



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Nabil Mousa,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Nabil Mousa on August 17, 2020. The interview took place at Mousa's home in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie, interviewing Nabil Mousa at his home in Seattle, Washington, on August 17, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project.

Nabil, could you tell me a little bit about how your work and your life have changed since March of this year?

NABIL MOUSA: Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, I was travelling quite a bit before this happened. Uh, my husband, Scott has a job here in Seattle. And unfortunately, it's so expensive here, as an artist. I can't afford, you know, the kind of space that I want to be able to work out of. So, I transitioned from Atlanta, Georgia, to Columbus, Ohio, where I purchased an 8,000—6,000 square foot warehouse that I turned into my art studio and, basically, an archive for all of my artwork that I've created over the years. So, I've been travelling back and forth doing that. So, whenever, you know, I feel the need to be creative and just need to work on large scale pieces, um, I go back and forth. And that has, for the most part, kind of, come to a halt. Air travel is not something I'm eager to do right now. Especially with the airlines, you know, filling up quite a bit. So, I'm basically here in Seattle, and I do have about a 200 square foot space that I'm, you know, adjusting to slowly. So, I've been going in there and I'm going to use the word "trying" to be creative while I'm here.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well that's, I mean, yeah, we're all forced to work with what we can. Um.

NABIL MOUSA: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Could you tell me a little bit about your experience of the pandemic, being an artist who's travelled and connected around the world, and, um, thinking about that interconnectedness, and how it's now reflected or stymied, in your experience?

NABIL MOUSA: Yeah. I mean, I think—one of the things that's frustrating to me personally, is that I have been working so hard for so many years, you know, to get my career going, and things always, kind of, come—like, all the hard work pays off in a very short window. It's really weird. And all of a sudden, you know, you get contacted by this magazine and that magazine, and people want to write articles or want to do shows for you. And, you know, of course, finally, like, after finishing renovating the warehouse in Columbus, and I'm finally focused on art, and when I went out and started meeting people in Columbus in the art world, and making connections, and I've got shows coming up and big fundraisers I'm involved in. All that came to a stop. So, you know, it was really frustrating from that aspect. The feeling, all that energy, and just being enthusiastic, and just seeing that there's, you know, something really good on the horizon that's happening in my art career, and then slowly seeing everything, kind of, come to a stop. They pushed it out a couple of months, and then it was six months, and now everything's about a year out, and some have just, kind of, given up altogether. So, that part of it, you know, has been frustrating.

BEN GILLESPIE: And how are you seeing changes in what they're going to do a year out? Are there more digital events that are popping up and opportunities? Or are people really just waiting for a vaccine, and to open back up?

NABIL MOUSA: I'm going to speak for me personally. I'm waiting for the vaccine. I'm waiting for things to get better. Digital just doesn't do it for me, as much. You know, and then again, somebody like me who's not, uh, technology savvy, I have to hire people to do this. And it's frustrating, trying to find the right people at affordable prices that can actually accomplish what I

need. So, for me, you know, I'm taking one step forward and two steps back with technology. Uh, so I am looking forward when things go back to normal and I can actually meet people one on one and be able to move forward with my art career.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, thinking about what you're able to do right now, I know that advocacy for refugees has been so vital in your work. Now that you're stuck at home, you've got a limited amount of space to be creative in, how is your notion of advocacy changing?

NABIL MOUSA: Um, I think there's a lot of frustration involved in it, because it's very limiting for me to work from home. You know, and part of it is just going out and talking to people makes bigger difference.

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You know, talking to somebody through social media, to me, it's just not as effective. Uh, I believe in personal connection, the human connection is so vital. So, now I'm having to be, uh, creative again in how I try and get my message out on social media and how to get people involved. And, you know, I mean, I'll be honest. You know, social media, unless you've got something with a dog or a cat, or something funny, people are avoiding the real issues of humanity, and it's a big problem. It's a frustrating problem for somebody like me who wants to make a difference, who wants to bring attention to the human struggle, to the atrocities that are taking place outside of our bubble that we live in. Whether it's your neighborhood, your city, the country, you know, we're still in different types of bubbles, and we're not really looking out to see how people are struggling, you know, in other countries.

BEN GILLESPIE: All right. And what sort of crises and struggles do you think are missing the most from our general accounts, what you're seeing on social media? And in general, in the news?

