

*"We rule to live, not live to rule, and for those who have ruled with injustice, there will be a day when they'll be judged, and they will ask people for forgiveness, but won't receive it, because it will be too late to bring back what has been lost."*

At age 28, Nada's inspiring Tedx talk on the connection between emotions and art resonates a maturity well beyond her age. Having earned a bachelor's degree in architecture from Sana'a University in Yemen, Nada began drawing only four years ago and has well established her unique style of art - and voice.

The Republic of Yemen – with capital city of Sanaa - is predominantly Arab with a population of more than 26 million Muslim Shafi (Sunni) and Zaydi (Shia) as well as Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Baha'i living in an area about twice the size of Wyoming. Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Arab world for the most part due to its declining oil resources, continued civil war, and a critical water shortage crisis. The Republic of Yemen was created in 1990 when North Yemen, the Yemen Arab Republic, South Yemen and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen were unified. Its short history is dotted with bouts of civil wars leading to militant Islamist activities – including those of Shiite militant group, the Houthis from northwestern Yemen - declining socio-economic conditions and continued struggle between supporters of Yemen's president Ali Saleh and his VP, Ali al-Baid from north and south Yemen respectively.

Read more Fast Facts on Yemen [here](#) and more details [here](#).

*"My life is running fast in the slowest and most wasted way there is."*

### **Tell me where you were born and about your family and early childhood?**

*I was born in Sana'a Yemen on 21 of June 1987. I am the eldest sister of six other sisters -- no brothers. I live with my parents, sisters, grandparents (my father's side) and one aunt in a house in one of the oldest neighborhoods in the old city of Sana'a. I had a wonderful childhood where I used to watch all the cartoons that shaped my imagination and thoughts and taught me how to speak English. I also used to spend almost every holiday at my maternal grandfather's farm. We would go there with all my cousins and spend a week or two, swimming, riding bikes and going to the beach sometimes. Almost five years ago, I moved in with my maternal grandma to look after her -- my grandpa passed away seven years ago. There is also my uncle and his wife and three children who live with us in the same house.*

### **What's your first memory of war?**

*It was 25 of March 2015 -- I was sleep with grandma in our room after a heavy rainy night. I remember waking up hearing a strange noise that sounded like thunder at the beginning then I realized it was unusually repeated and too heavy -- I felt it through the ground. Grandma woke up and she asked me about the noise. I wasn't sure what it was and I was so paranoid and scared, I told her it's still raining and that's the sound of thunder. She went to sleep peacefully. I came out of the room slowly and carefully trying not to wake her up. I tried to find my uncle and*

*ask him what's going on. He was already talking on the phone to some people asking them to be careful because the war had started. It was then when I was officially part of a war. I never chose to fight or witness a war. After that, we woke grandma up gently and moved to the basement because the strikes sounds started to get louder, closer, and scarier.*

**How did it change your world as an adult? Can you offer details of your memories?**

*I never thought I would ever encounter such a twist in my life. At the beginning, I was in shock that took a while to wake up from. It felt like a bad dream that didn't want to end. We moved to the basement and spent almost all our time there. The first night was horrible. We had to sleep there with hundreds of long-legged spiders all over the walls and the ceiling. It was suffocating and dust was covering every inch of it. There was a bed where we all – grandma, my uncle and myself - laid on. By the way, a month before the war, my uncle sent his family to America for vacation because his wife is American. We stayed there in the basement in silence listening to loud noise coming from outside caused by the strikes of fighter jets. I thought then, maybe this is it for me, and I won't see sunlight or my parents and sisters again. I will never forget grandma's crying that night. She was asking the same question all night long: "Oh God, what did we do and why is this happening to us?" She never found an answer -- even until now.*

