

Sparking the Creative Flame: Interview with Professor Bashir Makhoul



Looking back at his formative years in Palestine, Professor Bashir Makhoul reflects on what experiences, attitudes and outside influences have contributed to his remarkable journey from work on a building site aged 13 in Galilee to becoming Vice-Chancellor of a specialist arts institution in the UK. An artist and an academic, his joined-up vision of these two worlds is highlighted throughout this interview: particularly their importance in an international context to allow for greater collaboration and encourage a stronger spirit of entrepreneurialism, growth and understanding of other cultures.

Tell us about your upbringing and how it has influenced you as an

artist and as an academic.

I grew up in the tiny village of Makhoul in Galilee, Palestine/Israel, and was one of ten children being raised in a two-room home by a widowed mother. I was always instinctively drawn to making things. Even in those early years, I would collect stones from the rubble of a bombed-out village nearby and carve small figures using our family's knife – the only one we owned.

While I didn't know any artists as such when I was growing up, I was surrounded by people who valued creativity and were incredibly resourceful. My mum's attitude and her faith that tomorrow could bring better things than today influenced us all. She instilled a work ethic and passion for creativity that I continue to draw on to this day.

When I reached the age of about 13, I took up paid work on a building site to supplement my schooling. It was tough physical work, but I was determined to educate myself. I left school with the academic credentials needed to attend university, but unfortunately without the financial means. I took a job working in a carpentry shop, sweeping floors and tidying the workshop – later, my boss discovered I could draw and started taking me along on jobs.

Eventually, he also discovered my passion for carving and gave me the opportunity to get involved with the production process. Eighteen months after starting out in the lowliest role, I was made manager of the workshop.

I was incredibly grateful for this opportunity, but the desire to continue both my education and my artistic practice never left me. Working as an instructor for a summer school on the Sea of Galilee brought me to the attention of a Scottish clergyman who invited me to the Isle of Iona to design and install a public sculpture.

The kindness of the people I met on Iona convinced me that the UK could

have a very special role to play in my development as an artist. I was shocked at just how politically aware the residents were, and at how much they knew about the issues faced by Palestinian villagers such as myself.

I sold everything I had, and with the help of a scholarship was able, aged 25, to commence a BA at Liverpool Polytechnic. The work ethic instilled in me by my mother led me to achieve a first within two years, whilst simultaneously studying English and holding exhibitions of my work.

Further scholarships enabled me to achieve an MA and then a PhD at Manchester Metropolitan. I'll be honest: I didn't even know what a PhD was before I came to Britain. But the support I received, the way I was encouraged to explore my Palestinian heritage and engage with issues of culture and identity, was revelatory.

Mine was the first PhD to meld the practical and theoretical. I interviewed many Palestinian artists, and I was encouraged to use my explicit knowledge of making and doing to further explore artistic responses to the political context. It was a turning point in my life – a moment when I fully understood the contribution universities can make to furthering understanding of our culture.

As a successful practitioner and academic, why choose academic leadership as well?

I was fortunate enough to benefit from highly personalised support during my own education, which has led me to become a passionate advocate for engaging with students on an individual level. Nowhere is this more important than in specialist arts institutions where students should be encouraged to develop their own unique practice.

I intend to make it my mission to ensure that as many people as possible benefit from a personalised creative education. Wherever they may be in the world, wherever their interests may lie, everyone has their own forms

of expression. This should be celebrated because it has the potential to enrich all our lives.

Leading a university and having such an impact on a new generation of creative professionals is a huge responsibility and honour. As a practicing artist, it seems only natural to want to shape and influence creativity in some way. Education opens so many doors for so many people and I want to ensure that it becomes increasingly accessible in a way that benefits creative generations of the future.

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What attracted you to UCA and what are the opportunities for it internationally?

As a practicing artist, I was of course attracted to an institution that values creativity and has such a strong track record of nurturing creatives who go on to be leading practitioners in their fields.

