

**ENCOUN  
TER**  
CHRISTIAN  
AWE  
IN CONVERSATION  
WITH  
ARSALAN  
MUHAMMAD

TEXT AND EXTRACT OF THE INTERVIEW  
JULY 2016

The Berlin-based artist Christian Awe is an unusual man. As a successful, world-renowned artist in the bustling, thriving German art capital, he is an artist with a deep commitment to the emotional potential of colour and composition. But Awe has broader concerns than just focusing on the evolution of his artistic process. He is an artist whose works speak of the human condition in these troubled times. His artworks reflect and comment profoundly on issues taking place in his home country in the context of global uncertainty and unrest. He has travelled extensively, absorbing foreign cultures, traditions and political landscapes. And back home in his East Berlin studio complex, he works to bring his talents to exposing the realities of migration, and urging others to consider the shattered lives of those who have fled to Germany from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. From arranging painting workshops with refugee children, to building a school in Burkina Faso, long-term partnerships with national institutions and initiatives to raise awareness, to his latest project “Begegnung”, a vast painting erected above the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, Awe’s deep concern with the plight of refugees and a commitment to furthering mutual understanding and harmony, is central to his practice.

End of spring 2016, Awe was approached by the office of the Minister-President of the Niedersachsen region of Germany, Stephan Weil, to co-operate in the “Niedersachsen packt an” initiative. Being a joint project by the German trade union federation, churches, and the business associations of Lower Saxony, under the aegis of the Lower Saxony state government, the initiative brought together municipal associations, major relief and welfare organisations, parliamentary parties of Lower Saxony, as well as numerous companies, chambers, associations and individuals, to help those who have arrived in the region, fleeing war, terror and political persecution.

With the tragic reality faced by thousands from faraway lands now entering everyday life for Germans, and the resulting efforts in the country to accommodate the displaced migrants, national initiatives such as “Niedersachsen packt an” represent a groundswell of humanity and compassion, promoting understanding and acceptance in the face of ignorance and bigotry. When the directors of “Niedersachsen packt an” looked for an artist who could best represent these themes, Awe’s track record of humanitarian works and profound engagement with such themes in his work, made him a natural choice.

It only became apparent after some discussion between the artist and the organisers, that the best approach was the most natural and obvious one – a vast mural work by Awe, to represent the core message of “Niedersachsen packt an” and inspire those who saw it to realize the depth and scope of the situation and empathise with a common element of humanity. To maximise impact, it was decided the work should be situated upon the façade of the Vertretung des Landes Niedersachsen beim Bund, the vast building overlooking Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial, facing the American embassy and the Brandenburg Gate. Without doubt, this is a supreme honour for any artist given the allowance to erect an artwork in this especially poignant location.

The work “Begegnung” (“Encounter”) was unveiled on June 20th 2016 and has enjoyed a significant reaction from politicians, critics and passers-by. Fulfilling Awe’s hope that the street location ensured the widest reach imaginable, the work is testament to one artist’s vision, echoing a common goal of mutual respect, unity and harmony, even under the most difficult of circumstances.

### **How did all this begin?**

The start of it all is a Begegnung, an encounter. In my opinion, every encounter holds a possibility. It could be an encounter of a person, thought, or culture.

### **Who were the instigators of the project?**

Basically, it was the office of the Minister-President in Niedersachsen, Stephan Weil. It turned out that his PA is a fan of my work and he came and visited me in my studio. I had heard and read about “Niedersachsen packt an” - an integration project, with volunteers of all spheres of society working on integration and migration in Lower Saxony. To show what is going on, as a symbol of freedom, hope and strength, we had an idea of doing something on a bigger scale. So they asked if I could imagine doing a project with them. They knew about my large public art works and liked my engagement with charities. Taking into consideration that they were planning a big event coming up in Berlin in June, their intent was to have an artwork that is a symbol of togetherness.

### **What was the event in Berlin?**

Every summer, there is a big event in Berlin at their representation offices, the Landesvertretung Niedersachsen. They invite about 3,000 people. So their plan of sending out a symbol of togetherness to thank people and inspire more good deeds would be a fantastic statement to launch at this event. That's how the idea for a wall painting was born, as a starting point for the project. The measurements are quite huge – 12 x 27 meters – and there were only four weeks to create it.

### **You only had four weeks to do this!?!**

Yes, and the whole time I was doing it, I was afraid that somebody from Niedersachsen or Berlin officials would come up and want to inspect what I was doing and comment on it or even put in their influence. But they didn't – and that was great. It needs a lot of courage to say to an artist: *We trust you, we don't need to see it while you're creating. We respect your artistic vision and freedom.* That is what I need to deliver my full potential. Among many others I am very thankful especially to Staatssekretär Michael Rüter, curator Stefanie Sembill and Marcel Deister of the State Chancellery Niedersachsen, for their support and trust. To fully understand the scope of things, you need to know that at the Holocaust Memorial and its surroundings, as far as I know, nothing has ever been allowed – neither artworks, nor commercials, absolutely nothing. And we had clear instructions that we could only hang it for a few weeks.

