

Aphra Shemza

Hearing from Artists



Aphra Shemza at Wolverhampton Art Gallery,
image by Matthew Kaltenborn

Aphra Shemza is a UK-based multimedia artist and activist. She is the granddaughter of well-known abstract painter Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-1985). Her work explores Modernism, her Islamic cultural heritage, sustainable practice and creating art for all. She has been working with MIMA on a participatory digital project since 2022. Here, she is in conversation with Kate Moses, Public Programme Assistant Curator in May 2023.

KM: You have previously described yourself as a sculptor working with light. What draws you to this medium?

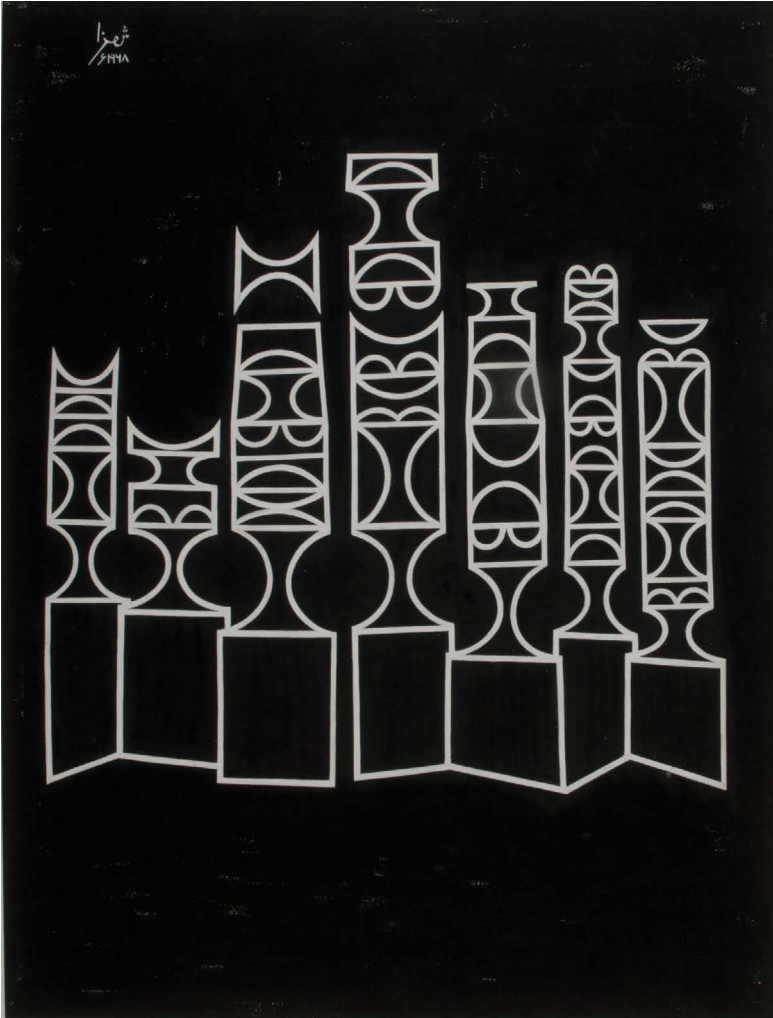
AS: Light has a very primal attraction for human beings. I use light as a medium because it is a great way to create dialogue between my work and audiences, asking them to become active participants rather than passive consumers of art. I make bespoke and interactive electronic circuits that respond to where the viewer is in the space, or the sound that they create. As a society we are deeply immersed in visual imagery. My use of light and interactive technologies are an attempt to cut through the overwhelming visual noise that surrounds us every day.