*I used to work in the Netherlands Embassy, but they evacuated one month before the war started. We stayed home ever since. Everything has changed. We had to move downstairs and clean the whole place and make it appropriate - livable. I hated it at the beginning and I missed my comfy, soft, cool bed upstairs, but there was nothing I could do especially when the strikes start. Everyone was trying to hold up and stay strong but I knew there were moments when everyone just lost it and cried their eyes out. It is not something anyone would ever want to experience. We kept phones close and charged all the time to check on every one whenever we heard heavy bombing. Some strikes would shake the whole house and fore open the windows and doors, and every time, I thanked God that I was still alive and breathing. I saw how life changed for everyone everyday I woke up. People were scared in their houses, streets were empty and cars were parked everywhere. We barely had any electricity so we had to run the generator at night just for a short time so we could watch the news and see where the strikes had been all day, and how many people had died. Then when the time came to turn off the generator, the darkness and the unknown were already knocking every one's door. It felt more like a zombie apocalypse to me, except there were no zombies.*

*Water hasn't come to our house for over a month now. We try to use as little water as possible. We filled some containers a while ago for emergency use. We have to buy our water now every other week. I feel so horrible for the poor people who can't afford it. My parents are struggling to provide a normal life for us, but the worried look in their eyes and the obvious shortage of the basics in our daily life can't hide the sad fact that life is becoming almost impossible.*

*I barely go out now, and if I do, I have to pay a fortune to cabs because the shortage of fuel is making it so hard on everyone. I walk most of the time now. I rarely get the chance to go see friends and spend some time away from the awful reality we live in. I am losing my job this December because the war is still on and they can't keep paying us any longer.*

*My life is running fast in the slowest and most wasted way there is. I am only 28 and I have a lot of things that I've been planning to do. Everything seems to be so dark now, and I am afraid to start anything that I might not have the chance to finish. I feel my heart is dropping down my body piece by piece asking me to stop thinking and making it too hard for him to bare. I am tired!! I don't know what to think or what to plan now. Why was I part of this?! This is not the life I pictured for myself but obviously it chose me along with other millions of people!!!!*

*I need a break from all this. I need to breathe clean air and make plans for later, because I am not afraid that something might fall on my head from up the sky; hit me all of a sudden and just simply kill me. I want to go out without my parents calling me ten times asking me if I am OK because they worry too much that the situation might escalate while I am out there and they can't get me back home. I need to have my sweet dreams back and be a normal person again. Who will pay me back this precious wasted time of my life??*

*I had big dreams that I one day will be a great artist and will win an Oscar for my unfinished short animated movie that I was working on before the war started, travel the world and see all the places I always wanted to see, be in a "Burn man" show, dive in the ocean and see a real whale, try all the great food I read about, build my dream house that I've designed, and get a lot of pets, hold exhibits everywhere in the world and share my art with people, and live happily and long with my beloved family and friends.*

*Today my dream is just to wake up the next day and wait for the day after...*

### **What was the start of your artistic journey?**

*I started in 2011 when the first revolution against the ex-president Saleh took place. I dropped out in my senior year in architecture school for nine months waiting for the situation to calm down so we can proceed. I never knew I could draw until I stayed home for all that time doing nothing but sketching in a drawing book of one of my younger sisters that I found around the house. My mom saw something in my art and encouraged me to participate in the presidential award for youth that year. I did and won!! Then I started to have confidence to share my art and I found out that my art is something special and people loved it so much that they get emotional when they look at it. After that, I started exhibiting my art, and participate in competitions and in galleries all over my city, Sana'a, until I made a name for myself and my art was finally recognized as a special style of my own creation that is easily acknowledged by people once they lay eyes on it.*

### **How did you come to select your media? Talk about your inspiration, your muse?**

*I've always had a world of my own inside my head, because reality never satisfied me, or my thoughts. I couldn't take photos because they only catch what's out there, and I was never good with words. When I started drawing, I was going through a tough time because of the critical changes in the political situation in my country. Also, I was going through a difficult personal experience, so I had a lot of feelings inside of me that I needed to express somehow, the way I see it in my head. I started to draw what I felt and slowly, I found out that I could see it. I can see*

*my internal secret world that I've been seeing in my head my whole life! Also, a year ago, I found out that I could sculpt, too!! I've made a few sculptures now and people are so amazed to know I've never studied, and that I'm doing it naturally. I feel so happy to shape my art in more ways now, and God knows what's next!!!*

*The character I draw and sculpt in my art has been in my head for sixteen years now, but I never realized it dug its way through my art. I had a dream when I was 13, and this creature was in that dream walking next to my window where I sleep -- all of a sudden it stopped and looked directly at me before I woke up breathing heavily and soaked in sweat wondering if it was a dream or reality.*

