



REVIEW - 01 JUN 2012



Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar

BY CLARE DAVIES



Photograph of Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar working on his painting *The Past, the Present and the Future*, c. 1951

The theft or systemic neglect of Egypt's rich 19th- and 20th-century cultural heritage has become increasingly apparent in recent years, accelerating dramatically in the wake of last year's

revolution. As such, a certain poignancy attended the opening of this modestly scaled and eclectic retrospective of Egyptian artist Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar at the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art's 'Ibdaa' (Dimensions) Gallery. The show brought together long-hidden paintings, ink and pencil drawings, and watercolours from the collections of Gazzar's family and the museum. While it might not have provided new frames of reference or contributed to our understanding of the work, it did remind viewers why the artist has become so important and well loved. Gazzar, who died in 1966, is celebrated for his humble roots, his deliberately naive painting style and his representations of life in Cairo's popular quarters in a way that exceeds or at least reconfigures the Orientalist Egyptian picturesque ascribed to an earlier generation. His prominence and popularity today speak of his work's ability to transcend the tropes of authenticity, nationhood and a non-Western modernity through which the history of 20th-century art in Egypt is usually articulated.

Gazzar's career is often narrated as a series of distinct phases, and the exhibition comprised examples of each. His best-known paintings are those made prior to 1962, in which Cairo's traditionally poor neighbourhoods represent a collective cultural subconscious. This world is threateningly irrational and sensual, infused with animistic magic and populated by *djinn*, fortune tellers and madmen. Gazzar's paintings and drawings of the period rely on a vocabulary of class-inflected human types – modern Egypt's 'others' drawn in outline – rendered in an exotic underworld, yet somehow retaining a specificity and agency that complicates the civilizing narrative so central to Egyptian art of the period.

Popular Chorus, also referred to as *The Theatre of Life and Hunger* (c.1952), is perhaps Gazzar's most famous work and makes explicit the artist's longstanding political commitments. His original version of *Popular Chorus* (1948) depicted nine figures standing before a row of empty platters. When exhibited in 1949, the work was read

as a comment on the stark poverty of great swathes of Egyptian society, and, as such, a critique of King Farouk's rule, leading to the artist's brief incarceration. After the Free Officers' coup of 1952, the state commissioned a reproduction, which Gazzar backdated to 1951. His critical voice also echoes in later works, which ostensibly celebrate the scientific advances and political successes of the Nasserist military regime. In these we see men and machines interbred in claustrophobic sci-fi scenes that today appear somewhat dated. These worlds are more dystopian than heroic, suggesting parallels with the country's current political situation.

Finally, Gazzar's largely ignored abstract paintings of the late 1950s through the early 1960s straddle the perceived divide between his 'popular' period and his later 'machine man' drawings and paintings, complicating any neat theory of progression. While these works were well represented, the exhibition did not attempt to shed light on their place within Gazzar's oeuvre. Nevertheless, the simple fact of their inclusion could suggest an alternative narrative to the conventional story of the development of calligraphic abstraction, which tends to dominate art-historical accounts of the rise of abstraction in the Arab world. The lack of curatorial self-reflection in this instance was characteristic of the exhibition as a whole. Paintings and drawings were hung on the gallery walls in no particular order, and the exhibition's organizers appeared to have made no effort to make visual or art-historical sense of the group, or to shed light on the selection of works and their placement within the single-room gallery. For many visitors this occasion represented their first encounter with the original works of Gazzar, and the exhibition's value in this regard shouldn't be underestimated.

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