



The European Graduate School
EST. 1994

EGS – Alumni Masters Spotlight – Habib Ahmed Afsar

Graduation Year: 2013 / Master of Arts Expressive Arts Coaching and Consulting

July 2015



Tell us about yourself! Where do you come from? Where are you living now?

People ask me that all the time: “where do you come from?” And I am always lost for an answer: Mars! (“Where’s that?” people often ask). I was born in Bahrain, I say ... a small Island with a king and all! Ethnically from Pakistan ... the north ... high mountains ... I have lived in Switzerland for a long time now ... feels home/ish ... I travel quite a bit ... I come from no-where and everywhere ... Geography has no meaning for me ... people do ... It’s always quite an awkward question for me, and perhaps one of those important ones. Where do we (all) come from?

EGS – Alumni Masters Spotlight – Habib Ahmed Afsar

How did you discover the Expressive Arts and EGS?

Even though I found it intellectually stimulating, after working in the development sector for so many years, I was thoroughly disillusioned with the materiality of it all. I was desperate to find a way to continue what I loved doing that included my passion for art. It was a lazy afternoon random internet prayer to the Google-god: art+ therapy+ Switzerland+development. And the Google-god answered!! EGS! Changed my life.

What is your fondest memory of your experience in the Masters program? Or maybe two memories? :-)

This is just one of many many many:

Close to 1:00 am in the first Summer School: All that art-doing! I'm so open and über-sensitized. I can hear my heart beating in bed and it keeps me awake, as does the much too bright moon. Its overwhelming - it hurts. I run out of my room in Steinmatte and down the hill. I am crying for nothing. I see Margo. I rush up to her in a panic. "I feel so scattered," I say. I read her a cheesy poem that I wrote to explain what I couldn't explain. She looks deeply at me, then fumbles through and takes something out of her wallet and places it in my hand. It's a silver angel. "She will take care of you." I hold on to it tight and feel immediately better. I held on to it for all my three EGS years ... until she went back to where she came from (hmmm ... again that bloody question: where do we come from?)

Since finishing the program, what Expressive Arts work have you been doing?

I do not always call it Expressive Arts, but the principles and skills I learned at EGS have literally become my approach to life and in particular to my work! I've used EXA for peace building, community development, organizational management, all kinds of workshops with children in-and out of schools, adolescent and adults (subject specific, art-making for pleasure, personal development, team-building etc.), poesis seminars for art-therapists, exhibitions and artists interventions, performance, social action and as a daily art-doing ritual for self discipline. Yes it does seem "scattered" I guess and it works only if you're grounded. While I am a bit lazy with updating the website (am a bit of a technophobe), I do document everything I do thoroughly: www.habibafsar.com



If you had a crystal ball, how would you imagine yourself in five years?

I don't go that far in the future - but I do fantasize about being famous after I am dead.

Anything else you want us to know? (This is the place to add links and/or images.)

"Love makes possible what reason says is not."

Why I do art

by Habib Ahmed Afsar

I loved school as a child, and when I think specifically of my school-memories, most, if not all, are related to “making stuff”. I remember vividly making paper chains and being fascinated by the simplicity of the process and material leading to what seemed back then as such a complex form. I remember making the penguins from the toilet paper rolls, the papier-mâché cherries, the wall hanging for mothers day, the 20 odd pair of animal tails I did for our class play Noahs Ark.

When I was six, I was allowed to use our small storeroom to do as I wished. Here, on Sunday mornings, I would wake up around six before anyone else and work-converting the small pieces of fabric and other objects I collected from the streets into soft toys, hand puppets, bags, doll furniture and other strange objects. When the rest of the family would wake up for a late breakfast around 9.00 am, I would have already prepared the “show”. At ten I started to collect and press leaves and use them to make pictures. At twelve I wrote my first poem about a chair - never stopped with the poems. At fourteen I had enough pocket-money to buy myself an expensive box of oil-paints and some brushes. At sixteen I took classes in water-colour, tried a failed apprenticeship carving wood, attempted pottery and began to draw. My mother saved and catalogued every piece I made. She showed off these pieces to people. I was just happy trying out different things and noticed that they “came” easy to me. I also noticed how people would be excited when I showed the things I had made and ofcourse I noticed the praise and admiration I received. Achieving skill was never my objective, In fact I had the compulsion to do many different things ... - as many as I could so I never got really good at anything- - and that didn't bother me at all!

Perhaps pleasing my mother, my most ardent fan at the time, was the highlight, but there was something else happening. In the relative dark and silence of that store-room studio, I would be transported somewhere else like children often do in play. It was another world away from this one. For a hyper-active kid, these three odd early morning hours were focused and sharp. Time would disappear. I would somehow disappear and something else would appear through me. I would explore and experiment with materials. Often pricked by needles and burned by candles, I learned that art-making hurts - it was a price to pay - and that I could deal with it well without the help of mommy!

I do art for all the same reasons now: For the opportunity to be silent in mind and voice - for the sense of other - worldliness where time disappears - for the timelessness - for the feeling of wonder and amazement at what chooses to be born through my labour.

I do art because I am in control and yet somehow I am not. I make art because that is the only way I know how to hold paradoxes.

When I am finished, there is often something there that did not exist before, and this feeling is very empowering albeit humbling as well. I do art because I can share these intimate things with the world; sometimes making people happy or just cause a reaction - art demands a response! I do art as an expression of what I feel is important for me to express even when I'm not sure what that is.

I do art when I am happy, sad, angry and when I am confused. I do art to heal myself, to deal with issues and to reveal to me secrets. I do art because it feels like the most natural thing to do.

