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CULTURE / ADAM HENEIN

The Adam Henein Museum in conversation and photos

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Mada Masr,
Sama Waly
and Taha
Belal

The Adam Henein Museum, which opened in 2014 in Harraniya, contains hundreds of works by the artist on three floors and a sculpture garden. Gallerist Karim Francis helped set up the museum in the grounds of Henein's house and studio.

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After receiving a degree in sculpture from the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1953, Henein trained in Munich and Paris, where he lived for 25 years until 1996. He has received various prizes from the Egyptian state throughout his career, and after returning, he founded the Ministry of Culture's annual International Sculpture Symposium. Last year, the symposium honored Henein himself, meaning that all the participants helped construct a new Henein work called Forest of Granite.

Artists Sama Waly, Taha Belal and Mada's culture editor Jenifer Evans went to have a look around the museum, and the kind caretaker let them stay long after opening hours.



Jenifer Evans: It was your second trip to the museum right, Sama? What do you think about

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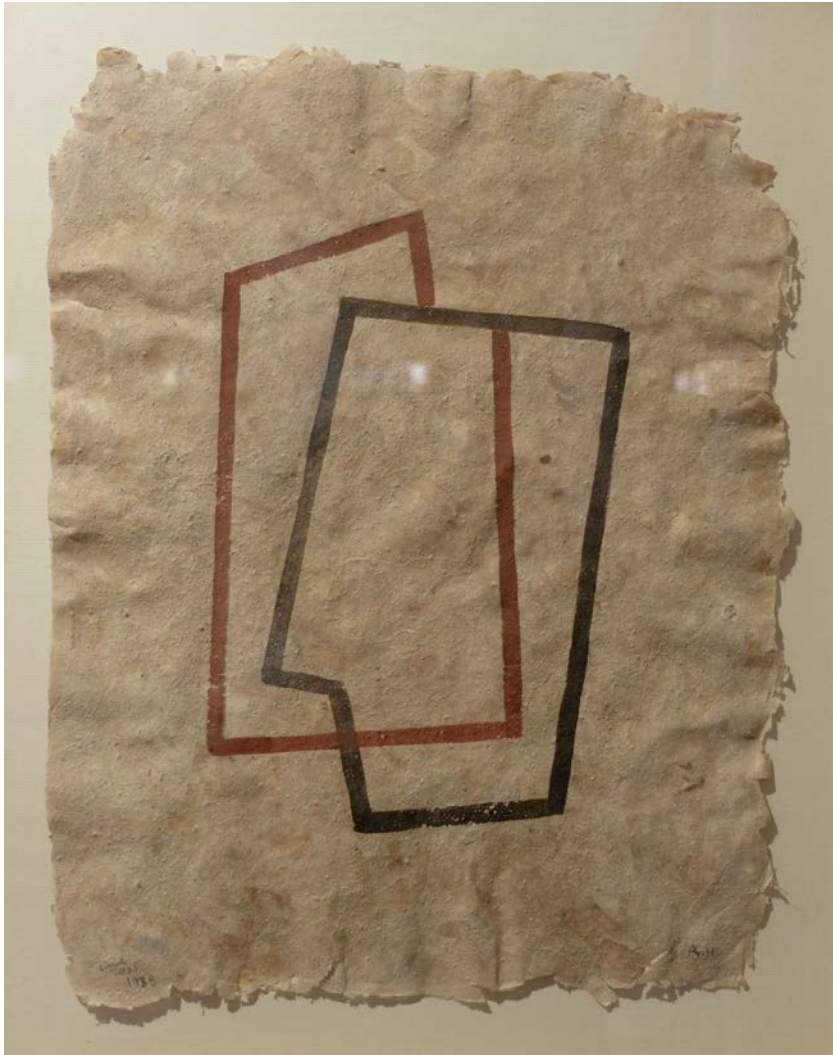
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it?

Sama Waly: I loved it, to put it simply. There's an area that looks like a studio. Because it's also the space where he produced a lot of the work, it feels very dynamic. I met him last time I was there.