*My inspiration is my own feelings and emotions. Perhaps that's why people get so emotional when they see my art – it's because they can sense real feelings and connect with them somehow.*

**Do you remember when and how the war in your country started to infiltrate your art?**

*At the beginning of the war I lost inspiration because I was in a deep shock, but three months later, when I realized what was happening, and saw the loss, the unknown and death surrounding my country and my beloved, I connected again to my feelings and started making art again -- especially when I saw the destruction, loss, and death with my own eyes.*

**Is your art then a conscious act of channeling pains and terror of war?**

*It was spontaneously happening because I was part of it and I felt it every moment. War affected as much as our souls, and since my art is all about feelings, you can't but imagine the amount of mixed emotions pouring from my heart and soul, dragged out through my fingers to shape what I feel and see on every white paper I lay my hands on.*

**Is art empowering you – perhaps as you were never before?**

*Oh yes, it did! I feel now I have my own identity among people, and step-by-step my art will allow me to put my own print on the world and leave a part of my soul in it after I'm gone.*

**What's the overall message you want to convey through your art?**

*Feelings -- feelings shape us and identify our souls, and they cannot be ignored no matter how small they seem, because one day they can turn against us and slowly destroy us, and anything we touch.*

**Do you think your art disturbs the viewer – or perhaps it is meant to?**

*Yes, it does! I've never come across anyone who sees my art and doesn't pause to see what's in there even if they don't understand it. I think this is what happens when your art reflects real human feelings. I think it served the purpose.*

**Do you remember your life before the horrors of war started?**

*I do remember every little thing. I remember going out any time I pleased and staying out late hours. I remember safe street life. I remember watching the news only for one hour at night*

*instead of all day long! I remember my father's happy, calm face and mom's worst worries that we should study well for school. I remember getting together with friends and going to coffee shops and shopping. I remember bright streets and nightlife. I remember sleeping for six hours straight without being woken up by bombs and fighting jets engines. I remember making plans and preparing for months ahead.*

**What part of your life do you miss most?**

*What I miss the most?? Peace of mind, feeling secure, and the certainty about what was to come tomorrow.*

**How has war changed you as a person?**

*I am just a sister now. The eldest for six other sisters - the youngest is only 5 years old. I've come to realize now what it's like to be responsible and worry about someone else's well being, their source of food and shelter. I am most worried about my dad now. I can see how he hides all those concerns in his smiling lips, yet sad eyes. I see mom trying to keep their worries always away from us, trying to show us that everything is and will be OK, and there is nothing to worry about as long as we are alive and together. I think differently now. I think more responsible and mature. I saved money to buy myself a car but I changed my plans now. I have to be ready if my parents need money at any point for any emergency. I can't think of myself now, I think of eight other people first, then myself.*

**Do you think you're a better, more mature person now as a result?**

*Oh yes! I feel like I have grown 20 years older in matter of just a few years. The way I think, the way I see things, the way I plan. Everything has changed. I have changed.*

**What's been lost in you as a person – because of the war?**

*I've lost my dreams and ambition. I had a lot of plans regarding my artistic life. Now I can't do that because I have other things to worry about. That's the least I can say.*

**What have you lost as an artist because of the war?**

*My art supplies and materials. I can't find art supplies easily now. I have to use the materials found in the market – they're not always what I'm looking for. I hate the fact that my work is affected because the materials are not good quality or not enough. Yet, I never use it as an excuse and I keep on drawing and sculpting, and never will I stop!*

**Explain, if you can, how war robs the native citizens and civilians of a country of the basic human rights?**

*You can never imagine how tough life gets living in war. There's no fuel, no power, no water, and when there is any, you have to pay a fortune. People can't store food now because there is no power to run a fridge. People have to pay lots and lots of money to get basic needs for their families and houses. Not just that! We've lost secured life and happy moments like weddings. Two wedding parties were struck with bombs while people were celebrating -- over 130 were killed in both weddings. Now people are scared of holding weddings or attending wedding parties!*

