INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 3 EPISODE 1 (Early Jan 2021)

Transcript of interview:

APHRA SHEMZA

SHEMZA.DIGITAL

Tim Stackpool:

Okay. Let's head to the UK straight away and learn about Aphra Shemza's online project, who along with fellow artist, Stuart Batchelor is calling for collaborators right around the world, inspired by One to Nine and One to Seven, which is a painting by her late grandfather, the world renowned a British Pakistani artist Anwar Jalal Shemza. We'll get the story behind this project as Aphra joins us online via Zoom. Aphra, thanks for logging on.

Aphra Shemza:

Thanks so much for having me. Really pleased to be here.

Tim Stackpool:

Let's first talk about your own art. For anyone who may not be familiar with it, plenty of geometry in there, shapes and of course, light in your work. Somewhat different to your grandfather's work, but still some influence, I guess?

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah, my grandfather unfortunately died before I was born in 1985, but I've always had a really deep connection with him and his artwork. I've grown up surrounded by his paintings in our family home so I really feel like he's been one of my biggest inspirations. I've also had a Western art school education though, as well, so as well as using geometry and abstraction, I'm influenced by movements like the Bauhaus and Western Modernism, where artists like László Moholy-Nagy used abstraction and minimalism within their works.

Aphra Shemza:

And later as well, artists like Donald Judd and artists in America that were working with abstract forms. Even a bit later still, also inspired by movements like the Light and Space movement in California so artists like James Turrell and Dan Flavin, who were working with light, so light's also quite important part of my work. So you've got this dual culture, my heritage, and then also this Western art school education as well, so that it combines with the two of them.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, I was going to ask you if your heritage weighs heavily in your work. That disconnection you have from your grandfather because he passed away before you were born, do you feel that you have that connection nonetheless? Do you work your way back to that heritage?

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah, I think more increasingly now I've become more interested. I'm the manager of the estate of my grandfather's work, so I've always been deeply immersed in that world. But I think only really within the last year or so, I've been dealing with an archive of his, so press cuttings and newspaper clippings and images of him, and images and writing from his work that he was sending back home to his friends in Pakistan. It's really started becoming really important for me to find out more information.

Aphra Shemza:

I feel like in this increasingly polarized society that I'm living in, in the UK here, that it's something really important to delve into and explore further. So I've been exploring a bit more Islamic geometry, those Eastern influences, and practicing that within my own art practice, to understand a little bit more about those kinds of, the noble way in which you work with geometry, in a different way than perhaps I have been up until now. So yeah, it's definitely something that I'm very interested in at the moment.

Tim Stackpool:

I want to ask you about some particular challenges that you may face because of that position, but can I just go back to what you said earlier about the polarizing situation you find yourself in the UK? Can you describe how you see that polarization?

Aphra Shemza:

In the UK obviously we've had the horrible Brexit words that's been happening here. What it's meant is there's been quite a lot of national unrest about people who would consider... There's a polarizing nature between the born and bred British and the migrant... what would you call it? Migrant population basically, people who have come from other places.

Aphra Shemza:

So I feel especially now because I have this heritage, my grandfather came over to London in the fifties from Pakistan. He was a very early migrant artist that have only really recently had a rethinking in British art history and been given their rightful place. A lot of that is to do with this Western viewpoint of art history and what it means to be British. At the moment, there's this sense of pride or national identity and there are also these other stories that are being explored and given their rightful places. I think it's really an interesting point to be exploring these topics in, and exploring my heritage and getting that out to the public.

Tim Stackpool:

In terms of this polarization though, do you think that... I'm not using the correct words here, but are we seeing a renaissance of what the UK and what Britain went through perhaps in the sixties and seventies? Are we seeing that again?

Aphra Shemza:
Well, that was before I was born.

Tim Stackpool:

Well, given your education and your understanding of history, I wonder what you learned about in terms of the history of where you are, where you live, whether you think this is reminiscent of that. I mean, I'm just after your perspective on that.

Aphra Shemza:

I feel like we're in a difficult realm at the moment with the want or need for some people in this country to be saying, "Well, they're not from here, or they're not my neighbors," and there's this split between we are all connected and we're all living in this country, and we're all in it together, to this difficulty there and friction between different cultures or different ways of doing things. I think really now it's

really important and I think that the arts have a role, a really crucial role I think, to play in bringing people together and highlighting how crazy that is.

