Crossing Borders and Bridging Gaps Through Art

An interview with Elshafei Dafalla

Education for Justice, a project of Center of Concern
Elshafei Dafalla was born in Sennar, Sudan. He received international praise for his work as a sculptor, photographer, painter, and installation artist with a special interest in sound. Mr. Dafalla’s work is noted for its political engagement with different world cultures and has been celebrated for its capacity to create solidarity among communities and peoples across political, cultural, and racial differences.

Mr. Dafalla’s journey with art began at age 13, when he was recognized as a videographer. At age 19, he had his first solo exhibit which included sculpture, drawing, and calligraphy. At age 24, he was elected a member of the Sudanese Artists Association Executive Committee. His work also includes documentation of the lives and cultures of the Umbororo, a nomadic group in Sudan that hosted him for two years. In addition, Mr. Dafalla documented the life histories of more than 50 Sudanese artists through photographs and biographies for the African Studies Center at Cornell University.

In 2001, Mr. Dafalla moved to the United States, arriving just in time to participate in a major exhibition of Sufi and other Muslim artists in New York City in the wake of the September 11 attacks. In 2004, he was awarded a Visiting Artist Residency at the Center for Afro-American and African Studies and the School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan, where he was awarded a fellowship to pursue his Master of Fine Arts degree in 2005. In 2007, he was awarded the University of Michigan’s Martin Luther King Spirit Award. Mr. Dafalla’s experiences traveling with the Umbororo in Sudan led to a public sculpture installation, called Umbororo Crossing, which won him the Golden Paintbrush Award from the city of Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 2008. That same year, he graduated and his installation, Delirium was selected for exhibition at the Michigan State Capitol in Lansing.

Mr. Dafalla has participated in more than 50 exhibits worldwide and his work is part of public and private collections in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. He continues to lecture and to exhibit his work, holding artist residencies, participating in community building activities, teaching young children, and creating performative installation events around the United States and internationally.


“My art is a voice for those who cannot speak, a voice that tells of a people’s suffering, a voice that speaks of people caught between borders and conflict, a voice that says we are one people who are more alike than different.”

—Elshafei Dafalla
Note from the Editor
The cover image is from Elshafei’s installation entitled, *Delirium*. This project was inspired by the artist’s experience of being fingerprinted multiple times as an asylum seeker. This art piece “reclaims” fingerprints as something we all share—a pattern of oneness and community. *Delirium* is a collection of over a thousand fingerprints of people from around the world—from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, the Americas, and the United States. The fingerprints are from people with different immigration statuses, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and ages. In describing *Delirium*, Elshafei stated, “It is important that we recognize and celebrate our uniqueness—but never forget that diversity makes us stronger.”

Partial list of exhibitions by Elshafei Dafalla
- *Safe Harbor*
- *Unshackled Memory*
- *Umbororo Crossing*
- *Delirium*
- *Water and Fire: A Message from My Hometown*
- *Selected Painting and Photography*
- *Rooted in Memory*
- *Shadows of the Dancing Rose*
- *My Experience in the Countryside*
- *Cultural Diversity in Sudan*
- *Visualizing the Discernment of Black Transnational Perspectives*
- *RE-MEMBER-ED-LAND(e)SCAPE-S, Here, There, and Everywhere: Anticipating The Future of Art*
- *Displaced Spirit—A Visual Journey*
- *Uprooted, A Visual Engagement of Forced Displacement and its Causes*
- *Torture: A Sign of Despair—A Sign of Hope*
- *Sufi and Muslim Artists*
- *Ten Sudanese Artists*

Videos by Elshafei Dafalla

Books by Elshafei Dafalla

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EFJ: Tell us a little about yourself.

Elshafei: My name Elshafei Dafalla. I was born in Sennar, a town on the Blue Nile in Sudan. Sudan, the largest country in Africa and one of the five largest in the world. In Sudan, there are 700 ethnic groups and 115 languages are spoken within its borders.

