

## Commencement Exercises and Honorary Doctorates Ceremony 2014

### Acceptance Speech by Hala Schoukair, on behalf of her mother, Saloua Raouda Choucair

Mr. President, dear trustees and guests, proud graduates,

On behalf of my mother, Saloua Raouda Choucair, I would like to thank members of the Honorary Degree Committee and the trustees for this great honor.

Although she cannot be with us today, mother is elated with this most rewarding honor. In a very meaningful way, this degree brings her life and accomplishments full circle. Since much of her work is based on a theory of “noble forms,” I want to outline the circle that AUB is completing today.

Her story begins here. She was born almost a century ago in a red tile roof house that stood on the Lower Campus, just a few steps away from where we gather today. She frequently described to me that childhood house and its rich garden, and how her family lineage is firmly implanted in this part of the city. You can see Saloua to be intrinsic part to AUB’s geography. And just like the trees around her, her roots had already started, from an early age, to absorb its nourishment.

As a young woman with a BA in natural sciences, my mother worked at the AUB library and used the opportunity to enroll in some philosophy courses. In this setting, she had the epiphany that was the turning point in her life and shaped her career. It was here, provoked by a challenge from one of her professors, that she developed her theories of Islamic art and Arabic abstraction, which she later introduced to the Atelier de l’Art Abstrait in Paris and guided her for the rest of her life; it was here where she did her initial research; and it was here where she returned to teach later in her life. It was in the university journal that she published her first manifesto. So we might say that Saloua Raouda Choucair, the artist, was an AUB phenomenon.

As a child, I often accompanied mother on her visits to the campus. She would come here to discuss an idea, borrow a book, or use the university’s resources. With her inquisitive mind, she was always happy to be on campus. I felt here that she was hopping, not walking.

I can never forget a special smile I saw on mother’s face during her 1974 show. That was when the Dean of Engineering at that time was intrigued by a sculpture she had created of different-size stainless steel cylinders, held together by the mere tension of threads, devoid of any central support. “Saloua,” he said with amazement “what you did here was to put into practice a new theory, called Static Dynamism.” That smile lasted for a few days, and she often repeated the story with definite pride.

The late Onsi el-Hajj was equally fascinated by that particular sculpture, which he called Hanna el Sikran. I remember him visiting the show, across the street from his office at Annahar, to push that piece and watch it swing – just like a drunken man swaying in its place, but without collapsing.

If mother’s art fascinated an engineer and a poet alike, I think it has the potential to inspire all of us. Though she took her own path, it has run concurrent to AUB and also revealed the value of bringing the different branches of learning together, in contest and dialogue. She always believed that, in addition to its aesthetic value, art should be functional and practical. It should be part of the everyday life of our urban landscape. I am still discovering among her papers all sorts of ideas and plans. These include

gardens, fountains, even drawings for street lights. As Friedrich Schiller said: “Man is completely human when he plays.” Mother played a lot, seriously.

It would only be appropriate for me here to mention my unconventional father who was open-minded and fiercely independent, and who always gave my mother all the space she needed to work. I would also like to acknowledge members of her supportive family, especially her older sister, Anissa Najjar, who is with us today. In addition, without the appreciation of art lovers from all around the world who are constantly discovering the work of Saloua Raouda Choucair – not least, several researchers on this campus – I would not be here today, receiving this invaluable honor on her behalf.

Finally, I want to thank AUB again for closing this circle of my mother’s search for the noble forms.

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