

the dots

a podcast about connecting.

Kohl King Transcript

AD: [00:00:04] Welcome to the dots. A podcast about connecting. The dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring things together for their communities, companies, and themselves, for a better life. And now you're host Digital Strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur Kathleen Buckzo.

Kathleen: [00:00:31] Artist, professor, and project manager, Kole King draws from psychology to create her art and combines nontraditional and symbolic materials to make a statement. She's just back from Arizona where she completed a sculpture in the Sonoran Desert. Kohl, welcome to the dots. Thanks for being here.

Kohl: [00:00:48] Thanks for having me.

Kathleen: [00:00:50] Tell me about your journey as an artist. an immigrant. a project manager.

Kohl: [00:00:54] Oh boy. Let's see. Well I.

Kathleen: [00:01:01] Where were you born?

Kohl: [00:01:01] I was born in India, Bangalore and it was the early 70s and right around shortly after I was born my parents decided my mother decided to come to the States on a nursing visa to be here as a nurse. But she wasn't planning to stay. So she came here by herself and after about a year I realized there were more opportunities for women than there were back in India.

Kathleen: [00:01:31] Yeah.

Kohl: [00:01:31] So she convinced my father to come out here with with me. And so then we immigrated out here in seventy six, seventy seven somewhere around there.

Kathleen: [00:01:42] So did you grow up here?

Kohl: [00:01:43] I grew up in the northeast for a little bit of time. New York and Philadelphia. But then I went back to India for a period of time and I lived with my aunt and uncle while my parents stayed here.

Kathleen: [00:01:57] How is that?

Kohl: [00:01:58] How was it?

Kathleen: [00:01:58] Yeah, what was that like?

Kohl: [00:02:02] I didn't. Looking back on it I realize it was pretty intense. My first memories of India actually came at that point versus when I was...

Kathleen: [00:02:12] How old were you that when that happened?

Kohl: [00:02:14] I think it was six six or seven. So still relatively young.

Kathleen: [00:02:18] Yeah. Culture shock?

Kohl: [00:02:21] Culture shock, yeah because I moved in with my aunt and uncle who were very very poor. And but it was close to the British school system that my mom wanted me to go to. So I would go there and then come back to their little sort of set of row houses with corrugated tin roofs, a gutter in the front, you know communal bathrooms right in the heart of Bombay. So it was a very very interesting thing because I spoke English then but everyone else around me didn't. So I had to learn how to communicate with the other kids through...

Kathleen: [00:03:07] Did you pick up the language, being so young?

Kohl: [00:03:09] No, not very much really close. Also my family is from South India which they speak Malayalam and the national language of India is Hindi. So I just it was completely a different language. But I think that's where I started to be attracted to the how to communicate through visuals. One of the biggest things there is color. Women wear a lot of bangles that are made out of glass. And I remember as a child getting all the other kids in the village to help me find all the broken glass bangles and put them in a jar and we would create these little jars full of broken glass that we would put in areas where the sunlight would come through. So I just like early memories of that just creating small pieces that said I was here.

Kathleen: [00:04:01] Right.

Kohl: [00:04:02] You know. But that's that's kind of how it all started.

Kathleen: [00:04:05] Were you an only child in this area?

Kohl: [00:04:09] No, my brother was I think my brother was just a baby when we went there. So my my mom sent my me and my brother there.

Kathleen: [00:04:17] Wow.

Kohl: [00:04:18] She was having a hard time making ends meet you know in the United States. She was a nurse working two to three jobs different hospitals. My father was a was working for the civil service of India. But when he came to the States it didn't translate. So he was having a hard time. They were trying to figure out where to live. They were moving around a lot and all over the northeast, and then to try to get their bearings, they sent us back there.

Kathleen: [00:04:47] So how long were you there?

Kohl: [00:04:50] About I think maybe over a year.

Kathleen: [00:04:53] OK.

Kohl: [00:04:54] Maybe maybe a little bit more I can't remember the dates exactly.

