

## Khaled Hafez

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### Interviews

#### Interview with Simone Struth for her Master degree, University of Munich, Germany, 2012

**SS - Back in 2005, the complete series *Philadelphia Chromosome* was painted in Philadelphia/USA. Was there a main impetus for you to create it and if so, which one?**

**KH -** I was—at that time—exploring the notion of hybridity, hybrid art and hybrid forms, in terms of concept and visual aesthetics. Remember i was always intrigued by questions of what it is to belong to the East or to the West. I now know that i always tried to break this barrier between East and West, and between Past and Present, and between the sacred and the ephemeral. I myself—though perfectly Egyptian, was born Moslem but my parents put me in an Irish Catholic school for my basic education; i was/am both East and West.

**SS - Does the series title have a special meaning for you? Is there a connection with the medical term (like, for instance, a play of words)?**

**KH -** Indeed; i used the term *Philadelphia Chromosome* to signify hybridity, as the medical term *Philadelphia Chromosome* as defined by medicine is:

*The [chromosome](#) abnormality that causes chronic myeloid leukemia (CML). Abbreviated as the Ph chromosome. The Ph chromosome is an abnormally short chromosome 22 that is one of the two [chromosomes](#) involved in a translocation (an exchange of material) with chromosome 9. This translocation takes place in a single bone [marrow](#) cell and, through the [process](#) of clonal expansion (the production of many cells from this one [mutant](#) cell); it gives rise to the leukemia. The discovery in Philadelphia in 1960 of the Ph chromosome was a landmark. It was the first consistent chromosome abnormality found in any kind of malignancy. The discovery led to the identification in CML cells of the BCR-ABL fusion gene and its corresponding protein. ABL and BCR are normal genes on chromosomes 9 and 22, respectively. The ABL gene encodes a tyrosine kinase enzyme whose activity is tightly regulated (controlled). In the formation of the Ph translocation, two fusion genes are generated: BCR-ABL on the Ph chromosome and ABL-BCR on the chromosome 9 participating in the translocation. The BCR-ABL gene encodes a protein with deregulated (uncontrolled) tyrosine kinase activity. The presence of this protein in the CML cells is strong evidence of its pathogenetic (disease-causing) role. The efficacy in CML of a drug that inhibits the BCR-ABL tyrosine kinase has provided the final proof that the BCR-ABL oncoprotein is the unique cause of CML.*

*The Ph chromosome is also found in a form of acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL). It seems highly probable that this form of ALL is due to the same chromosomal and molecular mechanisms as CML. The Philadelphia chromosome (named because it was discovered at hospital in Philadelphia) is actually what is known as a balanced, or reciprocal, translocation. What this means is that early in cell division a process known as crossing over occurs. This is when the tip of each of a pair of chromosomes breaks off and switches places. **This increases genetic variety in a species and is one of the reasons that no two organisms are exactly alike (unless they are clones). Sometimes the pieces don't switch places correctly. One of the errors that can happen is called a translocation. A piece of one of the chromosome pairs doesn't make it to the other to trade and actually attaches to another chromosome that isn't its pair. In the "Philadelphia chromosome" a piece of chromosome 9 attaches to chromosome 22. It is a reciprocal translocation because part of 22 also attaches to 9. Other types of translocations occur when the piece attaches to the other chromosome but they don't trade info. The information that piece carries is inserted next to another gene and causes what is known as a "fusion protein." This means that the two parts now work together to form a new message. The gene from chromosome 9 is called "abl" and the gene from 22 is called "bcr." "Abl" is a gene that plays a role in normal cell division. Because the exchange is reciprocal, two different forms are made. If the genes are in the bcr-abl order, this causes the CML, because bcr makes abl stay turned on longer than normal and causes prolonged cell division. If the genes are in the abl-bcr, or the mirror image on the other chromosome product, this doesn't happen. A new drug marketed as Gleevec, is able to turn off the abl gene causing the cancer cells to stop dividing.***

I know this sounds like medical jargon, but part of it is my research on hybridity, and how my mind often worksJ

**SS - To what extent the *Philadelphia Chromosome* and *More Chromosomes* series are connected to each other?**

**KH -** It is the natural progress of events; i do not change style every day, and any evolution in style and concept has its own timing. They both link in technique, with a slight variation in subject matter, the use of imagery. I was then still obsessed with hybrid forms and aesthetics though, and still am.

