

Interview 20

This interview was conducted by the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of The Graduate Center, City University of New York (June 2002 – June 2003).

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 26

{missing last two questions}

Q. Okay. Initially I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself.

A. Okay.

Q. For example, where were you born?

A. I was born in London.

Q. Yeah. And where did you grow up?

A. Okay. I grew up in Africa and Nigeria.

Q. Wow. Where in Africa?

A. Nigeria.

Q. Okay.

A. Yeah. I lived there for fifteen years. Then I went to England for high school. Then I moved to Beirut, Lebanon, where my ... my folks are from to do my undergrad and I was there for about six years. And then I came here to New York.

Q. So how old were you when you came to live in the United States?

A. Twenty-four. Wait what am I ... Yeah, twenty-four. Yeah. That was like two years ago.

Q. Okay. And so where was your fat-- ... Your parents were both born in Lebanon?

A. In Lebanon. Yeah. Yeah.

Q. Where in Lebanon?

A. In ... My Mom is from Halaigh and my Dad is from a town called Hasbeiya. That's in the South and it's one of those villages that was occupied by Israeli forces.

Q. Really? Wow.

A. Yeah. So...

Q. What do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. Lebanese for keeps. Yeah.

Q. And ... and what ... what is your religious affiliation?

A. I'm Druze: D-r-u-z-e. Yeah.

Q. And your parents are both Druzes?

A. Yeah. Yeah. Once a Druze, always a Druze.

Q. (Both laugh) I have a friend, he says the same thing.

A. Yeah. Yeah. You can't join it and you can't leave it.

Q. How old are you now?

A. I'm twenty-six.

Q. And are you a U.S. citizen or permanent resident?

A. I am neither. I'm a student considering to be here more permanently. So I'm ... I'm on my ... They give us a grace period of one year.

Q. Okay.

A. Yeah.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I just completed my Master's in Fine Arts.

Q. And where?

A. At [school removed].

Q. And when was your degree awarded?

A. June, 2002 ... May, 2002. May.

Q. Okay. So you basically obtained your education in Beirut initially and high school was England?

A. Yeah. But I don't ... I mean, art-wise that's where I started painting. But I usually just refer to Beirut because that's where my work really was sort of like took off. And all of my work is based on--you know--my experience being Lebanese living in Lebanon.

Q. So what is your main occupation? Can you talk more about that?

A. Yeah. I'm an ... Okay. I'm an artist and at this point that's all I'm doing. And I'd like to just be able to keep supporting myself with my art-work.

Q. What kind of work do you exactly do?

A. I do a lot of mixed media, painting and installations--mixed media installations as well. And, like, in the installations I do a lot of work with, like, everyday objects and manipulate them. And I ... and I started working with lights. But again, like, lights are ... I like to take things from my ... my immediate environment so ... so the ... the materials I use really depend on, like, which country I'm living in. I ... I like to ... Yeah, I like to take from my environment and sort of use it to express what I want to express.

Q. Okay. What is your current marital status?

A. Single.

Q. Okay. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th.

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you on that day around nine a.m.?

A. I was asleep and having quite a horrible nightmare, actually.

Q. Really!

A. I had a dream that it was World War III.

Q. On that day?

A. On ... on that morning, yeah, that's what I was dreaming of. And then suddenly my ... my friend walks in to wake me up. We were going out ... I was actually going to apply for a Social Security number. And we ... we got an email...

Q. Was this ... I'm ... Was this in New York?

A. This was in New York.

Q. Okay.

A. This is ... I'm in New York starting my ... my second year of my Master's program. And then we received an MSN message from my friend's sister in Lebanon saying the Towers had been bombed. We immediately turned on the TV, then ran out onto the street. And we walked down to 14th Street and Sixth Avenue and it was at that point that I witnessed the first building fall down.

Q. Wow.

A. Yeah.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. I couldn't believe it. It was very strange hearing this type of reaction and screaming in this country. You know? In ... in Lebanon you kind of ... it seems more familiar to hear someone scream out all of a sudden and--you know--pray to God in the middle of the street.

Q. Yeah.

A. But it felt here that I was in a movie. It felt like I was at some Hollywood shooting because the words I was hearing was words I usually hear on TV. You know?

Q. Like what?

A. Like, to quote, like, "Oh my fucking God."

Q. Oh.

A. Or "Oh sweet Jesus." Like, these are words we hear on TV a lot when we watch action movies and--you know--those Blockbuster ... like, "Independence Day" type of movies.

