

# To Inspire and Be Inspired

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** What if art was used for good, as a means to create a smarter and more holistic society? One that could address the most pressing challenges our world faces today, from climate change and world hunger to poverty?

Today we get to speak to Faouzi Khelifi, also known as "eL Seed", an artist best known for fusing Arabic calligraphy with graffiti to paint colorful, swirling messages of hope and peace on buildings in Tunisia, Nepal and quite a few countries around the world. One of his most renowned pieces is "Perception", a large mural painted across almost 50 buildings in the Cairo neighborhood of Mansheyet Nasser, which is home to the majority of the city's garbage collectors.

I'm Tariq Al Olaimy, and this is "People and Planet".

A podcast from Expo 2020 Dubai's Programme for People and Planet, where changemakers from all over the world breakdown what it will take to create a sustainable future for our planet.

## [INTRO STING]

During Tolerance and Inclusivity week at Expo 2020 Dubai, eL Seed joined a group of panelists to discuss the power an art piece has on a community and its ability to shape the society as a whole.

## ARCHIVAL RECORDING

**EI SEED:** Artists in general have a social responsibility. Our goal is to bring people together and this is what I'm trying to do through my work. I'm trying to create bridges between people, culture, and generation.

I work with scripts. I work with literature, so there is a message behind every work that I create.

### **Back to the interview with EI SEED:**

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** So you're an artist, whose work has touched souls even before it touches a person's eyes. You're an ambassador for peace. You're a human being who leverages the power of art to uplift universal human connection. You are someone who walks through the world, seeing the world itself as your canvas.

And in this case, your brush is the poetry of the Arabic language and you are of course, the man, eL Seed, welcome. And, please introduce yourself, for our audience and what your mission in life is?

**EI SEED:** My name is El Seed. My artist name is El Seed. So this is how I call myself in the art field. I'm an artist who uses calligraphic Arabic calligraphy is my main medium. I use it as a tool, you know, to create bridges between people, culture and generation.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** And you were born in Paris in 1981. And I wonder, what was the artistic background of your upbringing? Like what was the kind of art that was surrounding you and your community growing up, and how did you first get into the art scene?

**EI SEED:** I grew up in a modest social class. My dad used to work in a car factory when we were in Paris. My mom, she was a nanny. I wouldn't say art was, we didn't use to go to museum, you know, or go to exhibition. There was nobody around me that was an artist. I just used to love to draw, you know I used to...I've been painting, I have a memory of me painting and drawing since I'm a kid and the first drawing that I remember was an elephant. I was painting an elephant, you know, I think it was second grade with one of my teachers. She showed us, you know she showed us how to draw you know, and then eventually with shapes, you know, like first making big circle for the body and then the head. And that actually was the first time, you know, I was like: "Wow, actually, like I can draw."

I think it was an evolution, like drawing was always something that I loved, you know, but I never thought I would pursue, like a career as an artist. It was not in my, in my goal.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** What was that moment you felt that things were starting to change for you? Like when you felt okay, the stars are now aligning in this direction.

**EI SEED:** You know, on November 9th, 2007...I used to work in New York, for a French company, I used to be a supply chain manager there. Then they call me and they say: "It's time for you to move on." You know he didn't say like you made a mistake. He said, "it's time for you to move on." So actually he was just telling me you're fired but in a nice way.

Like I was like sent I think by God, you know, telling me: "Hey man, you're in the wrong place. You know what you're doing, this is not your field. You should be more useful somewhere else."

And so when he told me this, I stayed in New York, I think for two more months, and then I moved to Montreal, just, I think two weeks and, on my way to Montreal, I met this guy who was an artist, a French artist, you know, he used to write his name, graffiti name, H E S T a with the Arabic letter, you know, like they used to put two dots on top of the E and stuff.

And seeing this guy like playing with letters, like in such a beautiful way, I was like, he inspired me. And then, I went and I paint my first wall, you know, with.. in Arabic. And that was weird because it was so. natural. I felt this was something that was inside me for such a long time and it never came out, you know?

And then since then, you know, I don't know. I felt I unlocked something that was in me that I didn't know. And I'm sure a lot of us have that. I believe in this, I believe we all have this kind of unlocked boxes and we need to find a way.

## MUSIC

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** I am very curious, like, as you're talking, because you're, you're not just doing art, you really speak often about art as a universal language, the importance of using art to convey universal messages. And the elephant, which was your first drawing and elephants are of course, beautiful community builders.

Elephants grieve together. They have joy together. When there's a marginalized member of their community, they go and make sure that they're protected. They really live in a sense of universalism. And I wonder, like, as you're talking through that journey, where did that sense of your values of unity and universalism come from?

Like how did that get infused into your art?