Tim Stackpool:

And over centuries, art has always reflected the social standings at the time, which is why I'm asking this question because it comes down to how you've been influenced and how you're feeling, and then how you are reflecting that in your work. Let's move on to how you find yourself. Do you find yourself split in terms of your heritage in that respect? Do you need to pay respect to all the different influences and all the different types of nationalities that make up your heritage?

Aphra Shemza:

I think maybe it depends project to project and the different themes that I'm exploring within the work, yeah. I guess previously I hadn't so much explored my Pakistani heritage or the Islamic, so it had been inherently there within the work because I use abstraction, but it wasn't necessarily the present themes that I'd been exploring. I'd been working a lot with ideas of spirituality and the cosmos, almost split between art and design almost, and thinking about sustainability and these kinds of ideas.

Aphra Shemza:

So only really in this new project, shemza.digital, it's been the first time that I've actually delved into exploring my heritage as a theme within my art practice. I think it's been spurred on by this understanding and more knowledge about my grandfather's work and the feeling that right now is a good time to be discussing these things, and wanting to go ahead and continue that. I feel like whenever I open up a theme in my work, it becomes a life's work, so I think that this will be something that I explore as I go forward.

Tim Stackpool:

Sure. When we talk about your practice and looking at your work, as you mentioned earlier, light plays a big part. It looks to me as if you're really taking advantage of, let's say LED technology, I'm guessing is what you're using in some of this artwork that I'm seeing online. Is it because the technology has evolved to that point where this becomes more convenient to use light or have you always somehow incorporated light into your work?

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah, advances in technology have been absolutely amazing. I work a lot with interactive technology, so bespoke circuits that I solder at home. These kind of advances in technology have allowed me to create my own interactive sculptures. So as well as using light, I also use interactivity and I do this by using these different microcontrollers that are like mini computers, such as the Arduino or the Raspberry Pi.

Aphra Shemza:

I embed these pieces in my sculptures, and then I use maybe a sound sensor so like a microphone or a distance sensor that can tell where a person is in space in relationship to my sculpture. Then I take in readings from them into the computers and then I display that back out on the lights that I use. This has only really been possible within the last 10 years, this technology that's become readily available, fairly low cost. There have been these global communities of hackers and coders talking to each other and furthering this way of working. It's been amazing for me to be right at the forefront of those developments with my practice.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Let me ask, how did you teach yourself how to work with these mini microprocessors?

Aphra Shemza:

A lot of it is self-taught, yeah. At university, I studied in London at Middlesex University. There was a technician in the plastic workshop, I think, and he was a kinetic sculptor. He's called Mark Lowman, and he basically taught me from that very young age how to make bespoke kinetic circuits. So working with motors basically, motors and switches. It was very basic, it wasn't micro electronics, it was really just a power supplier switch and a motor.

Aphra Shemza:

But that's how I really started getting into electronics and he was very influential, in my early work I created a lot of kinetic sculptures because I was interested in creating works that gave a unique or momentary experience with the viewer. I think that's where I got interested in taking it further. A lot of it is DIY. Making my circuits, hacking, talking to other people. Later on I was a member of the London hack space, which is a place where artists and hackers can meet and figure things out together. So yeah, it's fun. It's a nice community.

Tim Stackpool:

This is a great collision between art and technology. Was there a time when you created art that wasn't built around this type of technology?

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah, absolutely. I started from a very young age, I suppose at that point it was all very much 2D, so it was drawing and painting. I quite quickly, when I started studying, before university I quite quickly moved from 2D to 3D and became really interested in sculpture, but not necessarily technology. It wasn't until I saw an exhibition at Tate by the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles, in about 2008 maybe. It was the first time I'd ever seen an art exhibition of an artist that was working with non-traditional media.

Aphra Shemza:

There was technology used. There was huge immersive installations where you could pick things up and be immersed in this art. That was the first time I'd ever seen art that wasn't a sculpture on a pedestal or a painting on the wall. This really spurred me forward to start experimenting on my own and creating these more immersive installations. At the time I was working with CCTV cameras, being inspired by Bruce Nauman, UV lights and things like that. Then I started fusing all these things together that I'd learned later down the line.

Tim Stackpool:

This now leads us to the core of what we want to talk about, and that's shemza.digital, which is the work you're developing and is online at the moment. First of all, I guess you need to describe this to us and how'd it all come together?

