

Khaled Hafez

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Interviews

Interview with Maryam Hamdy, Critic and Blogger, for the Semmel Concerts Touring Exhibitions Conference Project, August 2013

MH: If you could pinpoint the most important source of inspiration for your work, what would that be, and why?

KH: I have several sources of inspiration according to the medium I use; for painting it is ancient Egyptian painting, because it is ancient Egyptians who invented painting, created and sustained its laws for over three thousand and few hundred years, and we are trying –alongside and through our inevitable awe and admiration– till today to decipher the motives and objectives and symbology behind. It transcends time, geography and human ideas. From modern and contemporary artists I inspire from painters Gustav Klimt, Igon Schile, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Robert Rauschenberg and Anselm Keifer. For my photography practice, I refrain from everything and anything conceptual, love the practice of visual poets and photojournalism, adopt candid photography and street photography, inspire from the works of Irving Penn, Henri Cartier-Bresson Robert Doisneau, Bill Brant, Elliott Erwitt, and Ansel Adams.

For my video practice, no video artist inspires me at all. I look at this world with curiosity and amusement and –at many times– disdain much of the video art production, perhaps because the medium is too democratic and allows weird formats and practices into the field, which kills the pleasure of assimilation of the art offered. I like to think of myself as a filmmaker: I inspire though from film and the practice of filmmakers. I am directly influenced by Claude Lelouche, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Bernardo Bertolucci and Sergio Leone. For my overall practice I inspire from, and follow the path of, Gerhard Richter, William Kentridge and Gordon Parks, as those break all barriers of mediums, enjoy massive technical skills, and enjoy every second of their practice, and it shows.

MH: Your work is heavily based on dichotomies: contradicting, complimenting, opposing or affirming. What lends you to think in doubles, and how do you digest your surroundings as such?

KH: I guess this is due to the diversity of mediums I use –which entails a diversity of references and continuous movement between mindsets. I believe that every mediums dictates the –for me “rigorously scripted”–content, be it painting, drawing, photography or video. For drawing, painting and video I hybridize imagery by using déjà vu media propagated iconography: from advertising to found footage, from news papers to Internet-downloaded TV sequences. I am an “image-maker”, and my narrative comes through as I assimilate all those reference media sources. The key to a successful formula is the continuous daily studio practice, long studio hours, and opening all the senses, not just the eyes. Dicotomies in my practice were first spotted in the nineties by cultural anthropologist and scholar Jessica Winegar, and I continuously –and consciously– think about that, which definitely has some impact of the final art production. I think doubles because I am not looking for any answers: I am just proposing questions, curious ones all the time, and all based on my observations, hence the irony, which became obsessive as I work. I smile and laugh at ideas all the time while working in my studio; indeed double-thinking is amusing and exploratory. But again, painting is different than video, and photography is all the way in the opposite direction of drawing. The pleasure of thinking and producing is the same though.

MH: Your most recent work has a much more reduced, calm and monochromatic colour palette, versus your earlier much more busy and louder paintings. How did that reduction of color come about and why?

KH: I guess even revolutions calm down. I guess –and I cannot be sure–that it depends on this beautiful chess game between the conscious and its “sub”. My ideas are colorful, my old studio that I kept for 25 years was too. My new studio is larger and much less colorful; it could be age, it could be the cumulative experience of the professional painter –as we are talking about painting here–, the painter who paints every single day in his life when s/he is not traveling. I also guess –and again I cannot be sure–that the process of assimilating information has developed by time too, and this is reflected on the production: stimulus compared to output. There is this beautiful Sufi Arabic phrase that explains how I perceive and perform things now: *“if the scope of vision gets bigger, phrases get shorter”*.

For photography and video things are different: for the past three years I have been taking images along world travels: street photography, candid photography, urban or rural. After processing and retouching I transform those into fake Polaroids. My first camera at the age of 15 was a Polaroid Land camera 2000 that was later upgraded to 3000. I love screaming color in photography, or black and white. Again: thinking double, thinking extreme.

MH: How do feel touring exhibitions can benefit young, contemporary visual artists specifically?

KH: Touring exhibitions is a relatively new for both the art-specific or non-art-specific touring models. In both case, it is important to exhibit the art production to different audience, exchange with different receptive-modes that are specific to every community that has different age groups, and sometimes different migration-host cultures. Every tour is a different exchange, and for the artist every exchange enhances the self-learning, peer-learning, enhances concepts and techniques. The artist learns how to speak about the work, defends it need it be, and explores new development possibilities for the self, for the work and for the practice.

MH: If you had to describe your favorite color to a blind man, what would be and how would you?

KH: I would describe the color Blue. I assume that the blind person has been born blind and does not have a clue. I would speak and explain first the notion of the sky, the clouds, the river and the ocean. I would explore the notion of sand, beach, desert and oasis, and how all those relate to the clear sky. I would try to simulate for her/him the rain, the dew and the state of "water droplets", then relate those to the clouds and the sky. I would try to verbally explain the grass, the meadow and the sunflower field. In brief: I will explain the whole palette and make her/him smile.