

Egyptian Surrealism and the Quest to Define Modern Art in Egypt

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Hyperallergic travels to Cairo to see one among a new wave of exhibitions that are reintroducing Egyptian modern art to a wider audience.

[Hrag Vartanian January 5, 2017](#)



Hamed Nada's "Folkways" (nd) in *When Arts Become Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938–65)* exhibition (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)



The calls to revise the canon of art history have grown louder in the last few years, but the research, curation, and collection of art from regions that have long been overlooked or ignored is a slow process. Egyptian modern art appears to be the latest to undergo this process of rediscovery and integration into the larger history of art. Two major traveling shows (one beginning at the [Centre Pompidou in Paris](#) and the other at the Palace of Arts in Cairo) are reexamining this period and prominent Egyptian modern artists, including George Henien, Hamed Nada, Ramsis Yunan, ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar, and Van Leo.



Fateen Mostafa Kanafani of Art Talks gallery in Cairo holding a magazine with a famous photo of George Henein on the cover. Henein was one of the founders of the Art and Liberty group.

Hyperallergic traveled to Cairo to see the [*When Arts Become Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists \(1938–65\)*](#) exhibition organized by Sharjah Art Foundation Director Hoor Al Qasimi, Salah M. Hassan of Cornell University, Ehab Ellaban of Cairo's Ufuq Gallery, and Nagla Samir of the American University in Cairo.

The show in Cairo concentrates on four decades (1930s–1960s) and two

art groups (Art and Liberty, and the Contemporary Art Group), though the end of the exhibition ventures beyond those dates to integrate contemporary work as a way to show how the threads of Egyptian modernism continue to inform art today.

On the podcast, we talk to Fateen Mostafa Kanafani of Art Talk gallery in Cairo, Sharjah Art Foundation Director Hoor Al Qasimi, and Metropolitan Museum curator Clare Davies about the history of modern art in Egypt, the factors that contributed to this flowering, and the inclusion of non-Western modernism in Western museums.

Here are some images from the Cairo exhibition:



The Palace of Arts in Cairo



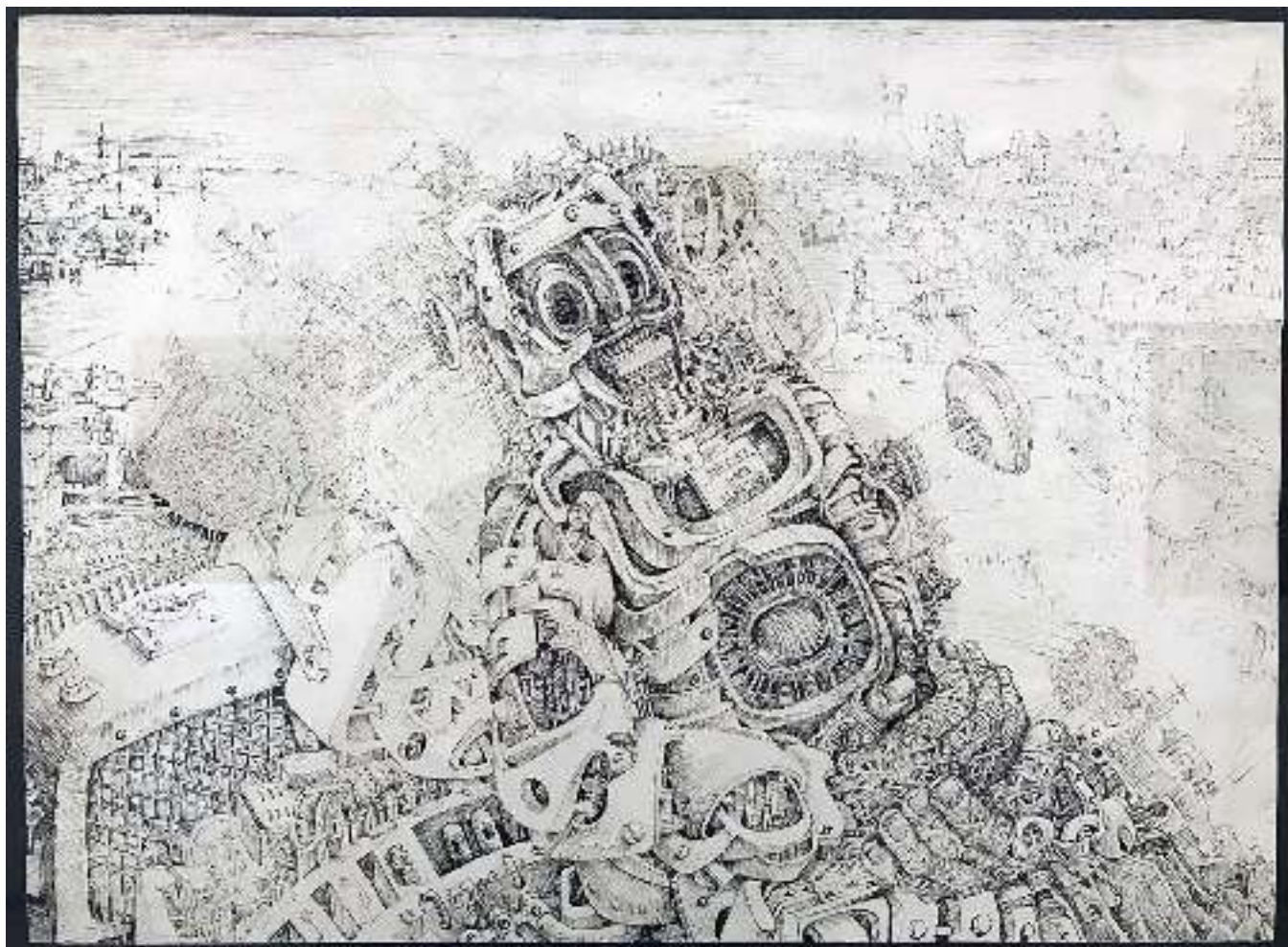
The first hall of the exhibition



Carlo Disdiro, "Satan Around the World" (nd), general view (above) and detail (below)



Ramses Younan, "Nature Loves a Vacuum" (1944)



Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar, "Untitled" (1964)



A display of works by Van Leo



Inji Efflatoun, "The Girl and the Beast" (1941)



Inji Efflatoun, "Contemplation" (1940s)



Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar, "Key of Time" (1951)



Kamal Youssef, "Key Holder" (1952)



Ramses Younan, "Family" (1937)



Samir Rafi, "The Family" (1956)



A view of the first hall from above



A view of some of the works in the Contemporary Art Group gallery



Ahmed Morsi, "Elegy of El Gazzar" (1968) and Abdel Hady El Weshahy, "Outlook (1)" (1986)



Ahmed Morsi, "Artist in Alexandria" (1989)



Some archival documents related to Art and Liberty



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