

Immersive experience will be out of this world

Art : What Lies Beneath



Afra Khan's 'The Gemini'



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Afra Khan sits in her bright, elegant, spotless studio on Merrion Square, and it's her first time in Ireland. She sees herself as "an artist in cyberspace", laptop and phone at the ready.

She views "traditional notions of conformity, belonging, and identity as antiquated - concepts within the framework of lanetary futurism".

Here on a seven-week Studio Quantum residency at the Goethe Institut, Khan came to Ireland for its folklore, “clichéd and irritating as that might sound”, because “that is something close to my heart”.

“I grew up hearing a lot of folklore from my mother who is from Kashmir where fairy folklore is intrinsic to the culture.”

Khan was born in India (her mother had arranged that), but she was “exported - immediately back to Saudi Arabia where my parents were living already”. Her father studied electrical engineering, her mother was a housewife, but Khan grew up in a family of independent women.

More than drawing or painting, music was an early interest. She played drums and now composes her own soundtracks for her dynamic, electronic- techno, audio-visual work.

Khan speaks English, Kashmiri, Urdu, Arabic, French, and is learning Spanish, has a dental degree and now plans to work in public health. But “my art will continue”. She has been exhibiting for 10 years.

Covid lockdown was spent in Bangalore. The day she had planned to return to Saudi, flights were grounded. Her computer broke, “nothing was open”, but using only her phone she made “a lot of quantum technology art and touched on themes such as faster than light signals, data privacy and what would happen to our data when quantum computers would become a reality”.

She’s very interested in St Ulrich of Augsburg, and John the Baptist “is very close to my heart”.

This image, above, from *The Gemini*, is “an immersive 360-degree virtual reality - experience that will allow a user to send real-time messages into space”.

It has little to do with Khan being “a Gemini in the ascendant” and “everything to do with the idea of quantum entanglement which is a more interesting thing for us humans to ponder on”.

Being in Ireland, she says, “will inform the aesthetics of my work”. Cork, - Connemara and Newgrange are on her to-do list but she has also, by happenstance, been attending quantum-related conferences while here.

In the National Gallery she was transfixed by Frederic William Burton’s *The Meeting on the Turret Stairs*. “It took my breath away, I stood there like a robot”. Khan admits she “bought all the merchandise” and then, serendipitously, she spoke with a security man called Aidan, “a name I’ve always been drawn to”.

“It’s like a play on Eden and it’s also an Arabic name. If I ever have a son I’ll name him Aidan.”

Not interested in art for art’s sake, Khan’s hope “is always to have the work serve as a means of inspiration towards the evolution of humankind”. “My work is a commentary on the state of the world and as long as we have kindness and love in our hearts, there is hope.”

She likes her own company – “it allows you to go deeper into yourself and make friends with your own being” – and is yet to find a place she can call home.



“I’m searching for home and when I find it the world will know.”

Instagram @anakhemia