Aphra Shemza:

I'm going to give you a little bit of history about the project and how it came together. It starts really with my grandfather, Anwar Jalal Shemza who was a Pakistani abstract painter who came over to

London in the fifties to study at the Slade School of Fine Art. Whilst he was at Slade, his art history lecturer was the very well-regarded Ernst Gombrich, who wrote the Story of Art that was published in 1950. This was the history of art from an entirely Western point of view and we know now... It wasn't unusual then that in one of my grandfather's art history lectures, he was really dismayed to hear his lecturer Gombrich, he dismissed all Islamic art as being purely functional and he was really frustrated and upset by this because his heritage was being denied.

Aphra Shemza:

He went home that evening and he destroyed all the work that he had created so far in the UK and he decided to go back to basic and work with the square and the circle. He wanted to combine Western Modernism with Eastern influences. There's this beautiful quote that he created in one of his works in 1962, which is, "One circle, one square, one problem, one life is not enough to solve it." And for me, this really became the starting point of the shemza.digital project.

Aphra Shemza:

I think I mentioned before that I'm the manager of the estate of my grandfather's work and our main aim is to provide a platform for the work of my grandfather. I've seen through my work in the estate, that over the last 10 years there's been a rethinking of British art history and migrant artists are being given the recognition that they really deserve. I felt like these new advances in the art world, they haven't really filtered down yet into the school curriculum. I wanted to find a way to introduce my grandfather's work to the public, and also ask them to become actively involved in art making as a way to do this.

Aphra Shemza:

In my own practice, I'm working with technology, I work with sculpture, I work with physical materials often, and I've mentioned that I work with interactivity, that's a really core part of my work. Due to the pandemic, my life and work has been turned a bit upside down and I was forced to adapt my practice to this new world that we find ourselves in today.

Tim Stackpool:

Very much so. It's a tale that everyone is telling at the moment.

Aphra Shemza:

Absolutely, exactly. So I wanted to find a way where I could take a key aspect of my practice, which is interactivity, and create a project that the public could participate in whilst they were at home, self isolating. A kind of project that could bring people together whilst we were all so distant from each other. A couple of years ago... I run an organization called Art in Flux, which I co-founded with two other artists, Maria Almena and Oliver Gingrich. We're an artist charity for artists working at the intersection of art and technology.

Aphra Shemza:

A couple of years ago I met the artist, Stuart Bachelor, who came to speak at one of our social events. Since then Stewart and I have worked together on different workshops and exhibitions that we've held at the VNA and other kind of places like that. I really admired his work. He combines traditional painting with digital computational arts. I was thinking about this project and I thought, well, it'd be perfect to collaborate with Stuart on this.

Aphra Shemza:

Shemza.digital is basically a digital painting app that Stewart and I have created, that is based on my grandfather's painting style. So we've developed three digital paints, the Squirkle, which has become the mascot for the whole project, really, which we love, which is a square and a circle, hence the name. We have the mosaic paint and we have the weave paint. The public are invited to go onto our website and create their own digital paintings and then submit their paintings to our online archive. You can see on the archive, everybody that has submitted a painting, you can explore that. We've had nearly 300 paintings submitted already, which is just fantastic. It's just a fantastic way of working for me. Every morning I get to wake up and see the new paintings that have been created, and it's so exciting.

Tim Stackpool:

Lovely, yes.

Aphra Shemza:

The idea with this project is that the digital painting app will be live for the public to interact with and create their own works. There are some lovely videos and things on there that people can explore, the history and the heritage side of things in the context of British art history, and migrant artists and their different voices. Then we want to take our online archive and turn these drawings that people have created into large scale light art installations. That would be our hope, to make these into physical things that we can explore and tour around as an exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

So COVID in a way, has developed for you and inspired you to create something that you're really quite excited by.

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah, it was interesting for me because I'm slightly on the edge of the digital art scene because I predominantly work with physical materials, so wood, metal, plastic. I'm quite a traditional sculpture in that sense, although I embed technology as well. But a lot of my peers work with computer generated art, software based art, artwork on screens. There's a lot of projection and things like that. The COVID situation really pushed me in their way of thinking well, I want to be able to exhibit, I want to be able to show my work. I want to be able to share my work with the public and I can't do that if we can't go to shared, physical, real life spaces.

