

COCKPIT ARTS 3 YEARS

Omeima Mudawi-Rowlings

- *Textile artist and designer*



Omeima Mudawi-Rowlings is a textile artist and designer whose use of intense colours and rich blending and layering techniques is influenced by her Sudanese upbringing. In 2015 she was selected by the British Council, in partnership with Shape Arts, for a residency in Qatar, and was commissioned to create work for the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. An alumna of Cockpit Arts, she has recently moved her practice to Brighton where she is preparing to launch her new interiors brand.

Omeima's path to Cockpit Arts is an interesting one. She originally applied for a studio over 20 years ago, fresh from a BA in textile design from the Surrey Institute of Art & Design (now the University for the Creative Arts). "Sadly, I wasn't successful," she says, "but I understood why. I just wasn't ready for it at the time. But I promised myself that one day in the future I would be back at Cockpit."

Eighteen years on, having recently been made redundant, Omeima decided to reapply for a studio at Cockpit. She had undertaken mentoring sessions under the Creative Steps programme at Shape Arts, which gave her the confidence to submit an application a few months later to Cockpit Arts. In 2013 she won a bursary, which provided subsidised studio space and in-house mentoring at their Holborn incubator. "Getting offered a place at Cockpit was confirmation that I was the right standard to be there," she says proudly.

When Omeima first arrived, Cockpit Arts spent time ensuring that her particular needs as a deaf artist were accommodated, especially given she was the first deaf maker to take a studio at Cockpit. Deaf awareness training was provided and basic issues, such as installing flashing lights on the fire alarm system, were addressed. "I would like to think Cockpit now has a much better awareness of deaf issues," she says. "It was a challenge but it was a fantastic experience. Cockpit really treated me as an equal member of the community. There were a couple of people who had learnt basic sign language but hadn't used it for a long time. That was really nice because I felt people were willing to communicate with me, which in turn gave me confidence. It completely changed my perspective of what it's like to be in the real business world."

"I needed to believe in myself, that I had the same professional standing as the other makers in that sphere, particularly as a deaf person," she continues. "It was challenging for me at first because I didn't know what to expect. But once I got to Cockpit, being amongst like-minded people was really inspirational. I loved sharing a space with so many talented artists."



Gradually, through one-to-one mentoring with the Business Incubation Team, Omeima's confidence in her work began to grow. "I really appreciated their directness and honesty," she says of the team. "They're blunt but they need to be because it's a tough industry. I have a creative mind but I just wasn't as skilled in the business elements. They helped me understand financing, accounting and all the various processes needed to run a business successfully. Also, seeing other Cockpit members at related trade and craft fairs introduced me to the community in which my work would be seen and understood."

In 2014 she won the Jill Humphrey Springboard Prize and was shortlisted for Shape Arts' prestigious Adam Reynolds Memorial Bursary Award and a real turning point for Omeima came when she joined Cockpit's New Creative Markets Programme (funded by ERDF) in 2015. She was introduced to renowned textile designer and Handmade in Britain's Creative Director, Piyush Suri, who became her mentor. "I have to say he was harsh and tough but I really valued that directness. I knew it was what was needed to take my work to the next level," she smiles. "I learnt so much." Piyush also took the time to go with Omeima to industry trade show Top Drawer, where he explained some of the things they had discussed in their mentoring sessions. "He was excellent at seeing things from a visual perspective," she says, "which helped me gain a wealth of insight and knowledge."

Influenced by Piyush's feedback, Omeima is in the process of separating her business into two distinct strands: Omeima Arts, for her teaching and commissions, and 1,000 Camels by Omeima for her interior design work. "My name Omeima means '1,000 camels' in Arabic," she explains. "When Piyush heard that, he said it would make the perfect name for my interior design business. It's a great way of selling my story." She created a new collection of textiles and her sales increased exponentially.



In 2015, Omeima's family moved to Worthing in West Sussex. For seven months, Omeima continued to commute into her Holborn studio, but it just proved too tiring. So she made the difficult decision to leave Cockpit in February of this year. "I really enjoyed my time being there and I was sad to leave," she says.

Omeima has since moved to Hove and, despite fierce competition, has been lucky enough to secure a studio space that is local to her home. She says there is a thriving artistic community in Hove and Brighton, and plenty of opportunities to get her work into galleries and shops in the area. "I've discovered that a lot of Cockpit makers' work is sold here, so the name already has a good reputation. It has enabled me to have some initial conversations with gallery owners."

She is currently working on increasing her stock levels, and is hoping to apply for a loan to buy materials with the help of Creative Industry Finance (CIF), an organisation that she found out about via an email from Cockpit. "CIF provides free business advice and access to finance," she explains. "I need to replace some of that support I got from Cockpit."

What is particularly striking about the three years that Omeima spent with Cockpit Arts is the symbiotic relationship she feels she had with the organisation during that time. "Being at Cockpit has done a lot for me, but it's been a learning experience for them too," she emphasises. "I'd like to think Cockpit is now in a much better position to be able to welcome deaf and disabled makers and understand their particular needs."

She is looking forward to coming back to Cockpit Arts as an alumna at this year's winter Open Studios event, where she will introduce visitors to her new interiors brand, 1,000 Camels. "Cockpit has a very special place in my heart," she smiles. "I have to say Madeleine Furness [Business Incubation Programme Manager] and Vanessa Swann [CEO] were a fantastic support throughout my entire time at Cockpit. I can't praise them enough."

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Portrait photo: Jamie Trounce