Q. Yeah.

A. So it ... 'cause I'm not ... also I'm not used to hearing people scream and pray in English as well so it just seemed very surreal. And the first thing I thought of was my parents back in Lebanon, and the first thing I prayed to God was please don't let them think that we did it. You know? Please don't let it have been an Arab thing. Please don't let them--you know--attack Arabs without finding out who did it first. So that was my ... my first reaction.

Q. So you did have a reaction to the possibility of the terrorists being maybe Middle Eastern?

A. I ... I ... I did not think they were. I was just hoping that people wouldn't think they were...

Q. Yeah.

A. 'Cause I knew that the first reaction ... I felt deep in my heart that the first reaction is that people were going to blame Arabs.

Q. Why would you think that?

A. Because of the media, and especially in New York and with the recent events in ... in Palestine. And when I moved to New York I ... I'm very much into ... I'm very aware of politics and I'm very much into the Palestinian causes and I ... I voice my opinions a lot and I felt a lot of kind of uncomfot--discomfot when I voice my opinions because I realize that there is much misinformation going on in this country and...

Q. Concerning the Middle Eastern issue?

A. Concerning the Middle Eastern issue and a lot of bias towards Israel and not an objective coverage of the situation. So I ... I felt immediately that that was going to be the first reaction.

Q. What were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards?

A. After I ... I calmed down and got in touch with my folks and just assured them that I was alive. I never for once thought about myself, which was strange. I kept thinking about Lebanon.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah. I was more worried about what was going on in Lebanon because it just seemed too incredible that had happened; too ... like nothing like this could ever be done without it having been set up. You know? Like, I'm kind of ... I'm one of those sort of maybe--here they call me paranoid. You know? But my immediate reaction is that this was a set up; that something is going to happen but this is such a set-up because it's just too incredible. And that's what I spent most of the time thinking, about who could have done it, because I ... I knew that I'd have to--I felt like I would have to defend myself at some point. You know? Friends and peers would start asking me questions and I'd need to tell them something because at the time in my ... in my class of 2002, I was the only Arab

and I naturally felt this need to be a sort of ambassador--you know? That people were going to ask me questions. And so my ... my next initial reaction was to keep sort of like an open mind brainstorming: could it have been us, and if not, who could it have been? You know? But more of the defensive, like, this cannot be an Arab thing because--I don't mean to sound discriminatory but I mean, we can barely coordinate things at home. You know? I ... I just...

Q. You're right.

A. Yeah, so that was my ... my first ... I mean, my next sort of initial approach to thinking about it.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. No. No.

Q. No?

A. I mean, especially with all this kind of--you know--where is Bin Laddin stuff. You know? America is a great country and if they want to find him, --I don't know--I believe that they can. And I know how intricate politics are and--you know--I ... I try not to get too involved but I cant' help ... but what's going on in my head, what I'm thinking, is that ... I mean, it's almost been a year and this is definitely a horrible act but it definitely has its roots go down very deep ... we may never know. But I'm ... I'm ... I'm very suspicious of the whole thing.

Q. Did you feel any anger after the events?

A. I felt angry towards all the finger pointing because I was in class, like, less than a week later we had a seminar class and--you know--everyone was kind of talking about things. And then suddenly--you know--everyone turned to me: so what do you think?

How can you--you know ... How do you feel as Arab woman? And I told them, --you know--when I was speaking I was very angry. I remember that. You know? I'm, like, this is just typical for ... people want to find the ... the--you know--the person ... the wrong doer, --the ... the evil wrong doer. People want to find him without thinking why this happened. They just ... Your first reaction is to punish before understanding so of course you're not going to be objective about this. And I ... I felt very, very uncomfortable but I also felt very proud that I was in such a position; that--you know--people were going to listen to what I have to say and I was just hoping I could say the right things. And ... and I ... I did insist on talking about humanity and human nature, sympathy, empathy, and tried to kind of take out the words Arab or--you know--Israeli, Palestinian, Bin Laddin ... You know? I tried to turn it into a more objective kind of humane approach. Yeah. But I was just very angry because people didn't have to tell me I don't want to be your friend any more. It just ... It was in their eyes. Yeah. But I guess, instead of feeling scared I kind of used the anger to fuel my ... --you know, --to make sure I ... I didn't break down or--you know--leave the country as a lot of people did. A lot of people just went back home after--you know--just two weeks of school.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah.

