

Chant Avedissian: Go East, young man

Costume drama, boxes and a penchant for the East. But never, never exotic

"I shall wear a costume from Mongolia... practice calligraphy... from the cultural revolution and then dress in black, and be modest, because everyone dresses in black in Korea, and you will interrogate me". Chant Avedissian.

Asked to describe what he does, Chant Avedissian becomes coy. Once upon a time he took photographs. "But the minute you say you are a photographer you run the risk of going mad." For a decade he worked with Hassan Fathi, compiling his archives, filing, cataloguing, imposing order on mountains of paper, on drawings, plans and theoretical texts. And this "was possible only because I am not an architect." He travelled the length and breadth of Egypt, photographing Fathi's extant buildings for a book published by the Aga Khan Foundation. In 1990 he showed a collection of clothes at the Institut du Monde Arabe, reworkings of traditional costumes, the patterns meticulously miniaturised and, of course, filed, alongside samples of the cloth used. In 1995 his textile hangings were shown at the Barbican Centre, London; later, stencils were exhibited at Leighton House, London and the British Council, Cairo. Last year he was commissioned by British Airways to produce a design for the fin of an aeroplane. And since 1991 he has been engaged in an on-going series of images, monotypes created from stencils, reworkings of photographic sources, of pictures that first appeared in magazines and newspapers published in Cairo in the late '40s and '50s. (It is these latter that provide the most valid clues to current preoccupations.) He studied painting at the Montreal School of Art and Design and applied arts at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Currently, he works out of one room, divided into two levels, in an apartment shared with his sister. Chant Avedissian is irreverent, seriously if selectively so. Certain things are simply fair game, the French for instance. "Countries celebrate what they are not, celebrate the antithesis of what they are. The French go on screaming about liberté, égalité, fraternité, but could any people anywhere contrive a greater xenophobia, be more racist?"

"India is too colourful."

"To sit on a chair is pompous."

The one-liners come thick and fast and it is perfectly reasonable to wonder whether they are intended to be taken seriously. They are, up to a point.

You can just see a little peep of the Passage in the Looking-Glass House, if you leave the door of our drawing room wide open: and it is very like our passage as far as you can see, only you know it may be quite different beyond...

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

In China it is profoundly unimportant to know about Picasso and Braque painting in L'Estaque in 1907. They simply don't care, about the origins of cubism, about any of these -isms. They are after all, just rectangular things to

hang on the walls and the Chinese don't hang rectangular things on the wall. They roll things up and put them in boxes." Chant Avedissian has been conducting an affair with the Far East. He has travelled in China and Mongolia. He knows the back streets of Ulan-baatar and the price of Genghis Khan vodka. His exercises in Chinese calligraphy fill several books. In 1995 he was the only Egyptian to take part in the Korean Biennale.

"We must go East." he announces. "Why visit Paris, London, New York when the West is here, in Cairo. Cairo can be more West than the West; it can be a parody of New York, more exaggeratedly French than the French. The Middle East, Europe, they are reflections of one another. But in China they do not care what lies to the West. Mention Egypt and they might have heard about the Pyramids but nothing else. This gives space. In Egypt I am Armenian, in Europe I am Egyptian, but in China these definitions mean nothing."

Yet if the Middle East is merely an extension of Europe, or vice-versa. Egypt retains a firm hold on his affections. It is just that there are difficulties. In one published interview he tells his interviewer, quite baldly, that his work is too Egyptian to be noticed here. And again, there is a point. He adores Hassan Fathi, has only the fondest of memories. "Fathi was, in some ways, very like Matisse. As an old man, Matisse would receive visitors who sought him out, and the first question he would ask was what did you think of the flowers. And of course, these people would be so nervous about coming to see the great man, the exemplary modernist, that they failed to notice the flowers in the garden, could not describe them. and then Matisse, a little disingenuously, would dismiss them.

While Fathi was always polite, visiting him could become an ordeal. Experts on Islamic architecture would come from Geneva. And then they had to cross Mohamed Ali Street, and find his house, and climb the stairs, and for these Geneva based experts it was often their first real experience of Islamic architecture. Visiting Fathi constituted a little course in Islamic architecture all by itself." Avedissian's photo-graphic work with Fathi, however, seems to eschew this lived experience. His architectural photographs are essays in reduction. A horizontal band of light picks out the stones in the courtyard of Sultan Hassan, the custodian of Al-Muayad is caught in a perfect triangle of light that pours through the door. These are geo-metric abstractions, and it is on the non-negotiability of these perfectly balanced equations that he focuses. In many ways his work has been an extended experiment in paring down, an exercise in reduction. "There is no room for paintings in an Arab house and so I started to produce textile hangings. There is, really, no room for chairs in an Arab house." Not surprisingly. Avedissian has experimented with making chairs, wooden boxes, the size of a brick, in which tea-making things can be stored, and on which one might squat. They were a product of his first visit to China, after which he determined to work only in carpentry, make only boxes, a short-lived resolution and one perfectly indicative of the way he does things.