*Poor people are the worst. War takes the hardest toll on them now that everything is triple-priced. A lot of the less fortunate have lost their homes and families. We all are still suffering from a siege. We hardly get basic supplies like food, medicine, and many other products and needs related to our daily life. But one thing this war will never take away is the peoples' strong will to live and to survive!*

**Can you reason the purpose of war, oppression or discrimination?**

*I see that the reasons are far from what's been officially declared. No reason can justify a war this ugly and unfair and an alliance of more than 13 countries against one poor and harmless country. It's well known that our country is still trying to catch up with the international development in all aspects and levels. It's also known how simple and kind the people of this country are. I think that history is witnessing the most unfair and unjustified war against 25 million people. It has destroyed everything beneath, and barely achieved any of the officially declared targets by the alliance military representatives. Women, children, elders and men are being killed everyday. Students can't go to school and if they do, their parents wait at schools' gates in case of an emergency so they can save their children. I had to escort my sister in her middle school final exams, and I remember the last three exams because there was very heavy bombing while she was inside the school – it shook the whole place and freaked out every one inside. I had to wait for her and call my parents every 15 minutes to clam them down and confirm we were still alive and safe. Although I knew deep inside it wasn't that safe, but I had to show them courage and stability, so they don't lose their minds!!!*

**How do you explain the madness and chaos of war to the next generation? Is your art in some way your testimony for the next generation, you think?**

*There is nothing in the world that can describe war except living it and witnessing every moment of it. I hope the next generation will have a brighter life and free of wars and political complications. One thing I want to pass to the next generation, though. Hatred is the poison of the soul, and the destroyer of all achievements and dreams. No matter how much you suffer, never step into the hatred side. You will be stuck there forever and it'll be too late by the time you find out. Also, love your own country and cherish it with all your will and heart, because no matter where your paths lead you, you will always belong to your homeland and its land.*

*About my art, yes! Everything I've seen and felt will be documented in my drawings. Art is the only way to make others – especially next generation - know exactly what we've been through and how awful it felt. Maybe this will make them think again before they make any decisions that might drag their country and people to the hell of war again.*

**How do you make sense of it all – how are you able to pick up the pieces and continue on and look ahead to the future?**

*I think it won't be that easy, or at least not the same. I've witnessed a lot of death and loss and hatred, and this has changed me internally forever. I – and everybody else - will carry on, and we will pick up where we left although it's going to take some time, but the way we see life now, the way we think of the simplest life aspects, are so different and mature.*

*I will make sure I teach an appreciation of life to my children in the future, if I am to have any. I will teach them that justice, honesty, courage and caring are the best weapons to make them go through this life and make it safe.*

**Does that courage to teach come as a result of your art – does it empower you in some fashion or another – as others can't?**

*Oh yes, it does! In my art, there are things that I can express and feel like I can't in real life. I've created a world of my own where I am the ultimate power with an army of creatures (the characters in my drawings) to protect me from harm. Nothing and no one can give me the feeling of glory and protection like the world I've created and introduce through my art. I never realized how limited the world is for me until I started drawing and dragging things out of my imagination.*

**What are your hopes for the future – your own personal hopes and for humanity in general?**

*For humanity, I hope that everyone can realize how big the universe is and that it can fit all of us, so we can just stop killing each other and stop festering hatred that drowns everyone. They should understand one thing. We rule to live, not live to rule, and for those who have ruled with injustice, there will be a day when they'll be judged, and they will ask people for forgiveness, but won't receive it, because it will be too late to bring back what has been lost.*

**What are your dreams for your future?**

*Personally, I hope I can continue with my dreams of spreading my art around the world, and make a life-time achievement that will make me – and the generations of my own family coming after me - proud and honored. I don't want to die without existing and leaving a piece of my soul on this earth. That is my worst nightmare. Also, I want to be there for my family and make sure I protect them and provide them with the beautiful life they deserve, and make up for all the hard times they've been through.*

**Why have you continued to live in your country when so many have fled to safer lands?**

*I will never leave my country and I feel so proud to be living through such hard times, to be able to document everything and pass it on to the next generations.*

**Will you ever leave your homeland?**

*Even if I am to leave it for a while, I will always return to my homeland, because there's no place on earth that will always welcome me with open arms like my own country no matter how hard and ugly it gets sometimes.*

November 2015