**SS - The 15 paintings of the *Philadelphia Chromosome* series are titled very differently. Can you provide me with slightly more detailed information about the paintings, please? What do the paintings' titles mean to you (for instance *Milano Chromosome*, *Exodus Chromosome*)? Do you separate them into categories/matched pairs etc.?**

**KH -** Taxonomy and nomenclature are very sophisticated processes. In fact the name either exists with the initial idea of the work, or it can be delivered during the painting process; there is no one golden rule for that. It is that simple yet that intricate and sophisticated. In *Milano Chromosome*, 50% of the imagery was found and processed in scanning/printing in Milan, the painting (200 x 300 cm) was done over 15 days in Milan at a specially rented studio (by the gallery). The other 50% of the collaged images came with me from Philadelphia, USA. No match pairing nor categorization happens; it is just that I work on 5 or 6 canvases at the same time, and they all get names/titles around the same time.

**SS - Where do the drawings in the background of your paintings derive their origin from? What is their meaning and what do they refer to?**

**KH -** Many of those are manipulations/distortions and/or inspirations from ancient neolithic cave-and-stone drawings from the Egyptian south, and from immediate Egyptian prehistoric civilizations like Nagada 1 and Nagada 2 civilizations. I later make tricks of deforming such imagery by creating contemporary simulations like snipers and machinery.

Those are made for the purpose of surprising the viewer with whatever s/he is not expecting to see, some sort of a witty and intelligent solutions, rather than providing simply aesthetic values or formulae.

**SS - Your works often contain animal symbolism. What meaning does the rhinoceros have in your paintings?**

**KH -** Power and force. I often represent this in different forms. In my painting and video, I am always exploring notions of wealth and power; such conceptual notions can replace the direct and more literal visual iconography propositions. For that I used also the elephant, the gigantic human form, the tank and similar forms.

**SS - Ancient Egyptian/pre-Islamic elements appear throughout your entire works. How do you distinguish yourself from Egyptian artists as of 1908 and what parallelism is there, respectively?**

**KH -** For the past sixteen years or so I took distance from post-renaissance laws of painting, like dynamic symmetry, composition, form, shadow and light, etc, and I resort to ancient Egyptian laws of painting that use simple flat, graphic, kinetic imagery that focus on narrative over aesthetics of the discipline of painting itself. I use this approach to simulate an ancient impression in the eyes and mind of the viewer—be her/him of Eastern or Western culture—who is always programmed since childhood in formal educational systems all over the world with ancient Egyptian painting. I capitalize on this knowledge to simulate ancient *feel* while the content is always drawn from contemporary advertising that characterizes our modern consumer societies.

**SS - What exactly are you captivated by regarding ancient Egyptian art and Pop Art? Do you refer to the distinct time levels? (Past, Present and Future)?**

Both ancient Egyptian art were flat, graphic, painted in primary colors, accessible and very comprehensible; both painting types focus on the narrative, on recounting certain stories. The ancient Egyptian painting just told numerous stories on one wall, which what captivates me over Pop Art that tends to work with one or few icons at a time.

Using my synthetic approach that simulates ancient rules, I draw visual similarities between icons of ancient mythology and today's identifiable popular consumer culture, like in the case of Anubis and Batman: both are identical from front and back in their ears, the naked torso, the muscles, the shorts, the power position and the function that is protection against evil. The same resemblance is between Bastet—goddess of domestication wearing the cat's mask—and Catwoman. By exploring this process of historical and cultural recycling, I attempt to break this barrier between East and West, between Past and Present and between the sacred and the ephemeral.

**SS - You had an international upbringing. Which artists, writers, philosophers etc. did influence your works and where/by whom do you draw your inspiration from?**

**KH -** Plato, Aristotle and Socrates; Albert Einstein, Nostradamus, Pablo Picasso, Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Giorgio Morandi, Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Michel Basquiat. Today I add Claude Lelouche and Steve Jobs.

**SS - What stance do you take regarding postmodernism?**

**KH -** Wow, this is way too old, and way too impractical.

Postmodernism is—to me—dead with the birth of Steve Jobs, who invented everything that contemporary artists, musicians, filmmakers and painters are using today. Jobs offered solutions, not a single problematic, like the constructivists and deconstructivists are probably still debating today. Jobs influenced art, mathematics, astronomy, marine biology, philosophy, and the still-to-write-about art theory.

Postmodernism is good to teach as a dead method of thinking, dead since its inception, but it was

necessary to think about until Steve Jobs made his mark.  
I think today we need another model of thinking that will be dictated and led by a generation of thinkers that are now in their twenties, a whole population of post Steve Jobs *earthlings*.