outside world. In an earlier conversation we spoke about one of the greatest influences of dual cultural background being the importance of complexity and nuance, the ability to never think of things in absolutist terms. Can you expand on this?

DA: If I can trace any conflict or negotiation between my dual cultural identities as an Arab-American it is generally reflected in my approach and sensibility rather than in my "message". Having been surrounded by a household filled with lush colour and ornamental objects from across the world, but studying under a team of Modernist-born art professors, I noticed I was simultaneously attracted to both aesthetic systems, to speak very broadly. In a way I tend to try to reconcile two very oppositional worldviews of what is 'artful' or 'beautiful'. I find that each side wins arguments along the way while I'm making decisions in the studio. In the end, I can identify areas of my work where reductive organizing principles contain opulent effusions, yet at other times decorative impulsive overtakes essentialist design. To me it seems that the complexity and nuance you mention is best described in the compositional character of the work itself.

KC: With this in mind I'm intrigued that boundaries, membranes, outlines and a sense of physical pulling and extraction seem to play a large part in your work....

DA: That's true, there is possibly an overlap as you suggest between the forms and cultural background, which is perhaps too deeply psychological for me to decipher! I do feel compelled to delineate space very carefully, to exclude or include the viewer in certain works, to consider the psychological "violence", as Bernard Tschumi would have it, of architecture. So, in terms of the forms behaving metaphorically, outlining space in a way to express distance and boundaries, I think that's interesting. I'm curious to what extent I've been exploring the romance of "distance." I am curious at which point we feel simultaneously removed and deeply connected to a place, or even to a person. My work is never completely a closed and contained object, it is always something you can see through, the space filled with layers, defined in small measures by lines and planes. There is a constant question regarding where a work will begin or end, how invisible the boundaries are, or how obscured the starting point is. This can be considered metaphorically I suppose, but my job is first to consider sculptural implications before cultural ones.

Built from Our Tallest Tales
Fibreglass, wood, metal, polymer gypsum, polystyrene, plastic, concrete, paint, 144″ x 100″ x 80″
Credit: Mariano C. Peuser

KC: Expanding on this idea of dual cultural influence and thinking of the work of other artists of similar backgrounds now living and working in the West…. do you think that this physical and cultural displacement, either via political diasporas or voluntary expatrism, is a defining element in their practice?

DA: I don't know how to speak for other artists, but I think the sad truth is that I would not have been able to make the specific kind of sculpture that I make now if I were living in Syria. My family left because my father knew there would be more opportunities for his kids in America, but also I think because he felt a little limited by some of the cultural expectations in the Middle East. Lucky he left, because I really can't imagine making this sort of work in Syria. I think even now it's not too common to be a single 28 year old woman welding and chopping wood in her studio, and to be fair, it's not a

typical life even in America. So, to give credit where credit is due, on a logistical and technical level – let alone the emotional/ psychological impact – the work I make is a result of my living in America. In that sense, sure, my relocation defines my practice and it defines who I am and how I came to think the way I think. But I don't think I work with a spirit of urgent political revolt and response. It's a much more complicated and pervasive thing. The migration of Arabs to America is relatively recent compared to other minorities, especially in the suburbs where we moved. But I would not want anyone to misunderstand the kind of life I've had and the reasons for my family's immigration. They were not living in a warzone and we certainly did not move into a warzone in the suburbs of Ohio. But in a sense, I would agree that my father felt, in some way "forced out"... perhaps psychologically, or emotionally, or economically. He certainly felt like he needed to leave to have a better life for his kids, and he has never visited since he left. He believes strongly that Ohio is the best place on earth, as a matter of fact.

KC: Reading Western art magazines I'm always coming across exhibition reviews and profiles of artists where their Middle Eastern background is used as a filter for the whole understanding of their work. It seems to proceed actual looking at the piece or exhibition and clouds how it is understood. Although a somewhat ubiquitous approach to artists of non-Western backgrounds, I wonder if for Arabic artists it is the current external perception of their culture, especially politically, that makes this framing so popular. What are your thoughts?

DA: In terms of the "fetishizing" of Arabic culture right now, perhaps that is the case. One should look at the broader context of a work to be able to understand it; you can't look at an object and not know where it came from and how it came to be there. I have no issue with people coming to a work because of a certain cultural curiosity, that is normal and natural and actually responsible — you have to know the context of everything to understand it. The question is how well rounded is the understanding of that context. The danger is that beyond responsible contextual research, the initial cultural curiosity is a "fetishization," and strongly colours and limits the interpretation of the work. When I see this happening, but I want to believe that the interesting work will stick around after the fetish wears off and, eventually, hopefully, it will shake off the initial superficial interpretations and attract more broad-minded, complex critics. Minorities of all types have to deal with this oversimplification of their work all the time, and wait patiently for the more layered readings that is the luxury of the rest of the artists. On the other hand, if the artist indulges these superficial interpretations, I guess you can start to blame them, or, better yet, ignore them. But eventually I think the smarter audience will find them out.