Kathleen: [00:04:57] What was re-entry into U.S. life like then?

Kohl: [00:05:02] Honestly it was it was a little crazy because I hadn't seen my father in like almost a year and a half two years. I kind of forgot what he looked like. My mom came to visit us. And

then one day this couple came, friends of my family, next thing I know I'm on the airplane and I'm coming back to the states and I'm walking into this gigantic airport and this man picks me up and I look behind me and it's my father. It was stunning, stunning so I just didn't understand what was happening, I didn't understand the long ride. I didn't know what was going on. Very, very confusing. But again like, I have really vivid memories of that trip. I remember when it was the first time I felt like I was actually coherent on an airplane trip and they had these gold packets of butter and they were very very cold and solid. And so I was so attracted to them that I started walking around the entire airplane and grabbing all the gold packets and putting them in my like little tiny you know purse or what have you thinking that when I got to where I was going to get this was going to be amazing stuff and of course it was just butter and it had all melted, but very, very you know vivid memory.

Kathleen: [00:06:22] So attracted to the color right?

Kohl: [00:06:24] Color. substance, texture. Yeah definitely. Maybe trying to hold onto to something something I can control you know in uncontrollable circumstances.

Kathleen: [00:06:35] Yeah.

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Kathleen: [00:06:51] So you're back in the United States you're still a young kid.

Kohl: [00:06:53] Yeah. So I came back. We were I think at the time my parents had moved to. They were in New York but I can't remember exactly. Sometimes the memories fade now but. And then I lived there until I was I think in fifth grade and then we moved down to South Florida. For the health of my mom. She wasn't dealing with the winters. And then I grew up in Florida for the rest of the time in middle school and high school and then got out of there as soon as possible.

Kathleen: [00:07:28] It's so funny so many people through this process talk about getting out of there soon as possible.

Kohl: [00:07:36] Florida?

Kathleen: [00:07:36] No no, you know just high school the whole dynamic.

Kohl: [00:07:39] Oh yeah.

Kathleen: [00:07:39] There are those who love it and those who hate it. So you know you fall in the hate category. But...

Kohl: [00:07:45] It, I was not a fan. Yeah.

Kathleen: [00:07:47] Yeah. Why. Why. Why not a fan?

Kohl: [00:07:50] I just think high school at least the high school I went to I can't speak for everyone but you know it was just so regimented and it felt like the system was set up for, to really only work for certain people. While we had a good strong arts program, it wasn't really accessible to everyone. And I don't think there was a lot of, at least for me a lot of, other opportunities for advisement on which way to go or how to be, you know how to how to tap into what was important for me. You

know it was just like take Spanish, take Math, take this, take that you know and I did very well in high school in terms of grades but I don't I don't think I remember anything from that whole time except that I didn't like it.

Kathleen: [00:08:47] Yeah.

Kohl: [00:08:48] So I was very happy to leave.

Kathleen: [00:08:49] Yeah. It seems to be a common theme. You know that people are either all in or not.

Kohl: [00:08:58] Yeah I always think that if you really... I guess. I just never thought about it as those were the best years of my life. I always think that the best years are coming. I'm always thinking that. So maybe that's always a good thing to think, in terms of how to proceed.

Kathleen: [00:09:19] Right.

Kohl: [00:09:19] I don't know.

Kathleen: [00:09:20] So how did you find your voice?

Kohl: [00:09:25] Honestly it's almost... it's a process. As a process of elimination really.

Kathleen: [00:09:33] Really?

Kohl: [00:09:34] Well. I went into college thinking I was going to be a lawyer. You know I came from a family that somewhat expected me to have that kind of success. You know doctor, engineer, or lawyer, or something of that nature. I'm from India. So that of course you know really helps to push those stereotypes.

Kathleen: [00:09:59] But I think it's also the traditional, Asian, must succeed, well.

Kohl: [00:10:05] Yeah, yeah.