Taha Belal: There's lots of different kinds of works, from painting to drawing to sculpture to tapestry, and in all kinds of materials.

JE: They go all the way back to when he was studying academic modelling in the 1950s. He seems really interested in experimenting with materials and with different ways of making marks and shaping things. I think he goes through phases where he's trying out one very particular technique, and then he'll move on to something else and maybe revisit it later on. It makes me feel like he really loves handling stuff and trying things out. It makes you want to try stuff out yourself.



SW: There's some made of pigment and Arabic gum on papyrus, and it looks like he worked a lot with that when he was in Paris.

JE: Some of those looked like tapestries. Some reminded me of Eva Hesse artworks, because of the way that the edges are rubbery and uneven. And they're kind of in between sculptures and paintings, which I liked. But it's also difficult for him to get any detail going, because the texture of the papyrus is very rough.

TB: Yes, it's kind of overpowering. It's similar to some of the granite sculptures that have very rough surfaces.



SW: I wonder if he's interested in painting details. The paintings seem more about form and mark-making.

JE: That's true. There are a few of animals or ants where he's a bit more detailed. And in the frescos on plaster, there's a lot of precision as though he wanted the lines to be really clean and clear. But that was much earlier on in his career, so maybe before he'd figured out that he wasn't really interested in...

SW: Clear lines. Also, with fresco – I think the medium itself requires a certain clarity.

JE: Like drawing in pen – you have to make up

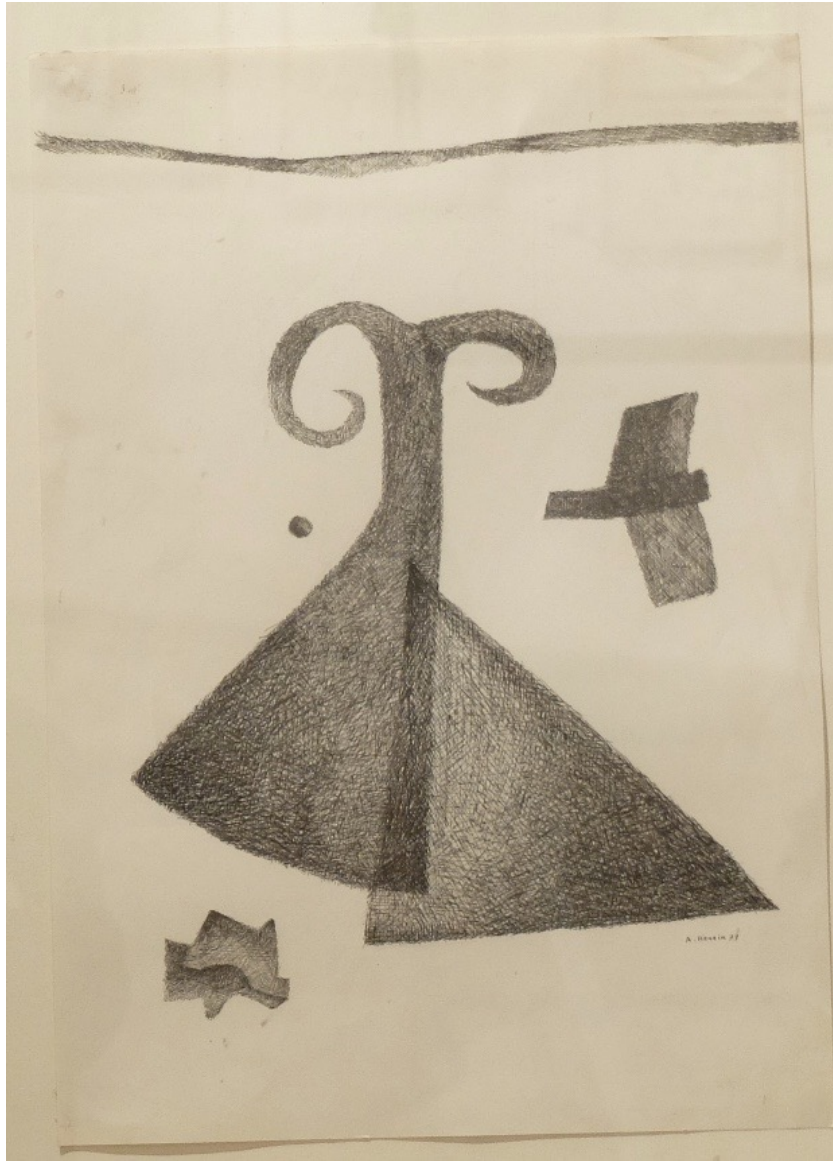
your mind what you're going to do and then do it, because if you do something wrong it'll just turn into a bit of a mess.