Q. Was guilt ever involved because Arabs or Muslims were involved in the attack?

A. No. Because I still don't believe that it was an act of Arabs or Muslims. You know? I refuse to see in that light. It was an attack of a group of very sick people. I will never feel guilt. I feel sympathy for those who lost their lives. I'm angry that people lost their lives for such a stupid--you know ... It ... it was such a stupid thing to happen. And I feel

sympathy for those who are grieving. But I will not feel guilt--you know--being an Arab because I still don't--you know--I can't see it in those terms.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th?

A. Being on 14th and Sixth. I ... You couldn't really see the building falling 'cause there was so much kind of dust and cloud but suddenly there was just a lot of dust and clouds and that visual is very strong as well as there was ... we were all, like, a group of people on that corner and there was a guy playing the new straight out of his van. It was just parked in the middle of the street. So we were listening to the new commentator on the van ... in the van and watching the building and hearing the news happening at the same time was probably the most vivid. And then obviously the ... the crazy screaming and praying to God and Jesus. Yeah.

Q. When Americans asked you about your ethnic background or origin before September 11th what did you tell them?

A. I always told them I was Lebanese and I still do.

Q. There's been no change in the way you identify yourself?

A. No. In fact, like, I feel more strongly than ever that I need to ... I need to be clear about who I am and what I stand for school. However, I find that, like, with my day to day things ... Like, I just moved and when the landlord asked me where I was from for the first time I felt uncomfortable.

Q. Really.

A. So ... so I actually said I am Lebanese and then I ... I included I was ... I was actually born in England and I grew up in Africa too. And I have never really done that before. I usually do that kind of--you know--like if I want to ... as an artist, if I want to kind of

show off my kind of cultural background I add that. But this was the first time I did it because I felt ... I felt uncomfortable that I wouldn't get this apartment because of who I was. Or I would get it but I'd be under surveillance. Yeah.

Q. Is this the first time this happened after 9-11?

A. Yeah. Yeah.

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States changed since 9-11?

A. Not really, because I've ... I've been trying to hear both sides of the story. You know? And I have just as many American friends as I have Arab friends. And I've always been exposed to American culture. I went to American schools my whole life, even elementary. And even in England, it was an American high school so I'm very much a part of the culture. And I've always known its bias towards Israel and its--you know ... Lately with all this brutalization and activism against globalization and capitalism, like, I've always been aware of it. And I don't think it's changed much. It's just reconfirmed certain things such as the amount of ignorance there is towards--you know--U.S. citizens and U.S. foreign policy. And especially, like, after 9-11 I started thinking more about U.S. politics whereas I never really was interested before. But now I really pay attention. And, --you know--going back to the whole ... the election--you know, --But 'cause I was here when it happened 'cause that was the first year of ... of my Master's program, --like, I started thinking about that, which I had never thought about before and thinking about what happened in Florida. You know? And I realize, I mean, America is just as ... has its onset of problems, just as other countries around the world, and that its citizens are very misinformed about the state of government that its in.

Q. What caused this change of political awareness in you?

A. I guess it was this desire to prove that not ... as the trend is right now it seems all Muslims and all Arabs are terrorists or anyone of dark skin is a terrorists. And I just feel like it's my duty and my obligation to be as aware as possible. Like, if you want to kind of educate people you have to learn the system that they're under so you know where the weaknesses are, and--you know-- the pluses and minuses. So if you can help, you'll know where you can help. You know? And I'm a strong believer of education. And ... and, I mean, it's ... Living in Lebanon, like, the news there is quite objective and you law as know what's happening around the world.

Q. Yes.

A. But since I've moved here I don't ... I don't know anymore what's going on in ... in Europe or Asia or Africa. I don't hear about inventions anymore. I don't hear about--you know--great sports accomplishments outside of the United States, etcetera. So I just felt suddenly that, well, I am a student her but I need to be completely responsible for my position here and I can't just--you know--use the education system. I need to be part of the whole system if I am here. I can't--you know--kind of half ass it. Yeah.

Q. Would you say your level of political awareness may have also changed because of U.S. foreign policy or domestic policy?

A. Yeah, of course. I mean, this whole Axis of Evil theory just makes me so ... not just angry but just so disappointed because I know this country is capable of so much. And it's always ... like, for the last few decades it's been the leader in world development. And if it's taken this responsibility to be a leader--you know--I mean, it's a big responsibility and it has to try to be able to ... and if you're going to preach democracy, equality, understanding, I mean, you can't ... it can't just be all talk. This would have been a great

time for America to really be able to show its potential for--you know--equality and understanding and democracy. But instead I feel like I'm in a ... in a fascist state where people ... it's just cowboys and Indians; good guys and bad guys--you know? --black and white. And I'm just so disappointed how--you know--the ... the U.S. policy right now just kind of narrowed everything into good and evil. So I think yeah, it's ... it's definitely after that I wanted to try even harder to ... to understand the government here.