[00:10:05] And I think you know again my parents were immigrants to this country. They struggled in terms of fitting in and they wanted me and my brother to have success and they defined success in a certain way. Shortly after I got into college I decided to take just a couple of art courses. I ran into the department chair. He looked over a little portfolio I had and you know said if I declared myself an art major I could you know apply for this scholarship. And that was it. You know so I applied thinking you know what do I have to lose. And I actually got it. And I remember getting a letter and opening the letter and I was on the college campus and I just remember looking up and everything just felt right. So of course I ran home and I told my parents you know hey guess what I'm going to be an art major and they were like "What what does I mean?" [laughs]

Kathleen: [00:11:02] Right, Right? [laughs] Oh great you are going to be starve.

Kathleen: [00:11:02] You know every stereotype that we have heard about artists.

Kohl: [00:11:08] That's exactly their reaction like what does that mean? And what kind of job can you get? And there you go. So I just kept going and I moved from that college to one in North Carolina that was specific for arts and music it was a two year program. And from there transferred to the University of Georgia where I actually received my Bachelor's still in Fine Arts. I took a

small segway to try to be an art educator and realized in terms of early childhood and realized I didn't have the patience for that or it really is a calling and I commend those individuals that can really work with children. It's it really is amazing. And I just knew that I was going to be able to do that. So I went right back into Fine Arts and and then just kept moving right along. You know I went to my Masters and I always chose places in terms of my education based on the fact that I wanted to live there. I wanted to try something different. So North Carolina because I wanted to live in by the rain for it's not a national rain forest but it was the land of waterfalls so you know two more inches away.

Kathleen: [00:12:23] It's beautiful.

Kohl: [00:12:23] Yeah.

Kathleen: [00:12:23] Yeah it's absolutely I've been there it's beautiful.

Kohl: [00:12:25] Absolutely. And then I loved Athens. Georgia. I loved the music and the culture. And you know I started dreaming of the desert. And so I decided to move to Arizona. And then a couple of years later after my Masters, I bought a house there stayed there for a little bit. Working trying to make a living and still doing my art and then ended up in L.A. then 14 years ago.

Kathleen: [00:12:51] Tell me about that period right where you're you know trying to make a living. A lot. Lots of artists face that.

Kohl: [00:12:57] Yeah.

Kathleen: [00:12:57] How did you balance that voice, that desire ...

Kohl: [00:13:01] You know it a struggle.

Kathleen: [00:13:03] for art.

Kohl: [00:13:03] Yeah it's a struggle. Shortly after graduate school. I mean when I was in graduate school there wasn't really any kind of I guess training on how to make a career from what you're learning. There wasn't any focus on that. So right before I graduated I remember going to a career counselor. Funny enough I came in with this gigantic list of all the things I want in a job. And it was you know...

Kathleen: [00:13:33] What was on that list?

Kohl: [00:13:34] Oh just I wanted to travel. I want to be creative. I wanted to make enough money. You know just like all the things I still want now but I walked in and I remember the career counselor started laughing at me. And he was like I don't think you're going to get all this. So let's focus on the top three. And saw I was a little stunned. And you know I was young had really no idea. I just thought I got here. I worked myself through arts education I should be able to do all this and in some ways I am doing a lot of that just not in the same way that I thought you know. But he he gave me a sort of an idea of how to prioritize. And I left that session thinking wow this isn't going to work. But funny enough I somehow got on his email list and he sent me this, this job listing for a visual merchandiser few months later, right before I graduated. So I applied and it turned out that it was for a very large company that owned properties all over Arizona but also all of America. And next thing you know I started my own business as sort of visual merchandiser and like a little bit of a marketing strategist you know.

Kathleen: [00:14:58] So how does it come together for you right here? You know what is a visual strategy? Early on you are using color to communicate with people.

Kohl: [00:15:06] Yeah, and just what I thought looked good good to the eye I had really no idea I didn't go to school for it. I was just trying to fudge my way through it.

Kathleen: [00:15:14] Yeah.