Anwar Jalal Shemza, 9 Dorlcote Road, London, 1960. Courtesy of the artists estate

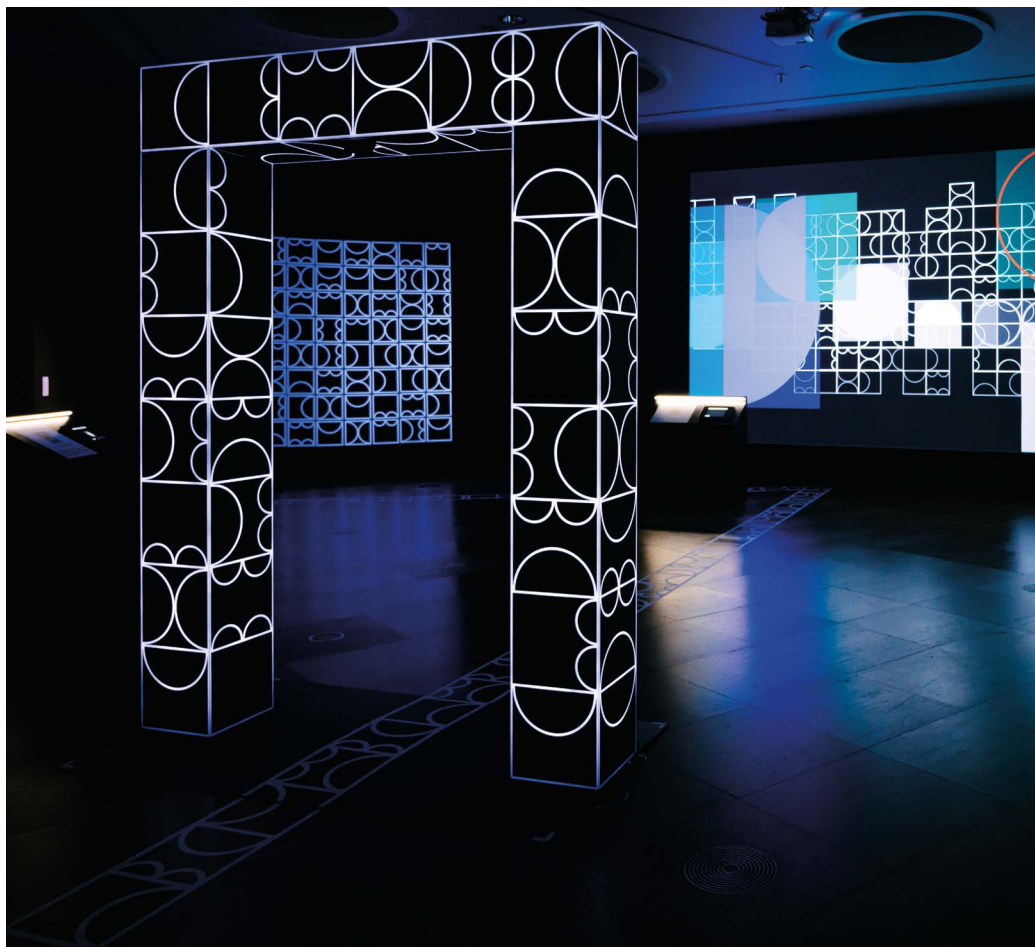
KM: What is your earliest memory of making art?

AS: I grew up surrounded by my grandfather's paintings in our family home. He is the well-known abstract modernist painter Anwar Jalal Shemza, so it has been a real privilege to live alongside his work. I didn't get to meet my grandfather, as he died before I was born, but my grandmother Mary Shemza became a great



Anwar Jalal Shemza, *Chessmen* (1968). Courtesy of the artists estate

supporter and inspiration of my art practice. I always remember going to her studio as a child and having access to the most beautiful selection of pens, pencils and paints. Even my GCSE fine art exam was directly inspired by the work of my grandfather, creating a cardboard chess set based on his Chessmen series. I knew then at the age of 16 that sculpture was my medium of choice, creating something physical in the world.



KM: Your work with MIMA is part of a wider project which celebrates the legacy of abstract painter Anwar Jalal Shemza, whose work *Magic Spiral* (1970) is held in the Middlesbrough Collection. Could you tell us more about the project?