**EI SEED:** I think it's from the education. I believe this is the way my parents educated me, you know like. You know I remember my dad only used to get mad at me and my brothers and sister, if we used to fight together, you know what I mean? I think they put something in, I think in me that make family first, you know what I mean?

Like making sure that you, you create link, you know, you, you hold those links with the family. We have a strong family bond between my, I think between my family, from my brother and sister to my cousins, you know, and the extended family. We come from. Like a modest social background. My dad used to be a farmer in Tunisia. So most of my family are farmers, you know? And I never forget from where I'm from, you know what I mean?

It's important to have those roots, you know, like to make sure that you are you're, you keep rooted from where you're from.

## MUSIC

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** There's a lot of trust in life that you've had, like in the moments where either you, you quit and you went to into new direction. Where, does that trust come from?

**EI SEED:** I don't know. I don't think there's a special point, you know, but I think these triggers, you know, in all the projects that I've done, I always say that I, I want to inspire and be inspired. You know, this is my motto. So, and when I say I want to inspire, it's like, I try all the time to get out of my comfort zone.

You know, and I look at the comfort zone as a, as a big circle that keep growing and growing as, as long as you stay in it? And, it's so difficult to get out of your comfort

zone because the circle just get bigger and bigger, you know? So, the distance that you have to walk from where you are to the edge of the circle is longer, you know, because the more you stay in it, the more you get bigger and to inspire, I think it's important to get out of your comfort zone, to break this circle.

It's not only about the artwork. It's also about the human experience in the, and I collect those moments. For me this is something so important to me to make sure that it's not just only living, just only creating and challenging myself artistically, but also finding a way to create a human stories.

## MUSIC

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** For those that are maybe not aware, could you tell us the story about how the name actually came about and maybe some of the artists that then inspired that as well?

**EI SEED:** You know, there is a play in French play called Le Cid from the writer Corneille, and we're studying that French class in Paris in '97 or '98 — I think it was '97. And so my teacher was telling us Madam Lacroix — I hope she's still alive, and I hope one day she can hear this. Madame Lacroix, she said, "look, the, the word El-Cid is coming from the Arabic word, 'Al-Sayed', which means the man, or the master. And I was 16, you know, at this time. So I was like, look I'm the man, you know?"

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** And the world has linked you back many times to, to the word, "calligraphiti", and I wonder, how did that word come about for you? Like, is that something that you coined?

**EI SEED:** I used to define myself with this word. I'm an artist, you know, I see myself as a contemporary artist, you know, because I'm still alive thank God today. I'm a multidisciplinary artist, you know. I paint, I do canvas. I do art installation. I do wood sculpture. I do metal sculpture. I work with glass, I do films. So there is a... it's not only one thing.

**EI SEED:** I took this decision recently to not define myself by my origins. I'm not French. I'm not Tunisian, I'm French and Tunisian by, you know, by birth and by roots, you know? But, I don't want to limit myself. You know what I mean? I think, I'm international. I'm human. I'm universal. People used to always define you as a French-Tunisian artist, you know. And French-Tunisian, why you don't say Tunisian-French, you know, that's something we never read as well.

So it says a lot, you know, about the historical, you know, imperialism of France, you know?

I am questioning a lot of stuff today about the way people perceive me, about the way I perceive myself, about my identity as a man and an artist.

If you don't define yourself, people will define it. So like now with my team, we're working a lot on this way of communicating the real me.

**EI SEED:** When people ask me, you know, what is the... what you love the most?

You know what I love the most about what I do is not the artistic challenge. I love it and always love to go beyond my comfort zone, but what I love the most is the human experience and see how art can bring people together. And, I didn't find any other tool actually that can connect in such an easy way.

People are proud to see a person coming in from a different place and say okay, you know what, I'm gonna spend some time here and try to beautify, like add some beauty into the neighborhood. But also you create a sense of ownership, you know, which is probably the most important thing, because, in my process of creating, I love to involve people from the community. Which means like I always try to make some research on the place and try to make sure that I'm not colonizing physically the space, you know. Because I worked with Arabic calligraphy in Bahrain, it's easy because it's an Arab place, but you know, I'm going to a border of North and South Korea, or just recently in Nepal. Because I work with message, I try to find the message that are relevant to the place itself.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** One of your most prominent projects of course was "Perception." I wonder, you know, in reflecting back, what are, what are those kinds of projects still teaching you?

**EI SEED:** You come with an art piece in a place where people are not familiar with art and people they don't see it, you know what I mean?

Because at the end they realize that actually the art piece is the vector that connects you to the people that you meet. You know what I mean?, I look at art as, as way to bring back our humanity, you know, because what would make you welcome somebody that you don't know?