Kohl: [00:15:16] Picking up small clients here and there. A lot of mom and pop shops you know that were just starting out with their new product and wanting to increase their sales. And what I thought looked good they thought looked good. So I started to just move along and eventually build an entire list and a business out of that. But just like any new business there were some pitfalls like I didn't know how to manage the business.

Kathleen: [00:15:48] Yeah.

Kohl: [00:15:49] I grew so fast that I was working some crazy hours. I remember sleeping inside of an empty mall store. You know at two o'clock in the morning with like a little tiny sheet of paper as a blanket trying to get the store done for their grand opening the next day. And just just ridiculous things like that I didn't know how to hire people or how to manage labor. Just think about any of that.

Kathleen: [00:16:18] And what would be your advice to someone who is looking at that right.

Kohl: [00:16:21] Oh I, I don't know.

Kathleen: [00:16:21] Right. All of a sudden all of a sudden you know you're a classically trained artist.

Kohl: [00:16:26] Yeah.

Kathleen: [00:16:26] And you seize this opportunity. What would you do differently now?

Kohl: [00:16:33] I would probably align myself with a lot of people that were also working in the same way and join groups, you know have affiliations. I didn't know anything. I was just putzing around you know, and I also didn't know how to align myself. I didn't understand that there were business groups and you know artistic groups and creative groups. You know I just didn't get that at the time. And maybe a lot of it was because I didn't see myself in a as a businesswoman. I saw myself as an artist doing a project. So, I just maneuvered in that way. You know I wasn't really invested in the business as much as I was invested in the creation of this beautiful thing that I was creating for someone else.

Kathleen: [00:17:23] Yeah.

Kohl: [00:17:25] Well 2001 September 11th happened. And right after that, all the clients I had lined up again all mom and pop got very scared and all cancelled and all of a sudden I had no work for months and months. And I'm a person that needs to keep busy. And I just didn't know what that meant. And I got scared after months of months of having no income and then all of a sudden decided to join the ranks of the corporate world and got my first real corporate job at AOL. And that was probably a good thing and also somewhat of my downfall because I learned to rely on the corporate structure as my backup plan. And it's it does, every time I go back I, just personally speaking, it almost kills me. I'm not a person who fits into that structure. But I go back because it's

it offers that kind of structure where you can get a paycheck.

Kathleen: [00:18:35] It's that addiction to that two weeks right every two weeks you get a paycheck. Right. And it becomes an addiction.

Kohl: [00:18:43] I wish. I know it's it's weird that that's the word. I'm not sure if it's if that's absolutely correct but what it is is that it's the it's the safety it's the safety. But the truth is is that it's not very safe. Actually there's a lot of a lot of risk to my personal health, mental health, emotional health, physical health. And each time I take on a project I meet some amazing people, but overall I keep saying to myself this is the last time I'm going to do it - this last time I'm going to do it. And then sometimes I have to go back or. And this time I just finished a project with NBC and I told myself at the end of that I'm like "this is it. I'm done. I'm done". Because I just don't want to go through it again. I spent about a decade on and off teaching and I truly enjoy that.

Kathleen: [00:19:52] Teaching older students. Right?

Kohl: [00:19:53] Yeah. College level. College level.

Kathleen: [00:19:54] Right. OK.

Kohl: [00:19:55] And, but the the way the world has changed in terms of securing a teaching position especially you know full time, tenure track. It's just not the way it used to be. You know where you go to grad school for a degree with the mentality that you're going to teach one day. And of course I didn't follow that track right away. I don't apply to schools right out of grad school and felt like I needed experience.

Kathleen: [00:20:22] Right.

Kohl: [00:20:22] Of just living.

Kathleen: [00:20:23] Right.

Kohl: [00:20:24] Yes so my goal now is to solely focus on continue to make my work.

[00:20:33] And also just find ways to subsidize that with out having go to go back to that structure.

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Kathleen: [00:21:42] So let's talk a little bit about the work. You were just out in the Sonoran Desert. And tell me about that project.

