Khamsa Project

[00:00:00] **Swati:**

[00:00:33] **Swati:** Good evening everyone. And welcome to apex express. This is Swati Rayasam your very special guest host. Tonight I got the chance to sit down with Leva Zand and Guled Muse to talk about their recent project Khamsa which launched at the aggregate space gallery in west Oakland. Khamsa the Arabic word for five is a multimedia art project, showcasing Black, Muslim immigrant, and refugee visual [00:01:00] artists and musicians transversing the five stages of grief.

[00:01:03] **Swati:** I was so glad I was able to learn about not only Humsa but more about Leva and Glad's backgrounds and how in the process of putting together this show. They navigated their own grief and the multifaceted nature of grief, from the personal, such as the loss of a loved one to the societal toll of the COVID 19 pandemic, Islamophobia, or other forms of prejudice and violence.

[00:01:26] **Swati:** Stay locked in.

[00:01:28] **Swati:** Leva and Guled I'm so excited to have you. Welcome to APEX Express. I'm really thrilled to talk about your show, Khamsa, to talk about the music Guled that you've been working on, and Leva to talk a lot more about Art Together and kind of your, vision for using art as part of social change.

[00:01:45] **Guled:** Absolutely. For sure. And thank you so much for bringing us to the show. Truly appreciate it. My name is Guled Muse. Vallejo, Bay Area. I'm a music producer, curator, event, and content creator[00:02:00] had a lot of years, community organizing in San Francisco.

[00:02:04] **Leva:** My name is Leva Zand I was born and raised in Iran and I came to the US with my family in 2003 as refugees. My professional background was an international development. And I founded and I started Art Together in 2017 and I'm currently the executive director of the organization.

[00:02:25] **Swati:** Awesome. And can you tell me a little bit more about what Art Together is?

[00:02:29] **Leva:** Absolutely. The promise of Art Together is that we can do community building through art. Our original story is that during 2016 we were all very mad and sad and angry of election of Trump. To me, it was actually a shock because I didn't expect, and I realized that after, like being here for 15 years, I don't really know people enough. And also I experienced a sort of anger and rage in me that was very unique and new.

[00:02:56] **Leva:** And that feeling stayed for a couple of months and I was like, I have to do [00:03:00] something about this. And it's very interesting because it seems like that election of Donald Trump was the moment that I felt American in a way that I felt like I have some skills. This is my community, this is my place, this is my people. I wanna bring those skills home. My goal was like, what is missing in the services that refugees and immigrants are receiving?

[00:03:23] **Leva:** If you remember, we had lots of anti-refugee, anti-immigrant rhetoric back then. Muslim Ban and all of those. So I start researching what services available, what has changed since my family came here. And I realize not that much. There are amazing organizations who are providing services when refugees arrived, or social services, like mental health food or logistical support, like helping them finding housing or employment, but I couldn't find any community building program. I remember when we came here, me and my siblings speak English, but that was not the [00:04:00] case for my parents. And it took them many years to basically found their community. And knowing that, and also be familiar, that, language, is a barrier for new arrivals here for many of them. I was thinking like, what can be a medium that bring people together that they don't necessarily needs language or enter a room, a space that don't immediately feel like, oh, they don't know English, and the shame or isolation that ca comes with it. And that's why art came to mind basically.

[00:04:28] **Leva:** It is something that everybody can enjoy, everybody can practice that you don't have to be artists to go enjoy music or theater or arts. So I started talking with a few friends of mine. And, we put together some concept of this Art Together, like how can art be used as community building? And then I started reaching out to, some service agencies, some resettlement agencies that, Hey, what do you think about this idea? Many of them welcome this idea of like how to use art to bring community together, so [00:05:00] that was the origin of story basically the first year.

[00:05:02] **Swati:** Awesome. Yeah. Guled, if you could just give our listeners like a background, How did you become a musician? What was your inspiration? What's your vibe?

[00:05:12] **Guled:** As far as my music, it really just started with Rap City, back when I was like 10 years old when I first immigrated to this country and we got cable in the apartment. I remember, the channels we were just flipping through and BET was one of them. And more specifically Rap City. I remember it vividly because I remember like just that small television in the living room. We didn't have too much furniture. And, I remember seeing Black Star, Definition, the music video. And just seeing these brothers just spitting the way that they were was like, was absolutely fascinating. I've always had an experience with hip hop, but then it was much more like the commercial, like bad boy puffy, big willy style, men in black soundtrack. And from a global perspective you only get like what is being pushed to you, but [00:06:00] then really starting to understand regional hip hop, whether it was Outkast, whether it was, listening to hieroglyphics. It was something that fascinated me to the point where I started to participate in the culture as an mc, I was known as that little rapper in school. And, went on and just, things evolved. Being in college, doing a lot of events hip hop related in SF State. Shout outs to Professor Fisher, Donna, Lisa, the whole Africana studies department over there. Major love to them and the experience that they had provided me in being able to also participate in the educational aspects of teaching hip hop.