Q. Do you feel a sense of belonging to the United States? Like, do you feel at home here?

A. No. No. I was hoping too because at this point I would like to be able to spend--you know--a few more years in New York. New York for me is the capital of the world. You know? But I feel so uncomfortable, so out of place now. And it's ... It's very funny because I've been fueled in an American environment since day one--you know? The first day of school which I remember--you know--I ... I learned how to play games like wall ball and four square and all these--you know--things that didn't exist in my life before. And after that point, --you know--it all became a world of scratch and sniff stickers and--you know--Mead ... yellow Mead pencils. I mean, it's ... America is very much my ... my environment has always been. And visiting here I always had a great time and I did feel, --you know--a little bit of belonging. Even my first year of school, like, it was kind of hard at first but then--you know—I--just when I felt like I was happy to be in New York, then this happened. And then after 9-11 I really feel like a stranger and I feel threatened all the time.

Q. What makes you feel so uncomfortable?

A. I just feel like because I voice my opinions a lot I feel like I'm being followed. I feel like my phones are tapped. My sister is an activist and she's very outspoken and she's always at rallies and she's always speaking out, so I ... like, I feel I just want to have a conversation with my Mom or my Dad or--you know--my best friend or my boyfriend. I feel like there's always somebody else listening in. You know? I'm never alone. And I ... I feel as well like it effected my art work a lot because my work in the first year here was very kind of outward and addressing the public. And then after 9-11, it became very inward. It was more about me and my relationship to my family and my religion and my ethnic background. It was more, like, therapeutic.

Q. Did you ... did you sense these changes as you were doing the art, or today, looking back, you see the changes?

A. No. It was ... it was as I was doing ... 'cause actually, my initial response like a few days after ... I think September 11th ... Was it on a Tuesday or a Wednesday?

A. Tuesday.

A. A Tuesday, yeah. Then eventually I made it into my studio on Saturday, I believe. And the first thing I did was I hid all my ... my notes and my diaries. I used to leave my books lying around. I put them all in a locker because I was afraid people would come and trash my studio. And the ... the first thing I painted, -- actually did a painting, it was kind of like a poster of ... It was how I felt, because as I said, it felt like I was in a movie. And I kind of painted this thing that looked like a street poster of a movie and it was the Twin Towers on fire and behind it ... it was me and somebody I was in love with at the time, who is in Lebanon. I forgot to mention that was also another thing that crossed my

mind. You know? I thought of the loved one back home. So it was kind of like this very kind of catchy Hollywood poster of ... It was a self portrait of me and this guy I was in love with holding me and fire all around us and the Towers burning. It looked like a 1950s Marilyn Monroe poster for a movie. And at that point, after people started coming back into school and they found the painting in my studio, I was highly criticized for...

Q. Really?

A. Yeah. The first reaction I got was, --you know, --what's this supposed to learn? You know? Don't you feel bad about what happened? It looks ... to us it looks like you're making fun of the situation.

Q. Was this from other students or professors?

A. No, students, --students. And I said, "Well, I'm not making fun of it but I'm painting what I felt." And that's what I felt and you can't--you know ... I mean, that's what I felt. I'm sorry. I felt like I was in a movie. That was my first reaction. And then I had a lot of people come in and say--you know--you have to take responsibility for this painting. And what about the people who died and blah, blah, blah. And I told them--you know--I ... I feel bad about that too, but I can't paint that. That kind of sorrow is too much. It's beyond my capabilities. It's something I feel in my heart but I cannot paint it. You know? This is all I can paint for now. Because there was a sort of numbness happening as well. And after I received so much criticism and threats from that painting I took it down And I just spent two weeks ... I didn't do anything. But then suddenly I started building a space and I just worked day and night covering my studio with layers and layers of cloth and ... and paper and lights until it sort of turned into ... it felt like I was in a cave or a womb or, basically, a very safe space. And the more I built and worked on the studio, the safer it

felt for me. And it just isolated me from the realities of the outside world and I just became very enclosed.

