

Khaled Hafez

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Interviews

INTERVIEW WITH MAYMANAH FARAHAT FOR THE ONLINE MAGAZINE ARTENEWS

MF- How do you see the state of contemporary international art? How does art function in today's global society?

KH- I can easily say that I am lucky to be 43 years old!!!!!!

Let me explain; when 23 years ago I, with some of my artists peers, was trying to find my way in the professional local (very local) egyptian art scene, one could NEVER find an international art magazine that was informative; Egypt was a closed country in terms of "what went outside".

Then there came Mashrabia gallery in Cairo in the eighties, with French gallerist Christine Rousseillon, who created a library in her gallery where any artist could come and read Art in America, Flash Art, Art Forum and Freize; my generation, then very young knew that what goes on in Egypt has nothing to do with the rest of the world. Among others, I decided to focus on making an international career; at that time, contemporary international art scene was dominated by a bunch of powerful Galleries who managed careers of artists like Jeff Koons, Julian Schnabel, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Eric Fischel among others; a couple of American critics and a couple of Italian Critics joined power with this coalition of powerful galleries to dictate what went and what not.

Then of course there came the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Perestroika; then everyone, powerful or not became interested in Russian artists, ex-Eastern Block artists, and artists from the Far East; there was not a single "curator" then, only powerful critics and powerful galleries.

I am lucky to witness, and later work with the first generation of curators.

To answer the question, today I see the art world is governed, rather dominated, by powerful curators, and we witness the declining roles of galleries and the near-total downfall of critics, who "changed jobs" to curatorial practice to survive.

After September 11, and the emergence of neo-terror and all sorts of right wing ideologies in the East and West alike, and the consequent need to create dialogue between cultures, Middle East artists are for the first time given the opportunity to take a place of "peer" instead of a place of "indigenous".

MF- What role does scholarship (art criticism, art historical discourse, etc) play in shaping our perceptions and understandings of art?

KH- Today I am able to discern, locally in Egypt (and also the Middle East) two types of practices that describe two different perceptions of art: on the one hand there are the artists who still approach and tackle art with the "aesthetics" mindset, and those are the natural descendants of local pioneers and avant guards.

On the other hand there is a group of Middle East artists with an eye on the international art scene, approaching art with the very same concepts and perceptions of other "international" artists, i.e. they speak the international language that art professionals speak all over the world; art then becomes a "tool for communication" and bridging between cultures.

The growing phenomenon of mixed residencies between artists, critics and curators of different Geo-political and cultural backgrounds unifies more and more the newly developed global nature of contemporary art language, and possibly plays a part too in gradually abolishing "cultural specificities" along the way.

I believe that art criticism of the nineties, with its esoteric linguistic synthesis and confusing texts is declining and giving more ground to curatorial texts of socio-political economy nature and social history interest.

MF- How do you read the current interest in Middle Eastern and "Islamic" contemporary art in European and North American art institutions, markets and galleries?

KH- With the exception of the pioneer and near-avant-guard curatorial work of Marilu Knode (currently Curator at the Scottsdale Museum, Arizona) and Martina Corgnati (Italian Academic, art historian, critic and curator, currently finishing her book on Middle East contemporary art practices) who both showed interest in Middle East art practices as early as 1996, and who sensed a "premonition" somewhere in the virtual art spaces that a wave of Middle East art and artists will emerge, I personally believe this current interest only started with the grave incidents of 9/11.

With the rise of the neo-Republicans in the US and right wing trends in the rest of the West, and the near-

establishment of a new generation of international terrorists most of whom have Arabo-islamic backgrounds, the need to discover (curiosity) and establish bridges between the inevitably clashing civilizations made (and still make) a wealthy and cheesy curatorial material to feed the already curatorial favorite themes of "gender", "identity", "sexuality", "sexism", "feminism", the "sacred" and the "ephemeral".

So I see now much curatorial work about "identity and gender under Islam"; much interest is given to second-generation Arab female artists (After Mona Hatoum, Ghada Amer and Sherin Neshaat making the first wave).

Many of the female artists from the Middle East though refuse any link or adherence to any feminist description, and insist to be approached as "artists" rather than "female Arab" artist or "female Arab feminist" artist.

Visual artists Amal Kenawi and Sabah Naim (both based in Cairo) as well as writer May el Telmissany (based in Montreal, Canada) refuse categorically any link to Arab feminism.

To summarize, I think that the current interest in Middle Eastern and "Islamic" contemporary art in European and North American art institutions, markets and galleries shows three basic trends:

1. **Curiosity:** serious curatorial work really trying to trace actual changes happening in the Middle East and the subsequent changes, development and progress happening to art and artists.
2. **Pursuing cliché:** curatorial work looking for gender, identity, etc
3. **Pursuing exotism:** curatorial work looking for non-existent-anymore themes like oppression, persecution, etc..

MF- What artists, movements, or schools have had the most impact on your work?

KH- a-Robert Rauschenberg

b-Jean-Michel Basquiat

c- Andy Warhol

d- Fluxus

e-Pop Art

f- Abstract expressionism

MF- As art progresses into the 21st century, can you reflect on art of the last century? What or who marks the importance of art in the 20th century? What or who has ushered in art of the 21st century?

KH- I have my very personal perspective as to what happened to art in the twentieth century, especially in the seventies with terms like "post modernism" and so forth.

I believe the twentieth century in the post impressionist era started to deconstruct what has been built cumulatively in the post-renaissance centuries; this deconstruction was ignited by the industrial revolution, pace of life, WW I & II and the subsequent distribution of wealth and power. The Fluxus movement played an important part there; several arts were mingled and fused; sound and performance entered as a new medium.

After the political assassinations of the sixties in the USA, the Vietnam war, the May 1968 social revolution in Europe, the emergence of film as a visual arts medium on the hands of Warhol's factory, the visual arts world attained a level of saturation and demonstrated a sense of "cultural nihilism".

The following trends of minimal and conceptual arts reflected certain serenity that could be seen either as "emptiness/void" or as "a breeze to calm down".

A second breath came in the last two decades of the century with the revival of painting on the hands of the neo-expressionists of Germany (new-wild-ones movement), Italy (Achile Bonito Oliva's Transavanguardia) and the few New York painters, especially Basquiat. The content though was either a re-adaptation or re-interpretation of precise expressionists of the earlier century; what I like to call "visual recycling".

I believe that we enter the 21st century with no clear objective of where we head; if we compare artists who entered the twentieth century started a process of deconstruction, which was a long process to do, a seven-decade-process to complete.

Today artists need a few decades to identify the way, and more than a century to reach a new maturity.

With such military conflicts as in the Middle East, and the American invasion and military atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Israeli systematic mass murder of Palestinians, and the resolution to arms in different parts of the world to resolve conflicts, new aesthetics are established, I personally call those "war aesthetics" and "aesthetics of violence"; perhaps photo-journalism and documentary video are, and will be one of the most sought after and used tools of expression to enter the new century; already there are new categories to show and project those works like "citizen-journalist category", "mobile-phone video category" and "web-cam category".

The new century starts with realist documentation.