I come from a family who values education. My father was a principal and my mother, a teacher. She taught at an after-school program and has always been interested in education. Since I was young, I learned from my father and mother that, as someone who had a chance to get an education, I was to share my knowledge, my artistic tools (talents) with others. When my mom would travel to rural areas, she would try to start schools for children. I remember I would go with her to other areas in Sennar. There we’d meet people living in the those areas who were from many cultures. She shared her skills with them: reading and writing. My mom also taught the women basic life skills such as housekeeping, cooking, hygiene, and health. But she also learned from her students. They also shared a great deal of their knowledge, knowledge that is not found in books.

When people in Sudan would ask me where I was from, it was difficult for me to answer. I lived in the city Sennar, but my father was from a different city and tribe, and my mother belonged to another tribe and region. (It was common for two people from different tribes—usually those who had an education—to marry out of love.) As a child, I spent a lot of time visiting these two districts. When I was in mother’s city, I was told that I was from my father’s region; and when I was in my father’s city, I was told that I was from my mother’s region. It was difficult for me to understand my roots. It was like I had no identity. Since I spent most of my childhood in Sennar, I called it my home. These types of tribal conflicts contributed to the civil war in my country and divided Sudan into two countries: North and South Sudan. I grew up in one of the longest civil wars between North and South Sudan. Sometimes people reference that the causes of this conflict were tribalism and religion, but it is also rooted in politics.
EFJ: When did you realize that you wanted to be an artist?

Elshafei: I remember one day when I was very young, my father asked me what I wanted to be in the future. I said that I wanted to be a soldier. A soldier who carried a gun was powerful. He could do what he wanted. I wanted to be strong and powerful like Rambo and Arnold Schwarzenegger in the action movies. These kinds of movies and the civil war in Sudan brainwashed kids’ minds by telling them that having a gun would make them strong and muscular. That was a game that was played on us kids; even today, those who are involved in the school shootings in the United States think they are strong because they have a gun.

My dad was not happy with my response. As a kid, I looked up to the President, who was a military person, and others before him who were also in the military. Even today, in the news, when you see leaders from different countries, they all come from a military background. My father and my mother, who believed in knowledge and science, didn’t wish for me to be a soldier.

Not long after, I realized that education could help me use my voice for good. A voice for change can be stronger than any bullet, gun, or bomb that destroys humanity, culture, art, and history. I realized that, by continuing my education, I would become a better person for myself, for my family, for my community, and for the world. At the age of thirteen, I started to become interested in art. My cousin who was a videographer invited me to help him out. This is where I learned about photography and creating videos. I learned to understand light and darkness in images. I learned to document regular things like meetings, weddings, parties, sports—anything that had value in the community.

My parents always encouraged me to be creative. They didn’t train me in the area of art, but they supported me. I remember my mom gave me a set of colors when I was in elementary school; that set of colors was so valuable to me. I came to appreciate artisans from my community who used different techniques such as weaving, embroidery, and drawings in creating their cloths and clothing. I was truly inspired by them. I began to recognize art as a valuable tool of communication. I knew then that I wanted to be an artist.

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—Elshafei Dafalla
EFJ: How did you learn your craft?

Elshafei: I never took a formal art class in elementary and high school, but in high school, I took an art exam, and I received one of the highest scores in the school and in my region. After graduation, I applied at the School of Fine and Applied Art at the Sudan University in Khartoum, the only art school in Sudan. I got accepted. For the next four years, I studied art techniques: from graphics to design, from sculpture to ceramic, and from drawing to painting. During my second year, I chose to focus on sculpture and earned a BA in Sculpture. I also studied folklore and received a diploma in this field. Folklore is a type of language where people express themselves: their traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of the community. All of it is passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. In studying folklore, I was able to understand the history, tribal culture, and the landscape of the people around me.

EFJ: How did you make your way from Sudan to the United States?

