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Interview with a Former Pupil of Hamed Nada

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Interview with Khaled Hafez, Former Pupil of Hamed Nada

Seggerman: When did you first meet Hamed Nada and what are your memories of that meeting?

Hafez: It was 1981. I was a student in medical school and there was an all-universities art competition judged by Zakareya el Zeiny, one of the best painting professors ever to exist in the Cairo fine arts school. El Zeiny prized my work and left me his business card; I called him and he asked me to meet him the following morning at the fine arts faculty. There, El Zeiny helped me register for the evening classes that were taught by the "great painter" (in Zeiny's words), Hamed Nada.

At the beginning, Nada was not impressed by my presence; for months he never even recalled my name, a fact that changed after three years in his class.

I spent three years in Nada's studio and later another three in Zeiny's, before they both passed away in a span of about five years.

AS: How do you define "artistic influence" and do you think that is a valid mode for analyzing art practice? How would you place Nada in a genealogy of artists, both Egyptian and non-Egyptian, and do you see yourself drawing from the same sources?

KH: I believe Hamed Nada influenced many artists, and eventually, retrospectively others have influenced him. I personally believe he was directly influenced by one of the stages of Abdel Hadi el Gazzar and by Ragheb Ayad before that. He influenced Evelyn Ashamalla in a way, and Ashraf el Zamzamy and Mahmoud Hamed, among others, in another. In the nineties, when I used to write about contemporary art, I linked the practice of Hamed Nada, his choice of motifs of Zar (folk Egyptian exorcism practices) and his imagery reminiscent of Egyptian Sahara cave drawings of the Stone Age, to the critical term "magic realism" used in literary circuits to describe Latin American narrative.

Regarding a genealogy, Nada is considered on of the top ten Egyptian painters of all time, as judged by the few Egyptian critics publishing today as well as by sales in the local and regional (Arab Middle East) markets. In terms of identity, Nada's work is a symbol of the Egyptian identity together with names like Ragheb Ayad, Mahmoud Said, and Mohamed Nagi among very few others.

Nearly two decades after my contact with Nada, my practice tackles Egyptian imagery in a rather different way, which is more representative of my generation and visual culture. I saw the birth of the digital age, the advertising era, as well as socio-political changes like the end of the Cold War and the shifting of Egypt from a Soviet pattern of socialism to an open-market capitalist model, with the new iconography that accompanies such change. I appropriate images from ancient Egypt and blend them with advertising iconography of globalization. I can say I am attracted by the same sources of Nada and the others, but my painterly techniques are from abstract expressionism and pop art sources.

AS: How have Nada's artistic techniques influenced your own? How do you think they have influenced your generation of artists?

KH: Nada was a lover of painting as a practice and he taught his students this passion. Among his students, many later used a diversity of other media like installation and video, yet almost none have given up painting. On a technical level, I picked up from him the habit of "layering:" Nada used to use loads of layers on his canvases. I never lost this habit. There was a rule to layering: first the dark colors, then the textures, then finally the white. After that came his brown motifs of elongated male and female figures. In my work, I adopt the exact formula, though in the nineties I minimized layers and colors, but for the past decade I am back to the Nada formula.

Some painters working today in Egypt, like Essam Maarouf, Adel el Siwi, Huda Lutfi, Amre Heiba, Ibrahim el Dessouki among others, use similar layering approaches – all with their own specificities as painters, and all with different theme obsessions that represent the Egyptian life from their individual perspectives.

AS: What kind of a teacher was Nada? What is one lesson he taught you that you would never forget?

KH: He was loud, very loud, because of his hearing aid. He told loud jokes, and had warm, tactile contact with students. He was often nervous, and because he was loud he was massively misunderstood by those who did not know him. He also laughed out loud, never refraining from cracking raunchy anecdotes in front of students and staff alike. Students ("el welad" or "kids" as he referred to them) loved him in general, though many times they were afraid in his critique sessions, as he would express his opinions in an extremely non-diplomatic bluntness. As a student, if you did not solicit his opinion he would generally not delve into inflicting his opinion, with an exception of a few female students of course. Everyone loved him; he was simply lovable and you couldn't help but feel the aura in his loud presence, with his ultra white hair, white moustache and big glasses.

The one lesson I got of my days in his studio is the unconditional love and commitment to painting as a medium.

AS: Do you think there is a traceable formal and/or theoretical continuity through these generations of Egyptian artists? If so, how would you describe that continuity? Did Nada break with his predecessors at all through his use of surrealist, pharaonic and folk influence?

KH: Nada started figurative like everyone else of his generation and before; at that time the motto would have been "train classically and figuratively then go to figural distortion and abstraction;" art education was like that. Nada continued in the figurative semi-surrealist folk path of Gazzar; he was contemporary to Gazbia Sirry, Zakareyya el Zeiny, Inji Efflaton, Youssef Sida, Margot Veillon among others; we must not forget that their careers were shaped by the political and social change that they may have been part of, living the change from a monarchy to a republic, from the beautiful Cairo of the bourgeoisie to a dynamic republic with the newly created ideology of pan-Arabism.

Many artists of Nada's generation followed the revolutionary stream, whether by total conviction or by simple seduction. Many went to Nubia to paint it before the region was flooded by the Aswan High Dam in the early sixties. They were all part of the social "revolution," either in compliance, like Gazzar, Sirry and Efflaton, or in some sort of resentment (or lack of interest) like Mounir Cnaan, Fouad Kamel, Kamal Khalifa and Gazzar again himself after the defeat of 1967 and the collapse of the Pan-Arab ideology.