[00:06:36] **Guled:** I remember moving to Oakland. I think that was the city that really provided the spirit inside of me. I was once outer shell of myself, just didn't know who I was and like really Oakland around that time just like really embraced me. And just being around a lot of creators, a lot of artists inspired me, but then there's so much politics within the rap game. There's a lot. [00:07:00] To the point where artists had to compromise the way that they would rap. The music that they would create. And I was seeing, an underground movement happening at the same time in Oakland, shout outs to Smart Bomb. They're doing phenomenal work. And they really inspired me to the point where, my colleagues and I, we created a website, a music project called Speak With Beats, where we were highlighting, beat makers and musicians from the Bay Area because in the Bay, we are very unique, due to the fact that we're siloed from a lot of other regions where we're not really inspired by what is hot at the moment. It's always been a thing, but now with the internet, everything sounds the same, right? Because you're being inspired by so many different artists from a click of a button.

[00:07:44] **Guled:** But still, there's this unique aspect of people making original music and I wanted to reward them and to highlight these artists that I was just fans of before I was friends, like fans of, just to give them a platform was very important.

[00:07:58] **Guled:** And that's where I [00:08:00] saw where my skillset was. It's transmuted from, like participating more as an mc now, just being much more behind the scenes and utilizing the organizing experience that I've had to empower my people, my colleagues, my friends who are just extremely talented and just to know that I see them.

[00:08:19] **Swati:** I love that. I love, that's such like a beautiful local Bay Area story. How did you two get into contact? How'd you find each other?

[00:08:27] **Guled:** It's funny that Leva mentioned like the 20 16, 20 17, moments of our politics. Around that time I was dealing with personal issues, to the point where I just wanted to just step away from a lot of things, including music, art, activism. I was just personally more or less burnt out. And all of this stuff started happening. During 20 15, 20 16, I was wanting to think about ways of like really pushing, the culture that I was witnessing and experiencing and supporting at that [00:09:00] time to like new heights, right? Because when it comes to beat making music, like the instrumental hip hop scene, folks are now getting the taste of it with the lo-fi Cafe Girl, but I wanted to take it, one step further because I seen like the process of how people were creating the music, the way that they were sampling the music, the way that they would just come up with the production out of thin air. And I wanted to merge it in a, in such a way where it was like classical music, like jazz music, right? Because people were just putting out beat tapes consistently. Didn't have no theme, no nothing whatsoever. So I was like, let me try to curate something that was going to affect people in a way that words cannot describe.

[00:09:44] **Guled:** So that's where like the origins of the Khamsa project started coming to be, just bubbling. So around that time I stepped away from a lot, but that project always lingered. It always was there. And I would have not [00:10:00] brought this project into manifestation if it wasn't for my co-creator, my brother, Abaas Muhammad from the GAMA collective Gathering All Muslim Artists.

[00:10:10] **Guled:** Major love to him. He was someone who really just inspired me to push this further because as somebody who was providing support, sometimes you need support, right? I remember, some of my peoples telling me, a therapist also needs a therapist, right? At that moment, he was a person who really helped me out, who just didn't want me to stop my artistry. he recognized it and he really supported me to the point where he brought me into the attention of art together.

[00:10:40] **Guled:** And then just from there, that's where it really started and it's been a long time coming, it's been a long time coming. This project has been years in the making, but it's just started having a mind of its own and I can't thank art together enough.

[00:10:54] **Leva:** Thank you. Thank you for saying that you came from your mind. Let me also share my side of a story. First of all, part [00:11:00] of our mission was supporting refugees and immigrants. Very soon we realized that the disparity in art community and also the exclusivity of art community here, especially for immigrants or refugees it's very hard to get into the art world here. So, I think it was 2018, that we start thinking about how can we support, art together and support artists, refugee and immigrants artists.

[00:11:21] **Leva:** And by then there were a team of like few interns who were working volunteers so we decided to partner with, GAMA, gathering all Muslim artists and Oakland Art, Asian Cultural Center to put a group show together to celebrate refugee immigrants artists in Auckland.

[00:11:38] **Leva:** So we put the show together, I think we showcased at the work of more than 30 of such artists at O A C C, March 16th, 2020. Four days before everything goes down . And, Basically Guled came to one of our meeting. We didn't have office gallery or any of those things back then. And he said, well, I need a [00:12:00] couple thousand dollars for this. And we were looking at the project and we were like, this can be a major project.

[00:12:05] **Leva:** This can be a lot bigger than this. Just the music. So we told him that yes, we are in. Let's see if we can find resources for that. First we didn't get them, and then we applied for a major grant through Doris Duke Foundation, building varied bridges, which is about, bringing more Muslim artists and our Islamic arts to the community here. And back then Angira Huka was our program director and the project developed a lot through talking through meetings and gatherings. we were really trying that not let funding or that the direction of fund shaped the project. And that's always a challenge because funders are interested in specific things. So we took some liberty on that. We took some liberty to making sure Guled's Ideas is actually coming out and GAMA shout out to them. Great partner. and that's how this came together.