Elshafei: In 2001, I left my homeland because of the civil war in Sudan. I did not belong to any political group. My work as an artist began to take the form of activism. In my art, I started to shine the light on what was happening in my country. My academic work, as well as my art with cultural tribes, was not appreciated. I was threatened and mistreated and I had to escape Sudan. The conflict resulted in dividing Sudan into two countries: South Sudan and North Sudan. I arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, in 2001—right before 9/11. I wasn’t granted asylum immediately; my case, like that of many other asylees, was delayed because of heightened fear of terrorism in the United States and, what I believe was racial profiling.

I used to visit galleries and museums. One day I found a gallery that had an exhibition similar to my style of art. I thought it would be a good opportunity for me as an artist to collaborate with them. My sister-in-law, who is an American, called the gallery and shared that her brother-in-law was an artist. I was told to bring my portfolio and come by the gallery. At the beginning, those in the gallery thought I was an American.

“I found my true self in art. Art, for me, became a way of expression—a powerful way of conveying a message. Art, I think, is stronger than any spoken language. It is an international language. An artist, when he creates an image, it is likely to be understood. But, if you say something, it is not always understood—it has to be translated. The spoken message gets lost.”

—Elshafei Dafalla
EFJ: How has life as an artist influenced you to become an activist?

Elshafei: I found my true self in art. Art, for me, became a way of expression—a powerful way of conveying a message. Art, I think, is stronger than any spoken language. It is an international language. An artist, when he creates an image, it is likely to be understood. But if you say something, it is not always understood—it has to be translated. The spoken message gets lost. Art is a tool that I use to express what is happening in the world around me—around us. My chisel, my camera, my colors, my pencils, my colors, and my sound recordings are important mediums that I rely on to create work with a message and to be a servant leader for others as an artist.

It is very important to me to collaborate with other people. I help others to see that they can create art. People make art as a way to express who they are, what they are thinking, and to release themselves from the shackles and stress surrounding them. I work with many communities: survivors of torture, survivors of human trafficking, school-aged children in lower-income neighborhoods, and those with disabilities who wish to express themselves through art. Also, I’m using my art as a tool to bridge the gap between ethnicity, religion, gender, and age—to break down, to tear down, the walls that divide us. Through my art, I try to help others see that, as a people, we share more commonalities than differences.

EFJ: What words do you use to describe your art?

Elshafei: My art is a voice for those who cannot speak, a voice that tells of a people’s suffering, a voice that speaks of people caught between borders and conflict, a voice that says we are one people who are more alike than different.

EFJ: How does art or your work awaken the senses of the viewer?

Elshafei: I try to incorporate the sense of smell, sound, movement, and feeling into my art. My art is inspired by what I see and by what I hear in the world around me. My art transmits beauty—a sweet smell of life and hope—even if it has some dark aspect in it. You can filter it to see and experience the good. It’s like the feeling of a fire: it’s hot, powerful, and dangerous, but it’s also calming, peaceful. It’s beauty mixed with both darkness and light.
EFJ: If your art were a brand, what slogan would it have? How would you describe your art?

Elshafei: My brand is, “Art for Human Rights.”

EFJ: How can art help children see a different part of the world and influence them to be future leaders and agents of change in the world?

Elshafei: I work a lot with children, with the poor, with those who travel from one place to another. I work with them and sometimes we discuss ideas. We challenge each other about our ideas, our way of thinking. Every Saturday, I work with children ages four to seven. I work with elementary schools, high schools, universities, and graduate schools. Sometimes, I get paid and, other times, I don’t. There are some institutions that don’t have money to pay, and I never say no to them.

When I work with children, sometimes, they will come to me and say, “I made a mistake. I need another paper.” And I respond, “There is no mistake.” To help them understand this, I take, for example, charcoal, and draw random lines on a piece of paper. These lines look like mistakes. Then, I begin to draw a portrait over the lines—like adding a layer over the initial work. The children become amazed with how a “mistake” can contribute to the overall work. The mistake becomes beauty. This becomes a moment to share a message. The mistakes of today can be used to better the future. As an artist, I try to teach them the technical aspects of art. For example, with watercolors, I ask the children to create their own colors by mixing the primary colors. I try to help them think outside the box, to have a conversation where there are no rules; art should allow them to express themselves, to think outside the box. I ask them to tell me about their work and tell them that what they created is beautiful and is amazing. Sometimes I arrive at the school early and the children are having their recess. When they see me, the children rush to come into my class. We have built a friendship, and I provide tools that help them to express themselves.

