

Nature and Justice: Multimedia Artist Saharah Uses Her Voice to Demand Action **By Claudia Gohn**

Claudia Gohn

Sarah Elbakri leans over a hand, focusing on every tiny, intricate brush stroke. It seems like the kind of thing that would be very intense and tedious. But the whole time she's smiling and welcoming visitors.

Sarah is a henna artist. Her work is featured at the Malukah Center Art Gallery. It's advertised as New York's first art gallery celebrating Muslim women artists.

Saharah

As a Muslim woman I hold certain beliefs, you know, it impacts my, my beliefs about justice. It impacts my beliefs about the environment, about nature, about our responsibility to steward the Earth, which has impacted my career choice, which impacts, you know, like the ways that I express myself.

CG

Sarah's artist name is Saharah - with an H at the end.

Saharah is 27 years old. She only started henna a year ago, but began writing songs in middle school.

"Feel My Love" starts playing

At the gallery, she shares her Spotify profile and gushes about her newest single, "Feel My Love".

A few weeks later, she talks more about what it's been like since the release of the song.

Saharah

It's been fun, you know, to have something out in the world that like tells a story that's from my life. And like being able to like transmute an experience into a song or like a relationship into a song was super cool. And just the whole process of like recording the song, writing the song, but then also releasing it was like a big learning process.

“Feel My Love” fades out

Music in

CG

Saharah says her work is inspired by living life and being in community. She says she finds solace in her creative pursuits and explores different themes: sometimes nature, sometimes her Sudanese heritage.

Themes in her art, such as water, can be seen in both her henna and songwriting.

Saharah uses art to express herself. But this isn't her only motivation. She talks about wanting to create human connection in her work, especially in her henna designs.

Saharah

It's such a physically, like, intimate experience. Like literally you're holding somebody's hand and like drawing designs on it with like a, like a substance that comes from the earth, and that originates from my home country and my homeland, and like signifies so much, you know, in my culture.

CG

She also pushes for social change as an artist.

Saharah

Growing up I had this, like, activist heart sort of bred in me through my family, not even intentionally, but just through the ways that they would speak about our home country, Sudan, which was under like, you know, a brutal military regime for over 30 years.

And so my parents would talk about like, the good old days and how Sudan was very, you know, a lot more—like just better, you know, to live in and to thrive in. And then that's part of why my parents left Sudan was just to, you know, to find a better life for me and my siblings and our family.

And so I think that knowing that always kind of bred this like, fire for justice in my heart.

Music out.

CG

Saharah tries to put these thoughts and feelings into her song lyrics and henna designs.

Darya Nichol

Her art is very grounded in like emotional processing.

CG

That's Darya Nichol, Saharah's friend of six years.

DN

We connected over a shared love of art and just like social justice things as well.

CG

Nichol is also a visual artist.

DN

Before she started like really investing in music, she was doing, cultivating creativity circles, where there'd be like different prompts that she'd gather folks around to create different pieces.

And so that was pretty cool. And seeing the evolution of just like her artistic voice evolving and her becoming more comfortable in herself and her music.

CG

Saharah uses her voice as a tool for activism, as well, speaking out against systemic injustice and humanitarian crises.

Saharah

Understanding how, like, imperialism and colonialism and white supremacy and all of these systems of oppression are interconnected—it's something that I wanna reflect in my art and something that I wanna bring light to and something that I want to definitely focus my art on moving forward.

CG

Saharah continues chasing her goals to inspire human connection and demand justice. But there's a reason why she chooses art to achieve this over another profession, like being a human rights lawyer.

Saharah

I think it gives people hope. I think art gives people strength. I think also it connects us to our various identities.

Concert ambi in.

CG

Saharah lived in Brooklyn up until November.

She moved back to the DC area, where she grew up, to save money.

But she's back in Brooklyn for a concert. This is the first time she is singing in front of so many people.

She's wearing a white suit and bright eye makeup. Purple and pink lights shower the dance floor.

Through the haze of artificial fog, Saharah stands alone in the spotlight on stage.

Saharah

Before I get into the rest of my set, I wanted to collectively take a deep breath together.

Concert ambi—Saharah singing at concert

CG

At the end of her set, Saharah returns to her push for action.

Saharah

And before I go, I wanted to say Free Palestine. Free Sudan. Free the Congo. Free Haiti. Free Hawaii. Free Puerto Rico. And free every mother fucking oppressed people on this earth.

Have a good night, I love you.

Concert ambi out.

Music in.

CG

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