Tim Stackpool:

Galleries, yeah.

Aphra Shemza:

How do we develop a language to do that? And this is with technology, with computational devices and regenerative code and things like that. So yeah, it's definitely pushed me in a new way of working. Yeah, and I'm definitely excited by it.

Tim Stackpool:

The other thing is too, about what you're doing. You've come up with a concept where everyone can collaborate and create artwork and give input to your project, which is great to see online, and we can

all enjoy that. Then the next step, once we can emerge from this hibernation, is for you to turn these into actual material works of art as well. So it's kind of like everything is just rolling ahead, almost as if it's predestined and predetermined. However, every step is like a new work of art in itself.

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah, I think that's what makes it so exciting. Also Stuart and I, we've begun with the interactive painting application, that's our first artwork in a sense. Then the online archive as we have it now in the form that it is now, that's almost another artwork. We want to develop the archive, it could be an interactive archive that could be shown in an exhibition space, and also develop different ways of displaying these paintings in a real-time way, so it could be using holographic technology. It could be using lasers. It could be using LED.

Aphra Shemza:

Now that we have the data, I suppose, of the painting, the content, we can then change it. We can then use this content to create probably multiple installations, probably for the rest of our lives. This is a huge undertaking. And I think it's exciting. It's exciting to take the public on this journey with us. There's a sense of ownership as well. It's not just our work, we are collaborators with the public. We're also collaborating with computers as well, we're kind of collaborating with this technology.

Tim Stackpool:

You're facilitating the interaction. I just want to digress a moment and just explore this a little bit more. If I can talk about disruption of art... and this is kind of what you're doing... where there was a time, maybe more towards last century, where when any artist's work was hanging in a gallery, it gave that artist and their work a level of legitimacy. Now, like all manner of self publishing, we can now put our work, our artwork or whatever, we can publish it online. Whether it's a written word, whether it's visual arts or performing arts, or anything like that, we can now publish it online and make it available to thousands and thousands of people.

Tim Stackpool:

Do you still think though, in terms of the third step that you're doing, taking the virtual works and making them physical again, turning them into material works, that we still need to have material works in order for the artwork to be legitimate? Is the online space or the virtual space still not giving us legitimacy as artists? Do we still need to create a material form of our art in order for it to be recognized and respected?

Aphra Shemza:

I don't think that we need to create physical works at all, no. I think Stuart and I could make virtual iterations. And if COVID doesn't allow us to go back into the gallery space, that is what we will do. We will create virtual, maybe VR installations with these things, to create virtual space. I think for me, the reason why I want to turn it into physical installations is because that is my passion, to make light sculptures. That's really something that's a basis in my work. But many of the artists that we work with with Art in Flux don't create physical pieces at all and I don't think that that stops it from being legitimate.

Aphra Shemza:

I also think that a lot of these museums and institutions now are exhibiting works that use VR or that are predominantly online. I mean, the V&A Museum have a software-based computer art collection and Tate have their time-based media collection, and they've been building that up. I think really the challenge is there, is more about how we conserve these things, how we make sure that they last the test of time, that they can be experienced and understood historically. I think those kind of questions are really interesting and it's something that I've explored within my practice.

Aphra Shemza:

I was funded by the Arts Council a couple of years ago for solutions for a sustainable art practice, and this was to do with this idea of using technology and using digital media. But for me, I felt like it was really important that, at the beginning the artists, we are thinking about the legacy and the conservation of the works that we produce. That I think is maybe one of the reasons why a lot of technology-based works, they've not been standing up the test of time because we just need to think a little bit more about conservation, I suppose.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, and how we can make them accessible to people as easily as walking into a gallery and seeing canvases hanging on a wall. But I do think the most astonishing works I've seen over the last five years or so have been those that look like they're virtual work. They're projections on shapes in galleries and how those shapes and forms are changed by the projection that's on them, for instance.

Tim Stackpool:

I'm finding that incredibly engaging, but I don't know how I take that home. That's the challenge that I find. I mean, I can photograph it, I can video it, but I can't hang it on my wall. Do you know what I mean? It's tough in that respect, and maybe that's the reason why I raise the question with you, is how do we take such artworks home? How do we take one of your light sculpture pieces, one of your interactive pieces, home? Is that not the type of art that you create? It's not meant for that, maybe.