[00:12:56] **Guled:** Yeah. I wanted add as well too, I told Abbas, if I [00:13:00] wanted to pursue this project, like I had to provide compensation for the artists. I feel like it was really important, especially like in the hip hop community over here, there's a lot of pro bono work that goes on. I just wanted to break that culture of pro bono work because people are just working so many jobs while doing music and some of them, they just basically making music for free.

[00:13:25] **Guled:** But just to have that component, to say once again that I see you, like I wasn't going to do this project with without that. So to be able to partner up with Art together, partner up with GAMA, partner up with the Doris Duke Foundation, it was really humbling. It was really one of those moments in my life that kind of reinvigorated my admiration and my aspirations in the arts. And since then, it was just like, it was history.

[00:13:56] **Swati:** Yeah. I think that it is so critical, for [00:14:00] both of you having worked in community spaces and actively involved in community spaces in different ways, it's so important that like when you create projects or when you pursue things, that you do it with that code of ethics, right? I know that what I am doing is building up folks who are behind me, who are with me, that We seek to create a world in art and in any other aspect that is less exploitative than the one we inherited, the forever pursuit of liberation through that. So, tell me a little bit about what the Khamsa project is and then what was it that inspired you or that kept, you kind of stuck on it.

[00:14:37] **Guled:** Yeah. It's grief, like there's multiple levels to it. Everybody has their own relation to it. But at that moment, once again, it was just like me losing myself, I was grieving my hopes or whatever that I was personally dealing with at that time. I wanted to create this music project but then have people step inside the music project, [00:15:00] inside the mind of it.

[00:15:01] **Leva:** I got interested in the project because it was about shared human experience. It was a thing that you don't need to be from Somalia, Iran, America, Texas, I don't know. You name it. You don't have to be from any of those to experience grief.

[00:15:15] **Leva:** So it's a shared human experience and that's basically what we are doing at art together to emphasize on things that we can share rather than things that dividing us. And also it is not just grief. It's not grief for life. It can be loss of land, loss of people lots, loss of home. All of those things are lost.

[00:15:33] **Leva:** So it's not necessarily just life that we are losing and we are grieving for. So for me, that aspect was very interesting that this is a shared human experience. And of course the timing of it you know, COVID was happening and before that, the experience of gun violence in this country and what's happening for the Black community specifically here.

[00:15:51] **Leva:** So all of this came together for me at least, it was like this is a shared human experience and this is something that everybody can come and enjoy and [00:16:00] understand and also process. Guled is talking a lot about the music aspect of that, but we also put lots of emphasize and work on the visual, part of it for your listeners who may not know, Khamsa project, we partnered with aggregated Gallery space, which is a gallery in West Oakland, and we basically turned the space, like people could walk and they could, there were stations that they could listen to music, but they were also seeing different form of art forms. We had abstract art. We had video art, digital art. We had fabric art. So all of them were in the one place that walking people through this stages of grief, we all experienced it in a different way and different stages. It's not a linear thing. But Khamsa itself was a project walking through grief while music is with you. And while you are looking at some of these visual arts, this is how I describe it. and also I like it that it's hard to describe because it was very intersectional. It was very different from like other exhibitions or other albums [00:17:00] that you go through because it was just very intertwined with each other.

[00:17:03] **Guled:** Yeah. the aspect of bridging the gap between different communities was an important aspect, as someone who identifies as Muslim, and I've been in a lot of Islamic art shows and it was always something that relates to politics. They're always, something relates to Islamic history. I really wanted something that was more human. So to be able to have my homies who created the music project at the same time, the visual artists, they were also doing their own thing, creating art for the gallery. The funniest aspect is that none of them riffed ideas off of each other. They were all working independently away from each other. So it was a way to look at this concept from different vantage points, from different identities, but we're all looking at the same thing.

[00:17:51] **Guled:** And that's like kind of the commonality of us just being humans in general. Somebody who now sees the world different. Like what I saw is [00:18:00] like a lot of different groups, they would always share their culture.

[00:18:04] **Guled:** So just like the music project was one component, it was gonna be an instrumental music project, but then, I needed that element of the mc and needed the element of just raw MCs that were in our local area who were just phenomenal to speak on grief, to speak on the state of the community.

[00:18:22] **Guled:** And in the meantime, like just being able to have these visual artists express themselves in such a way was the idea. But things just started . As Leva said, it just started becoming this, when the exhibit got launched, it just became a safe space for people to go through that journey and heal each other.

