

**24. august 2023**

**Rector Marianne Skjulhaug**

**Speech at the start of studies**

Dear students,

Welcome to your studies here at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts! Congratulations to each and every one of you on being admitted here, and a warm welcome to one and all. My name is Marianne Skjulhaug and I have just begun my work as the new rector here.

It is with great enthusiasm, respect and admiration for you that I welcome everyone here today, both new and old students. I believe that those of us who work at the Academy, no matter our position, know the effort it takes to get through the rigorous entrance exams and critical assessments that face those who apply to this institution. Few academic programmes in Norway are harder to get into. However, you all passed the tests with flying colours and will now commence your studies.

A whole battery of teachers and technical and administrative staff are ready this autumn to make the programmes the best possible. My expectation is that together we will create vibrant learning environments that promote diversity, the community as a whole and all of us as individuals. I would hereby like to wish the entire staff welcome back for the new term.

*As the largest academic institution for artists and designers in Norway, the Oslo National Academy of the Arts (KHiO) is a specialised and ambitious university. The institution consists of six departments: the Academy of Dance, the Design department, the Academy of Fine Art, the Art and Craft department, the Academy of Opera and the Academy of Theatre. The Academy offers a range of Bachelor's and Master's programmes within these primary fields, and it has been charged with a national responsibility for some of them. The Academy also offers a PhD in artistic research and is a leading institution in artistic research as well as academic research within the arts, both nationally and internationally.*

Together, we are a vital institution within Norwegian art and culture, one that trains the next generation of artists.

So what will these next few years bring?

We are living in unstable and unpredictable times. Major social challenges impact how the community will prioritise going forward. During such processes, it is easy to resort to well-known solutions. That may seem to be the safest bet. But perhaps it is precisely during times of turbulence that substantial changes are called for – perhaps it is then that it is *the less obvious things* that should be explored and tried. And indeed, perhaps it is then that artists should be elevated to more leading roles in order to bring about social change.

The next seven years, leading up to the target year of 2030, will witness major transformations. Climate footprints and emissions will need to be greatly reduced in order to slow down climate change and mitigate the loss of nature. The statistics and reports that are

continuously being presented do not give us the impression that this process will be a walk in the park – far from it.

As for you, you represent the next generation of artists. I assume that you all have an ocean of different and powerful motivations for coming here to KHiO. My own motivation is primarily my belief that art is critical important if we as a society are to achieve the sustainable transformation that is needed. I believe that art's dual ability both to ask completely new questions that challenge the conventional wisdom and to inspire people can help drive the required social transformation.

I hope that every one of you will find your place here at KHiO. I also hope that you will help develop and strengthen student democracy and the student community, so that there are always new students who can help us shape and promote the venues and spaces that are necessary for you to be able to learn, to challenge yourselves, to use your experiences and to dare to create things that do not exist yet. Welcome to you all!

It is now my pleasure to invite an artist and former student at KHiO to greet you as you enter the world of art education. I would like to welcome Ahmed Umar.

Although he is only a few years into his career, Ahmed already has a few impressive achievements under his belt and has made quite an impact. He is currently a nominee for this year's Lorck Schive Art Prize, with the jury explaining its decision to short-list him as follows:

*Ahmed Umar shows a strong commitment to traditional craftsmanship. Even as it continues a visual idiom with deep cultural roots, his art relentlessly confronts social norms that make life unbearable for queers who lead unconventional lives. Umar uses his own body as an artistic material, and his own life story permeates his artistic project, where his personal experiences are the driving force behind an extensive project of liberation. As an aesthetic activist, he both continues and disrupts traditions in works where a consistent, meticulous craftsmanship highlights wounds and victories, as well as personal losses and struggles, when adapting to a new culture. At the same time, his art expresses tremendous strength in his willingness to confront both bullying and the threat of alienation and banishment to the margins of the normative.*

*Umar came to Norway from Sudan as a political refugee in 2008. His art has been displayed in several leading art institutions in Norway, with works being acquired by such prestigious institutions as the National Museum, the Drammen Museum of Art and Cultural History, and the City of Oslo Art Collection. His debut work from the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, entitled Thawra(Ox, Revolution), was made after the revolution in Sudan and was subsequently purchased by the National Gallery [now the National Museum].*

Ahmed, thank you for being here today, and thank you for being in Norway and making the world of art richer.

The floor is yours.