Q. Would you say that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East in the U.S. are treated since 9-11?

A. Definitely.

Q. How so?

A. It's two extremes. Either it's a lot of kind of anger and bitterness and it's very hateful to the extent where people won't talk to you or people will be very kind of hateful in your face or it's the complete opposite. It's a type of sensitivity where they really want to learn about who you are and where you come from. But I'm not sure if it's because they sympathize or it's because--you know--they're just scared and they're curious to know: Wow! Do we all--you know--produce children to go ... so that they can grow up to terrorists. You know? Oh, I have an Arab friend. Why don't I just ask her. She'll tell me--type of attitude.

Q. So that insatiable curiosity.

A. Um-hum.

Q. Yeah. You mentioned an incident in your classroom where they basically asked you, as an Arab woman, what do you think of this. But have you personally experienced any backlash after 9-11 such as maybe harassment, or racial profiling or discrimination?

A. I haven't on the streets. Not at all. I'm not very dark. But the only thing that seriously effected me was just my relationship with all my classmates at school. Most ... I would say ninety percent of the students just avoided me.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah. And then probably just ... there was one or two--and they weren't Americans: one was Korean and one was Australian--came to my studio and asked me if I was okay and--you know--what I thought about everything. But that's, like, two students out of sixty. And then...

Q. Had they been friendly with you before?

A. Not ... not really, no. It was quite a surprise so I was grateful for that. And then kind of like, as the months went by people forget quickly here. Well, it least it seemed that--you know--all was forgotten. And especially after Christmas break it was kind of like turning a new leaf. And I had to ... No one really kind of came up to talk to me any more. I had to kind of work with as hard to talk to some people and I did gain some friends back. But I don't feel ... I mean, I graduated and I ... I feel like I only graduated with one or two friends whereas when I started I felt like there was potential that we could all...

Q. Have any members of your family experienced backlash?

A. Yeah. Yeah. My ... my sister ... as I mentioned, she's an activist.

Q. In New York?

A. Yeah. And ... She's a student too. She's an undergrad. And she's just a tough girl. Like, she ... she wore her caffia every day. And she wears T-shirts that say, "Free Palestine!" on the street. Like, she has no fear. She strongly believes in what she believes in. And it's ... it's ... it was very strange that people were relating all of a sudden, 9-11 to Palestinians. That was my biggest kind of disappointment with the environment here; that they are two completely different things. And my sister who is--you know....

Q. How old is she now?

A. She's ... She's twenty. She has devoted so much of her life now to bring justice to the Palestinians. She wanted to make sure that that these two issues did not conflict and that's why, like, she had no problem wearing her "Free Palestine!" shirt, putting up her "Free Palestine" stickers...

Q. Did anyone bother her for doing that?

A. Of course. Of course. She put one up on our ... our door-- our apartment door of our building and immediately we were asked to take it down by the superintendent. And then we didn't, and then we got a letter from the holding company asking us to take it down.

Q. Um-hum. Did they give you a reason or...

A. They said that political signs are not appreciated. If you want to express your opinion, do it in your apartment. We have to respect everyone's rights to political beliefs. So... I mean, we ... we didn't buy it but we took it down after a while. Actually, this when this happened--the first time it happened it was back in 2000, during the ... when the intifada started up again. And then the sticker went up again a few months ago and we just ... People ... We didn't obey the superintendent and I guess he didn't go back to the holding company. But the tenants around us in our hallway, on our floor, every day either the sticker was torn or there was graffiti on it. You know? It said, "Free Palestine," and most commonly people would scratch out the ... the free and write "Fuck Palestine."

Q. Oh no.

A. Yeah.

Q. Did she experience any backlash during her ... any rallies or...

A. Yeah. Yeah, of course. well, she ... she's very active in her school so she ... and she has her own kind of political group. I mean, she's part of a political group which is involved in educating people about Palestinian cause. But after 9-11 specifically she tried to hold seminars and forums at school to educate people about the events that had happened, --you know--and how to go about it--you know--diplomatically, because she felt it was her duty to defend Arabs from finger pointing. So there was a lot of--you know--kind of backlash at school. And they ... they have a very strong kind of Israeli-Jewish lobby at school as well and ... and ... 'cause my sister was always kind of like in the local paper, the local Jewish community kind of got involved with the school to try and stop my sister from conducting certain events And then--you know--the day to day ... On the street she's always stopped or because of what she's wearing on her, basically. And our ... our neighbors, of course. One of them always kind of, if they cross each other in the hallway or--you know--he'll always remark ... make a remark against Palestinians. And then my sister finally confronted him and she was like: "You can't argue with me. I lost ... I lost three friends in September. That's when it hit me that, like, people are making this link between Palestinians and 9-11. That's the biggest outrage.