SW: Then there's the ink drawings.



JE: I really liked a lot of the ink drawings. Again it's a lot about types of mark making. I liked the ones where he's making massive shapes, but

without outlines, like he's coloring in outlines that weren't there so the masses just build up.



SW: I also liked in the ink drawings that there's a wolf that keeps coming back. And a few weird-looking characters, some of which were reproduced in the Salah Jahin Rubayat book, which my dad has.

JE: There are just a few pages of that book in

the museum. We actually saw a page in the Al-Ahram collection too, but it was a smaller version, and it was really badly water-stained. All the works here in the museum seem to be in very good condition – even those made out of papyrus and gum. He’s really taken care of them.



SW: And these are just the works that are in his collection. I can’t imagine the amount of works that are in other collections.

TB: Yeah! At Mathaf, the museum in Doha, they have one outside – one of these Noah’s ark ones, it’s massive. Like the one in the garden here.

JE: It’s amazing the sheer variety of stuff – like the tiny little bird sculptures and then these

massive monoliths and boats.

TB: Or the Paul Klee type watercolors that seem very delicate, super finicky, next to those big geometric abstract paintings.

JE: There's a lot of big charcoal drawings at the beginning that he made recently. I really liked them. It just feels like he really knows what he's doing with the material. Charcoal is quite a difficult thing to properly control and you can easily end up making stuff that looks like generic charcoal stuff, but I feel like he is very controlling of the charcoal, which makes it very compelling to look at.

TB: It's nice that on that floor they also have a lot of the big granite sculptures as well – those drawings very much remind me of the sculptures and vice versa, the light and dark in both those drawings and the big sculptures seem to be influencing each other in a lot of ways. Some of the abstract drawings he made with ink in Paris also remind me of granite surfaces.



JE: As well as the wolf and the ants, other motifs come up again and again. There's some Christian imagery that pops up, there's a female figure, which I guess is the traditional male artist's subject, and quite a lot of trees. He's really into nature.

TB: A lot of bird sculptures. There's a very nice owl one.

SW: There's a humor to a lot of his sculptures.

There's a really fat owl and the face looks as if it was pushed toward the inside and the rest of the body covers it up.

JE: Yeah! It's almost as if you're not meant to know it's an owl, but it's unmistakably an owl at the same time.

SW: There's definitely a pharaonic influence in his work.

JE: Apparently when he was in France he had intended to go to Mexico to study pre-Columbian art, so he's definitely got this interest in really ancient stuff.

There's something also about the way the sculpture garden is laid out that feels very deliberate but also fun and playful. In a couple of the early fresco pieces it looked like he was drawing sculpture gardens – there's a person and all these art things that were placed around him, so I feel like a sculpture garden is something he's wanted to do for a long time.



SW: Did you notice the travel sketchbooks on display? There's one that says "This is a story of a black line and a red line and how they met and what happened between them." It seems like he's living in his imagination, or he brings his imagination to life. And that's refreshing for me, these days – beyond like the social commentary and social aspects of art, just going into someone's imagination and formal experiments. As opposed to trying to have a clear message.

JE: Do you think artists today are more concerned with having a message?

