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alketa xhafa-mripa

artist

Nine years ago, Alketa was my yoga teacher at a small studio in West Hampstead. We became friends instantly. Having just moved from Detroit, I was dealing with postpartum of starting over in a different part of the world, and dreaming up a future.

She was street-smart and confident – the kind of confidence that comes from growing up fast in humble surroundings; confidence gained from being raised in a state on the brink of civil war. Confidence earned from learning a new language, from grinding through big city life, all whilst attending a Fine Art course at Central Saint Martins.

Obsessive thoughts of whether her family and friends were dead, or living in a refugee camp during the genocide, didn't stop her. They fueled her desire to become a revolutionary and speak up for dignity and humanity. This she does every day as Alketa the Person; Alketa the Mother-of-four; Alketa the Friend; and Alketa the Artist, whose art reminds us that we only have one fragile life to live and we should live it with as much regard for one another as possible.

We first worked together in 2015 on *You Just Don't Talk About It* at The Balkan Artists' Guild, an exhibition which explored socio-cultural expectations and gender discrimination through Alketa's experience as a mother. From there, she went on to create *Thinking of You* (2015) in a football stadium in Kosovo's capital, Prishtina – a public tribute to the victims of sexual violence in Kosovo's war. Women and men lined up to offer her their clothes; survivors who had kept what they wore during the moments of their trauma.

Alketa is now an internationally-recognised artist and one of Kosovo's most influential voices on controversial topics involving the state of human rights in relation to women's independence – a role she proudly performs.

A few years later, I arrived at another turning point as I grappled with questions of identity and heritage whilst dealing with my maternal grandfather's past in totalitarian Albania. The more I researched, the more I started to understand not just my family's history, but the truth about my community's recent past.

From here, *Even Walls Have Ears* (2018) was born: not just as an installation, but a movement. Alketa came up with the title, and over the course of six months created a monumental series of installations, and we produced a full-length documentary directed by Ervin Kotori.

It was Alketa who walked with me in the concentration camp where my great-grandmother had raised her children and lived for five years. No one else in my family had been there, standing on the same grass, staring at the same sky, touching the same stone walls.

This is just who Alketa is. She is an ally, walking with you straight into the flames. Not only an activist, she is a teacher, an artistic life-force breaking boundaries in all directions, a beacon of hope for Albanian womanhood.

Words by Kristale Ivezaj Rama, friend and founder of The Balkan Artists' Guild

@balkanartists

My art practice centres on identity, memory and the truth. It touches on issues such as fear, struggle and, in particular, the silenced and unheard voices that surround us.

Being a refugee myself, who came to London in 1997, I always aim to explore unspoken narratives and fight against any form of oppression or injustice. I find motivation in listening to people and understanding the struggles and the fights for justice from those who are often labelled as 'other' – as I myself have been. I always try to embody and represent these stories in my art, in order to help people question, reflect on and understand different dimensions of struggle and unspoken truths.

I get inspired by everyday life: something that triggers me, something that questions my beliefs. I am involved with all topics that become taboo; that people don't talk about. I take issues out from under the carpet and bring them into the spotlight.

The desire to visualise what words sometimes cannot say motivates my work. It is a mission for the truth; for the lost, the forgotten, the unsayable to be seen and heard. Coming from Kosovo, as a conflicted country under the occupation of the Serbian regime – it was a time where Albanians were constantly denied basic human rights. I was denied an education in my own language. Life was a daily struggle.

When I moved to London, I saw a freedom of speech which I hadn't seen in Kosovo. As a young child, I remember thinking that the rest of the world was being brainwashed: how could they not see what was happening in my country?

I think that inner child comes out with me now in my art, and it is why I address issues which are not talked about. The role of the artist is to act: you have to act in order to make a difference.

motherhood

Another motivation as an artist stems from my being a mother of two girls and two boys; I try to raise my children to feel free and stripped of all expectations that societies have legitimised for so long. At the end of the day, my children are my biggest motivation for contributing to a society in which they can evolve differently from where I grew up, and without the obstacles that I had to overcome. As an artist, that's one of the aims and motivations I will always have; to bring change for younger generations and what we are giving them to see and believe.

My kids teach me everything I want to know and who I want to become. I was raised by very open-minded parents and, thanks to my special mother, I can definitely say I am where I am today. I am free to be what I always wanted to be, all thanks to her power and courage. As a mother now, I try to transmit the same energy, to feed my children with compassion and courage. To let them be, to teach them the right things, and let them choose. And so this mission of motherhood has always evolved with my vision as an artist. Motherhood has allowed me to think from another perspective which gives me space to think about women in general: we are bionic, and we have superpowers in every way.

a feminist perspective

I approach my practice from a very feminist perspective. My art and my work would never make sense if I didn't have a background of holding strong beliefs in fighting for women to be treated equally.

My strong ties to feminism have brought on a bigger responsibility to my role as an artist – especially as my work, for the most part, involves vulnerable communities of women, including female survivors of sexual violence and wartime rape who still suffer from social stigmas.

collaboration & participation

This is essential to my work, because it should never be about me. I'm an artist for a reason. I became an artist to free myself, by embracing diversity from a very early age and later creating a platform through my work in order for others to find freedom in their own way. I think that involving other communities and people in general is always important. My work has more passion when others are involved, especially women and fellow female activists. Unity brings power and productivity, and often results in different societal forms, which I am very happy and proud to have witnessed and achieved thanks to my work and the participation of others.

the power of art

I think everything is art and art is everywhere. I see art as a fundamental foundation of humanity, and that there wouldn't be any evolutionary progress of humanity without it. It is there to give us what nothing else can. I always say, where language fails, art can go through. The reason for this is because art is a global language, and can represent more than its part – it speaks to everyone.

We all have a role in this world, and if you can maybe change the mind of one person, that is enough.