AS: Shemza.digital is a collaboration with computer artist Stuart Batchelor and uses digital media, sculpture and light to create captivating immersive installations inspired by Anwar Jalal Shemza's abstract forms. We use Shemza's work to continue his



Install shot of *Shemza Digital Across Generations* at Wolverhampton Art Gallery 2023,
photo by Matthew Kaltenborn

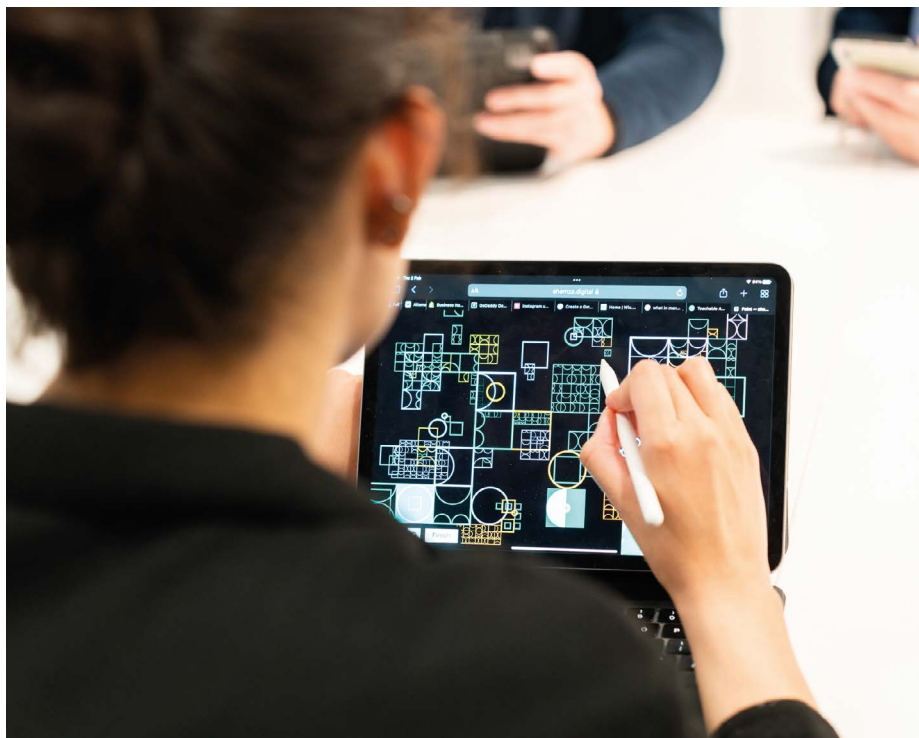
aesthetic exploration and highlight the importance of migrant artists in British Art History.

Publics are invited to join us on this journey by creating their own digital paintings in the style of Shemza. These participatory and interactive artworks create a space for contemplation and artistic activity that is free and accessible to all. Stored in an online archive, participant contributions are used to create physical collaborative artworks for exhibitions moving forwards.

We launched the project in November 2020 at *Shifting Ground*, an online event for National Gallery X and recently opened our first physical exhibition at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. Recently, hybrid exhibition *Shemza Digital: Across Generations* brought together the abstract art of my grandfather Anwar Jalal Shemza and my contemporary digital practice.

KM: Can you describe your making process?

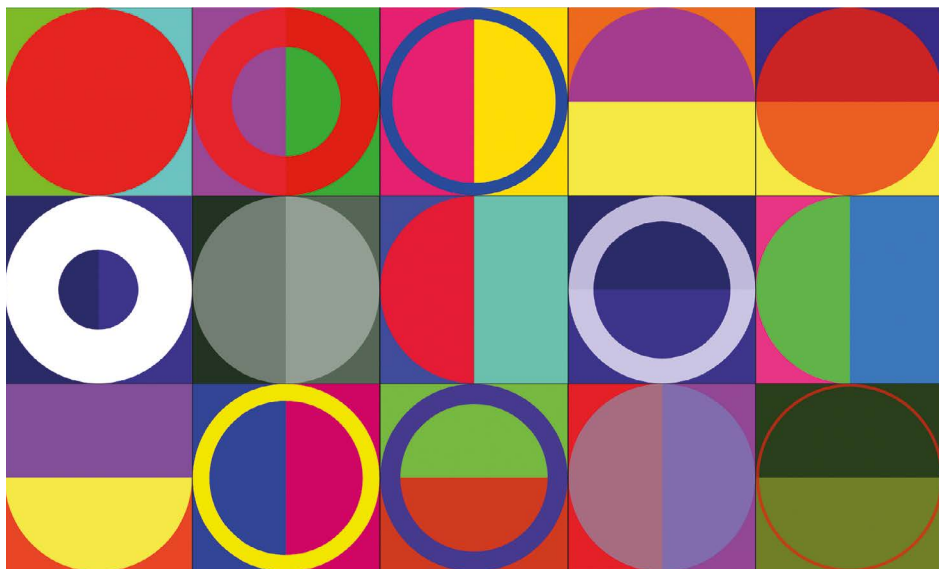
AS: When it comes to my personal practice, I come up with a concept, I 'dream it' - I know what it looks like in my head. I start prototyping with materials and simultaneously start prototyping the electronic circuit and interactivity. I then work with a programmer and start thinking about the practicalities of integrating the circuit into the sculpture. I then build the structure, integrate the circuit and finalise the code and interactivity with the



