



Eagerly showing her fascination for the culture of the Middle East which she was experiencing for the first time in her life, Cecilia began the conversation by mentioning how, at home, she feels here; 'I am very grateful for being here and this is my first time in the Middle East. This is a new culture for me but I think we are so similar; the sensitivity of the human messages is so universal. Even if we come from different cultures we are one!'

And as if to explain her point she continues, 'my children are part African, I have lived in America, and my grand father is a gypsy! Therefore I am not scared of different cultures. I feel like I am a bridge between different cultures somehow. When I met Iman Ahmed (Regional Media Relations Manager at DIFC), I spoke to her for five minutes and she was saying exactly the same things about my work that I would say about it myself. This similarity between different cultures, even though how far apart we have been brought up is so beautiful.'

Cecilia describes her work as 'abstract conceptualism', and normally works with stone but was exhibiting limited edition of four bronze works from her recently completed 'Listening' series to Dubai. These consist of two-piece sculptures which are round shaped and have openings like mouths or ears to show communication with each other.

Read on to find out more about this self described international citizen of the world.

Cecilia Rodhe: Sculptor with a soul

A rendezvous with the renowned sculptor Cecilia Rodhe who discusses why she left a glittering lifestyle to pursue her passion, art therapy for underprivileged children and most importantly why is it important to listen to ourselves!

By Ambreen M Ahmed
Pictures by Abdul Muttalib

Sculptor with a soul! You might find this description of Cecilia Rodhe rather amusing but once you finish reading this interview you will definitely agree with me as Cecilia is one artist who strives to spread happiness in the world through her sculptures.

A successful fashion model, former Miss Sweden 1978, runner up to Miss Universe '79 and wife of French Tennis star Yannick Noah, Cecilia enjoyed the life of a celebrity from a young age but left it behind to lock her self in the studio in Paris for ten years to study what she loved. Not only that but she has managed to utilize her success to make a difference in this world by being a part of many UN cultural and humanistic missions.

I met her for a chat at a cafe outside the Emperor's Hall in DIFC (Dubai International Financial Center) where Cecilia's work was being exhibited for an exhibition entitled '**MONEYworks** Bronze & Art' featuring works of almost 40 world renowned sculptors and artists. The exhibition was put together by **MONEYworks** Events in collaboration with Fine Arts Brokerage, Pearl Art Gallery & Roman Bronze Studio Inc.

This series entitled 'Listening' that you are showcasing has a universal message which encourages all of us to concentrate and listen to each other. Why is listening so important?

The first thing we should do is, listen, to ourselves! How can we understand others if we don't understand ourselves? The most difficult thing to do is to listen and understand ourselves. It is easy to go and judge others and try to pretend that all the problems come from outside but we need to look into ourselves and understand our own responsibilities.

As life goes on and the world gets smaller and smaller, I mean you have this facebook and very modern ways of communicating, which is good in a certain way that we don't miss a beat but I also feel that it is moving too fast. This is my biggest concern, good things take time. If you rush through a situation, you do not listen well enough.

When you start to listen, you transcend the mind. If you move too fast, you don't listen. That's how this series came

about really, from me and then from observing so many conflicts in the world. These conflicts occur because people don't understand each other and this fear of the unknown can create wars. We want to kill each other; which is insane! As we move into the new world we have to communicate with each other on a higher level. These really are my own wishes, for more understanding, more awareness and more consciousness in the way we deal with each other. This is the reason why we have different cultures. Each culture has their own beautiful things and we should share and inspire each other.



It was quite interesting for me to read that you had been a Miss Sweden and then to watch the video of you working on one of your sculptures on your website with all these tools and it all brought to life a sentence on the website which mentioned about the dichotomy between strength and fragility which you admire; I felt it described you. So what prompted you to become a sculptor from being a model?

I think it (sculpture) choose me. I met the right person at the right time who introduced me to this wonderful lady and I started studying under the French sculptors Zorko and Xavier Dambrine at Ecole de Beaux Arts.

From living this glittering lifestyle being married to a French Tennis star and traveling all around the world in a Concorde. I was suddenly in Beauville; with no heat in winter, sharpening all these tools and carrying coffee to the masters. It was a very different lifestyle to what I had been used to but it was so fantastic, exactly what I needed. To calm down, listen and emerge. Those ten years were a gift to me to be somewhere to listen to my soul.

My life was so fast, I started modelling at 14. I went to New York by myself at 16. Became Miss Sweden represented my country at Miss Universe. It wasn't my choice, it was given to me but I do believe there is a reason for everything. Being pushed into a world that was so superficial and focused on how I looked and not on who I was, made me depressed after awhile. So I started looking for an outlet. I think that is how I became an artist. I was quite late to study sculpture and to realise that I had something in my hands which had a connection to my soul, which was very deep.