Kohl: [00:21:49] So the product called Incra journey and it started off about actually in 2000. I was living in Tucson. I went to grad school there and I do a lot of writing and I started to sit through an entire process - make every time I wrote something whether it was a shopping list, a note, a rough

draft. What have you I started to make them into boats. You know a lot of it was just because I was frustrated that I couldn't get to the studio. Again it's a work life balance you know I was trying to live and eat and pay my rent and also make my work. And there were days when the errands just never ended. And so at the end of the day I'd be like oh at least I made one thing and it would just be a small little you know paper boat. Well 15 years later and thousands of boats later I realized this is an actual body of work. And you know there's all kinds of things that mark time in my days of just living and surviving, searching, trying to find meaning in the world and myself. And I was just carting that entire collection from studio to studio. House to house.

Kathleen: [00:23:08] Yeah.

Kohl: [00:23:09] And in around 2015-2016 I started to see them. I wanted to see them laid out. And I wanted to see them in the desert landscape because it seemed odd to me when I think back on it that I was making boats in the desert. I mean I could have made planes, I could have made anything. Right?

Kathleen: [00:23:29] Right. Right exactly.

Kohl: [00:23:30] But I was making these boats these vessels that carry something that journey somewhere. And so then I started to try to figure out the landscape. And originally I thought Joshua Tree but it just didn't feel right. It didn't seem right. And then magically I ended up through a connection of a connection of a connection, quote, unquote, reconnecting with an old friend of mine who now runs a residency in the Sonoran desert where this project actually started. So I sent him a proposal and was accepted and nine months later. So a whole baby life later,

Kathleen: [00:24:10] Right. Exactly.

Kohl: [00:24:10] Basically went out there with an assistant and thousands of boats. And the plan, all the logistics, and we were out in the desert. I mean way out in the desert for about three to four days just camping on this land and basically set up two separate sites where we anchored the boats to the landscape and eventually over time the paper will unfold or fade or decay and it will just all the words and anything that was holding it will just wither away. And it was great.

Kathleen: [00:24:56] What does that project mean to you?

Kohl: [00:25:00] You know I call it anchored journey and I call it you know colon in between because it really felt like a sort of a coming of age thing to me you know that that entire project came from all this. I wasn't trying to make a work. But that body of work came from all the days that I wasn't trying to make work.

Kathleen: [00:25:23] Right. Right.

Kohl: [00:25:24] And that's the that's the thing it's about just moving each day into the space that you want to be in.

[00:25:33] So eventually it just got to this place where it was so I had felt like I had outgrown that I had I had I had become I had come into my own skin so to speak ...

Kathleen: [00:25:47] Really?

Kohl: [00:25:47] And I needed to let go of it. And it was important for me to recognize that everything we do to finance our life to make that happen. As an artist is just as important as the

making of the work. You know I mean it's it's not just the studio time it's everything that goes into it. You know you sacrifice, you compromise, you do all these things just so you can do your work. And that to me was the documentation of it all. And I just got to a point where I, I realized it was as significant to my life as all the other things that I've made, that I've sold or you know...

Kathleen: [00:26:28] Right.

Kohl: [00:26:29] Cetera. So it was great it was. It changed me as a person to see to to be out there in the desert landscape and to you know I mean it's hard work.

Kathleen: [00:26:39] Yeah.

Kohl: [00:26:40] Super hot days over 100 degrees. Literally like digging into the ground with this sort of metal stake and like this kind of heavy sledgehammer sort of thing. And then anchoring them and then as we're doing it my my friend and assistant she would read some of the words to me and I would just take me back to that time when I wrote that you know there was a lot of things you know a lot of anger, a lot of frustration, a lot of happiness. Sometimes my shopping list, I was like oh?. [laughs]

Kathleen: [00:27:12] Has your diet changed over the years.

Kohl: [00:27:15] Nope, still eating a lot of rice and beans. [laughs]

Kathleen: [00:27:18] Yeah.