Like, I'm not saying for one night, but I'm talking for a month, for weeks, in your place, in your house, in your neighborhood, you know, and inviting him, like for tea, for lunch, for dinner, for birthday party, for weddings, you know, even when the project is finished.



This is what I, what I learned from one of those places in the oldest project and is that art bring our humanity back.

You know, it connects us.

## MUSIC

You know, what I did recently in Nepal was destroyed the day we finished. We did the art installation on a mountain, in a village that was rebuilt by women after the earthquake of 2015. So these women they've been creating workshops where they've been creating their own earthquake resistant bricks.

So you work for weeks, weeks, and weeks, you know, with them. You know, it was, it was painting and the fabrics and bamboo, it was a crazy thing.

Thank God we take picture of the artwork. We filmed everything. And then in the night this crazy storm that destroyed everything. It destroyed the bridge, you know, in front of the guest house we were staying.

When we arrived at the village, we see all the bamboo and all the installation on the floor. And then you're like, okay, what's the point of all of this?

You know, like we work for a month, but the artwork is done. But the relationship we created with the people of the community are still up.

Just this morning, one of the woman she texted me, I was sending her like some picture of Tunisia. And she was like, "ahh, it's so beautiful." And I said: "One day, we'll take you there, you know, you and your family."

So this is, this is the thing in Cairo it's same. In Cairo, like if you go now — it's been almost six years — the artwork has faded, but the relation is still the same. Me, I was invited to a wedding like three years ago or was it like two years ago? I mean, with COVID, we didn't go back since 2019.

I have a phone number on my phone called "Eid Cousin." Eid is one of the guys that I met in the Cairo garbage collector neighborhood, and all the time, at least once every two weeks, somebody call me. It's always somebody different. It's never the same person that called me. Somebody from the neighborhood with this number Eid Cousin, it's like, "Eh, Mr. Fauzi, how are you?" You know? And then I speak with five people, and you know, it's like, "Ammo, Ammo Moussa wants to speak with, speak with you." And then I speak with him and he say, "Okay, somebody else want to speak with you. Elena, she wants to speak with you." And then I speak with everybody and then they hang up.

And that's why I say it's, it's beyond the art piece. You know, the art piece is here, like to create this connection. And, and it did.

## MUSIC

**EI SEED:** This is I think what made me, make me want to do what I do, you know. Like when I will be an old man, 90 years old — inshaaAllah if I live this long time — having all my grandchildren and my kids and telling them those stories.

And they said, "Oh, grandfather, tell us one of your stories." You know? And I think this is, the beauty of it, you know. Being able to reconnect and connect with people that you wouldn't have met if it was not because of art.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** You know, as you're, as you're talking, I feel you are very grounded in a spiritual purpose and a sense of what you're doing. Is it grounded in a sense of spirituality? Is it something that, you know, as you're talking, you're not talking as an artist, you're talking as a, as a sheikh, as a monk, as a priest, cause a priest, as a far deeper calling, than, than that?

**EI SEED:** I don't know. I think spirituality is important, you know. Like I think in the world that we're living today, like we feed the body, you know, we feed the, I think we mainly feed the body, you know, and I think we, we forget to fit the, the mind and the spirit. We tend to forget that you need to create this balance.

You know what I mean? You can be the richest man on earth and have everything that you need, you know?

Your soul needs something, you know. And I think my soul, I think I need it.

Nobody can live by himself. This is a lie. The way you live is always connected to another human being.

And I think human connection feeds the spirit. You know that's how I look at it.

I don't know if it's a monk, sheikh, a rabbi or an Imam, you know, way of thinking, but, me as an artist, as a human being, mostly I, I need this spirituality in my life. Knowing that, it's not about only what I see and what I touch, you know, more like what I feel, you know, it's a lot about feelings, I would say.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** And what are you doing when you feel most inspired? Like where do you connect to that sense of deeper inspiration for the messages you create for, for each art piece?

**EI SEED:** Inspiration comes from observation of new surroundings. You know, you can be like in the urban jungle of New York and, focus on what's happening around you. You can be sitting on a table in the restaurant and, and looking at the girl is eating, the way the guy's eating his steak on the next next table and you know, it will, it will trigger some ideas, you know, and sometimes it's just that, like, it's just trigger, you know.

Sometimes, it's a constraint that make you, what make you inspired, like you can only do this, you know, or you can only do it this way, and then you will feel something in you that make you think differently, you know? So that's how I look at inspiration sometimes.

My daughter when she was two. You know, I was looking at her playing and I was like, oh, that would be so cool, you know.

Once I got a project we never did as well, that was inspired by a fight, a guy who almost insulted me at the family dinner. I won't say his name, but, he criticize my project in Egypt and to me, this is so stupid, you know, and, and then I was like, okay.