NABIL MOUSA: Gosh, um. You know, I think there's two sides to every story, and my frustration, my disappointment, is that we have—the leftists and the right, you know, and the right, have become so extreme in their opinions that nobody can see that both sides—there's a reason why things are going on. You know, you can't put the blame on everybody in one direction. Uh, obviously, if somebody is—I'm just going to say if somebody's being a racist, we need to find out why somebody is a racist. Uh, you know, you can't just call somebody a racist without digging in to find out the reasons behind it. And being able to have conversation about the real issues with that. Because when you do, people seem to just, automatically, become very defensive. Uh, and then, I think we're not going to accomplish anything that way. Um, our political system, Democrats vs. Republicans, you know, Trump didn't create himself. We created Trump. And until we analyze that and understand why he became who he is, why he became the President of the United States, we're going to have somebody worse than him down the road. So, winning the elections, for the Democrats, is not really a solution. It's a temporary solution. How can we dig deep and have a serious conversation, and be inclusive, no matter how difficult that may seem?

BEN GILLESPIE: Being attuned to all these, um, issues circulating and the international refugee crisis, do you find that your own practice is changing? Are you drawn to a different medium, different types of subjects?

NABIL MOUSA: Uh, interesting that you ask that. Usually, you know, a lot of my work tends to be very abstract. You know, I—every once in a while, I go back, and I'll work with portraiture and figurative, but that's not something that I naturally gravitate to. But while I've been here in Seattle, uh, you know, for some reason, like, the portraiture became somewhat of an importance. And while I was in the studio, really trying to be abstract, you know, something kept clicking. It was like, no, I've got to look at portraits. I've got to—you know, something is calling me to do that. So, I created, I think, probably, about seven or eight portraits in the studio that are actually currently on a show at Gallery110 here in Seattle, for the month of August. Um, and obviously, that didn't happen by itself. You know, my energy shifted, and I wanted to become more of a—more personalized, and to be able to, uh, I guess, be able to talk about history and where we are right now as human beings. So, each portrait is different, represents, you know, somebody from a different culture. And, you know, like most of my work, it's ambiguous, allow the artist—allow the artists, viewers, whoever's looking at the artwork, to see what they want in those images. I try to make it as relatable as possible, so that they can take something meaningful, uh, after seeing the artwork.

BEN GILLESPIE: And what is—how are the logistical burdens and hurdles, mounting a show right now?

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NABIL MOUSA: [Laughs.] You know, I try to be—you know, with stuff like this, I've learned to just go with the flow and not really, uh, stress too much over it. I remember, I guess, as you get older, that type of behavior, kind of, starts to manifest itself, which is wonderful. Um, I just, you know, I did the show. I believe that I did my best with it. Hopefully people will see it. We may not have a lot of people attending it, but I hope that it has traction. If not now, later down the road people will become aware of it and go back and review it.

BEN GILLESPIE: I'm really interested that you're turning to the portrait now, and, um, you know, away from abstraction, to very personal, the individual. And I'm wondering, how are you feeling about connection in this period, and how are you maintaining connections with your loved ones and your broader community?

NABIL MOUSA: Yeah, that's really been difficult. Um, I am a people person, so I need to hug as many people as I can on a daily basis. That's just my personality. Uh, and be around them. And that's been really difficult. It came down to, just, I'm so fortunate to have my husband, you know, with me, and we get along like crazy, so for us, being together has actually been a blessing. Because before the COVID-19, uh, you know, we were apart quite a bit. And it's something we had not really been used to, after 13 years being together, you know, trying to adapt to that was really difficult. So, we're grateful, in a way, that we are together fulltime right now. And it's been like that since, I would say, middle of January. And now we're trying to keep it that way. So, we're figuring out, how can we, you know, after all this is done, how do we reinvent ourselves and find ways so we can be together fulltime again. Because, honestly, like, nothing else is more important. Uh, and that's, I think, one of the things about this virus, this epidemic, that reminds you who is important in your life and who isn't. Um, and when it comes to my friends, it's been difficult. You know, we've tried the Zoom. After a while, you know, you get over it. It's not as meaningful, because you've got five, six people. You know, you're trying to give everybody an opportunity to chat. So, I typically just pick up the phone and I call my friends, or we text. And, a lot of times, like, you know, we send, also, positive messages to each other, because we all know, uh, you know, that we're all struggling in our own ways. And I've got friends who are single, and I'm always worried about them, because I can't imagine how difficult that must be, for them to be by themselves constantly. And not being able to be around other individuals.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I was thinking about that digital mediation, as an artist who's worked so much with the idea of the veil, with, um, what we can reveal to one another, what we conceal. Um, I can't help but think about the relation of that to—well, both to your new interest in portraiture, and what is—what can be made available through portraiture, uh, as well as, what can be made available through our digital channels.

NABIL MOUSA: So, I'm sorry. I missed the question between—I heard both, but what were you actually trying to ask me?

BEN GILLESPIE: I guess I didn't really pose a question in there. I was wondering about the, um—how are you thinking about those ideas of concealment and revelation, in terms of portraiture? Do you still feel that that's a driving force for you in your work? Um, is that useful?