I also work with activists, those involved in politics, survivors, and those with disability. Recently, I worked with those who are visually impaired in the area of painting. I guess you could say that I’m trying to be politically correct by not discriminating against anyone. I’m trying to open a conversation: to create a space where hatred is replaced with acceptance; where there is a better understanding between people and their idea; and where language, the use of words is welcoming and not hurtful. My experience of working with torture survivors for a long time has helped shape me to be a better and more caring person. From them, I have learned about different cultures, their way of expressing themselves, and ways to build community.
EFJ: How has the current political climate impacted your work as an artist?

Elshafei: This is an important moment not only for me as an artist, but also for activists: for those who share common values of acceptance, love, and understanding. We need to come forward and use our voices, to raise them loudly to stop the hatred atmosphere that is being sparked by the current administration. As a Sudanese and an immigrant, the President’s executive order banning immigrants from entering the United States, which initially included Sudan, was upsetting, but I could see the value [strength] of the American people. They marched on the streets to speak out against the travel ban, and they showed up at airports to support immigrants. This is the strength of human beings: the strength of a people coming together to stand together. I try to focus on the positive part of our lives and the goodness that surrounds us and to learn to bring change from a bad situation—to correct the wrong way of thinking and acting.

EFJ: Have you experienced fear during this time?

Elshafei: The fear I experience is real. I know the stories of many people who are struggling, who are afraid because of the executive order. Unfortunately, those who are affected by the travel ban are treated badly. Those who want to be united with their families here in the United States are denied entrance; then, there are politicians who are welcomed here and taken to five-star-hotels. I remember a friend of mine who was living in Washington, D.C., and was very sick. His mother was planning to come and care for him. She even had a visa, but she was not allowed to enter the United States. This is just one story—but there are many more.

There is the case of Dylan O’Riordan, an Irish man whose parents had lived in Massachusetts who brought him from Ireland to the Boston area in 2010 on the visa waiver program. He began living his life like any other American teenager. At 19, he had a child with his girlfriend. He and his girlfriend were shopping at a mall when they got into an argument. Someone called the police, and O’Riordan was accused of abusing his girlfriend and was arrested. Because he had no criminal record, the county chose not to prosecute so the judge let him go. When he walked out of the holding cell, ICE agents were waiting for him and he was deported back to Ireland. My point is that no one is safe. The color of our skin or the language we speak no longer protects us. People from ethnic groups and different nationalities are not safe from the current administration’s policies.¹

EFJ: Because of your work as an artist, you were persecuted. Why would you put yourself at risk?

Elshafei: For me, art is an endless way of living, thinking, creating, and building community. When I look at what happened in my life, I think of it as one period of my lifespan, another layer of my life’s experiences. There are still more layers waiting for me. My tools as an artist help me to see the bigger picture—not only to create pieces that will shine a light on human rights but also to lift up people who are struggling and help them express themselves—to help them find their voices.
EFJ: As an artist, how can you use your art to show that torture is wrong? How would you envision an exhibit on this atrocity?

Elshafei: I use my art as a messenger to tell a story. Based on the story I wish to tell, I choose my materials, the audio recordings that will accompany the piece, and I decide on the size of the installation and the location where it will be displayed. For example, I’ve been working on a piece called, *Harbor: Survivors Among Us*. It is an art installation focused on raising the voices of torture survivors and political asylees seeking peace and safe harbor in the United States.

I photographed the faces of torture survivors from various parts of the world. One half of the person’s face is filled with light and the other half with a shadow-like darkness. The light represents the person you may know—not as someone who was tortured, but as someone who lives close to you or works with you. But there is another side to that person—the dark side of his or her experience of torture. This collection of images is combined with audio poetic testimonials based on the asylum seeker’s real life experience. With this project, I am trying to bring light to the issue of torture—to who were tortured. I’m currently looking for a venue to exhibit this art installation. These are images that I would like to have politicians see so that they could see, hear, and understand torture survivors and asylum seekers. Maybe this installation could shame their silence, and they could be a voice to end torture.

