

Carnivals

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

AYK: What was your reaction to the presidential election?

AA: Initially, I felt as if I were in a period of mourning.

AYK: And now?

AA: Once Trump became president, I was ready, as were tens of thousands of others, to break out from that feeling of paralysis.

AYK: What do you think Middle Eastern artists living in the US need to do about this?

AA: All artists have a role to play, but it's not by virtue of being an artist that you're automatically going to have a political position.

AYK: Has your art changed as a result?

AA: I've shifted from inanimate architecture to, all of sudden, people. Figures are entering my work.

AYK: What does this mean?

AA: I think it represents the proximity of what's happening, right here, in my city. So that's a shift that's been very real for me.

AYK: Have you thought about moving elsewhere?

AA: No. I feel an obligation to change things where I am, and where I'm from.



read more on page 132

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#aboutamerica





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Born in Cairo in 1963. Lives and works in New York

Did you call the American presidential election correctly?

Well, I kind of guessed it would be Trump, because they elected Bush twice. So I wasn't surprised that they would elect another similar, but worse, person. But at the same time, I was hoping that I was wrong. I wasn't as surprised as many people, because I had already prepared my plan B a long time ago. And yes, I do have a plan C. Do you want to know my plans?

Tell me...

So, plan B is to go back to France. And then C is, I don't know... and then D is to go back to Cairo. In April, I will know if it's going to be plan B or plan D. But it might be plan D, because I think Marine Le Pen is going to win the French presidential election. There is a tendency in the world to move towards fascism in a way which I think is a reaction against globalisation. The only frontiers are the 19th-century and the 20th-century ones, but people travel and these frontiers have a tendency to dilute. The old order doesn't like that. That's when it becomes a bit dangerous, because they cannot keep control in the way they would like.

You grew up in France and came to the US in 1997. How was it then?

From 1997 to 2001, I was so happy that nobody knew what Middle Eastern meant. In France, being an Arab and a Muslim had something of a stigma attached. Here, I was nobody, not identifiable with anything. It was the best time.

And how is it now?

It's getting worse. As Alfredo Jaar said, "Now is the time of monsters". They're deporting everybody now. Mexicans and Arabs. This is it. But this is not America, it really isn't. It's such a shame actually, to view America simply through Trump because many people, in fact all those I know, aren't happy about Trump and the ban. It's going to be up to the American people, not up to the Middle Easterners I think, who are just part of this American fabric.

Does art have a place in the debate?

Art doesn't prevent anything in the short term. It's a long-term fight, or a long-term enlightenment in a way. It's not like an antibiotic, which you take and then get well. It doesn't work like that. It's more like Chinese medicine or homeopathy that you need to take like a poison, a little poison that will heal society. We are the poison. The artists are poison.

What would you say to Americans who believe that what Trump is doing is for their own security?

I would tell these Americans to go back to school, study and get some education.

That works for me. Have recent events changed your views on democracy?

Absolutely. Actually, I don't believe in democracy. And I particularly don't believe in American democracy ever since they were saying, "We have to bring democracy to the Middle East". We don't even know what they mean by democracy in the Middle East, since they've always backed up the dictatorships in the region. What kind of democracy is this anyway? First of all, it's a kleptocracy. It's thieves, the thieves of Wall Street, the thieves in the gun or medical industries, the thieves of everybody who wants to get richer. Meanwhile, the people are slaves.

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How has being an artist based away from your homeland affected your identity?

I don't know, where is my homeland? Egypt? France? My homeland is America. So I have three homelands. But none of them really accepts me 100 per cent. Because when I'm in Egypt, or even in the Middle East, I sometimes don't fit in. I'm not a French artist, though I grew up there and I speak and write in French. I was denied citizenship there three times. They're picky, the French. It's their national treasure. America did give me citizenship and I feel at home in New York, with all of the many races mixing together peacefully.

In what ways has your art been influenced by the places you have lived in?

My art would definitely have been different had I stayed in Egypt, even more so had I grown up in the US. I would say there's a very European aspect to my art, a large degree of freedom with the body, eroticism and sexuality, all of which is very specific to France and that part of the world.

Do viewers need to understand your work in the context of your Middle Eastern background?

No. I really hate this label or to have people understand my work in the context of my Middle Eastern identity. I don't want to be labelled as Middle Eastern, I don't want to be labelled as Muslim, I don't even want to be labelled as a woman. Last year, I wanted to be a white, male British artist. But after Brexit, I think I would prefer to be a white, male German artist.

As an artist in the diaspora, you are in a sense displaced. What does that mean to you in one word?

Free.

What would you say to immigrants from the Middle East who want to come and settle in the US?

Don't. Not right now. It's a mess. I would actually consider staying and working in the Middle East. I think the future is going to be in the Middle East and in Africa, and the emerging countries. It's my plan D. Plan D is to go back to Egypt.

You just answered my next question. Has the current situation made you re-think whether you want to stay here?

I'm not going to stay here if this continues or worsens. Now, it's fine because I have friends and I'm in New York and it still feels great. Apart from Staten Island, which I'm not going to go to. They voted 57 per cent Trump, I read that yesterday.

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