His room is full of boxes. Indeed, he inhabits a box, a wooden platform with matting and sliding paper screens. A ladder leads up to a second level where everything is stored, in boxes. It is here that he works.

"It was in China that I discovered you do not need furniture. The necessity of furniture is an illusion. The only necessary things can be rolled away." And in Mongolia he discovered that architecture too is an illusion. "Yurts. One can live perfectly well in a yurt." Fortunately, "Egypt is not obsessed with stones. Everything decays." In 1991, as the Gulf War was raging, Chant Avedissian went to Luxor. He stayed for several months, during which he began to work with stencils. The process is illuminating. He works from photographs - magazine images published three, four decades ago. These images are blown up, partitioned into blocks of plain colour. The stencil is made and then the colour - pigment mixed with gum Arabic - applied onto sheets of wrapping paper, butchers' paper, sometimes corrugated cardboard. "The paper is not acid free. I am not interested in pemsanence. At some point these images will simply self-destruct."

The works that result are images of images. They often strike a heroic note, these portraits of key-players from the nationalist heyday. There was always, of course, a propagandist element's," the photographs, and this is played up, mercilessly, so that many figures are stuck in the mock-heroic poses of socialist realism. The captions, too, are kept, the stylised Arabic script becoming one more decorative element. The choice is eclectic: a biscuit, Bimbo, or Umm Kulthoum, Dalida, a group-of nurses, an hilariously camp photograph that accompanied an article on the tragedy of the mother who has no daughter to help her look after her sons. Nothing is privileged in this most catholic of democracies. Over the years the stencils have become increasingly flexible, and now can comprise up to 20 separate sheets. These are carefully numbered, and then stored. There are hundreds, and each one is infinitely reproducible. Just take them out, apply the paint. So has Chant Avedissian consciously developed a method of working that could serve as a neat, perhaps too neat, paradigm of post-modern practice? Signification, appropriation, authorship, deconstruction, discourse, ideology: the buzz words of the last decade are all invoked in his work.

The stencils can be reproduced -"anyone," he says, "can do it." He does not pretend to an authoritative originality. These images of images explore the way symbols shift, the way meanings change when they are put into different contexts. The images are not original -no set of signifiers can be since they are all implicated in the ideologies -patterns of language or representation- of the cultures that produce or interpret them. The original photographs are historical documents, of a kind. But all this is water off a duck's back. And asked about that other post-modernist determinant -identity- Chant Avedissian becomes coy once more. "My passport is Egyptian. I am 47. It says I am male. These pictures are my past revisited."

A burst of temper. "My grand-mother walked to Syria. My aunt was born during the march. They were fleeing the Turks. Is that what you want?" And then back to what he does. "No one can carry on doing the same thing anymore. I cannot paint anymore. There is no point my painting and exhibiting in a gallery in the middle of Paris. I might as well be a panda in the zoo. I would simply be exotic. People should chop and change. Imagine if Youssef Chahine were to be made the

director of Cairo Zoo. Cairo Zoo would become a wonderful place to visit. Or the minister of culture was to be put in charge of hospitals. At least they might stop painting operating theatres that dreadful shade of green."

"There will be photographs with this profile?" The man who feels he would be as exotic as a panda in a Parisian gallery becomes animated.

"This is my first public appearance. I am neurotic. I shall wear a costume from Mongolia. There will be a picture of me practising calligraphy. And the cultural revolution. And then I shall dress in black, and be modern, because everyone dresses in black in Korea, and it is very modern. And then" -the images are quickly worked out on paper- "there will be a photograph of you and me. You will be interviewing, a military policeman, and I will be a Ukrainian spy."

And none of this, he insists, is exotic. "You see, everything will be stylised, will be hieratic, very Pharaonic." Modern Cairo, a reflection of the West, has now moved East. A little journey, perhaps, around the corner of the reflected passage. "There are connections," he says, but refuses to be drawn.

Calligraphy, carpentry, boxes in which to store things made in the past. But what next?

"I think tea ceremonies. Nothing on the wall, just a Japanese tea house and objects in boxes and six people at a time who can take the things out of boxes. But not in a gallery. I don't do galleries anymore."

He does aeroplanes, makes costume dramas, photographs, clothes, stencils, chairs, after a fashion. Some of his most recent work is on scrolls, rolled away, neatly filed. The stencils themselves have become increasingly Far Eastern in feel. They too can be mounted, in series, and folded away. The packaging is immaculate.

Chant Avedissian is very tidy.

Until 3 May Chant Avedissian is exhibiting at the Cultural Centre of Berchem, Antwerp

Profile by Nigel Ryan