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Egyptian artist Salah Abdel-Karim remembered with retrospective

Névine Lameï, Thursday 12 Feb 2015

Continuing until 27 February, an exhibition at Safarkhan of Salah Abdel-Karim's work brings to the surface his multifaceted passions



Twenty-seven years after the death of renowned Egyptian artist Salah Abdel-Karim (1925-1988), Safarkhan Gallery dedicates a solo exhibition to the artist showcasing for the first time works from his family's private collection.

The gallery is suffused with sculptures, paintings, sketches, scenography designs, posters, and drawings created for the daily Al-Ahram publication. No wonder one of the leading Egyptian artists and art critics Salah Bicar defined Abdel-Karim as "multidisciplinary."

"It's not only for the media... The multifaceted art of Abdel-Karim is also characterised by the wonderful fusion between Oriental and Western culture. This results from the fact that the artist studied abroad, and travelled extensively across Italy, Spain, Switzerland and settled in France," says Sherwet Shafei, owner of Safarkhan gallery, adding that the last time she exhibited Abdel-Karim's works were back in 2001.

As we enter the Safarkhan gallery, we're greeted by his sculpture titled Cry of the Beast (1961), the unfinished yet sumptuous work. One of the sides is incomplete revealing the metal plate on which the artist cast the mould that he brought from Cairo's popular Wakalet El-Balah district. Scrap metal, nails, coils, bolts and iron mechanical parts form this giant beast.

"What is original in this piece is the fact that Abdel-Karim did not work on the surface of the block. Instead, he was sculpting from the inside towards the outside. There is a lot of space for air to pass through giving the sculpture an impression of movement, strength and animal vitality," Shafei comments.

The vacuum in the symbolic beast is revealed as an expectation; and a sense of warning fills it up.

"The Cry of the Beast was mentioned by René Huyghe, in his book *Art and the Spirit of Man* (1961) where it is discussed next to the impressive sculptures of Pablo Picasso and Robert Müller."

Shafei places also an iron gilded sculpture of the Skull (1972) on display, a work that reminds us of a crocodile, a bull or any imaginary animal. Abdel-Karim leaves the visitor to figure it out.

In the animal form, the artist found an easy way to express what he could not have reached with other subjects. It is through those sculptures that the artist reaches what is universal, allowing his art to surpass the concept of a mere representation.

On the gallery's first floor, we find a sculpture dating back to 1968. In it, the artist uses aluminium tubes to form two bodies, male and female, entangled in a harmonious alliance. The visitor then walks between innumerable sculptures of cats, simple and vivid, made of marble, wood, bronze and iron, all dating from 1980. Cats remained one of the dominant subjects of the artist's sculptures and paintings

As we proceed towards many paintings, we find female portraits influenced by Picasso, an artist that Abdel-Karim admired. *Abstract Portrait* (1962) reminds us of the Spanish genius' *Weeping Woman* or *Dora Maar with Cat*.

It is the *Abstract Portrait* that brought Abdel-Karim the International Prize for Painting from San Vito Romano, Italy. The work, which superimposes multiple angles (especially in the eye area) is marked by pain and worry. Abdel-Karim had completed this piece in Italy, during his scenography studies in Rome.

PhD in his pocket, Abdel-Karim returned to Egypt in 1958 and invested most of his time into theatre scenography.

His numerous drawings and sketches in gouache for opera and theatre form big part of the Safarkhan exhibition. They testify to the days when the artist worked for many of the pioneering Egyptian theatre directors such Kamal Yassin, Nabil El-Alfi and Saad Ardash.

The display also includes numerous costume designs by Abdel-Karim. There are also sketches in a blue-like ink of naked women, portraits of friends and people on the train. The artist encountered the latter ones during his trips to Paris.

The French accent resurfaces once again in Abdel-Karim's marvellous landscapes capturing architecture of the country's Côte d'Azur: Avignon, Ville Neuve or Dijon. Those works benefit from the sensitivity to details and ability to discern between reality and emotions, developed by Abdel-Karim's passion for scenography.

A travel through subjects and forms, an exhibition is an important testimony to one of the most prominent Egyptian artists who should be cherished and not forgotten, a mission that Shafei achieves.

Programme:

The exhibition continues until 27 February
Safarkhan gallery, 6 Brazil street, Zamalek, Cairo

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