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Portrait of the artist as a strange man

As artist Abdel Razeq Okasha remembered the life and work of pioneer artist Samir Rafi, **Rania Khallaf** was spellbound



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Al-Ahram Weekly

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Memories and works of Samir Rafi is the title of a newly published art book written and edited by artist Abdel Razeq Okasha. The 175-page tome is an untraditional and unique account of the life of pioneer artist Samir Rafi (1926-2004), whose works represent a wide range of artistic schools: expressionism, symbolism and surrealism — so much so that his name is internationally renowned as that of the master of blending Egyptian reality with myth and folklore in a contemporary framework. Published this year by the Ministry of Culture's General Egyptian Book Organisation (GEBO) in collaboration with the Documentation Centre for Natural and Civilisational Heritage (CULTNAT), is a valuable item and a significant reference on the Arab art bookshelf. It is the first in a series on Egyptian pioneer artists, sponsored by CULTNAT, which was established in 2000 with the aim of documenting Egyptian heritage in different languages. Reproductions of Rafi's work take up 100 pages and include both full-colour and black-and-white images revealing his obsession with nature and his unique take on the human — especially the female — figure, which

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appears bony with a long face. As well as this collection, the book includes 12 chapters.

Most are written in an autobiographical style, recounting meetings and interviews with the author's master and friend, Rafi, in Paris. Okasha, 44, himself a Paris-based artist and writer, was a close friend of Rafi's in the latter's last days. In the first chapter the author recounts their unique friendship, which started two years and a half before Rafi's departure:

"He used to call me every morning and talk for hours, and then we would meet in the evenings after I finished my work at the Musee du Louvre, where I was working at the time. We used to have dinner at my house or at a Pakistani restaurant at Rue Estrees, where Rafi particularly enjoyed the curry, served with freshly baked bread. The day he passed away, I was in Egypt on holiday, when I received a phone call from my wife in Paris telling me in a sad tone that Rafi had been found dead in his flat. On my way back to Paris, sad and heart broken, I recalled my memories with the great painter, remembering how he used to sleep for only a few hours; he used to spend the night at my house, leaving at 4 am, and only three hours later he would wake me up with a phone call to review most of what he had told me the day before. Rafi had always been confused and bewildered; he used to document everything on pieces of papers, scattered all over his tiny house. He was a closet of secrets that I was never able to unlock, despite the fact that I might have been the only one allowed to enter his third-floor studio."

Okasha waited for a couple of days until Rafi's daughter, one of two children who both lived abroad, arrived in Paris, before he could make funerary arrangements: "Accompanied by a policewoman, we arrived at Rafi's place. As we unlocked the door, we were terrified by an unexpected voice, but it turned out to be the sound of a leaking tap. We were already confused and terrified, but we were even more shocked to see a real gun pointing at us right at the doorway. We ran back to the first floor, horrified, and only dared to come back up the stairs when the policewoman shouted: "The time to come in is now; you have to empty this studio in a month's time."

With this introduction, Okasha effectively draws the reader in, inducing a sense of curiosity about Rafi above all else. In the second chapter, he goes on to describes the studio, heightening the tension: "As we entered the place, I was walking backwards, my heart heavy; I felt I had never been to this place where the malodorous smell was overpowering. We found scraps of paper everywhere; Rafi used to write down notes, feelings, moments of happiness or sadness on whatever came to hand anything, sugar cube wrappers, bags of salt, pizza boxes; he threw nothing in the rubbish. The chair he used to sit on was the only clean thing; the rest of the furniture was covered in dust; it seems the chair was the last place that came in contact with Rafi's body during the last few days."

Rafi was born to an Egyptian father and a Christian Lebanese mother. His father, a lawyer, was very strict. He took him to one Sheikh Ismail to learn the Quran and classical Arabic. His mother, a mild and tolerant woman who called him Iskandar instead of Samir, took him to church and taught him French. "The contradictory, confusing atmosphere," Okasha writes, "left him with a legacy of conflict. He had a predilection for surprise, a versatile and powerful intellect." Thus Okasha describing the early life of Rafi, who emigrated to France in 1954.

In the next chapter, Okasha cites the names of venues he Rafi used to frequent where he would interview the great artist. Most of Okasha's questions are insightful and probing, but few are direct. To the question "How do you see Rafi the artist" the latter responds, "Rafi is an artist who studied the visions of the founding artists who prevailed in Egypt in 1938, and the only one of his generation to develop friendships with his masters such as Ahmed Youssef Kamel and Ahmed Sabri... I was keen on keeping such friendships strong, to study the intellectual and artistic basis of the art movement in Egypt at the time. It was in 1938 that I decided to become an artist; and seeing paintings in exhibitions was not enough for me." In 1940, with Ibrahim Massouda, Kamal Youssef and others, Rafi established the Contemporary Art Group. Nutshells was the title of the painting that won him the golden medal of the 1942 Cairo Salon; it indicated a distinct artistic orientation at an early age.

In the fourth chapter, Okasha provides a detailed account of paint manufacture; in a wonderful tale Okasha recounts Rafi's quest to study and produce his own colours in what might be described as a short study on the chemistry of colour. The author hints that all the artist's oil paintings completed between 1942 and 1954 used these homemade colours.

In the fifth chapter, the author traces the artist's relationship with Abdel-Hady El-Gazzar, another Egyptian pioneer whose animal figures influenced Rafi in 1946 — something he was blamed for as an artistic theft. But Rafi himself saw it otherwise: "Such copying of themes was a common feature among Contemporary Art Group members, part of the attempt to benefit from a collective approach."

Okasha, born in Banha in 1968, is an artist, sculptor and novelist. His first novel Fateeha was published in 2000; another novel, Nawal, is soon to appear with GEBO. He is also the vice president of Autumn Salon. He earned a Diploma of Fine Arts from Sandony University-Paris in 1995, and participated in exhibitions in 28 countries including Japan, Iran and Morocco. In this book he not only recounts Rafi's journey but also documents a significant part of the art movement in Egypt in the first half of the 20th century. Thus, in the eighth chapter, for example, he discusses Mahmoud Said's broad influence: "Said, who studied law, and never studied at an art academy, had established a method which the pioneers such as Mohamed Nagui and Prince Youssef Kamal followed." Said's own European influences, as the book shows, were thus channelled — not only through Said but through the Prince — to Rafi.

Rafi remembered Kamal's advice: "Do not imprison your colours the way Ahmed Sabri did. I am an impressionist and I love to let my colours breathe and be nurtured by light and vacuum, so don't ever be afraid of the whiteness of the paper around your drawing, let your brush move freely on the surface, and don't try to be a dictator by erasing the effects of the brush's hair on the paper." Rafi's famous giant painting of 1946, Time, was his homage to the realm of surrealism. It was also one reason behind his strong friendship with Georges Henein, the great Egyptian surrealist poet, who wrote in French. Rafi stayed in contact with his friends in Egypt, finding out about the art movement well into the 1960s — and Okasha's book duly reproduces some of the relevant correspondence, loaded with a sense of the times and much raw information on art and culture in Egypt.

Okasha has also written Artists and Revolution and Gaugin, poet of colours, both to be published by GEBO.

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