[00:18:42] **Guled:** Because there was a question in the exhibit where it says, how do you heal and grieve? And the last piece of the puzzle was the people. And they all shared some phenomenal answers and I feel like it's just in the end, became such a community project, like what makes the Bay Area so great, makes the Bay Area so unique.[00:19:00]

[00:19:00] **Swati:** Yeah. I think that's so beautiful. I am so intrigued by the fact that you had all of these visual, auditory, otherwise artists grappling independently with what is grief to them. Being at the exhibit, you know there were a lot of different examples of grief, right?

[00:19:17] **Swati:** Grief around lost girlhood, grief around home, grief around relationships within family, within community, and all these different aspects. How did you stitch the visual, the auditory, and even the live performance? I'd love for one of you to talk about the live performance.

[00:19:36] **Leva:** I feel like we were working with immensely talented people. We had two amazing project manager, Abbas and Michelle Lin from Art Together. Shout out to her. I think they did a phenomenal job in coordination because it was not easy to coordinate between that many artists.

[00:19:53] **Leva:** And so part of it was coordination and also, be intentional about every connection. This [00:20:00] project as Guled said was very intertwined with people who were there. Like it was a different experience if you would go there and people were there, and then if you go just watch or look at the arts or listen, it became a safest space for grief because people immediately felt connected to the message. And what I loved, loved about the project was that it brought people to, to see the exhibition and listen to music that we don't necessarily consider them gallery goers or exhibition goers. Right, aunties and uncles came and they were part of creating this space.

[00:20:34] **Guled:** Yeah, absolutely. I would to say strategically for this project, once again, special shout outs to Angira and, and Michelle for really holding us down, my brother Abbas was such an important part and Art together was such an important part to this project. Their wheelhouse was understanding the visual arts realm and the exhibits and galleries and what it takes for the artists to come up with their pieces. [00:21:00] Myself was on the music. What I really enjoyed about it so much about the music project was just like, once again, I'm just a fan of everybody. I'm a fan of everybody. It was just like, if you had a basketball team, who would you pick? It was my version of Oceans 11 , just like picking the best artists that I knew at that time, you know?

[00:21:21] **Guled:** When it came to the music production side, I wouldn't have, done this project also with one of my good brothers, Pat Mesiti Miller, phenomenal audio engineer, beat producer and also a curator as well. He would take things sonically to another level. So, once that was done, it was like two worlds coming together and I really feel like the Aggregate Space Gallery really brought these two worlds to merge.

[00:21:50] **Swati:** Guled you know can you tell me a little bit about, Khamsa the music album component of your project and how you originated it.

[00:21:58] **Guled:** Yeah. Right now the, yeah, the Khamsa Music [00:22:00] Project is a five track ep. Each one of the tracks represent the different five stages of grief. I initially wanted to create this more as an instrumental music project. Same way you can kind of feel jazz music, classical music, if you were thinking about, or processing an emotion, creating music that words can't describe, right?

[00:22:21] **Guled:** Like such, like these types of experiences that you go through with grief. But however, as, as years went on, I just felt that the importance of having an mc was crucial. I felt like we needed a voice. We were losing too many hip hop artists, to gun violence. COVID affected us. George Floyd affected us, whenever experiences, critical moments in history happened like the way that hiphop responded was always powerful to me. Whether it was the death of Amadou Diallo and how a lot of the hiphop artists at that time spoke up against his death to Tupac, to Biggie, like they [00:23:00] were reflections of their time. And I just felt it was important the MCs, speak on the state of their consciousness, but also in return, being able to let the community know that they're with them.

[00:23:11] **Guled:** Initially also, we were going to have interludes within each of these tracks, with a phenomenal artist, by the name of Sekina Noor, based out in London, with these MCs talking and rapping with each stage of grief, it was going to be her spoken word pieces during the interludes this divine feminine consciousness of what was going on in the way that we were processing this journey altogether. But yeah, just really touched base with all my homies from the Bay Area who are born and raised in Oakland Richmond, or who have had many years being in the bay, gotten in a lot of game from the Bay Area and these are all like my favorite artists I'm a fan of all of them. [00:24:00] And I guarantee three, four or five years from now you're gonna hear a lot more noise from these people.

[00:24:05] **Swati:** So in the process of reaching out to all of these artists that you respect all your friends, right? How did you go about curating each of these tracks did you pair the track or the theme to the artist? was that collaborative?

[00:24:20] **Guled:** And what's funny is, cuz all these other MCs, I spoke with them, a long time ago, I told them, straight up like, Hey, listen, I'm not going to ask of this from you if I don't have a budget and as soon as Allah blessed me with the grant money from the Doris Duke Foundation, it was on.

[00:24:36] **Guled:** These were people that I've known for years, so I've kind of recognized their strengths except for D. Lee, D. Lee is just like one of those people who I met on the fly, and he's such a natural, he's just a phenomenal artist.

