

## Khaled Hafez

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### Interviews

#### Interview with Tace Bayliss\* for Think Africa online Magazine, published 11 OCTOBER 2011

<http://thinkafricapress.com/>

Khaled Hafez is an Egyptian artist and filmmaker who has exhibited worldwide. Born in 1963, he trained as an artist at evening classes while he was attending medical school. He lives and works in Cairo, where he was born.

#### **TB: How has your work as an Egyptian artist and filmmaker been affected since the eruption of mass protest in your homeland?**

**KH:** The first days of the 2011 revolution changed me from an observer of the political events of my country into an active and engaged citizen. When the protests erupted and thousands took to the streets, I discovered that I had always assumed that my role as artist was to be politically and socially engaged through my art. But I had never used my right, as a citizen, to demonstrate and to vote. After all, voting would have been worthless in a political climate where votes were forged and manipulated. But all of a sudden, in those last days of January 2011, all that changed. Things promised to be different. In the third week of February, after the fall of the previous regime, I left the square and went back into my studio. I set to work on my new video project *11.02-2011: The Video Diaries* along with a set of new large-scale paintings. In both projects I used a lot of media-propagated imagery from the revolution. This video is currently on show at the Mercusol Biennale in Brazil. It is a three-screen nostalgic visual narrative of my own perceptions and memory of what we, as citizens, lived in Tahrir Square. Six months on, I'm still creating new work, but find that after the process of creating "The Video Diaries" I'm now resorting to less of this direct imagery of the revolution. Instead, I find myself using a lot more of the subtle messages derived from the collective action of January and February 2011.

#### **TB: Has Egypt's political landscape always affected your work?**

**KH:** Definitely. I have long been inspired by the social implications of political and military events in Egypt and this strongly characterizes my work. In fact, my works, especially the video and film projects, were described as "politically incorrect" by the former official establishment and often banned. They did not conform to mainstream political propositions and tackled issues like political subjugation, freedom of expression, corruption and broken political promises. I have always used a kind of "barbed irony" and place everything and everyone under the scrutiny of historical revisionism. The results have often been turbulent. For example, I've had to file two separate court cases against national socialist newspapers in Egypt that described me as a traitor for poking fun at national icons.

#### **TB: What is your earliest childhood memory?**

**KH:** My father was a military man and was always absent on war missions. My earliest memory was the pervading fear I felt, as a child, that one day we would lose him and he wouldn't come home. My other memory is of my uncle, an internationally leading etymologist and linguist, bringing me bright bunch of coloring pens and pencils from abroad each time he traveled. And he traveled a lot. These were impossible to buy in Nasser's Egypt and seemed, to my young eyes, like bright treasures.

#### **TB: Both your parents are doctors, how did they react to you wanting to be an artist?**

**KH:** My parents wanted me to be a doctor and took my decision to turn to art very badly indeed. Believe it or not, my mother only acknowledged me as an artist this year, when she watched a CNN feature filmed in my studio. By then, I had been an established artist for more than two decades. My father still keeps asking me every Friday morning during the weekly parents' breakfast: "And what exactly is it that you are doing?"

#### **TB: How is working in the medium of video different from painting? Which do you prefer?**

**KH:** I love film/video and painting equally and I always describe myself as "a painter who uses film and video as a medium to tell stories". As mediums, they require two very different mindsets: painting is much more pleasurable and sensual, while film and video is much more rigorous and less "at hand" since several people are involved in the making. As a video artist, I become a slave of external factors such as traffic, circumstances, electricity and technology breakdowns. I write my videos and rewrite and revise and rewrite. I shoot only when I have a script, and when I edit and place sound, either myself or with a team, there is no room for error. The creative pleasure happens in writing, correcting and retouching the final film after the team has finished; the process in-between is sometimes not that pleasurable as it entails discussions and disagreements. Unlike video work, painting is a medium with more "dictatorship" involved and it all lies in my very own hands at all stages of the work. However, I approach both my painting and video work with the same seriousness and military rigor. I try to get to

my studio every day of the year between 8 and 9 am, and leave between 5 and 6. I work an extra two hours at night in my home studio-ette.

**TB: What in your eyes is the significance of your exhibit Cairo Biennale?**

KH: The main significance was that I showed large paintings with strong political content and imagery that foretold of the revolution and captured its themes, at a time when - unbeknown to us - this revolution was only a few weeks away. The project was written, painted and constructed as a tomb that recounts a fictitious story of hegemony, dominance, wealth and power, and subjugation and equal rights. My canvases featured icons and elements of military resemblance like snipers, tanks, choppers and demonstrators. Six weeks after the biennale opening the revolution erupted in the streets of Cairo, with demonstrators, snipers, and later tanks and choppers. The project served as a "premonition piece", as if I had anticipated something that was just around the corner.

**TB: Which artist, living or deceased, is in your opinion under-rated or deserves to be better known?**

KH: The Egyptian sculptor Mustafa Naguib, who was the official sculptor of King Farouk, and later Mohamed Naguib, the first president, then Nasser. He had a program on Egyptian TV that sustained for six years, and he taught at the Helwan Fine Arts for over a decade. He got wiped out of history when he left Egypt in 1969 after a disagreement with President Nasser and his then vice president Sadat. He left for the USA and had a school of sculpture in Indiana and then Illinois called Naguib School of Sculpture. He died in 1990. There is also - from the same generation - Aly el Deeb, who designed the Egyptian flag as we know it today. And there is Mahmoud Hosny, also a sculptor and also from the same generation. From the living artists, I think there is Reda Abdel Salam, a great painter who deserves more light. From the younger generations, there is Amre Heiba and Ibrahim el Dessouki, who certainly deserve more recognition.

**TB: What are your aspirations?**

KH: Politically, I aspire to see my country adopting a model of reform and modernization like Turkey and Brazil. As an artist I aspire and work for a proper and distinct voice for Egyptian artists on the international art scene.

**TB: What is the most important thing life has taught you?**

KH: To be modest and to realize that nothing in life is sustainable except a good deed. Also that "painting is the official sport in heaven".

\* **Tace Bayliss**

Tace studied Film & Animation at university London. She had written and directed several short films that have received screenings on MTV movies and cinemas across the UK. She is now producing a feature film in France about African's living in the diaspora. She is particularly interested in contemporary African films, art & culture. Also the representation of African women in the world media.