Aphra Shemza:

Well, so I've made some installations in my time, but sculpture is freestanding, and although it has technology inside it, it just has a plug, you plug it in. So I do sell my artwork. I sell them to private clients. I've done big commercial projects. Actually in terms of my peers, I guess in a sense, a lot of my work that I've done previously is packaged in a way in which people could take it home and they do, which is great. Which is very good for me and my livelihood.

Aphra Shemza:

But yeah, for me, the beginnings of when I was thinking about how I wanted to work with technology, I didn't want to work with a projector and a wall because to me, I did want these little units, these sculptural units that could be easily installed. I was thinking about installation for exhibitions and things like that. I just wanted to take my work out of the box and plug it in and it just set itself up and did what it needed to do, rather than these complex installations that I'd seen other artists be doing.

Aphra Shemza:

I think it's all about learning and trying to find a language that works for you. So I guess in a sense, I do cross over into that more traditional way of art making as well so they're these kind of dual qualities. Also thinking about, well, if I'm creating an online archive, maybe some of these paintings could be

turned into prints. Or maybe they could be turned into a film that could be shown on a screen, that could then... So there are all of these kind of different ideas of how you package something in a way that allows people to take it home.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes. In terms of coming back to shemza.digital, you talked about there being more than 300 artworks by collaborators have already been uploaded, where do you draw the line with this? Where does that stop?

Aphra Shemza:

Well, it could go on forever. I mean, we think that we want to keep the painting application up for about a year, I think. So we're hoping to have tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, maybe by the end of that year. We'd really like a real huge wealth of data. We'd like lots of people to collaborate and to engage with the project and learn about migrant art and learn about computer art, and create their own paintings. We think with these light art installations, we could still have the painting app available when these were happening, so maybe they could be updated in real time. So you could have someone in one room uploading their painting to the archive and then as it uploads to the archive, it also uploads straight to the installation and that could be quite exciting.

Aphra Shemza:

You could be there with a QR code and an outdoor light festival, for example, and on your phone you could create your digital painting and send it to the installation. The installation responds automatically so you automatically see your input. And that to me is really exciting and so I think we want to keep them. I don't think we will end it. It would just become a case of how much server space we need for these things.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes. Yeah, outstanding possibilities there. Is there anything else that you're working on at the moment?

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah, at the moment I'm working with Art in Flux, the charitable organization that I run. I curated and organized an event called Shifting Ground where we launched the shemza.digital project. I often curated events and exhibitions around artists working with technology. And more recently, I've been creating events around South Asian artists and cultural heritage of South Asian British artists.

Aphra Shemza:

We're working with the National Gallery X, which is a new part of the National Gallery for art in tech, in collaboration with Google Labs and King's College. We're working on a series of new events that will be centered around artists working with technology around different themes. So I think [inaudible 00:28:33] be working on an ecological themed event and hopefully again, a cultural heritage event. I'm also obviously creating new works, which is great. I'm about to release a new limited edition light sculpture and looking to do more educational workshops and things next year, which will be exciting.

Tim Stackpool:

So you're not going through a quiet patch at all.

Aphra Shemza:

No, there was about a month where everything went very quiet at the very beginning of first lockdown and it was sort of, "Ooh." Most of my work was events and things at that point and it was like, "Ooh dear, how do we adapt?" But I think as an artist, you adapt very quickly and you innovate in these times. And I think that's what I've seen a lot within my artist community that, yeah, there was a bit of a lull, but we all got our heads in order and came up with some exciting ways of dealing with things, you know? [crosstalk 00:29:28].

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. It was very difficult to determine which direction to take and where it would go, because we didn't know what was going to happen day to day, week to week. You really couldn't make any plans.

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, still now we don't know if we will be able to make these physical light art installations, or whether we'll need to delay that till 2022. So I guess with all of our planning, it's about being flexible and having multiple options to go one way or the other.

Tim Stackpool:

Irrespective it'll be spectacular to see.

Aphra Shemza:

Yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

Aphra, great to talk to you and to learn so much about your background, especially the technology that you're putting behind your artwork and how enthusiastic you are about all of this. And the work you're doing with Stuart too, the collaboration with the public, through the app, it's great stuff. I thank you so much for speaking with us on Inside The Gallery.

Aphra Shemza:

Thank you so much for having me, Tim. It's been a real pleasure.