UCA is as an institution united by its diversity with unique creative and intellectual assets across each of its campuses. The substantial collective strength in the structure of the university is provided by the unique strengths of each campus. At the same time, it is a structure which is ideally suited to flexible and creative expansion both regionally and internationally.

Essentially, UCA is a university without borders that is simultaneously able to maintain strong regional identities and roots, provide world class

education to the regions and attract world class students and research.

Our ambition is to establish strong international partnerships with long-term sustainability, and we are already working collaboratively with many countries to ensure that students from a range of different locations, cultures and backgrounds are able to access the world-class creative education provided by UCA.

The global UCA experience means providing a diverse curriculum that is based on international creativity, working collaboratively on research and other projects with governments, industries and institutions, as well as enhancing student mobility. The opportunities and possibilities for an international, creative education are incredibly exciting.

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Where do UK universities, and in particular specialist institutions like UCA, lead? And what can they learn from its peers internationally?

For the last 150 years, UCA has been equipping students with the skills they need to thrive in the creative industries. From architects to animators, and fashion designers to artists, specialist institutions such as UCA, equip students with a versatile set of skills and offer important connections to industry.

UCA instils creative thinking within their students, which is a highly valuable asset that is extremely sought after by businesses. UCA doesn't just offer a skills-based education, it encourages risk-taking within creativity.

UK universities, while being world-leading, can learn a lot from their peers internationally. Apart from research, British universities are not open enough internationally. They have educational integrity, but they aren't agile enough and they don't think like businesses. The majority of UK institutions offer a very linear, traditional education and are risk-averse, which means that there is plenty that can be learned from overseas universities.

The Australian approach to education is completely different to the UK's, for example, and there is tremendous focus on investment and collaboration. Scandinavian universities, meanwhile, give creative subjects an equal footing and contribute in a much greater extent towards design.

Specialist institutions in the UK tend to be small in size and this can make them vulnerable, particularly when there is constant changing and shifting in higher education policy at government level.

The potential that these institutions have for delivering education that supports growth – through working with international governments, as well as public and private sector organisations – is enormous.

UCA has just launched its own Business School for the Creative Industries, which builds on our long tradition of collaborating with employers to cultivate leadership, entrepreneurial and problem-solving skills. There is growing recognition that creativity and innovation in businesses depends on the skills and attitudes that specialist universities such as UCA have taught for many years as part of a creative education. These approaches to innovation, creativity, and ideas generation have been ignored by business education – but now they are increasingly seen

as integral to growth and success.

Tell us about your work at the interface of academia with other sectors internationally, and its benefits.

My work has always centred around conflict. It is such a deeply personal issue that transcends an array of academic fields and sectors. It resonates with so many people and societies around the globe due to the profound way that it affects different communities.

Being able to communicate important issues and raise questions through art gives people the opportunity to stop and think about their answers for a moment. I want to draw people in with the aesthetic of the imagery and then confront them with deeper issues, such as nationalism and religion.

The international nature of my work, and the visibility it gains through global exhibitions, provides a strong platform to instigate discussion on such important topics.

Using an aesthetic sensibility that is attractive and engages people with these complex issues is important. By universalising location, my work transcends language barriers. The issues conveyed in the art affect nearly everyone in some way, but the careful choice of where I hold these exhibitions seeks to personalise the messaging and causes it to resonate with different regions and in different contexts.

What is your perspective on the creative arts in the UK, and what it needs to do to maintain and develop its global status?

The UK is a leading force behind the global creative industries. In the UK, the creative industries are growing at almost twice the rate of the wider UK economy and in particular, British contemporary art is world-leading.

Maintaining our international status goes hand-in-hand with increasing accessibility to creative education. I am very aware that I benefited from a

UK education during an era when overseas students were greeted with open arms. I will never cease to be grateful for the kindness and opportunities extended to me, and I'm all too aware of how different my life could have been had I not received support at key moments. That's why I've been saddened to witness the increasing barriers implemented by successive Governments in the UK. Today, a driven Palestinian villager is very unlikely to have the same opportunities as I had – a state of affairs that I'm determined to challenge as a Vice-Chancellor.