Q. Do you think that Arab organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against Arab groups after 9-11?

A. Not enough.

Q. Why not?

A. Not enough. I feel like the American Muslims kind of--you know--did a decent job ... I didn't like the way it was done because I don't believe in the way they handled it. But they tried very hard to do these commercials on TV and to do interview with children at

school--you know-who were either Arab-American or just--you know--American Muslims and that ... that was okay. But I know that, like, once somebody feels hatred it's very hard to erase it And I think that the Arab-American groups especially in New York, haven't done enough to kind of give good face to Arabs. I ... I know they did a lot to protect Arabs who were being harassed and ... of people were going in to do community work for Arabs, especially the ones living in Brooklyn, in Bay Ridge. But on the whole I don't feel like there's been enough work done. And that's why I really committed myself to working with...

Q. What more do you think can be done by these organizations, not individuals?

A. Well, I think the organizations, first of all, should team up. Like, there are just too many of them. You know? Everyone wants to kind of be a leader but nobody wants ... Like, I don't see enough work getting done. That's the first step. Then the second step is that they shouldn't use the same old methods. Like, they need to get more creative about their approach to things because it's always the same story, like--you know--a big gala dinner--you know--and dancing. And that's not enough. I think that the ... the groups should get more involved in the educational system, not just the universities because, I mean, Columbia and NYU are already pretty liberal. You know? They should focus more on high schools--you know--and communities and they have a tendency to just work with their own communities. They don't kind of venture out into other communities. I think that if we reach out more to--you know--not just--you know--the under ... under represented communities but even the ones who are already standing so that--you know--it's kind of like ... and you shouldn't ... You should not feel guilty being who you are, so

you shouldn't feel like it ... it should prevent you from socializing with different groups. And I don't think we do that enough.

Q. You mentioned joining mailing lists since 9-11. Have you joined any other organizations since then?

A. Yeah. Actually, I've joined a lot of mailing lists.

Q. And can you talk more about your project, this one?

A. Yeah. Yeah ... actually it was an idea that had been going around for a while between two people. And then I heard about it and ... and then I felt like this was how I could help the most because it's within my field, it's something I'm qualified to do, and art for me is the universal language.

Q. Can you briefly explain what it is?

A. Um-hum. It's a non-profit organization that is dedicated to showcasing art work from Arab-Americans and Arabs around the world, showcasing their work here in New York, hopefully to build a bridge, a cultural bridge, between America and the Middle East. Our first project was to do an art exhibition that would just showcase Palestinian art work, either Arab Palestinians or--you know--Palestinians living in their homeland, and having this big art and cultural event. And then hopefully in the future, like, my goal is to do more art shows. I'm one of the curators for the show and I would like to get more kind of Arab artists showing in New York because I ... that was my problem, too, when I first got here. I wanted to be a part of an Arab art community because eventually I would like to go back to Lebanon and ... and work from there and I thought it was important to ... to meet the Arab ... Arab Artists living here. But I couldn't find them. It was very hard to meet them. There are a lot here, but everyone's just so spread out. I thought that getting

involved with ... If I can't find them, let them come find me, --you know,--this thing and that we could have a center where we could all meet up and discuss--you know--the situation of contemporary Arab art and how we can ... --you know-- what similarities we have, what difference we have, and how we can get more of our art work to show. It's very hard to show as an Arab artist in ... in New York because most of the galleries--the top galleries--are run by Jewish families and there is--you know, --there is a lot of tension. and ... and so far, from my experience in New York, it's ... it's not easy. People just don't want to deal with you because you're Arab. And the art market in New York now is centered around money and people won't take risks. And being Arab is a risk. So I thought--you know--well, we can have our ... our own space and ... and help Arabs--you know--to show their art work we can just show it in our space. And then hopefully people will understand that we're not all terrorists and--you know ... I mean, art ... art is a very good source to reach people though because it is universal and we are talking about universal language, emotions, love, hate, fear, death--you know-life. These are universal topics and it's best expressed to me through art.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between Arab-Americans and others in the United States at this time?