EFJ: If you could create any piece of art, what would you create and where would you display it?

Elshafei: My dream piece...that’s a difficult question to answer. I have lots of art projects. All my art expresses real life issues and I would like to show my work in different places; but the audience that I would love to share it with are kids: to hear from them what the art means to them. When they grow up, I would hope that they would remember that experience and use what they learned from my art to work for peace—to be loving and accepting toward others.

I also would like to show my work to decision makers, to have my art open their eyes to something they have never seen or experienced before. A lot of times we take things for granted. If you live a life of wealth, where you never lack for anything, chances are you never think about poverty. If you don’t have the experience of how some governments and other groups treat people, like torture, you’ll never know anything about torture and how it impacts a person’s life. For example, on the campaign trail, Donald Trump said he wanted to bring back waterboarding and claimed it was not enough and promised to bring back tougher interrogation methods. He never had the experience of being waterboarded.

“No money can compensate the happiness that my work as an artist can bring to others.”
—Elshafei Dafalla
EFJ: You yourself have experienced unspeakable brutality. How has art helped you in your healing?

Elshafei: I have found being an artist, collaborating with other artists, being around other torture survivors and those who are dealing with their own struggles gives me support. I recognize that I’m strong and, through my art, I can use my experience to bring beauty, love, and hope to a world filled with a lot of hatred and pain. I did a painting and music workshop with children of human trafficking, five-and six-year olds. After the session, the children came to me and said, “Today was a better day in our lives.” No money can compensate the happiness that my work as an artist can bring to others. I also remember working with survivors from Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC) and, after the art workshop, a survivor wrote a letter and thanked me. She shared that she had been thinking of committing suicide, but the art workshop saved her life. When I think of the people who I have been able to help through my art it makes me happy. I want to continue being an artist for human rights.

Endnotes
LITANY FOR ARTISTS OF OUR TIMES

**Leader:** We come together to remember, celebrate, and pray for artists of our times.

**All:** Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness of injustices.

**Leader:** For artists of our times who bring beauty into our world through painting, music, sculpture, poetry, dance, and photography.

**All:** Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

**Leader:** For artists of our times who use their art to inspire us to be artisans for peace.

**All:** Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

**Leader:** For artists of our times who use their art to promote and protect the dignity of the human person.

**All:** Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

**Leader:** For all artists who use their art to hold governments accountable for crimes of torture, genocide, and slavery and who are often persecuted, imprisoned, and censored for their messages of justice.

**All:** Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

**Leader:** For artists of our times who use their art to reflect the beauty of the world and note the urgency of protecting our common home.

**All:** Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

**Leader:** For artists of our times who use their art to create solidarity among communities and peoples with political, cultural, and racial differences.

**All:** Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.
Leader: For artists of our times who use their art as a powerful tool for the transformation of society and individuals.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

Leader: For artists of our time who use their art to connect the dots between the migrant crisis and climate change, between human trafficking and war, and between fear and racism.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

Leader: For artists of our times who use their art to reflect the pain, grief, and suffering of the poor of our world.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

Leader: For artists of our times who use their art to promote nonviolence and gun control worldwide.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

Leader: For artists of our times, who use their art to tie current racial discrimination to historical roots of oppression of people of color.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

Leader: For artists of our times who use their art to incorporate the concepts of restorative justice through art instruction, mural making, and community service within the criminal justice system.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

Leader: For artists of our times who use their art to collaborate with fellow artists, schools, community groups, and youth to promote peaceful communities.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

Leader: For artists of our times who use their art to empower future generations of visionary leaders and citizens with skills and knowledge to create systemic change.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness.

Leader: For artists of our times who use their art to promote artistic creativity and freedom.

All: Creating God, continue to inspire, mold, and protect all artists who promote awareness. Amen.