

## **Silhouette Painting Revival by American Artist in Cairo**

Alexandra Zevin to Al Sharq Al Awsat: “I search for communication through art. This workshop will be brought to other Arab countries.”

*Cairo – Sabrina Sharmadel*

The But a Shadow of Myself project is an initiative launched by the American artist Alexandra Zevin. The project gathers Egyptian and American artists in a workshop meant to establish communication between them. Each participant asks himself questions about himself and expresses those questions through drawing.

The result is a drawing based on the silhouette of the participant including some of his features and some symbols about his personality.

The workshop coordinator, Alexandra, asks some questions about thorny problems of humanity like: How much do you know about the others? How much do you know about yourself? Are people’s identities constant? Or are they conditioned by situations, places and time? Is there something we can call “soul”? Is there something we can call “self”? If there is, what is it like?

Al Sharq Al Awsat met Alexandra Zevin in a coffee-shop of Cairo.

With her long braids, she observes the old buildings of the area, smiles like a child to the people around. From time to time she looks to her clock.

She talks about her experience in her research into silhouette painting, about the nature of her workshop and the idea of human communication through art, in particular, through Arabic popular art.

*Why did you get so interested in silhouettes and shadows? What made you follow this interest by visiting so many places?*

Because shadow is so true and natural: the sun reflects your shadow and your silhouette on the ground. Can’t this represent your identity?

*Since when did you begin to be so eagerly interested in silhouette and shadows? What made you fall in love with this subject? Have you ever seen Egyptian shadow theater?*

I’ve been thinking for ten years about doing a project on silhouette. I was impressed by Turkish, Indian and Chinese shadow painting, but I couldn’t see the right path to follow in order to realize my project.

The project’s features began to be clear last year when I started it.

I heard about Egyptian silhouette theater, but I’ve never seen it until now.

There is an American artist, called Kara Walker who has always been keen on silhouette theater. She made a number of projects based on silhouette theater. She also held many silhouette painting exhibitions.

*Did you carry out any exhibitions in the U.S.?*

Yes, I carried out some exhibitions in NY, Chicago and other places in the U.S.. I usually exhibit my work in traditional places, but once I held an exhibition in a public garden.

*What were your studies? For how long have you been teaching art in the US?*

I graduated with a BFA from the School of the Art Institute Chicago, then I received my MFA from Columbia University. I've been teaching art for 22 years in public schools. I directed painting projects in the New York City subways.

*In which countries did you carry out the But a Shadow of Myself project?*

I started in New York City first, then I went to Egypt last year. I'm planning to bring the project to Lebanon, Syria, Mexico and other places.

*Why did you start from Egypt, after the U.S.?*

I fell in love with Egypt through its music before coming to visit it. I love Egyptian music, especially the music of Upper Egypt.

*Alexandra then started sharing with me to folk music, zar music, Nubian songs. She was telling the names of all the singers. "People must communicate and know each other", she went on to say.*

*What were the positive and the negative aspects of the project?*

The main quality of the project is its flexibility: people from different cultural backgrounds can participate in it. I think it can involve many different elements, even if it's based mainly on communication. Americans and Egyptians are so eager to communicate with each other and this is what the project is meant for. We started with communication among U.S. artists, then we moved to Egypt.

*How did you become the creator of this project?*

It was music that brought me to Egypt. Because I love both Egypt and the U.S., I thought about doing something in these two countries. I did this also because we need good relations between the U.S. and Middle Eastern countries.

*What about your dreams and your teaching experience?*

From my personal point of view, I hope to reach a better level of communication between the workshop participants and the participants coming from other countries.

From a wider point of view, I hope there will be a better communication between different countries in general.

*I have the impression you've studied some psychology? Is it true?*

Actually I'm not trained in psychology, but I've always been interested in this subject. My mother was a psychotherapist and I grew up in house full of psychology books. My whole family was interested in this subject.

*Did your mother affect your personality?*

Yes, she did. My mother had a very strong personality; therefore I had to become strong and independent. Strength is the base for independence.

My mother was always studying, even when she grew old. She started to learn a new subject when she was 75. She learned how to write screenplays.

She traveled the world to help people who needed psychotherapy. Sometimes I traveled with her. She learned throughout life, and the aim of my life is to learn and carry out new projects to try to improve life.

*What do you know about the artistic movement in Egypt and the Arab world?*

I don't know that much about Arab artists. I have seen the sculpture of Mona Hatoum. Unfortunately I don't know much about Arab painters, but after visiting Egypt, I decided to educate myself more and try to facilitate collaborative projects.

*Do you know anything about Arab literature?*

I remember first Naguib Mahfouz. I have read some of his books, and lately I've been reading poems about love at the time of Pharaohs and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. I also started to read the myth of Gilgamesh.

*Tell me about the artistic movement in the US. We don't know a lot about it, except for what concerns the famous artists.*

I'm very interested in art that talks about women. As for art in the U.S., it's trying to move some steps forward, but the economic situation is getting worse and this affects art a lot. I'm trying to work hard in order to reach a good level anyway.

*"Art is therapeutic", what do you think of this idiomatic expression after your experience in the U.S.? Have you ever met someone who was treated with art?*

It's true that art can be therapeutic. It also makes people communicate with each other. I see it can really be therapeutic for everyone because it gives a wide space for self-expression. I've participated in training for teachers using ideas from art therapy where people were asked first to express themselves by talking. But by this way they were expressing only a part of their feelings. When they were asked to express themselves by drawing, they found out that their drawings were representing their innermost thoughts. I have met many people who were treated with art.

*Considering your teaching experience, how does art develop in children? How do parents discover their child's artistic talents?*

If a child likes drawing, painting or building things, this means he has a talent. My parents always encouraged me to follow my interests and that's what I do with my nephews.

One of them likes drawing very much and I encourage him to do it.

*Were you satisfied with this workshop?*

Yes, I was. But I always feel there is something missing, something that has not been fulfilled. It's a continuous learning process. I should be satisfied, but also the workshop participants should be satisfied.

I was thinking of having a smaller number of participants who practice art as professionals, this would allow us to reach a deeper level of communication, which is the aim of the workshop.

*Did you discover any talented people in this workshop?*

Of course I did. There were many talented people, like Ashraf Lotfy, a young man who died in a car accident one day before the exhibition opening.

*What are the challenges that this workshop faces?*

The first challenge is to find a language with which to communicate. If we don't achieve this, there will be a big gap between us. I always encourage participants to become involved with the But a Shadow of Myself project by making decisions about the project and working together to communicate.

I think we have to overcome the challenge of language next year and then we'll get to know each other in a better way.

Translated from Arabic by Marianna Massa