### **You've done similar public artworks and murals before in Berlin, for instance at Frankfurter Allee, in Karlshorst or in Berlin Schöneberg.**

Yes, when I was younger I did a lot of smaller wall murals. Now I try to concentrate on one huge mural of about 100-500 square meters every two years somewhere in the world. These projects are very intense and take a lot of passion and strength. Understanding the history of the location, finding the content and realising it against all odds while steering through bureaucracy, takes more than vision. Seeing the potential and challenges to create something like this in the heart of Berlin, made me want to realise something of historical relevance. I thought of this year as the 300th anniversary of philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's death, who had a saying, *Einheit in der Vielfalt*, which means, “Unity in diversity”. And I thought, well, this is interesting and more topical than ever.

**Did you feel a genuine sense of commitment and optimism from the political figures you were engaged with, for this message of unity and togetherness?**

Yeah, they see what's going on in the country. They are very eager, as a state, to do something and inspire other states and individuals to do similar things to create positive attitudes throughout Germany. There is a lot of talk about problems, but there are so many good things, too, which can be overshadowed by negative propaganda. So it's important to have a project like this, which can bring people together.

**The project is installed directly above the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. How did the prospect of placing a work in such a site of historical significance affect your preparations and planning?**

That really makes you think about history. How, as an artist, can you raise a voice and bring everything together, balance it, and make a historic connection with what's happening now? On site we are only a stone's throw away from the Third Reich's Führerbunker – that is relevant. The Holocaust Memorial has so much power in itself - and it deals with incredible injustice along with the death of so many people. Nowadays, people have to escape in mortal fear again to find new places. They leave their homes and all their possessions with so many hopes and start all over.

**Strength of unity, bringing people together, the significance of the location – what else fed into your final concept?**

Escape routes, water, strength, hope for the best, playing with words, a clear message, looking at the colours of the flags, of religious symbols which I could integrate...

**You had tried a number of different paintings until you arrived at the one which would finally be used. How did these 'drafts' evolve?**

I painted five pictures – I played with different ideas, using my new series of the water paintings. But of course I also wanted to use my usual style of working in different layers, symbolising the various cultures, countries, and flags and layering them on top of each other. For example, in one picture I wrote words in different languages on each layer, words of freedom, hope, longing – all of what might matter to a refugee. This eventually evolved into the painting "Einheit in der Vielfalt". Another thought was leaving my abstract style for a more concrete message – the painting "Hoffnung", a representation of the European external borders, along with splashes representing the refugee routes.

**So, in the painting which eventually became "Begegnung", we find a rich, blue background paling to a lighter centre, with connecting strands in vibrant greens, reds and oranges – contained within a loop of prominent, white markings. It contains a great deal of energy and motion within its parameters...**

Yes, this is the one I chose. The blue stands for freedom, longing, water, as the base of life – it's also referring to the Mediterranean. Furthermore, blue is the colour of the European Union. You can see these two opposite structures, which can refer to continents, thoughts, and beliefs. From the left like a rising phoenix, the red and orange pole conveys a lot of power. Then opposite, there's the green pole, coming from the right side, as a symbol of hope. They head for each other and everything goes together from these splashes into a very lighter ground in the centre - into a sign of a better future, maybe?

**The brighter ground in the centre of the painting symbolises hope then?**

Yes, hope as well as bringing together something very powerful, something new. Building bridges. There have been a lot of people who saw this more figurative, like someone riding a dragon. Others felt it was like Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam', with the two fingers of Adam and Godfather, almost touching each other, just before the moment of divine spark. These two oppositional, powerful poles touch and connect and something new occurs. It's an encounter. Meanwhile, some people looked at the white traces of paint and thought they symbolised the people who didn't survive the crossing, which I thought was a pretty strong idea...

**So none of those interpretations were as you had originally intended them to be – or were they?**

Well, you know, of course I planned it this way with the colours, the water references, the splashes being like the movement of a person from point A to B. But I left it open to interpretation. I was very happy that people felt similar things, without me even telling them. I didn't even tell people the name of the painting. I had asked colleagues, friends, family for advice. And the piece "Hoffnung", which looks like a map of Europe with the splashes being the escape routes into the continent, actually got the most votes. But I felt I needed more expression and more strength. I wanted it to be more abstract, so people could make up their own story.

**So, you got a lot of responses to the "Hoffnung" painting, but felt that "Begegnung", which became the selected work, was more effective in transmitting your intention?**

Yes, it really had to have that energy. The Holocaust Memorial is so powerful in itself; it really needs a punch there to make a statement. And there are so many people going by there, from different backgrounds and cultures, looking at it. I think it's so important to have art out on the streets – not just in museums or being discussed online somewhere. People should see artworks and react to them somehow. Art has to become part of the fabric of everyday life. At the Holocaust Memorial, thousands of pictures are taken and talking to people who see the mural is very interesting, because it really translates to different cultures.