SW: Generally I feel that, here, yes.

JE: I agree with that. That's partly the way artists are educated – one's told one needs a "concept" so often the work ends up illustrating it and not really being anything more than an illustration.

SW: Like a one-liner. And it feels like we're educated for the research to be from a social science perspective or a historical perspective, etc, which is more intellectual, as opposed to researching form and researching material. But I know that Henein has a big influence on sculptors in Egypt.

TB: Some of Ahmed Askalany's animals remind me of Adam Henein.

JE: One thing I really get from Henein's work is that he has a daily practice where he's just making things, and there's some works which are less successful or interesting and some that are really good. I think here for various reasons you rarely come across people who just devote their time to just making stuff, whether or not it's going to be good. You need space to be able to do that, and you need to be able to afford to spend all your time doing that.

But also, not just here but generally, there's this idea that you just make work for a specific purpose rather than just for the sake of it. So if you're invited to do a show you'll make something, or if you make an artwork you'll look for an opportunity to exhibit it, so it becomes much more about the moment of audience interaction and your career than it does about ...

SW: Spending time in the studio.

JE: Yes, and failing and trying again.

SW: I know that back in the day the Ministry of Culture would give out scholarships for artists to devote their time to art, a monthly stipend. I'm not sure if it still happens, but the whole structure is different now. Your time becomes limited and you have to balance between your everyday life and producing as an artist.



JE: It becomes much more function-oriented or purposeful. With a lot of Henein's work, it looks like he didn't have a particular purpose in mind, he was just sitting there doing what he did every day and coming up with different results.

SW: Like in a lab, experimenting. But I'm sure

there are young artists who have that daily practice.

JE: Ahmed Badry seems to do that.

SW: I'm thinking of Ramy Dozy. He's a painter and I used to go to his studio, and I remember he had a very strict practice. He was devoting all his time to his work.

JE: It's a difficult thing to make yourself do, not just to balance it with work. I always think of William Blake who ran a printshop during the day and apparently made all his work in the evening after 6 o'clock, so there are ways of doing it.

SW: A lot of artists spend more time writing proposals.

JE: And it's just easier to do other things, in a way. Just being confronted with having to create something out of nothing everyday can be tough, especially when you're not in the habit of it.

SW: That's definitely the most difficult part – to discipline yourself and find that balance between life and art.



JE: I wonder if Adam Henein has any other kind of life. I assume he started off quite wealthy.

SW: I can't imagine that he worked as anything.

TB: Yeah! He's made so much art.

SW: I went to see the recent Picasso sculpture show at the MoMA in New York and honestly Adam Henein's museum is in my mind really on the same level. Picasso also seems like he was working constantly.

What did you think about how the work was displayed in the museum?

TB: I thought it was nice. There are artworks everywhere basically, anywhere you look. And all sizes, from huge to tiny pieces that look like

jewelry, the same with the two dimensional pieces. The lighting was quite good. There was a beautiful view from the window, of the pyramids.



JE: You could argue that it was too crowded, but I didn't feel that really. It fits with his whole style of doing things, which is to take what you want and just do it. It doesn't feel like they've been over-selective.

TB: I was trying to imagine how they installed it, whether they had a floor plan. It felt like there was one, but also a looseness to it.

JE: Right, like there's a balance between some planning and some "oh that looks nice next to that."

SW: Some rooms seemed planned. There's the "hall of annunciation" and the "witness hall". The signage though could have been done better I think, instead of a printed A4 paper. ... I

wouldn't expect the Adam Henein museum to be a pure white box gallery.



JE: Yes, it wouldn't make sense. That's one of the nice things about the museum, this slightly improvised feeling.

TB: I can imagine that some people would want to put some of his very minimal sculptures in a very minimal space and make it very dramatic, but I like the fact that in this case it's not like that.

JE: It takes away from the authority of them, but in a way that works really well. It also makes sense for his work, being what it is – this life-long exploration of different techniques and materials – to have it where his house is. And the way you can see those casts near the