

Der Blog

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Videokunst Förderpreis Bremen 2016: Eight Questions for Sharlene Khan



The Kunsthalle Bremen presents until Mai 1st the Videokunst Förderpreis. Sharlene Khan (*1977, Durban) was awarded with the second prize for her project “When the moon waxes red”. Her film explores the younger history of women in South Africa from a personal perspective. In the following interview she talks about whether she would exhibit on a toilet, why Microbiology made her cry and her belief in God.

1. What did you do before you became an artist?

After school in 1994, I studied art at university doing a BA and MA (Fine Arts) in Durban and then a second MA (Fine Art) in Johannesburg. Then I worked for a Graduate School as a personal assistant to the Director part-time and as an events coordinator for Humanities postgraduate workshops. Thereafter I was employed as a lecturer in the Visual Arts department at the University of South Africa (UNISA) for two years and, thereafter, went to London at the end of 2011 for 3 years to pursue a PhD in visual arts. In 2015, I returned to South Africa. Since 2001, I have been exhibiting professionally and have maintained an art career throughout all my ‘day’ jobs. So since I finished high school, I have been pursuing studies in visual arts or practicing as a visual artist (and occasionally as a writer and curator).

2. When and why did you decide to dedicate your life to art?

In my final year of high school I was deciding what to do. All my concerned teachers advised me not to do art – after all, ‘where will art take you?’ So I applied and was accepted to do Microbiology. Two weeks before I was due to begin my course, I had to go to school to pick up a school report to deliver to university.

The night before I woke up in the middle of the night with a panic attack about the fact that I wouldn't be doing art ever again in my life! I went to school and visited my art teacher in tears. He immediately packed up his things, drove me home and told my mother that he believed I was meant to be an artist. My mum was initially unhappy, but my dad gave me the go-ahead that evening. I've never looked back and have never questioned my life as an artist (definitely my moralistic decisions sometimes but never the bigger dream).

3. With whom would you like to work together? Where would you like to exhibit?

Working with a theorist, filmmaker or composer would be pique my interest more than a fellow visual artist – I would love to watch Peter Jackson or Deepa Mehta work, or have a chat with bell hooks or Toni Morrison (or just meet and hug them), or work with jazz musicians Abdullah Ibrahim, Sibongile Khumalo, Simphiwe Dana or Oliver Mtukudzi on compositions for a few digital animation videos I am working on. I love the work of Indian artist Vibha Galhotra and I hope, someday, we can collaborate on a sculptural work together.

Many years ago I exhibited one work in a group exhibition at Bildmuseet in Umea, Sweden and I really enjoyed working with the curator and staff there – they were so respectful of artists. I wrote a list many years ago – when I felt completely stuck in Durban and that I would never get out of my township – of all the galleries in the world I would like to exhibit in and of course it included MOMA and Tate, etc. (most of this list still hasn't come true), but as I grow older I remember South African artist Pat Mautloa saying to me once that one should never scorn an opportunity to exhibit, even if it's in a toilet. I took that to heart – the arts field is precarious but it is such a privilege to be able to participate in it nonetheless.



4. Which material fascinated you and why?

I continue to be in love with paint – watercolour, oil, tempera, acrylic, gouache. In recent years I haven't had much opportunity to paint in long stretches, but I continue to think in terms of being a painter. I love walking into a painting studio and being accosted by the smell of turpentine, linseed oil, dharma varnish, liquin and oil paint. I love mixing paints. I've been painting since I was 16 years old and it still challenges me – I usually tack canvas directly on a wall and so I love the bodily relationship with the work, feeling encapsulated and stretched by the work (as often happens in mural painting). One of my favorite life moments is to sit at the beginning or end of the day or while eating lunch and look at my paintings – waiting for them to 'speak' to me. It's the time I feel most like myself in the world – where I am not participating in

a field or market or discourse, or having to please or be mindful of anyone. In this space in the universe, I'm doing the thing I love most in the world, and I feel like this is why I was created. I don't get this feeling when I work with video or photography or printmaking.

5. What do you need to be happy?

My partner, Fouad Asfour, who supports me in all my endeavours and surrounds me with love and laughter every day, my belief in God, love of family, respect of friends, a studio the size of my mind-space, dharmavarnish sitting in a can of turpentine and paintings all around. A wall full of books and any of my cheesy music playing on my LP player. Between the music, words and paint, I find myself and peace.

6. Which book are you reading currently?

"Our Sister Killjoy" by Ama Ata Aidoo, "The City and the City" by China Mieville, "Robot Visions" by Isaac Asimov, (rereading) "Camera Lucida" by Roland Barthes and "Zoo City" by Lauren Beukes

7. Is there a question you keep asking yourself?

"God, why me?" (followed by a grimace or laughter). Since (S)he isn't answering, I'm guessing the question is more self-directed.

Sharlene Khan | 28.04.2016

The Video Art Award by the Filmbüro Bremen is bestowed annually and is in its twenty-third year. The jury of this year's Video Art Award presented the First Prize of € 5,000 to E.S. Mayorga (born 1975 in Mexico City, Mexico) for his project "The Role of Fear". The Second Prize with an award of € 1,500 went to Sharlene Khan (born 1977 in Durban, South Africa) for her project "When the moon waxes red". The exhibition presents from 20 February till 1 May 2016 new video works. The prize money is provided by the Bremische Landesmedienanstalt, by the Senator for Culture and by the Künstlerinnenverband GEDOK.

[Find a short talk with Sharlene Khan on our Soundcloud platform.](#)

Images:

- (1) "Drowning Durga X" (2014), Sharlene Khan, Foto: Nicola Gear
- (2) "When the moon waxes red" (2014), Sharlene Khan