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# When painting and sculpture become one: Egyptian artist Mohamed Abla's new solo exhibition

Lamiaa Al-Sadaty, Wednesday 26 Feb 2020

After years away from sculpture, the renowned painter Mohamad Abla returns to this art, presenting his works in a solo exhibition held at Samah Art Gallery

Why does an artist decide to change medium or discipline? This question is forced upon us when visiting the sculpture exhibition of Mohamad Abla at Samah Art Gallery in Zamalek. The exhibition continues until 22 February.

With a decades-long reputation in painting, Abla turned to sculpture, commenting on his choice: "The idea of being able to hold your work in your hands, to react to its weight, to turn it around, to kiss it, is a fascinating experience, which can only be achieved with sculpture."

However, sculpture is not new to Abla, as he studied this form of expression in Switzerland at the beginning of his career some 40 years ago. Since the 1990s, his Sisyphus statue adorns one of the most famous squares in Walsrode, Germany.

Returning to sculpture today, Abla underlines that he always wanted to see his works in three dimensions. However, he was looking for a new path.

“Unfortunately, sculpture in Egypt is dominated by a trend that confines it within certain limits. It tends to represent specific direct ideas, rather than

reflecting the identity of the sculptor. This makes most of the sculptures look so alike," he says.

When creating sculptures, it is in painting or drawing that any artist finds a starting point before going through subsequent stages: wax modeling, molding, dewaxing and finally — as in Abla's case — bronze casting.

"During these long stages, a lot of feelings and emotions are at risk of being lost. So, to avoid this, I decided to turn the drawing into a sculpture without going through these steps. I managed to find very modest craftsmen who work in a primitive way in a workshop, without molds. That said, the molding is done from the drawing."

The time taken to develop this work is linked to the artist's know-how. Impossible to go to sculpture before going through the drawing, and to study the curve, the straight line, the movement, and then work spontaneously. Learning sculpture requires above all a perfect mastery of drawing. You also need to master the art of sketching before tackling bronze.

"I had never done sketches, because my professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Kamel Moustafa, had told me that the first touch is always irreplaceable," the artist clarifies.

Indeed, Abla's sculptures suggest that we are facing canvases that take shape before our eyes. This is the case, for example, with his sculpture entitled *The Military*, which immediately brings to mind one of his paintings, created one year after the January 2011 Revolution. With perfect abstraction, the sculpture retraces an overwhelmed, exhausted and weakened silhouette.

His sculptures representing animals refer to some heroes of his paintings: the donkey, the cat, the dog, the rooster, the horse. They are present as if to draw or release in space the energy of movement.

## **Sculptures in context**

The sculptures on display recall the way of working the form found in his paintings, but from a new angle.

Not only does the artist attribute expansive movement to his figures, but he embosses the surface, catching on them the play of light, and making them all sparkle.

The sculptor also goes as far as to open the mass for light rays to better capture their environment. For example, in his work *In Nature*, light passes through the open surface of the sculpture, giving it a deeper dimension, enough to concretise the idea of man's resistance against the forces of nature.

Some sculptures are placed in relation to the paintings that inspired them. But the eye is not limited to the painting, since Abla refuses to be locked in the labyrinth of the frame, trying to access the sculpture amid all the surrounding space. Thus the context is not just a place, or even a frame, but an echo.

## **Choice of material**

Why bronze?

"It is a most resistant metal. An alloy of copper and tin, corrosion does not affect bronze, hence it has been there for millennia, while retaining its original qualities, freshness and liveliness," Abla explains. Certainly, bronze pieces have always held a unique value, a prestige that defies time.

Furthermore, Abla's bronze works break with tradition as the artist masters its colours — different shades of blue, green and purple. These are colours often found in his paintings, and here they give different sensations: a lace effect is felt in *Kitabat* which, through green pictographs decorated with

golden touches, points to stories about women.

If Abla's sculptures are reflections of his talent as a painter, they also suggest a formidable influence of the Swiss painter-sculptor, Giacometti. The latter gave up surrealism to return to nature, in a quest for truth. His busts and figures are the result of his desperate search for a vision. His work can thus be placed in a philosophical and literary current that marked the turn of the 20th century: existentialism.

Abla did not hesitate to pay tribute to the Swiss artist, naming one of his sculptures Greetings to Giacometti. Here we see a threadlike figure reminiscent of The Walking Man, once created by the Swiss artist.

Mohamad Abla integrates light and movement in his sculptures as in his paintings. He creates a paradox between immobility and rhythm, giving power to his work.

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