And then he said something else that I was like, smart, thank you. You know, so it's, it's always this, you know. Like it's, you have to, to observe how people act. You have to be aware of what's happening around you. And also sometimes it's difficult that I think this is the most difficult part of thinking is when you manage to look at something from the point of view of somebody else.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** And one place where there is a lot of inspiration at the moment in Dubai is indeed at Expo 2020. And you know, the theme itself of Expo

2020 is connecting minds. It is connecting to that mind, then it's also connecting, creating the future. And I wonder, how do you personally connect to that theme?

### **ARCHIVAL RECORDING**

**EI SEED:** I wanted to shed light on this community of women in Nepal, who after the earthquake of 2015, they have rebuilt their own houses. They trained themselves in construction work and in architecture. They also created some kind of workshop where they build their own anti-seismic bricks. And for me it was important giving an art piece and a message that is empowering women and also shedding light on a community of strong and resilient women.

The mission of the pavilion is really to shed light on women and empower them, and I am really, really proud and happy to be part of it.

#### **Back to the interview with EI SEED:**

**EI SEED:** It's beautiful to see this, happening in the, in an Arab country, in Dubai. You see everybody coming from different parts of the world, gathering at the same place, showing what they're the most proud of.

Dubai is a hub today. It's a kind of place where people connect. And I think Expo was, I would say the archetype of this connection, you know?

And, for me, you know, working with the Women's Pavilion I think was, of course I was so honored to do this, you know, as a man or working, you know. Working for like gender equality. It has been a fight, I think for years now. But, it was more for me, like being able to work for a cause not for nationality, not working for the

French Pavilion or the Tunisian Pavillion. So I'm glad I'm not in neither, like neither this or this.

And yeah, so I linked my project in Nepal to the pavilions. The pavilion was for me was a platform where I could, I could show and talk about the struggle of these women in Nepal and find a way, you know, to, continue, not the project, but continue this kind of philanthropic mission that we set out in my studio, which is, helping, you know, like creating this program for educating girls in the village, you know, because Nepal many in this kind of rural place, — I won't say marginalized, but out of Katmandu — girls they stop going to school at the age of 16 or 17 because the school fee become too high and then the family cannot afford it.

So, I think, you know, if with my art I can contribute to this, it would be amazing. And so, that's why the artwork in the, on the facade of the Pavillion is about this being a platform to continue the work that we've done there and a way, a way, to amplify the voice of these women.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** And your work is about human connection. And for so many of us, we've just gone through an age of human disconnection, at least physically through the pandemic. I wonder how has the pandemic impacted, you know, your work, your art?

I know you've also been working with different materials such as glass over the last year. And I wonder, you know, how has the COVID experience — lock down, the disconnection... where, you know, your real work, which is about connection — has really, impacted you and where?

**EI SEED:** I enjoy myself. I enjoy working when I'm outside, you know, when I'm in the public space, and being locked means that you know, you don't create this

interaction. We managed...we did a project actually with, you know, with my team, we managed to create this zoom project, where I, I created an art piece with 48 people. I painted an art piece that I cut in 49 pieces that I then sent to people. And then there, they just had to upload it as a background.

And, I invited Aloe Blacc, you know, the singer and his wife Maya Jupiter and they both performed like for one hour, you know, during, I mean, during the creation of this artwork where like three girls from the Netherlands — Yara, Roseanne and Nora — were like super famous dancers, and they did the performance while people were waiting for me so stressed out to create this artwork. And then, it was a beautiful experience because people were able to connect, you know, during like one hour during a concert.

And, that was amazing. That was super cool. And then we, we created a lithograph out of this artwork that we sold, you know, one part of the money was sent to Tunisian hospital, and one was sent to a French hospital.

## MUSIC

**EI SEED:** So I think, like I said, you know, inspiration come from the condition where you are, you know, and the restriction that you have, you know, that's why I said earlier. If you're locked up, or locked down, you cannot go out. So how do you create art? How do you create creative experience, human experience? You do them virtual, but this is still a human experience.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** thank you for reminding us of what's real. Thank you for reminding us of what's cool. Thank you for reminding us of what's true. Thank you so much.

**EI SEED:** It was great to talk to you guys. Thank you, Tariq.

**TARIQ AL OLAIMY:** People and Planet is an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai. Creating a sustainable future for our planet, together.

Learn more by visiting [virtualexpodubai.com](https://virtualexpodubai.com) or searching “Programme for People and Planet”.

People and Planet is produced by Kerning Cultures Network.

Episodes are released every second Monday. Hit subscribe on your favorite podcast app so you don’t miss an episode. And if you enjoyed the show, share it with your friends and leave us a review!