

Huda Lutfi: The art of continuity

It's unfortunate that today we see more pertinence and understanding of the social structure and construct in which we live in from product, fashion and furniture designers — our applied artists — than we do from our visual artists. It has become exceedingly difficult to hear of a contemporary artist who has managed to persevere and continue to make artwork that is both relevant and aesthetically challenging throughout their recent and present careers.

There are obvious exceptions to this dire state both in Egypt as well as worldwide, one of whom is cultural historian turned artist Huda Lutfi. Huda Lutfi is a professor of history in the Department of Arabic Studies at the American University in Cairo. With her deep-rooted passion for art, Lutfi has managed to bridge the gap between the intellectual and the aesthetic in a way that undermines neither.

"The aesthetic side of things has always fascinated me, and I dabbled in jewelry, interior design and pseudo-calligraphy before getting into the visual arts," Lutfi told Daily News Egypt. It was during her tenured period of teaching at Harvard that she began her thorough research in art history and extensive visits to galleries and museums in Boston and New York.

Samia Mehrez, professor of Arabic literature in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Civilization at the American University in Cairo, is a close friend of Lutfi's. She describes her reaction upon Huda's return to Egypt: "When she finally showed me the work she had done in the US, I was blown away. I could see quite clearly how her academic work, research and interests had been translated into her artist's, two-dimensional vision."

Lutfi's artwork had its beginnings at a time during her stay in the US after she underwent an operation that would prevent her from doing much for months. Her decided disinterest in doing intellectual research led her to cutting up magazines and pictures and ultimately creating her first collage. An image of a woman cut in half, in essence disabled herself, was the first piece of artwork created by Huda Lutfi, the Artist, and is ironically titled "Cut in Half."

The dichotomy that is Huda Lutfi appears both in her career choices — as artist and cultural historian — as well as in her artwork and relationship to her own culture. She is truly Egyptian, yet she retains a love-hate relationship with Egypt that lends to a much-needed objectivity, allowing her to provide an honest critique and analysis of her

culture.

She's a scholar and an intellectual, but one that is just as intrigued by the power of the aesthetic as she is by that of logic. Her love for Cairo and her frustration by it fuels her work, inspiring a duality that allows her to create art of relevance, works that are a genuine addition to what is being presented in the current Egyptian art milieu.

Lutfi's artwork plays heavily on public memory. She subverts the associations related to icons that we all share as a culture, such as images from mythology, mannequins, children's toys and most importantly, Om Kolthoum, recycling them to tell very different stories from what we're used to.

This process of decontextualization has been a consistent theme in all her exhibitions. "Om Kolthoum is a powerful feminine icon to work with. I manipulate her image in paradoxical ways to make her say what I would like to communicate."

Interpreting these decontextualized icons requires some thinking on the viewer's part, Lutfi explains.

"There is always an idea behind the work, so viewers are expected to read and interpret what they see from their own perspective, and it is exciting when someone comes up with a different reading that I have not thought of," Lutfi says.

For instance, mummifying Om Kolthoum functions as an act of immortalizing the artist as well as illustrating Egypt's current state of stagnation. Both beautiful and funny, Lutfi's pieces are as thought-provoking as they are sardonic; striking a balance that resonates with viewers and achieves longevity in their memories.

Despite the success of her work with audiences and critics worldwide, one of Lutfi's installations got quite the backlash in a solo exhibition at the Townhouse Gallery. The piece was titled "Remembrance," presenting organized rows of shoe moulds in a darkened room.

The shoe moulds, looking like a carpet from a distance, are covered in calligraphic Sufi script. The overall effect is calm and serene. The script is visually repetitive as though in a trance, like words chanted in circles of Remembrance (zikr) and the moulds look like steady steps away from reality as we know it.

The work took a harsh blow from critics and viewers alike, leading Lutfi to a three-hour investigation at a police station and ultimately the censorship of this piece in Lutfi's later exhibitions. "It was a reality check and I was very upset for a few months. I

learned my lesson though — the artist's existence as this naive and totally honest being has been altered. I needed to start being more careful with how I present my work."

Rather than discourage her or alter her work to accommodate sociably acceptable concepts and imagery, Lutfi derived strength from these restrictions.

"The artist's work does not exist in a vacuum, and one has to be aware of the social and cultural context in which one works. Cases of censorship may arise regarding specific representations, but what often happens in these situations is that the work is taken out of its context, or interpreted in ways contrary to the artist's intentions," Lutfi says. "Every culture establishes its structure of restraints, but there is always a space in which mobility and restraint have a complimentary relationship, one that is re-enacted through a continuous process of experimentation and improvisation."

Always using the example of Iranian cinema, Lutfi finds it inspiring that Iranian films have flourished in spite of the strict Islamic government whose regulations they are forced to abide by. She adds that if one perseveres, then censorship should not be an impediment.

It is this notion that Lutfi hopes her audiences walk away with — the contemplation of the idea of restriction. Through her work, she hopes to evoke the mental and physical restrictions imposed on men and women, particularly in Egypt.

"I believe that one should not be too attached to one's own identity as that creates restrictions," she says. "I like to test that idea through my work, and inspire others to do the same."

Her struggle against restrictions is what defines Lutfi's artistic career. Initially a novice unto the art scene who had to self-educate and work hard to prove herself, this internationally-acclaimed artist will be celebrating 20 years of her work next week at the inauguration of Tache Art Gallery in Designopolis.

Mehrez describes what she expects will strike viewers in Lutfi's upcoming show: "I think viewers will be most struck by the continuities. If people look at her very early work and her much later work, they will be struck by how these continuities have developed themes. It's how she is able to translate those themes visually that takes her from one exhibit to the next."

Although purely serendipitous, Lutfi's choice of inaugurating a new gallery space with a

retrospective of her work seems highly befitting of her lack of restriction and ultimate modus operandi; an artist whose 'job' is to excavate the past, persist to critique and analyze the present, and prepare for a more fruitful future.

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Playfulness of the Aleph.

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Huda Lutfi working on Knocking on Heaven's Door.