KC: And politically?

DA: The more access that the "West" has to the Middle East, the more cultural exchange can occur and the more people will notice not only the artistic diversity in the region, but also the political and religious diversity. I still remember the first day I saw hummus in a suburban grocery store, and it blew my mind. It will take longer for 'Middle America' to think of the Middle East as a more complex place and not all religious or full of political extremists. It seems to me that there is a serious imbalance in the West of voices from the Middle East region... it will require initiative, curiosity, patience, and empathy to right that imbalance. But this will take time. And maybe a lot more hummus.

KC: Are identity politics still a valid or interesting way of reading work or a tired discourse?

DA: Yes, context is always important, no one makes work in a bubble... or if they do, that bubble will affect the work and should be studied.

KC: Do you think most people assume the work of an artist of Middle Eastern background to address the idea of identity? If so, how do you feel about this?

DA: I think they may assume that identity politics are being 'negotiated' at every turn, that it's part of every

aspect of the work... In the same way that I find it is hard for me to know what it means to work as a Middle Eastern artist, it is equally hard to distinguish what parts of a work or an artist's practice deal strictly with identity because it's a pervasive thing. In the same way, it would be strange to try to figure out what part of you is "female" or "tall" – its just not that distinct. Nothing is. And so it's confusing to me when people see work as being of or coming from such a singular and distinct characteristic. I'm becoming more aware of the novelty of my specific biography and, while I think I'm weary of overemphasizing my personal narrative as a one-to-one/ cause-and-effect/ play-by-play account of my work, I do realise that I represent a certain kind of minority.

KC: Is there a 'one size fits all' approach by the West, an oversimplification of context?

DA: The trap is that people stop seeing the other frames. For example, I am confused when people notice only that I was born in Syria, and that this must account for all the decisions in my work. I think that this is a misrepresentation, not just of me, but also of my work. A person should at least consider more than one frame to contextualize a work. And, more importantly, they should look at the work itself, it should precede the biography. I am used to the fact that I'm a female Arab, but I am still grappling with how to make a sculpture stand, the issues that I deal with everyday are much more specific than "who am I?". I care very much about sculpture, about process and form and material, and I am sad when, in the course of interpreting my work, my sculptural pursuits are repeatedly trumped by who I am and where I'm from. I prefer to distract myself with other kinds of big unanswerable questions, such as the fate of the universe and the interiors of black holes and such... something I think is easier to calculate than my identity. I want to affect art first, my allegiance is to art and artists – I understand them better than I understand any other language. But in the end I do not care what people expect or assume... the people who matter to me have a longer attention span, and have a more complicated appreciation of art and can see further than the reductive, essentialising statements made for press releases.

The Tower of Infinite Problems
Fiberglass, polymer gypsum, steel, plaster, wood, cardboard, wax and paint, Large: 174" x 99" x 95" / Small: 83" x 105" x 63"
Credit: Tom Powell

Kelly Carmichael is an independent curator and something of an expat herself. Originally from New Zealand she is currently based in the United States, arriving there via the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and France. As a commissioner she is interested in developing fresh ways of working and new forms of partnership between cultural and creative industries and the public and private sector. She has written for and contributed to cultural documentaries in Europe, the US and Australasia, presented at the Oslo Film Festival and is currently editing a publication on the meeting of contemporary art, architecture and landscape design.

Spells on our Youth
Fiberglass, high density foam, resin, steel, paint, 15″ x 16″ x 16″
Image courtesy of the Artist

Edge of Critical Density
Fibreglass, polymer gypsum, steel, wood, paint, 90″ x 79″ x 90.75″
Credit: (Peter Foe / University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum)

Self-Melt
Fibreglass, polymer gypsum, steel, polystyrene, cardboard, wax and paint, 58″ x 56″ x 75″
Credit: Tom Powell

Actor
Steel, wood, plaster, polymer gypsum, fiberglass, aluminum foil, silverleaf, paint, 84″ x 44″ x 90″
Image courtesy of the Artist

All The Stops
Cardboard, wood, fiberglass, metal, plastic and paint, 68″ x 56″ x 104″
Image courtesy of the Artist

Forever (Blank) Matter
Fibreglass, polymer gypsum, steel, plaster, paint, 84.5″ x 104.5″ x 139
Credit: (Peter Foe / University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum)

A Measure of Ariadne's Love
Mixed media, 84″ x 108″ x 96″
Image courtesy of the Artist

Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz
Wood, polystyrene, plaster, fiberglass, paint, 72" x 64" x 64"
Image courtesy of the Artist