**In technical terms, how did you confront the challenges of creating a painting like this on such a scale – was it a smooth process or something of a learning curve?**

It was a big challenge. I learned a lot. That's an interesting thing working on projects like this - you break new ground. I learned I couldn't make a painting of this size, that fast. I had to come up with an alternative, so I created a huge artistic print. There has been a huge learning curve, from the photographic process of taking over 150 photos of the original and stitching them together to one piece with a file size of over 25 GB, when most graphic programs struggle with half the data, to the discovery that I couldn't find anyone in Berlin who could print it in our time frame at my intended quality. I ended up in Thüringen, to finally bring it all to life.

**You used PVC – how did this handle the colours and printing?**

I used a material that is translucent. We had very good results, but we had to try a few options first and so for four weeks, I didn't sleep at all! We had to print it in sections and then weld it together seamlessly. We worked with different companies, a printer, an installation team, lighting guys, electricians, six industrial climbers to install it... and all with its own bureaucracy. I was very nervous, especially before climbing up myself for the first time. Is it the right size? Did we measure it right? Does the paint come out well? Will people understand? And finally it took eight hours to put it up. We were very lucky: The days before, it had been raining non-stop. But when we started, it cleared up instantly and we had a perfect time to do it.

**What reactions have you had?**

Soon after we installed the mural, I got a message from my former political science teacher from over 20 years ago. Out of the blue he wrote, *Hey Christian, I'm just on a tour with exchange students from America and we're standing in the glass dome of the Reichstag. What we can see looks like a painting of yours next to the Holocaust Memorial!?* We are just discussing the whole migration issue and find it spectacular you raise your voice in that way. I was stunned; he recognized my work from that distance and gave me immediate feedback just a few hours after installation! It was just amazing.

**Wow, what a coincidence that was!**

Yes, people are really enthusiastic about it. That's why I want the work to travel and to be seen. Like at Hanover main station or on Volkswagen premises, or on an autobahn, with thousands of people driving by it every day. There is a request from Marienplatz in Stuttgart and one from Muenster's WestLotto. Also, I wanted to find a way to raise money from this project for a good cause, so I made a series of 300 prints which are being sold for charity projects. Each of them has a hand finish, is framed and I priced them in a way that almost everyone can afford.

**What next? What do you hope this work achieves?**

I hope the project has quite a long afterlife. I'm hoping the image gets seen, in the media, newsletters, museums etcetera – it represents the idea incredibly well, but now the real work starts. Let's focus, let's unite on these initiatives and inspire others to do more. For me this painting is over but I want to keep talking about it, making people aware and trying to build a sense of unity and understanding between cultures.

**Of course, you also do a great deal already for charities and causes associated with refugee crisis relief and integration – can you tell me some more about these?**

Last year before the huge wave of migration really hit Germany, I painted a mural in Berlin called Adanzé, which, in several West African languages, means 'a very warm welcome'. I felt an urge to send out a welcome from the German capital, within the centre of Europe. I have been inspired by my travels though Africa, especially Burkina Faso. What really got me is the simplicity of life and needs of people, in contrast to their gratitude and openness. All their joy is manifested in the patterns of their clothes and these vibrant rhythms and movements when they dance and sing. That's why I thought of an abstract flower bouquet, a bouquet that is being handed to someone, like a welcoming gesture. So I created the work and made prints of it, which are financing the school I am building in Burkina Faso, on the border of Mali. It's nearly finished and will accommodate 120 students. Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world and has a high rate of child mortality in the region. I feel it's very important to do something there to help people out. Meanwhile, here in Berlin, at the former Stasi headquarters, we have 1,500 refugees, just sitting there and not knowing what to do. Everybody's trying hard, but besides gratitude there's also a sense of frustration because their relatives are still in Syria and Afghanistan or wherever. There are a few hundred children living in the refugee home, and of those, not everyone has the opportunity to go to school, because there just aren't enough schools in the area. Many children are here without their parents - they don't have anybody. So I do painting workshops, bringing them and the neighbourhood together although still many of them cannot speak English or German.

**So you find that through art and mutual creativity, something positive and hopeful blossoms?**

Yes - creativity is universal. That's my approach here. And then internationally, as with the school

in Burkina Faso, I try to do something to eliminate the root causes that make people want to leave their beloved homes. Then here, I'm connecting the refugee kids to German schoolkids and bringing them together. They smile, they get to know each other, and ultimately friendships come out of that. I do that all over Berlin and all over Germany.

*About the author: Arsalan Mohammad is a British arts editor and writer. Having lived and worked in London, Dubai and Berlin, he has profiled art and artists around the world. He has contributed to titles including The Art Newspaper, Harper's Bazaar Art, Esquire Middle East and many more.*