A. I think there's a lot of uncomfot ... discomfort, yeah, and I think everyone's kind of just waiting it seems, for the next thing to happen because the way--you know--politics are going in the States ... You know, --George Bush is looking for ... --you know--to capture this evildoer and so people are kind of waiting. And I think there's just a kind of schism happening now where people aren't really committing but they're not really

pulling away. It's just kind of stagnant right now. I feel like they're waiting for something to happen.

Q. People ... Americans or Arab-Americans?

A. Americans. And as for Arab-Americans, at least the ones I'm involved with, like, they're all, like, with ... we're all kind of trying to kind of--everyone is trying to save face. You know? I ... I notice now, like, Arab food stores or Arab taxi drivers, even Indian and Pakistani taxi drivers, anyone of dark skin, now--you know--stick up American flags on their ... on their cars, on their cabs, on their stores, so they are trying to show their affiliation or with America and to try and ease the tension. And I think they're trying to get more involved in ... in politics here.

Q. What do you think members of the Arab-American community can do to improve relations between the ethnic groups?

A. I think the first thing would be to kind of break down the barrier between ethnic groups; that it's not about being Arab or Puerto Rican or ... or Jewish. You know? It's funny how they mix religion with ... with ... with a country or a culture. But they're stereotyped--you know? --Arab Hispanic, Jewish, and these stereotypes need to be broken and people need to start speaking on a language that ... a language that's common to all, and--you know--not to feel sort of Arab pride but rather to feel this humane pride. And--you know--just to be able to talk as human being first before being an Arab. I think that's very important because if you just try and throw in this Arab stereotype ... I mean, what is Arab? We are from so many different countries and so many different ethnic backgrounds within those countries and tribes. And--you know, we come in all shapes and sizes and colors. It's just ridiculous going under this big thing called Arab. And I

think that Arabs often need to take responsibility to kind of ... I mean, the first approach to being Arab is always like this tough guy approach, like, Yeah! Yeah, --you know? I'm Lebanese. I'm a terrorist. Don't mess with me. These jokes ... I used to make these jokes and I will not ever make these jokes again because it's these jokes that have been ... we take them so lightly but the Americans don't. You know? You make a joke about being a terrorist--you know--a year ago, they'll remember it today--you know? --and that's why a lot of my friends stopped talking to me because,--you know-- how do they know I'm not, in their opinion, if I jokingly ... jokingly claimed to be. So I think we need to stop making these jokes,--these stereotypes about ourselves. You know? If ... if ... if we want to tell jokes--you know--it's fine every now and then. We can't help but do these stereotypical racial jokes because the whole world does that. But I myself will try and make it a point never to do that again. So kind of like to be a better ambassador of myself first and the being Arab.

Q. What do you think Arab-American organizations can do to improve the relationships between the ethnic groups?

A. I think my first target would be the youth because, I mean, people at an old age who have kind of made up their minds, it's very hard because of history--you know--to kind of get it changed now. What I'm more concerned with is what's going to happen, not what has happened. And ... and I think that--you know--organizations can help by--you know--providing events, spaces for interaction, lectures, --you know--guest lecturers to go into high schools. Like, we don't have any of that. You know? We kind of like save it all for college and everybody just wants to be part of--you know--the prestige. But--you know--we forget about the kids and--you know--these are ... This is the future generation and

that's where I think organizations should get more involved with working ... working with the children and high school, I think.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of Arab-American or Arab immigrant groups in the United States after 9-11, would you encourage people from the Middle East to emigrate to the U.S.?

A. It's very difficult. It depends where in the Middle East. You know? I know, like, for example, where I come from in Lebanon there are no jobs right now, --there are no jobs and everyone's leaving. You know? But I also know, like, for example, in Palestine they encourage people to leave because the more of the youth that leaves the country, the easier it is for the settlers to settle, --you know, --because you're basically ... you're encouraging people to leave their land. So, for example, I can't give both--you know--Palestinians and Lebanese the same advice. I would ... I would tell the Lebanese, well, I know from my experience that it's hard to make a living in Lebanon so if you need to go outside and do something, --you know--make sure you go back in a few years and implement it. You know? Because if everyone leaves, there's nothing left. But then for Palestinians--you know--I would say--you know--don't leave. I know things are tough, but if you leave there'll be no one left. It's ... it's ... it's very difficult.

Q. Well, why would you encourage them to come to the U.S.? What is it about the United States that you would tell them to come for?

