



Moataz Nasr's exhibition *In a Nutshell* opened in London on Friday.

## Moataz Nasr has a passion for change

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*In a Nutshell*, October 7 to November 12, Selma Feriani Gallery, 23 Maddox Street, London W1

The Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr was 16 when he was shot while demonstrating against the government in 1977. This year, he spent 18 days in Tahrir Square protesting against the corruption and repression of the Mubarak regime. But when it came to dealing with London's Westminster City Council, he was powerless.

He had been given the go-ahead to exhibit a maze of turf in London's Hanover Square, but at the last minute the plan to inscribe the words "The People Want The Fall Of The Regime" (El Shaab Youreed eskat el nezam) in ancient Arabic Kufic script was not "suitable at this time". Only days before, the

organiser Selma Feriani had been assured: "You won't require planning permission, because unlike most instances of visual art, the piece is not 'development'." Nasr, a well-known cultural activist in Cairo who founded Darb 1718, a movement that aims to be "a trampoline" to advance contemporary art in Egypt, says: "I have shown the maze in France and Stockholm and am going to do it in Oslo. For me, as an artist, I was always looking up to England and Europe as places where I could express myself and live freely without anything to control me, so I am bitterly disappointed.

"The maze symbolises the troubles in the Middle East, so maybe the decision has something to do with a fear that it might provoke difficulties. Maybe the authorities are not ready for it here." All is not lost for the artist, who was in London last week for the opening of his exhibition - *In a Nutshell* - at the Selma Feriani Gallery in Mayfair. The show traces his own progression from angry works in textile devised in 2003, in which he attacks the US for its propaganda war against the people of Iraq, to more reflective pieces such as 16,000 matches in a classic oriental design that was clearly inspired by this year's uprising.

"We are fragile when alone," he says. "But we hold the power of fire when we are together. We become strong and powerful. That is exactly the situation in the Middle East and that's what I found when I spent those days in the square."

His most recent works, titled *Love, Compassion and Beauty*, show his new-found commitment to Sufism, one of the most rarefied strands of Islamic philosophy, which he argues has convinced him that love is the only solution to the problems of his country.

"Tahrir Square was so special," he recalls. "So many people in one place made it a place of love, respect and passion. We were fighting with one heart. It was beautiful. Fantastic."

The most striking of his pieces is on display in the nearby Roman Catholic church of the Immaculate Conception. *The Key*, dramatically inset in a black dais in front of an altar with a gold tabernacle to store the sacrament, is a clear reference to opening up to wisdom and understanding.

But despite the unlocking of the door to freedom in Tahrir Square, he laments the slow progress in Egypt ever since.

"I am trying to be optimistic," he says. "But it is not going well at all. As I am trying to say with my work, it is like a maze. We got rid of the old regime but now we find ourselves with the army more in control than we hoped. We have been ruled by them since 1962 and, of course, they are one of the most corrupt organisations in Egypt with all their money coming from the state.

"For 59 years since the revolution which overthrew the king, there has been a fear of authority which became worse during the Mubarak period, especially in the past 10 years. You could smell the fear. Now we don't feel afraid anymore but because the regime stopped educating the people we have the freedom, but with more than 40 per cent illiterate we are not equipped to establish a new government. Hopefully the elections, which are due in November, will show that people have listened and understood what was said in the square.

"It was like a school with lessons that taught them how to be politicians, how to find a new way. We can expect some tears as we learn how to establish a new system but the people have the strength, the will and the energy to do so. And as for me, I don't want to lose my hope."

He has some cause for personal optimism. An Egyptian businessman wants to finance a display of the maze in Cairo. Banned from a similar public space in London, it may yet be planted in Tahrir Square.

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