A workshop participant creates a 'squirele' tile, image by Rachel I Deakin

programmer. We then test the sculpture for around a month with members of the public to make sure that the work is accessible and enjoyable for them to interact with - this is integral to the creation of the artwork as the dialogue between the artwork, public and myself is crucial to what I believe makes a successful piece of work.

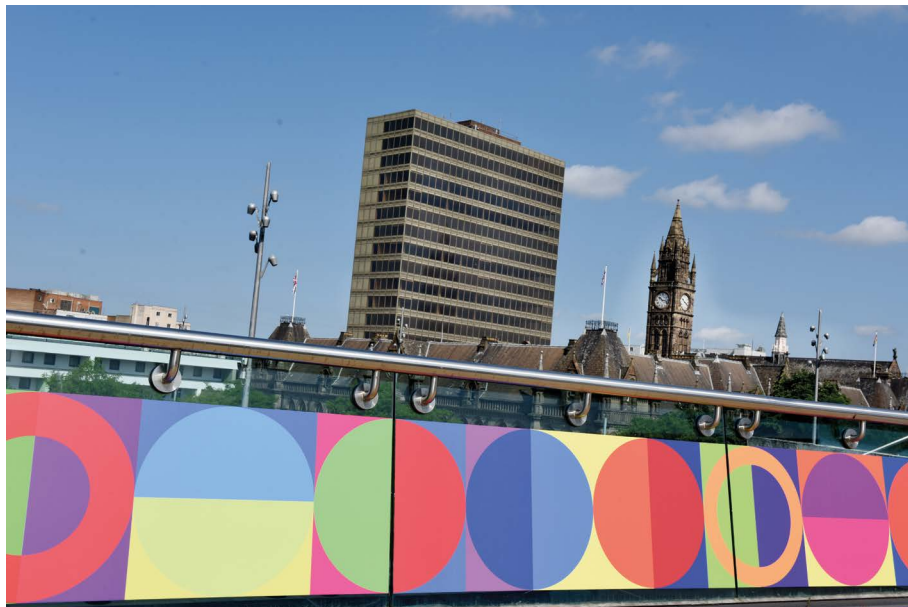
For the shemza.digital project and some of my recent work, my making process has evolved to collaborate with publics in co-creation workshops. I then go away and turn those into reality. For the project with MIMA, members of the public and students from the School of Arts & Creative Industries, Teesside University created their own 'squirele' design based upon Shemza's square and circle motif. These will be combined and shared in various formats at MIMA.



Screenshot from 'squirle' animation created by Aphra Shemza using digital tiles created by shemza.digital workshop participants, image courtesy of the artist

KM: What role do technologies play in art in the future?

AS: I am a realist and not a techno-optimist so I don't believe technology alone will save the world! I'm concerned with the climate crisis and how technological advancements have a massive impact on the planet. I use my art practice to imagine other ways of using technology that puts humans at the centre of the experience, asking them to consider their role in our future as an active participant rather than a passive consumer.



Install shot of *shemza.digital* #15, 2023 by Aphra Shemza, Stuart Batchelor, Peter Todd in collaboration with publics. Digital printed window vinyl, MIMA Terrace.

KM: Could you tell us what you have coming up for the rest of 2023?

AS: This year I will be travelling to Oslo for another instalment of Ocean Rise, a mixed reality sculpture project that highlights the rise in sea levels due to global warming. This time, Oslo City Council have commissioned me to make a sculpture made with recycled materials from a local building site, alongside a public programme. I am also working on a project with SPACER in Ramsgate to create a collaborative artwork about climate change with and for the local community.

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