

**SAFAR/VOYAGE: Contemporary Works by Arab, Iranian and Turkish
Artists**

Private Opening for Donors and Sponsors, April 19, 2013

Stephen J. Toope, President & Vice-Chancellor, UBC

Thank you, Gloria (Macarenko).

Honoured guests, friends:

*Forget your life You've carved so many little figurines, too many. Don't
knock on any random door like a beggar. Reach your long hands out to
another door Inside you there's an artist you don't know about. He's not
interested in how things look different in moonlight*

*Is what I say true? Say yes quickly, if you know, if you've known it from
before the beginning of the universe.¹*

Rumi. Thirteenth-century Persian poet, jurist, theologian, mystic. Touted by
the BBC some years ago as "the most popular poet in America." *In America!*

A continent of people who seemingly cannot forget our phones let alone

¹ From "Say Yes Quickly," by Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī.

our lives for even the shortest while without fearing we might disappear, or be forgotten. So many little figurines. So much to do. So little time. How, then, are we to turn our attention to the great work of our lives? At what point will we be willing to trust the canvas to the artist inside?

Tonight is about that voyage. Outward into space to look back at the Earth; and then down, into the cities of Cairo, Tehran, Zahle and Izmir; and then further still, but inward, to the imaginative and meditative spaces inside of ourselves, the seat of our emotional lives, our existential understandings, our spiritual aspirations. The home of the artist inside each of us.

The exhibit itself is its own voyage, and you may find yourself flying through these rooms, like a tourist with a checklist, determined to see it all. Like their lands of origin, though, these works offer more to see and know than the mind could grasp in a lifetime of looking.

And then there is the matter of your heart. Perhaps you will “reach out to

another door” and through it find just one painting or photograph or sculpture that calls you to attend to it. You won’t think about your choice; the artist inside you will make it for you. She will recognize her reflection instantly. Like these works, she abides by rhythms other than those dictated by clocks and calendars. *Stillness. Sacred time. Profound attention.* We all of us have an enormous capacity for these things, yet our daily lives no longer call them forth. But they are called for here.

You will encounter artwork tonight the meaning of which your mind will devour whole and feed to your heart. And then there will be the pieces that bypass the mind completely and speak directly to your heart in its own language. If you are able to let your mind hold what it sees and hears—of colonialism and war, revolution and diaspora, conflict and community, identity and diversity—while your heart is engaged in that conversation, you will leave here transformed. That is what art is for.

To make you forget your life. To wrestle your attention from its habitual

haunts and thrust your mind up against an issue, a travesty, a truth that must not be ignored. To break your heart open with images that cannot be borne by today's version of who you are. And to require you to transform, so that with your new eyes you can see the possibilities for solution that it intimates.

That is what art is for.

That is what a university is for. To call our profound attention to the things that matter. And then to break us open and transform us into the versions of ourselves that are capable of creating change. That broken heart we spend our energies avoiding is in fact the beginning of our expansion, the birthplace of our compassion. We *should* not be the same after we have made this voyage; we *should* be new people, with new minds and hearts, whose sensibilities and understanding transcend borders and nationalities.

The poet Rumi asks, “And you? When will you begin that long journey into yourself?” It is the question our students begin to answer when they arrive, and a journey that is well underway by the time they leave. Those of us here tonight began our journeys long ago, many of us with art as our catalyst and a university as the place where we first said *yes*, as if we’d been ready for that moment from before the beginning of the universe. I’m delighted, and so grateful, that our journeys have converged here tonight. On behalf of the University of British Columbia, welcome.

And thank you.

It is now my pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker, Minister James Moore.