A. Education. Education and mixing, learning ... I mean, I ... I hope that with all the people I meet here ... I mean, my hope is eventually to go back to Lebanon and start up ... help start up or help continue an art school. We don't have an art school for the Middle East. We have universities that have art divisions or programs, but we don't actually have

a school. And if ... if we want the school to happen then--you know--we have to bring in--you know- people from all around the world to get involved. So I--you know--I ... I hope that I can give Americans a better idea who I am as a Lebanese and my experiences being Arab and kid of help break down the stereotypes through this common language of art--you know? --and encourage people to come and visit and to come and learn, and to--you know--basically break down the stereotypes. I can't see myself living here for the rest of my life because I am very much tied to my homeland. But I ... I can see myself moving back and forth a lot because I'm interested in both cultures and I've been raised equally in both cultures.

Q. We have talked about some of the negative consequences of 9-11. Were there any positive consequences do you think, of 9-11?

A. No.

Q. Would you say that there's some kind of visibility or understanding of Middle Easterners or Muslims in the United States?

A. I mean, there is visibility but it's ... it's not a positive one. It's not, like ... any ... any horrible thing to happen, I mean, there's going to be a reaction, both positive and negative but I don't ... if there's something positive that should happen I ... I really don't think that it should have happened because of this big negative thing. So that's why I'm ... I'm not going to validate, --you know-any kind of reaction now. I think all these reactions should have been happening before and these organizations ... You know, there should have been a sort of existed when I got to New York. It should be there because there is an Arab Arts and Cultural Institute in almost every city in the world except for New York. You know? So, I mean, pretty much where ... where there's a city where a lot of Arab

immigrants ... they have centers. I mean, in Paris there's an Institut du Monde Arabe. You know? And I ... You know--New York has many cultural centers of different countries. There's the Japan Center. There's the ... the Jewish Museum. You know? There's Asian-American centers. But we don't have anything that's close to being an Arab arts or cultural center. Like, this should have been there before.

Q. Why do you think it isn't or hasn't been here before?

A. I think most ... most Arabs who are having ... you have ... don't want to blame it on this whole Arab thing. I think the word Arab is very difficult in itself, as I said before, because we're talking about many cultures and many countries and many ethnic backgrounds. It's probably such a large word ... You know, it's not one country. You know? It's not the Japan Center. It's several countries. And maybe it's wrong to group so many countries under one name. You know? I ... and expect it to function as that name. You know? If they called it something else, like, just a word that doesn't exist, that isn't related to--you know--Arabian--you know--maybe it would have happened, like, the Center ... You know? Like, we have, like, Center for Middle Eastern Studies in universities and that seems to be working out fine. I think the word Arab itself is very difficult.

Q. Um-hum. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened?

A. I think that there are two things. The first pressing factor would be that. Okay, this is so hard to say. I feel like this new American regime--and I call it a regime because I feel that it is--is very much centered on world domination through its different outlets. And my first reason, as much as I hate ... and it hurts for me to say this, but I think that it's an

internal job done to give America a reason to build its ... its ... it's race now for arms--nuclear arms, building bigger armies and just treating a world kind of threat or tension so that they can justify the weapons that they own. You know? It's a kind of justification. If... just because of the way the events happened, the timing--you know--and just enough to kill just enough people but not too many people. Too many people were killed but it could have been so much worse had they waited a half an hour or an hour more. You know? So my first ... my first reason is--you know ... that's what I think. I think it's a play of economics and power. Then the second again a little on the paranoid side but I feel sometimes maybe this could have been a kind of Israeli job to help kind of the world focus its attentions on America while they invade and take out more of Palestine. I don't feel that it's one man called Bin Laddin who did it because he hates America. You know? I don't ... I don't ... I don't think so.

Q. Many people claim that the Arabs or the Muslims in the Middle East hate America. Do you think that is true?

A. It's not true because as a high--you know--high school, college person being in Lebanon it's so trendy to be American. When the first McDonald's opened everyone was in line--you know--at six a.m. everyone's into jeans and the whole American ideology of--you know--freedom and--you know--the right for free speech. And, I mean, with the kids it's very hip to be American. So they can't possibly hate it. What they hate is U.S. foreign policy, spec--specifically related to Israel and the funding of Israel. That's what they hate. But they do not in any way hate America. The people who chant out--you know--America is the devil, these are very extremist groups. But the ... the young and kind of like the culture that's in schools--you know--or university settings or even, I

mean, in the cities, in Beirut, I've never really heard anyone say to me before: I hate America. I hate Americans. But they will say: I hate the fact that Americans are so ignorant, --or: I hate the fact that American media is so biased,--or : I hate the fact that America supports Israel.