# Denial

[00:24:49] **Guled:** I was wanting to work with another artist for the track denial, but that didn't work out. But in the meantime, out of the blue, I remember I was just like listening to Water, [00:25:00] water for the Town Project, a project that's a compilation project of the Smart Bomb Collective. And it was a track with D.Lee, with his cousin, spoke Breeze and when I heard him, I was just blown back. I had to just like, you know, press it on repeat again. And I was just like, this is, he's great. You know? And so I had to reach out to my boy, spoke and spoke, reached out to D. Lee and we politiced. And what's funny is that he was the first person to deliver the track to me. And then the dope thing about it too was on the production side, you got pASDOO, who's a phenomenal producer who understands the science of sound.

[00:25:37] **Guled:** [00:26:00] As far as with the track anger with Mani Draper, you know, shoutouts to Grand National, Mani to me he's such a great artist. I feel like he was able to bring anger home, like if you listen to the track, it sounds like Grand Master Flash is the message. You know, like, just don't push me. And he, I feel like can represent that. And then the energy that he brought with the track, I just knew he would be the right fit. We have Brian Simmons, a phenomenal composer. He tours with fantastic Negrito and this music project that's on his label, he brought it home .

 [00:27:00]

# Bargaining

[00:27:03] **Guled:** When I was thinking about who will be the right mc for bargaining, Spote Breeze just popped in my mind because of his albums, because of his music. He's a very, very layered, very complex lyricist, and I feel like the stage of bargaining was perfect for him. Cheflee is a genius, and Spote Breeze and Cheflee works together so well. And he brought it home not only providing the instrumental, but also he included the hook and the instrumental, so it was like a song that was writing itself and it just paired so well [00:28:00]

# Depression

[00:28:14] **Guled:** When it came to the track of depression, I reached out to my boy Nu Nasa, and Nu Nasa to me is one of the most positive, positive MCs. If you listen to the rest of his catalog of music, it's very uplifting. It's highly spiritual, and I've only known him artistically on that side. I wanted to see his shadow self something that was different. shout outs to aboveclouds from Virginia, he really brought that Boom Bap the style of Boom B ap was perfect.

# Acceptance

[00:28:46] **Guled:** [00:29:00] As far as with acceptance, my man, Gavin Anthony. He was somebody who I knew in my years being an mc. He was like, one of my OGs, one of my big brothers in the hip hop community. And he is not only a phenomenal lyricist, he's a phenomenal freestyler and his reflections and is just being like, older than me. [00:30:00] You know, I feel like he's been through the cycles of grief himself, so for him to talk about acceptance, it's kind of like this brotherly advice and just wisdom of somebody who's went through all of this and was able to accept. And I felt like it was a great piece to the puzzle. And then Sydequest really bringing the project home.

[00:30:18] **Guled:** [00:31:00] Each one of these tracks were challenging for the artists to process. So once again, all of these people I am a fan of, and I just thought like, what would happen if these folks were paired up together. and, The first time I heard it was two months after it got mixed. My boy pASDOO. He was also the audio engineer of this project. He was like, Hey, listen, you're not gonna listen to this project until the listening session. So we had a listening session at the Reef Studios on Oakland, OG Jaren and Brian C. Simmons spot. And when I first heard the project, I was just blown back, I didn't expect, the magic.

[00:31:38] **Guled:** It was hair raising to be in the studio, listening to the songs blare out, the speakers to be around my people. It was definitely a dream come true. Like just sitting there and listening to it all. It felt like I was at a brief moment living my aspiring self. Just being there, [00:32:00] just seeing, just witnessing everything and just knowing that the art was coming from a very deep place. It just came out to being something that I thoroughly enjoy just as a fan and I felt like I put all my chips in one basket and got double in return.

[00:32:16] **Swati:** Yeah. No, it's a really seamless album. As you said, it had been years between when you talked about this project and when it finally got funded you were like, it's go time. And I think it speaks to the strength of the Oakland hip hop community to your music community that like, everybody was like, absolutely, let's go.

[00:32:38] **Swati:** You're tuned in to apex express at 94.1 KPFA and 89.3 KPFB in Berkeley and online@kpfa.org. Coming up we have two songs from Khamsa the album. The first Anger by Mani Draper. Co-produced by Mani Draper and Brian C. Simmons followed by [00:33:00] Something by spote Breeze produced by Cheflee

[00:33:03] **Swati:** [00:34:00] [00:35:00] [00:36:00] [00:37:00] [00:38:00] you just heard Something by Spote breeze produced by Cheflee and before that [00:39:00] was Anger by Mani Draper. Co-produced by Mani Draper and Brian C. Simmons from Khamsa at the album. Now, back to the interview.

[00:39:09] **Swati:** Going back to kind of what I think both of you said at different points that like this exhibition was really about breaking barriers in terms of who is considered somebody that goes to a gallery, goes to an art show, and also what art is appropriate and then even then, what belongs together. And I think particularly in the space of Islamic art, it's so important both that you married the visual of having, artists of color having, Islamic art, but then also really having this huge hip hop auditory component to explicitly have that conversation of blackness and muslimness and creation together.

