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Interview with artist Khaled Hafez

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By RANDA EL-BANNA

CAIRO: "I, among many other artists, fell into the trap of using iconography of the 2011 revolution into two of my large paintings. I regret having done that now ."

Khaled Hafez, a Cairo-born artist, has been honored with numerous awards: a Fulbright Fellowship, 2005 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, USA, the Rockefeller Bellagio Fellowship, Italy, 2009, the Francophonie Prize, 6th Dakar Biennale, Senegal, 2004 and the Fondation Blachere Prize, 9th Bamako Photo Biennale, Mali, 2011. His work has been exhibited abroad almost constantly since 2005.

The Cairo Post sat with Hafez to talk about his history, work, and plans for the future, as well as the influence of the 2011 upon his work.

Hafez studied medicine while pursuing evening classes in fine arts in the 1980s. He obtained his medical degree in 1987 and M.Sc. as a medical specialist in 1992. Throughout his medical training, he was creating art and exhibiting, and said that in 1995 he felt he had to make a decision. He stopped his clinical practice, transitioning to pharmaceutical marketing, at the same time further developing his graphic design , video and filmmaking skills while continuing his artwork. In 2005 he dedicated his full-time efforts to his art studio work.

He received an MFA in new media and digital arts from Transart Institute in New York, and

Danube University in Krems, Austria

Hafez's art includes mixed media, installation, photography and video/film, and combines ancient Egyptian symbols with Western icons.

In his 20's, Hafez back-packed through several European countries "before AIDS, bio-terrorism, techno-terrorism, Osama Bin Laden, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, September 11, the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and before the Americanization of the Arab Petro-Gulf."

He said that he wanted to discover "The West" he had studied in history books: "the colonial West, the liberal West, the West that represents the free world."

His travels inspired him to use Western images in collages, and juxtapose them with eastern images, "trying continuously to find/create a language capable of representing ideas legible to both East and West."

Mingling fiction and reality

"By July 2011 I turned my back to all the events and took all political elements out of my artwork because it was clear for me that regressive forces and similar groups were stealing the revolution" said Hafez.

Hafez likened art the glorified current events to popular songs created for national events and played on official TV channels.

Instead, he said he preferred role models in the modern masters such as Picasso, Gustav Klimt, Igon Schile, Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Michel Basquiat.

He said he drew inspiration from different sources, depending on the medium; ancient Egyptian walls serve as a reference for his paintings, with their codes and symbols. He said he tries to simulate the methods of the ancient Egyptians.

Hafez added that his artistic goal is to mingle fiction with reality. He links imagery of the ancient iconography with deja-vu contemporary advertising elements; the icons/images are manipulated to insinuate metamorphosis.

"In my painting, I use imagery of body perfection and treat them to reflect metamorphosis and the movement from one state to another; for the male figures I appropriate images of body builders, and for the female figures I use images extracted from advertising and from cheesy commercial tabloids....The choice of the image reflects always the perfection of body proportions, a criteria used in all Mediterranean mythology, and a trait that does not represent a significant proportion of any majority of any population living today," added Hafez.

"My core research focus is the exploration of the complex nature of the Egyptian identity, one that is a composite of African, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Arab, Islamic, with ancient Egyptian and Judeo-Christian traces. In my current video, photography and other mixed media works, I am interested in movement, an element that was indispensable in ancient Egyptian painting, where all painted elements were in motion, as opposed to Egyptian sculpture that always caught the protagonists in a pose," said Hafez.

Audience

Hafez said he creates his works without thinking about a specific audience, and focuses on the thoughts he wants to express.

"I can say comfortably that my artwork, be it painting, video/film or photography, is quite accessible because I do care about creating a solid visual narrative in my work, a narrative that would be attractive and comprehensible. This is precisely why I resort to irony in my painting and film."

"My works were superbly received in Brazil, Cuba, Germany, Sweden, and Italy, in several parts in the USA and in UAE. I had questions around my work in Spain, Belgium, Senegal, Cameroon and Mali. The reactions and interactions are always different. I take those different reactions as a nice surprise that need an artist-audience dialogue."

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