NABIL MOUSA: Um, okay. So, if I think—if I understand your question correctly. You know, art doesn't have to be one genre. It can be many. And a message can be portrayed, no matter what type of media you use. Uh, so, for me, what makes the message powerful, uh, is, uh, what drove the artist. Because for me, I go by feeling, I go by emotion, uh, and I go—like, there's a compassion component to everything I do. So—and a lot of times, when viewers look at my work, they say, like, they can feel it. They sense that drive, the emotion behind it, and what makes my work, uh, so powerful. So, whether it's portrait, or whether it's just abstract, I don't think it really makes a difference. It just comes down to the quality of the work, uh, and the clarity of the message behind it.

BEN GILLESPIE: I guess, um, I would also love to hear about what's sort of drawn your attention, besides—So, portraiture is coming in there. Have you been drawn to, um, different sorts of books or movies? Is there something that has a special hold on you during quarantine?

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NABIL MOUSA: [Laughs.] Uh, I would say, I'm kind of sick of watching TV, for one. Because there's a lot of garbage out there, and actually, the news as well. Uh, I mean, I'll be frank with you. I think, like, all of this, uh, negativity, is—has really impacted me, in a way. Because I tend

to be a very positive person, and I always find the good in everything. But in the past, especially past month, it's been really hard. Uh, everything I watch, uh, very few people focus on the positive, and it's always about how bad things are going to become, how bad they are, and what we are to expect. And it is taking a toll. So, I'm trying, right now, to avoid a lot of that type of, uh, media coverage. And I'm trying to focus more on wholesome, uh, TV shows. You know, there's not really a lot out there on that subject, but I am finding stuff. I'm reading a lot about, uh, food, you know, natural ways to grow food to take care of your body. So, I'm focusing more on those.

And also, just going back again and really, just, uh, reading, uh, spiritual books to try and clear my head and refocus and get centered. That, to me, is the most important part. And it's so funny, so Scott, my husband, and I, were sitting here about three days ago, and we were having a conversation. He goes, "You know, I'm a little worried about you, because you seem to be down, and that's not typical for you." And I said, "Yeah." I said, "Honey, I just need, like, something. Like, I wish I could just go to the spiritual center and just, like, be around people who are just having something positive to say." I just need to go back and dig up videos, books, whatever it is I can find, and start doing that. And the next morning, my good friend, Julie, sent me a short video clip about spirituality. And, you know, it was so timely, because I am one of those people that believes in the connective power, that energy, what you put out, you receive. And I put out to the universe that I need that positive messaging. And I must have shared that video with probably about 60 people. Because, you know, it was so timely for me, and just kind of brought me back to being centered and saying, "You know what, it all has to do with me." I can't believe anybody else. What's going on in my life is my fault. I need to get centered, and I need to find that clarity. So, I've been sharing that video, you know, with my friends on social media. And hopefully, it will help somebody else, as well.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well and, uh, just to wrap up here, I'm wondering what sorts of positive things are you looking forward to in your own life as 2020 keeps going, and as we approach 2021 with alarming celerity?

NABIL MOUSA: Yeah, you know, I, uh, I feel—I think—I would like to say, I would love to see all of us, as human beings, as a collective, really try and focus on the positive element of things. And, if we can shift from the negative to the positive, I think we can conquer this a lot quicker. Uh, you know, it's—I'm not a religious person, you know, I—I'm more spiritual than anything else. So, my focus is trying to take care of myself, you know, make sure my husband is well taken care of, as well, and my friends. And be supportive as much as I can to anyone that needs me. Um, you know, and just share stories with people, what's going on around the world.

Because, you know, recently, we saw the devastation in Lebanon. You know, uh, over 300,000 people homeless. And when you talk about numbers that large, people just can't really get a grasp of the severity of this explosion that took place. And when you talk about 80 percent of the grain is destroyed, that country is running out of food. And we've got to do something as a collective to make a difference. So, I try and share short stories, like the one I had mentioned to you about my friend Rita. You know, I had posted, at her apartment, how all the windows were blown inside her apartment. Completely destroyed it. Uh, she's been in such a shock, I haven't really been able to talk to her. Uh, all I know is, like, she wasn't in the apartment, obviously, because she would have been either severely hurt, or she might have actually died due to that incident. But she's alive, she's safe, she's doing well. But she's traumatized.

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So, I try and share these stories wherever I can to remind people that, like we talked about earlier, we're all human beings. We're all—we all have similar—more things in common than we do different. So, how do we focus on the positive? How do you focus on the love, and the kindness, and embrace the differences that we have? And try and help them. It's not just—you know, it's all over the Middle East. African countries. People need our help. Locally. Locally, people need our help. So, how can we just—and I think, if we just take the focus off of ourselves a little bit and put that focus on just one other human being, we will have that positive shift start.

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay. Well, that's a wonderful note to end on. Thank you very much for speaking with me today.

NABIL MOUSA: Thank you, Ben. I appreciate your time.

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