[00:39:51] **Guled:** The thing is that this project was challenging for everybody. Like, for everybody. And when I've approached my homies about it, they're like, [00:40:00] you know, I have to really dig deep because there's trauma involved. We don't normally talk about it as much so for people to muster that up, even with the visual artists as well too, for them to really go into these spaces, that is hard, but they understood that the purpose of it was to really let people know that they're not alone, you know? To bring these world together cuz there was so much, these years, like from the moment this project was thought of to like, when the exhibit was happening, so much was going on in the world. And for people to be that vulnerable it takes a toll.

[00:40:38] **Guled:** But some of the best art, I've ever seen came from those spaces and for them to become the mirror for people to reflect on their own sense of grief gives all this work a lot of meaning. Just the way that the people was also able to participate, in these events. I know you mentioned something about the event [00:41:00] program inside, some were planned and others weren't, one of them in particular, cuz there was just so much gun violence going on in Oakland, we had a shooting that occurred around that time in the mosque, that took the lives of, Asam Al-Awjri and Belal Esa, two people from the community, were lost to gun violence, and also the school shootings that were happening as well. Like even during that moment, while the exhibit was going, we had to curate spaces for that as well. And, just to kind of reflect back, even after the exhibit was done, some of that emotion, some of that energy, it still lingers with me to this day.

[00:41:42] **Guled:** Yeah. Thank you for sharing that also I attended the closing ceremony and you know, Leva you gave this really beautiful speech around the crisis in Iran and what grief was bringing up for you in this space. I was wondering if you'd be open to speaking about that. [00:42:00]

[00:42:01] **Leva:** Yeah, it takes a lot to be comfortable with vulnerability and that is something that Khamsa and the space that it created, for it to be safe for me as the director of an organization, feel comfortable enough and feel safe enough to come and talking about what's going on in my community.

[00:42:20] **Leva:** Right. And feel safe enough to just cry and talk.

[00:42:23] **Swati:** just to interject, could you give a very brief overview of what the crisis in Iran is from your perspective?

[00:42:29] **Leva:** So what's happening in Iran is that people are tired of 40 years, four decades of autocracy and dictatorship, and a version of Islam, a version of religion that has been dictated to them no matter what they want or how they want to practice religion.

[00:42:46] **Leva:** Unfortunately, what happened is that under this Islamic regime, I'm not calling it Islamic country because the regime itself is a dictatorship, and this is different from people. So like any fascism, they are harassing [00:43:00] people. They're killing people.

[00:43:01] **Leva:** I came to the US as refugee because as religious minority back in Iran, my family around their persecution, my uncle is in right now, a couple of my friends are in prison. My uncle is in prison just because he was teaching in a university to people like us, right? So the current uprising started after a young woman got killed under custody of police, morality, police, if you don't know, in Iran, there is morality police who is basically telling women in the streets how to wear hijab, how to practice their religion.

[00:43:29] **Leva:** And people basically got tired of that so the uprising started with that, and very soon people got united that everyone wanted this regime to go. Unfortunately, what's happening is massive execution that has been regime's strategy in the last 40 years. Because again, they're killing and executing young people, young folks, without having any reason for that or any. Fair trial. So that is also grief. And it feels like for my community, we've been grieving for 40 years and that's [00:44:00] why I feel like sharing this stuff and sharing about this emotion is important. But yeah, Basically that's what's going in Iran, protests are still going, the mass execution, basically every day we're waking up to some execution news and we really hope that again we are so desperate and helpless from here.

[00:44:17] **Leva:** That was a day that a big fire was happening in a prison that most of the political prisoners are there. And I had no idea how to process that but still be a professional person, go to work, go to the speech, do the speech, because again, that's my job. So having that space and feeling so comfortable for that many people to just see me crying.

[00:44:38] **Leva:** Again, the beauty of Khamsa I don't know if I would be able to be the same or talk the same way or tell the same story if it was in another exhibition or another art opening. The space itself I feel like gave me and of course people who were around and I will see them I feel comfortable enough with them. And this is not common in our communities, especially men Muslim men, because [00:45:00] I know many of them and they're friends of mine, it's not common to talk about this emotions, what's going on. And again, Shout out to Guled and the whole team who created that space. during that time, one of our staff member was going through a shooting. And again, as a whole, we felt like, my God, this is space Khamsa, was the right time, right place for all of us to be able to be vulnerable and still feel safe and connected.

[00:45:26] **Swati:** I really empathize with that feeling of desperation and hopelessness being in diaspora currently. But I think, you know, maintaining conversations around what is going on currently in Iran keeping tabs on what is going on, talking about it, talking about injustice and lending complexity to a narrative and not giving it to the regime, not giving it to the United States government, but really giving it to the people who have deserved it for all this time.