In the seventies there was total void, and every artist who sustained a career worked alone and independently on a virtual islet. Then there was a generation of artists who emerged in the late sixties but attained a certain stardom in the void of the seventies, like Ahmad Nawar, Mostafa el Razzaz, Mohamed Taha Hussein (who is a special, unique and a particularly admirable case), Farghali Abd el Hafeez and Mostafa Abdel Moaty. It was this generation who broke the bloodline from their predecessors in Egyptian art history, and not Nada's generation, which was brought up with classical training and a quest to create an individual Egyptian identity, just like their professors had since the early twentieth century.

In his research, Nada was unique in combining recognizable Egyptian folk and ancient motifs on a tray of painterly techniques; I am not sure I agree with the description of “surrealist” that is linked to Nada in the critical discourse we read about in the scarce literature available. I think Nada’s work can illustrate one of Jean Baudrillard’s orders of simulacra describing societies identification by sets of codes and symbols; Nada provided such symbols in his own coding system.

AS: What was Nada’s relationship with art and artists outside Egypt? Do you think that artists in Egypt today have similar types of relationships?

KH: Nada, as well as many artists in his generation maintained acquaintances and friendships with some international artists, which never really took the shape as we see today in contemporary Egyptian artists who lead international careers and are engaged in the international art scene and thus have a deeper level of interaction with international artists.

Nada and many of his contemporaries traveled as part of their academic training to Italy, Spain, Germany, United States as well as some Eastern block countries. We can trace a few individual success stories that are exceptional like Mohamed Taha Hussein who studied in the Kunstakademie of Dusseldorf and had a solo in an American museum in the sixties. Gazbia Sirry and Mostafa el Razzaz also had similar encounters in the seventies. Perhaps the lack of serious peer-to-peer relationships between Egyptian artists and international artists was also due to the world situation. It is all about supply-and-demand, even in culture. Today there is a need to see Arab artists on the international scene, but back in the sixties and seventies, the demand was minimal if even extant.

Today there are several layers of network relationships: regional Arab, Mediterranean, African, Middle Eastern and so forth.

AS: Both Nada’s work and your own paintings employ a repetition of figures as well as portrayal of pharaonic and gendered imagery. Could you speak a little about these formal and thematic similarities?

KH: Nada definitely inspired me as a painter, both on the studio and the career levels. Technically, I adopt his layering method: working long on the under-painting layers. I also use motifs that are my personal iconography. In my painting practice, I do not comply with post-Renaissance theories of composition, light and shade, form and dynamic symmetry; I use simple ancient Egyptian techniques of graphic layout to create a narrative, a kind of story. Today I can easily say, especially after writing for a decade in the 1990s about visual arts, that Nada was a pioneer in truly breaking post-Renaissance rules in dealing with his painted surfaces – we certainly meet there. I definitely am influenced by him and by a couple of other international artists – Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Michel Basquiat – who also used similar process of thinking, each with his own personal iconography.

AS: Do you think Nada responded to the socio-political situation in Egypt through his work? Do you respond in a similar way? How?

KH: Nada survived a king and three presidents and lived a fourth. He was in the same generation as my father, a doctor in the Egyptian army. Both of them survived Arab-Israeli wars, the change from a kingdom to a republic, and the shift from a soviet pattern of socialism to a very weird model of open market policies, with subsequent social and economic consequences. Nada complied with the mass pan-Arab ideology propaganda in the fifties and sixties, but dramatically broke with this compliance after the defeat of 1967. Nada’s challenges and those of his generation were to represent the self and society during such changes. His paintings are loaded with local Egyptian folk and exorcism motifs, all specific to the Egyptian code of symbols, was his means to fight solely for the Egyptian identity, distinct from pan-Arab slogans propagated by the military-political complex of his time.

My generation and I are challenged by different realities. We have issues of identity, especially after the rise of right-wing fundamentalism in the past three decades, the slogans of neo-pan-Islamism and the consequent overt regression in liberties and the constraining (and staining) of the formerly modern and open Egyptian society. We also have to search for an identity that represents Egyptian specificities in a

world of globalization and hegemony; we need to find a visual language representative with such identity. My generation is also challenged by the generation that is younger – artists in their twenties and thirties today – working to catch a spot in the international art system away from identity concerns, developing along the way mottos like “there is no Egyptian art, no Arab art, no Middle Eastern art, there is just art,” a motto that must be respected as long as there is an “other” who believes in it.

AS: In your opinion, how is Nada portrayed in the art world today? Do you think he has garnered all the respect he deserves inside as well as outside Egypt?

KH: Nada’s name and art are secure on the local as well as the regional (Middle Eastern) arena; he earned his deserved place in all published art history books, a fact that does not reflect the prices his works garnered during his lifetime; we must not forget that he was obliged to work as an art professor at the Cairo fine arts school (Faculty of Fine Arts, Helwan University) until his death. Someone in his status in another moment in history would have been leading a full time studio career with seven international galleries depleting him continuously of his paintings. But this was not the world in the late eighties.

In the art world today, Nada has just entered through one of the international doors: namely auction houses like Christies, Sotheby’s and Bonhams, which have begun to deal in Nada’s works. Only through this door, if and when everything goes well, will Nada attain his proper international price. The existence of auction catalogues adds pedagogically to the valuable resources available to researchers, academics, collectors, museums and others.

Nada is one of the underrepresented names in the international art history so far, even relatively to other Arab artists from the Maghreb region and from the diaspora. To answer your question, he got the respect that is never enough for an artist like Nada.

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