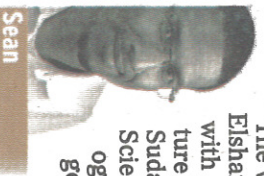


Speaking without words

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. But the pictorial art of Elishafei Dafalla Mohamed is worth exponentially more.

Omar Hassan al-Bashir, president of Sudan, came to power with a military coup in Africa's largest country in 1989. And ever since, the iron fist with which the Islamist ideologue rules Sudan has crushed entire segments of civil society.



Sean GONSALVES

The work of artists like Elishafei, who graduated with a bachelor of sculpture arts in 1996 from Sudan University for Science and Technology in Khartoum and got his master's from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, was literally smashed to bits during a repressive purge of "idolatrous" displays in the late 1990s.

Sharia law was sweeping across the land like the Sword of Damocles. The crackdown on civil liberties and political diversity brought misery to that nation of 40 million people and 115 different languages – not the least of which was a ban on various forms of artistic expression and intellectual freedom.

Though Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and other crimes against humanity, one of the continent's most notorious thugs has maintained his grip on power. Elishafei had to get out. In 2001, months before 9/11, he was granted political asylum in the United States.

Ten years later, Elishafei is still sharing his artistic vision with the world outside Sudan – through his sculptures, photographs and paintings.

His most recent exhibit – "On Borders and Other (Un)Natural Elements" – has found its way to Cape Cod and will be on display at the Cohuit Center for the Arts until the

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or what country they came from," he said.

On a side wall, the exhibit Elishafei calls "Dialogics" is comprised of a half-dozen, close-up shots of solitary leaves, displaying their bright autumn colors of orange, yellow and green.

On the wall across from the fall foliage prints is another exhibit called "In Transition." In that series of images, you see out-of-focus shots of people Elishafei photographed at different airports and train and bus stations around the world – from Paris, Amsterdam and Cairo to New York, Los Angeles and Detroit.

The closer you're drawn to the images, the more difficult it is to see the blurred shapes of the people in them.

"You can't tell who the people are – their race or ethnicity. Only that they are all people in transition, crossing borders. That is the human condition, traveling from place to place, looking for a better life," he tells me.

Elishafei and I are sitting alone in the gallery. I ask him whether art is inherently political.

"Yes, but I don't connect myself to any political ideology, even though art has political impact," he said, searching his multi-lingual mind for the words to explain.

"Politics is what's wrong with the world. Politicians want to put us all in these boxes. Race. Religion. All these categories. But art is a universal language. We can share it and communicate without words," he said.

Art, Elishafei said, is about

the "beauty and creativity of the human being. It comes from the heart, not from political interests."

To illustrate, he talked about how differently people reacted to him after 9/11. One person he was friendly with before the terrorist attacks "suddenly began acting very aggressive toward me. He went from looking at me as a human being to looking at me through a political lens. Instead of a human being, he began to see me as black. As a Muslim from Sudan."

Just then, someone enters the gallery. He is captivated by the fingerprints first. When the man realizes Elishafei created what was before him, he introduces himself as Jason Eldrege, an artist from Cohuit who came to the gallery looking for a bit of inspiration.

I ask him what is most striking about the exhibit. "The fingerprints. They define us individually but also anchor our humanity. And I like how he uses the space."

Elishafei was right: Art is a universal language that can be communicated without speaking. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but some are worth infinitely more.

Sean Gonsalves' column runs on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Read past columns at www.capecodonline.com/gonsalves. E-mail him at sgonsalves@capecodonline.com.