[00:45:50] **Leva:** Absolutely. Absolutely. And again, this is also important for me personally, having many Muslim friends that I want them to also understand that this is not an uprising [00:46:00] against religion and the way that hijab was dictating on us we never had a choice. For me to be able to go to a school, I had to wear hijab, right? We never had a choice to practice what we wanted to do. So this is not an uprising against Islam, it's not about being Islamophobic. or don't want that. It's just people tired of fascism that govern them under the name of this religion. And that's why I feel like solidarity of Muslim community outside of Iran is crucial for them because the government in Iran can't say that, oh this anti-Islam, this is anti-religion movement. But thank you for bringing that up. Absolutely correct that we also have duty to keep this conversation going.

[00:46:40] **Swati:** Yeah, definitely. And I think back to just really what the whole purpose of Khamsa is, right? In terms of humanizing people and bringing to light and bringing to immersive experience.

[00:46:53] **Swati:** This really, scary emotion that all of us are feeling constantly and trying [00:47:00] to avoid. I mean, Guled, how has grief modified and changed over the lifetime of that project and what does it mean to you right now?

[00:47:09] **Guled:** I feel like grief is like one of those, like eternal human tragedies, just when we are very well versed in what it is theoretically, like when it happens to you, you feel the effects, whether you far away, whether you're close to someone. It's like one of those truths, right? For me, just living with it, I remember seeing something really cool about Japanese art where they glue pieces together of like pottery with gold. Because even through all of that, amidst of all of the suffering and the trauma. You gain wisdom, you gain light, you gain hope. You gained this understanding of what it is to be human because day by day we're still like running around. You're just going from one place to another and not really sitting down with the experience, like what it is to live this life, in the third dimension . And I felt that art has always been a [00:48:00] way to bring something from the ether or from a different dimension, from a different place these things that really affect us to the core.

[00:48:07] **Guled:** As far as with, my Muslim identity like Islam. You know, there's a really important fact that people have to understand is that, the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) there was a period of his time called the Year of Sorrow, where he lost his beloved uncle who protected him from his persecutors and his first wife who was holding him down, who supported him since day one. This is somebody who we revere as extremely holy, somebody who had divine revelations from the most high in a very personal way. But yet somebody of this stature still dealt with grief, he still dealt with that. So, the beautiful part about the Muslim artists is the fact that, there's people who identify with Islam you know, and from a different perspective. You could [00:49:00] be Shia, you can, speak on like the history of what happened to the grandson of the prophet Muhammad and his family, and the anger that community still feels to this day during Karbala, you can, speak on behalf of Leva's experience where , you have this regime that is pushing Islam in such a way where it's suppressing people when it's supposed to liberate us.

[00:49:22] **Guled:** And I myself, even though I identify as Sunni, for Somali people in general, when I did the knowledge, you know, we have Sufism we have that spiritual component in our faith. And just knowing the spiritual wisdom behind the experiences that we deal with, in our day-to-day, is kind of way of God still communicating with us. Even outside of a book is God still communicating with us. So this project really, you know, after going through it, it really brought me closer to a higher power. But in the meantime, made me [00:50:00] realize like there's still so much that we have to do. Not even on the activism way, but to just even call somebody. Just tell them that you love them. Like how many of us are really doing that? Because we're chasing money. We, are putting our lives or putting our value towards things that are material, you know? It gave me such a deep reflection and for others to share their art this way and for the community to show up and provide their wisdom. It helped me a lot. It helped me a lot emotionally. It helped me a lot spiritually. It still has a mind of its own, it's still lingering. But I'm grateful and I'm blessed

[00:50:40] **Leva:** Thank you Guled for sharing. People processing grief very differently. I believe that, I think when I was a child, somebody told me that everybody who's living your life is taking a little piece of your heart with him. And there is a hole there that you have to learn to live with that hole and still survive. There are lots of holes in our hearts, and as we are [00:51:00] growing up, there are more and more of them. So it is actually, how are you gonna manage that? To me, over time, it became the celebration of life. It became the celebration of what we lost.

[00:51:10] **Leva:** If it was a relationship, if it was land, if it was home, how can I cherish the moments because I cannot have them back. Coming to the realization of that, and also give it time, it's like we cannot say that, oh, I'm gonna give a five months timeline to this grief, and then I'm gonna be fine. No, every grief is different.

[00:51:28] **Leva:** For now I'm at the stage of my life that for me, it became more about celebration of life. Then go back and thinking about that piece of the hole that I have in my heart. It may change in a few years, but I am there. Right now .

[00:51:44] **Swati:** That's such a beautiful sentiment. So for both of you, as we're closing, what projects are currently in the works or up next for either of you, or are you taking a very well deserved nap?