A creative education can help power the economy by preparing generations of young people to enter today's workplace. We have a responsibility to place employability at the heart of all programmes we deliver, both at home and internationally, which means we must create partnerships with employers to ensure that we are helping students develop the skills needed to power the economy of tomorrow.

Making that distinctive connection between the creative arts and industry is crucial to maintaining our international position. Acknowledging the enormous value and contributions the creative arts make across the board, and ensuring that we continue to develop and shape a workforce capable of breaking boundaries, solving problems and keeping pace with industries as they transform and grow, is paramount to maintaining our global creative arts status.

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Tell us about how you produce your art and its transnational nature.

I have always maintained my art practice alongside working in academia, because fundamentally it is who I am and what I have strived to achieve. How could I support and influence creative education if I stifled my own creative instincts?

I maintain a studio in Beijing, and work with themes that create universal connections with people. Issues such as migration, for example, affect all nations. I use an ideas-driven approach to production, which means that I can plan work in advance and even test it, sometimes through digital simulation, before it is produced. Sometimes components for my work are manufactured away from the studio due to the scale or nature of the materials being used.

I've exhibited at many locations worldwide, some of which have included the Hayward Gallery, Tate Liverpool, 2013 Venice Biennale and the Aichi Biennale in Japan. I currently have work on show in Australia, Liverpool and Beirut, and a large exhibition in Mexico is planned for next year.

For me, my art has been a way of opening a dialogue on my own Palestinian heritage, connecting people through discussions on refugees and war-torn nations and offering exposure to some of the most harrowing humanitarian issues.

How would you describe the UK higher education sector at the moment and what do we need to do to ensure its position as an international leader is protected?

Higher education in the UK is world-leading but maintaining its position on the global stage requires the backing of politicians – keeping university

doors open should be a priority for the UK government.

Universities need to stop being used for political games if they are to maintain their global status. The government must establish a sense of stability in order for universities to get on with the job of providing world-leading education.

Maintaining an international profile also means recognising and meeting the needs of businesses. We must listen to the direct requirements of industries and match the demands of the economy, so that every person who enters higher education to increase their skillset or develop their artistic practice leaves with the ability to contribute to the rapidly growing creative industries, or with the creative know-how to work innovatively in creative and non-creative roles.

We need to appreciate that academic disciplines are never fixed. Take design for instance. In recent years we have seen perceptions of design shift dramatically. A generation ago 'design' referred to the creation of objects that could be touched and felt. But with the advent of the digital age the discipline is now being interpreted far more broadly, to encompass not just objects, but experiences. The websites we view, the apps on our phones – these have been crafted as diligently as any sculpture or piece of textile art.

Disciplines and creative outputs evolve all the time, but the creative mind-set that powers these changes is essentially timeless – adding value that transcends time and place.

The most important factor in maintaining our position as a global leader is ensuring that we aren't closing doors to international students, researchers, businesses or partners. Universal collaboration generates growth. Ensuring that the UK is enabling, rather than stifling, growth should be a top priority for the UK government.

Biography: Professor Bashir Makhoul



Bashir Makhoul is Palestinian, born in Galilee. He is an artist and academic and has been based in the United Kingdom for the past 26 years. During this time, he has produced a body of work based on repeated motifs which can be characterised by their power of aesthetic seduction. Economics, nationalism, war and torture are frequently woven into the layers of Makhoul's work and often the more explicit the material, the more seductive the surface. He completed his PhD in 1995 at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK. He has exhibited his work widely in Britain and internationally.

In April 2017 he became Vice-Chancellor at the University for the Creative Arts. Prior to this he was the Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Birmingham City University and a professor in art and design.

Previously he was Head of Department of Art and Design and the Director of the Research Institute of Media, Art and Design at the University of Bedfordshire, where he was also the founding Head of the School of Media Art and Design. He was also the Rector of the Winchester Campus and Head of Winchester School of Art. Additionally, he is the founder and Co-Director of the Winchester Centre for Global Futures in Art Design and Media.

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