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Hamza Salim Interview

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Interviewer: Julian A. Coleman
Artist: Hamza J. Salim
Phone Interview Chicago, IL
Date: May 7th, 2013

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.



Bio: Hamza J. Salim is a Palestinian artist, architect, and community based activist from Chicago, Illinois. He earned his masters in Architecture from the University of Illinois at Chicago and his work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, London and Dubai. He is currently serving as the Project Director of the 12th Chicago Palestine Film Festival and is the Immigrant Community Coordinator at a non-for-profit social service agency, Arab American Family Services.
Bio from [facebook.com/HamzaJSalimStudio/info](https://www.facebook.com/HamzaJSalimStudio/info)

Interview Transcript:

Julian A. Coleman: Tell me about your background (i.e. birthday, hometown, school, training).

Hamza J. Salim: I was born on December 4th, 1985. I was born in Saudi Arabia, but I am originally Palestinian and that is where my dad is from. He is from Palestine and my mother is Filipino. I lived most of my life in Jordan. When I turned 17, I moved to the United States where I finished my senior year of high school. I received my Bachelor's Degree from Northeastern Illinois University, in Fine Arts and I have my Master's Degree from the University of Illinois Chicago in Architecture. In terms of art and practice in general, I know that I went to art school but my training is mainly by myself and through working with others.

JAC: How would you categorize your art?

HJS: Honestly, it is very difficult to categorize it because I started as a political cartoonist in the newspaper. Then when I became more of a professional artist, I started to add sculpture and installation art. Then was working a lot with street artist so I shifted to paintings, so now I go back and forth between sculptures and paintings.

JAC: How and when did you get involved with the Chicago Palestine Film Festival?

HJS: This was my first year, I received a phone call from the Executive Director of the Chicago Palestine Film Festival and she had heard about me and what I stand for with my art. The Chicago Palestine Film Festival was going through a difficult time over the past few years and needed to do an entire reconstruction of the entire organization and a whole rebranding of it. So I was offered the Project Director position, basically to bring in new inputs and more ideas to the festival.

JAC: What stood out about your art to the Executive Director of the festival?

HJS: My work revolves around the idea of the complexity between Palestine and Israel. I like to go through the topics of stereotyping Muslims and Arabs and I have personally experienced it first hand, as an Arab, a Muslim, and a Palestinian. Bringing those ideas and what inspires my work and taking it to another level, which is film and how to run an organization. Bringing ideas from an art prospective instead of a business prospective. Ultimately, it is a business and you need to sell tickets for the film festival, the last few years they missed the art part of it, which is the most important aspect of the festival.

JAC: Would you say that bring the artist expression back into the festival was the most significant change?

HJS: Definitely, I think the wide range of films that we had this year focusing on unlike the past from what I've been told, that it used to be a lot of political influence to determine which film were shown. Versus promoting arts and culture through film and I think that part of the rebranding and changing certain policies. The ways we pick out films, staff members worked together, committee members worked together. They gave a new rebirth to art for the festival this year and the selection of films this year can speak to that.

JAC: How would you say the quality of Palestinian film is in comparison to the rest of the Middle East?

HJS: Anything that deals with Palestine is interesting in so many different ways. In terms of paintings, sculptures and installation works, there are so many complexities and dynamics that you need to consider when creating your artwork and the same goes for film. I think that is what sets it apart from other Arab film festivals, like what struggles each Palestinian film festival goes through in setting up and behind the scenes. This really adds flavor and another dimension to the films, for example, our opening night film where the filmmaker was nominated for an Oscar for her previous film. She is banned from going to Palestine and there are certain struggles for Palestinian actors and directors go through and add to the challenge of her film. She had to shoot her film on the border

of Palestine and Jordan and I think other Arab filmmakers don't have those same struggles.

JAC: How has the film festival affected the rest of your art?

HJS: I think that it is too soon to make that judgment because it was just over a few days ago. But I think that my interaction with filmmakers over the past few months and watching multiple films that didn't make it to the film festival. I definitely think it will influence me in one way or another; it is just too soon for me to make that judgment, because I haven't even gotten much sleep yet.

JAC: Do you identify as Asian or Asian American? And does that identity show up in your artwork?

HJS: Yes, it may not be directly but in general I try to have my audience come to the point where they are realizing the occupation, discrimination as universal themes rather than it's just an Arab issue or a Muslim issue or a Palestinian issue. I think that transition into being an Asian as well, not too many people think I am Arab. People think that I am Filipino, so there is that influence on me. Eventually I can use that to the advantage when I speak of themes of occupations and discrimination and stereotypes. They are universal themes regardless of your race, color, language, it's all the same struggle and I used that in my art.

JAC: Have you ever been involved in an Asian or Asian American exposition? Have you ever been labeled as an Asian artist or do you try to stay away from that stereotype?

HJS: I did one time at Northeastern Illinois during Asian month where I met your professor. I did an exhibit for them a couple of times. Do I avoid that label? No. When filling out government forms I always choose Asian even though Arab Americans are categorized as white but I always identify myself as Asian. I am big on my identity because I struggle with it myself. It's very difficult to define, sometimes I find myself defining myself more as a Muslim artist rather than an Arab artist or a Palestinian artist or an Asian artist.

JAC: What are your future projects that you are planning on pursuing?

HJS: I am working on some private commissions currently. I like to work on secret projects and unveil exhibits as I complete them rather than showing one piece at a time so I am currently working on a big project.

JAC: Do you plan on returning as the director the Chicago Palestine Film Festival next year?

HJS: The big picture is to work and contribute throughout the year as opposed to the two weeks of the festival. One of the ideas that we are looking into is how can we keep activities of the film festival and the contribution to the community. Whether to do art workshops or film workshops. The question whether I am the project director or develop new positions throughout the organization is yet to be determined.

END.