Kohl: [00:27:18] Yeah, But basically I'm just it was amazing to see some of just the way I wrote and how I how I transformed as a person throughout that time.

Kathleen: [00:27:29] Did you transform as a person or did the work transform you?

Kohl: [00:27:35] That's a very interesting question. Probably a little bit of both. But you know of course I grew up grown older things that meant something to me back then. They're not the same. They don't hold the same importance. But then that you know, I am definitely a different artist than I thought I would be. I thought I would be a painter. I studied painting and I am not a painter at all. In fact every time I pick up a paint brush and canvas I just, it doesn't feel right anymore.

Kathleen: [00:28:02] Really?

Kohl: [00:28:03] And I had my masters in painting so completely different.

Kathleen: [00:28:07] So how would you define your work today?

Kohl: [00:28:10] It's really conceptually based. I don't really stick to a medium. And I think that's really important. It took me a long process to understand that and accept that because as you said I was trained in one fashion.

Kathleen: [00:28:24] Right.

Kohl: [00:28:26] But I just work in different media and it's all based on the psychological states that I'm I'm interested in whether it's about other people or how I work. Of course they're interpreted. You know in some ways. So the medium is second to the subject matter.

Kathleen: [00:28:45] So given that how do you define success?

Kohl: [00:28:50] You know. I don't know if I have ever thought about it that way. I think success is each day if I were to say that if I would answer your question honestly I think that the definition of that changes for me. But for me right now it's that - I am incredibly grateful for everything that I have had in my life and have now. And one of the most important things is I'm still doing my work. You know no matter how many times I've gotten derailed I've gone back and gone back and gone back and it just says to me that that is really what I'm all about. So to me that's successful.

Kathleen: [00:29:32] So every time you escape to corporate structure, your work has brought you back?

Kohl: [00:29:37] The work has brought me back the fact that I don't feel connected to my life and I really get that in the work that I create. You know it makes me feel present and that's important. And yeah that's really important. And the success of that is that is a definition of success because I remember what I was teaching I would tell my students that very often people who graduate with a degree don't really stay in their field for five years. They just don't for whatever reason which may say something about the education system I'm not sure right.

Kathleen: [00:30:18] Could be either one.

Kohl: [00:30:20] But you know the fact that I am still doing what I set out to do whether completely different than how I thought I would do it but I'm still doing it. So and I'm enjoying it and it makes me feel that I'm on the right path. So that's that's a good thing.

Kathleen: [00:30:42] So what's next?

Kohl: [00:30:44] Well currently I am on to my next series. A lot of it has to do with the aging process being vulnerable. And also the idea of homesteading. So I'm working a lot with these very antique type farm tools like sites and pitchforks and what have you. And there are these elements of kind of women's work that are mixed in with that. So they're sculptural. There's some drawings and just the installation all in general. And as I get a few more works under my belt I'll start to figure out where where they're going to go or how they'll be displayed or what have you. But yeah I'm still working away I'm learning how to macrame right now.

Kathleen: [00:31:37] That's kind of a throwback.

Kohl: [00:31:38] Yeah yeah definitely. But with very large bandages. [laughs] Yeah. Very interesting. I know. I'm trying to figure it out myself.

Kathleen: [00:31:49] So if we want to follow this in anchored project and as it returns to its roots, how do we do that.

Kohl: [00:32:01] The project was installed it was it was part of a residency on the place called the Land without No Name. Excuse me Land with No Name. I apologize. And you can follow that on Facebook. They have a website, of course. And actually the work will be launched on my web site, pretty soon there will be documentation as as the project slowly decays. But if you happen to find yourself in Tucson and you'd like to go see it definitely and look up Land with No Name and you'll be able to set a time to go see it. They'll take you out there.

Kathleen: [00:32:44] That's awesome.

Kohl: [00:32:45] Yeah. Cool. Thank you. Thank you for sharing your colors and communicating with us in a unique way and really sharing with how you've connected the dots from a corporate escapee to an amazing artist.

Kathleen: [00:33:00] Thank you so much for having me.

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