[00:51:59] **Guled:** [00:52:00] As a matter of fact, right now I got the Khamsa Music project on all streaming platforms I have a Spotify playlist right now drop a Gem on them. It's a, It's a song from Mob Deep, one of my favorite hip hop groups. And it's a lot of just powerful hip hop music from different artists, from my own personal listening collection that got me by cuz hip hop taught me a lot. And I just feel like in this moment, I wanted to share that so people could, can get educated and learn and to also feel, and the same way that I really love hip hop. But in the meantime, you know, working with different artists and their music projects, Got some stuff under wraps, I'm still pushing. No matter how much, I'm, I'm trying to , I try I feel like this always still calls me and this still inspires me.

[00:52:50] **Leva:** We just opened Art Together's center in downtown Oakland. We started with a gallery. We really hope to make it a[00:53:00] new cultural hub for artists who may otherwise not have the opportunity.

[00:53:03] **Leva:** right now, Unfortunately, artists needs to be artists, they're social media manager, marketing person, project manager. So they have to be all of those things while also their brain is working on the art. I feel like organization like Art Together and specifically artist support program is coming handy because we are trying to take care of the logistic of the board and let the artist brain work the way that it's working.

[00:53:27] **Leva:** Right? And that's why we are trying to have one or two major artistic project every year, the end result is going to be a public display of art, but we are here to support the logistical part of it and make it happen. This is unfortunately part of being an artist that you need to do everything and everything is harder for artists of colors and refugee immigrants, Black artists, everything is harder for them, so this is a mission for this space. I invite everyone to please come 1200 Harrison, downtown Oakland, close to Bart, make a visit. You wouldn't regret that. In terms of like major [00:54:00] projects, we are currently working with Toro Hatari, Japanese American artists for a participatory project that contains some installation coming out of workshops that spark conversation between refugees and non-refugee and locals, sharing experience and sharing a story. So we are excited about that one. That is our major art project for now. But our community art programs and many other stuff are going on. Look at our website, www art together.org.

[00:54:28] **Swati:** Amazing. I am so glad, Leva, that you were all able to find a new home at 1200 Harrison, you said in downtown Oakland. And you know, Guled I think for the most part, all I can say is that we have to keep an eye on you. But, I really appreciate, both of you coming onto Apex Express. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about before we closed out?

[00:54:50] **Guled:** So the Humsa album is on Bandcamp, on all streaming platforms this project was, an artist-led one. So all money is gonna go [00:55:00] towards, the folks that were involved. just

[00:55:02] **Guled:** Shout out to Simmons Music Group or shout out to Brian Simmons. Shout out to Mani Draper,Nu Nasa, pASDOO. My brother D. Lee, definitely he's next up from East Oakland. Fire! Spote Breeze, Cheflee, my brothers Sydequest, Gavin Anthony, all my brothers. And the music project, major love town, major love to leva, major love to art together. Once again, it gives me reassurance to keep going. And in art and once again, . Major shoutouts to Abbas Muhammad GAMA Collective and shout out to all the listeners

[00:55:40] **Swati:**

[00:55:40] **Swati:** Amazing. So that would be khamsaprojectartist.bandcamp.com/album/khamsathealbum. We'll drop that in the show notes for those of you who are curious.

[00:55:52] **Leva:** Everything that Guled says, plus I wanna name the visual artists who were part of this project Fahd Butt, Romina Zabihian, [00:56:00] Keyvan Shovir, Shaghayegh Cyrous, Gazelle Samizay, and Nabi Haider Ali, Meriam Salem, Fatima Zara. They were amazing visual artists. Shout out to Miles, Michelle, Angira, Velasani and everybody else who make this project possible. And thank you. Thank you for giving us this platform and opportunity to talk.

[00:56:21] **Guled:** See we have like a hundred people on this project.

[00:56:24] **Guled:** Yeah. You say, I was like, this

[00:56:26] **Swati:** is, this is absolutely a community project.

[00:56:29] **Guled:** Yeah, definitely a community project.

[00:56:32] **Swati:** Awesome. Well, thank you both so much.

[00:56:35] **Swati:** To learn more about Khamsa a collaborative and very clearly community involved project by ArtTogether and Gathering All Muslim Artists Collective or GAMA visit www.art together.org/khamsa. That's KHAMSA. From there, you'll be able to find and purchase the album on Bandcamp, listen to the podcast and learn more about the project as a whole.

[00:56:58] **Swati:** Thank you [00:57:00] so much for joining us, please check out our website, kpfa.org/program/apex express to find out more about the show tonight and to find out how you can take direct action. We thank all of you listeners out there, keep resisting, keep organizing, keep creating and sharing your visions with the world. Your voices are important. Apex express is produced by Miko Lee, jalena Keane-Lee, Paige Chung, and today Swati Rayasam.

[00:57:30] **Swati:** Thank you so much to KPFA staff for their support and have a great night.

 [00:58:00]