If I hadn't been in that world, I probably would not have devoted myself to being an artist. It took me ten years to develop a relationship with myself and to stabilise myself and have a language for my work that people will hear, hopefully.

Your work has strong concepts, do you do a lot of research to come up with concepts or is it more intuitive?

The first concept of listening came about when I was in Washington DC sitting at a cafe watching a mother holding a child who was probably around two years old. This baby was lying on her mother and the mother was putting her ear forward and the child was talking into her ear. The mother was beaming, she was just a sun. It was such a beautiful scene of love. So perfect! I started doing some drawings at the cafe and I called them 'Listening' as the mother was listening to the child.

This mother might have just been busy, with the phone ringing and she might have missed that but consciously or unconsciously we love for these moments. When something like this happens it stays with me. Then I went home and watched TV and saw all these conflicts. There are always going to be two situations having two different truths and we need to listen to both of them if we are going to evolve otherwise we will go backwards. We need to move forwards, to be more intelligent, and to bring more goodness.

'The Promise' too is a long story, it happened at a time when my children left home and I had a severe case of 'empty nest syndrome' which I did not know existed and I started making eggs. But then it grew also from my own need of having my children around me and I had to grow and set them free. It is as you said 'strength and fragility' - an egg if you press it sideways, you can crush it with two fingers and if you press it from the top, you put a truck on it but it will not break. I think we have these in us. The decisions we make at every stage in our life are important to make this journey, the best, most beautiful one and filled with goodness.

Yes, 'The Promise' (egg shaped stone sculptures created to deliver the message of re-inventing) also had a unique concept delivered in a simple manner but with multiple messages that apply universally.

I like metaphors. An egg has ingredients to create life. The whole idea was to use it as a metaphor to say that we have the power to change, to grow, to re-invent. Re-inventing the way we think and re-inventing the image we have of ourselves.

Most of your sculptures are like circles, round or oval shaped. Why so?

I don't know. It might have to do with the fact that a circle is completion. Circle of the sun, the moon, the ring. Whenever I see a circle, I am drawn to it. It's also of people being together, the roundness of a pregnant women's stomach, so many different things. Also one thing that I do like is that when you have a round shape, it is filled with something.

For example my public installation in the Atlantic city called the 'In Oneness' it is a simple structure, it is very huge, around ten-twelve feet tall but definitely filled with something.

What has been the most amazing response to your work so far?

For me, the most important response I have is from children, I work for children and have created what I call 'Expression from the inside for kids'. If you open these doors for children to the fact that you can sculpt what you feel and not only what you see, they just go. They have so much to say, they love the whole experience. It gives them an endless possibility of expression. They love it and I feel proud to be able to transmit it to them. I love the way they react to it. It is the most profound connection with children.

Let's discuss this in more detail. Can you tell us about the various organisations for children that you support?

I am a board member/ director for Art therapy for INNOCENCE IN DANGER and we work with sexually abused children. It is a very difficult topic but we try to help the children with the psychological support they need and then we also have the art therapy for them.

I have done this for fifteen years but I am going to university and doing my Masters in psychology as I want to have my credentials. This is something which did not exist before but now we have these creative therapy classes like painting, music, arts, etc. I think this is a wonderful way in which we can help to rebuild the confidence of children. They don't have to talk about this; it speaks louder than words to themselves. They have lived the unthinkable but they are young and strong and can help to prevent this happening to other children. Art is a wonderful therapy for children and a new way of healing.

Why this interest in psychology?

I love psychology. I feel if I do this work, I need to know the theories of how the brain works. I did art therapy sessions with nothing but it is always good to learn as much as you can. It is very sensitive area and one has to know the different symptoms, how to read them and where not to go. It helps to understand myself and other people.

Do you have any favourite sculptors?

Yes, there are two sculptors I greatly admire and this was even before I knew that I had a passion for sculptors. These are Bruncusi and Rodin. Rodin because he always put a concept, his sculptures were very figurative but also very deep. 'Hand of God' is one of my all time favourite sculptures. Bruncusi for the shapes he created, he was such fantastic artist and did his own things completely. He didn't confine himself.

Do you have any message for the Arab women?

What I have felt here is the strength of the Arabian women; I see how similar we are. I come as a friend more than anything because I want to learn from you. I find there is a lot of mystery surrounding Arab women. We also have misconceptions that you have no rights here but I see that you are strong, beautiful, sensitive and



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speak your mind. I want to take away that misconception of who you are, if I can do anything.

I have only been met with kindness here and I also find that I have been understood more here. The angle you are interested in is more about who I am, in the west, the press come to talk to me about my work and just ask me 'how is Yannick doing?' which is so superficial. I am very honoured that you people have gone to the heart of my work and who I am rather than on the superficial aspects of me. I really appreciate that and it shows the strength that you guys have in yourself. I am in awe of you and I want to stay here and learn. ■

To know more about the artist and her work you can visit her website www.ceciliarodhe.com