

Algebraic formulations: The work of Chant Avedissian

By Nigel Ryan

In 1998 I proposed a profile of Chant Avedissian for the back page *Al-Ahram Weekly*, the Egyptian newspaper for which I was then working, and after the requisite period of haggling the proposal was accepted. I had known the artist for some time and duly arranged an interview, though that is probably the wrong word for what transpired. The interview is not a form to which Chant lends himself easily. Instead our meeting passed more in the manner of conversation, at times meandering and expansive, at others punctuated by the kind of declamatory statements for which the artist has a clear predilection. “To sit on chairs is pompous”; “Could any people be more racist than the French?”; “Countries celebrate the antithesis of what they are”.ⁱ One-liners peppered his speech, as they do in every interview with Chant that I have read.

Some random examples:

"In Egypt I'm a foreigner, in the West I'm Egyptian. In China I'm me".

Again, in a later interview: *"In Egypt I am Armenian, in Europe I am Egyptian, but in China these definitions mean nothing."*

"There is no such thing as universal art."

"Anything that is not traditional Japanese, or close to its spirit, is pure barbarism."

"If parents tell their children that Paris is at the centre of art - that is abuse."

"I couldn't care less about Shakespeare's entire literary corpus if I cannot go to England, say, tomorrow."

Such statements are clearly intended to be provocative. Like much provocation they reduce complex sets of problems to soundbites. Were it not for the fact they reveal themes which inform Chant Avedissian's practice as an artist and, in their compression, suggest a route by which his work might be approached and understood, they could easily be discounted as glib.

One obvious thing the soundbites betray is a focus on identity, or more precisely – “in China these definitions mean nothing” – the sketching of a strategy to escape identities that are imposed, a not surprising preoccupation on the part of an artist of Armenian descent born in Egypt and brought up during the heyday of Gamal Abdel-Nasser's pan-Arabism, a project riddled with contradictions only partially glossed by the anti-colonialist rhetoric of independence and whose overweening recourse to homogeneity rests on a flipside of exclusion. There is, too, a nod towards one of the great antinomies of our age, the claims of the universal versus the right to cultural specificity, alongside a referencing of the economic context within which such claims are made, particularly in the cultural sphere, exemplified by the difficulties the vast majority of Third World citizens face in travelling to the First World and the relative ease with which such journeys are made in the opposite direction, and certainly to Egypt, a country in which many people have little choice but to depend on the income generated by attracting visitors from richer states. ⁱⁱ

Yet despite the clues with which Avedissian liberally peppers his statements and writings the publicity for a 2011 exhibition of his Cairo Stencils – works that interrogate the mechanisms by which an Egyptian identity was constructed in the second half of the twentieth century – still managed to claim the artist's "*inspiration* is fuelled by the pantheon of Egypt's modern Golden Age".ⁱⁱⁱ Elsewhere, references to the supposed nostalgia of the Stencils abound. "The reflected nostalgia in Avedissian's work is overpowering," writes Rose Issa, adding that "the paintings depict an era, the Egypt of the 50's, when the country was at the height of its cosmopolitanism: spies and tradesmen, Greeks, Italians, Muslims, Copts, Jews, Armenians, Palestinian refugees, Europeans and a great number of Middle Eastern intellectuals mingled."

This is a strangely ahistorical description of works that examine the historiography of the period, not least in its misrepresentation of the 50's, a decade which saw a massive exodus from Egypt of Greeks and Italians, many of whom were small tradesmen, of Syrians, Armenians and Jews, as "the height of cosmopolitanism". There is no accessible data concerning the number of spies but it is hard to avoid the suspicion they are the illusory icing on this half-baked cosmopolitan cake.

And what should we make of the assertion that the artist is inspired by the occupants of the pantheon of this capitalised Golden Age?

They are certainly a motley bunch. Avedissian's stencils include Sayyid Jamal al Din al Afghani (1838-1897), political adventurer, anti-imperial campaigner, religious moderniser, sunni muslim, shia muslim, double agent or hardened opportunist – take your pick, alongside screen siren Hind Rustom (1929-2011), the Egyptian actress whose fate it was to be dubbed the Egyptian Marilyn Monroe; Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970), depicted in the kinds of heroic pose most readily associated with socialist realism, alongside female shot-putters (another nod to the imagery of Soviet propaganda), political prisoners and pick-pockets.

It is, clearly, a catholic selection. The one thing the occupants of this pantheon do have in common is that they were all depicted in the illustrated magazines and papers that proliferated in Egypt in the years immediately before and after the 1952 revolution. It is these depictions – from the mid-50's onwards in media that was state-owned, earlier in papers and magazines that were rarely less than partisan – that Avedissian uses as his source material.^{iv}

The Cairo Stencils, then, are images of images. They can, as their creator notes, be endlessly reworked from the cut outs he made based on images published in state-owned magazines and newspapers. In each re-production backgrounds can be changed, new juxtapositions created. A soldier, symbol of Our Arab Forces as the calligraphic Arabic title declares, can charge heroically, Kalashnikov in hand, across a background of heraldic eagles interspersed with the order NO PHOTOS, in capitalised Latin script, a ubiquitous instruction in the vicinity of government or military facilities which, given the constant war footing on which the nation was placed, could mean anywhere.^v They may be "our" forces but "we" cannot take a snapshot of them. We are not allowed to re-imagine them. But Our Arab Forces, as envisaged by Avedissian and symbolised by the soldier, can also be made to charge across different backgrounds, across a map of the Arab world, against fields of motifs drawn from 17th century Ottoman fabrics, architectural details culled from the length of the Silk Road or

landscapes populated with a menagerie of hieratic figures of the kind that march around the walls of ancient tombs.

Avedissian is very clear about the advantage of using stencils. “Stencilling gave me the possibility of variation,” he says. “Once the drawing was cut out, one could concentrate on colour, or different backgrounds.”

The process also imposed formal qualities. “I had to go hieroglyphic, i.e. simplifying to the extent of [what was] real[ly] essential.”

His schematising of the figures, the paring down of all pictorial elements to areas of flat colour, turns the construction of a national identity pursued by the Egyptian regime following the revolution of 1952 into an essentially decorative enterprise. His simplification involves an acute compression of narratives. The subsequent emphasis on variation and the creation of new contexts by juxtaposition serves, ironically, to amplify the pick and mix techniques of the propagandist. The caption that accompanied the source image is frequently retained, allowing the inclusion of calligraphy, that most privileged of Islamic art forms, in the overall design. It is an inclusion that cannot help but reference the sacredness of *the* Islamic text.

A perfectly made-up, be-ringed and braceleted figure bends over a ballot paper, pen in manicured hand, elaborate coiffeur bisecting a field of eagles, above the kitsch legend Eve Votes. The stencil is reproduced in *Chant Avedissian: Cairo Stencils*: London, Saqi Books, 2006, prefaced by an introduction informing the reader that “following decades of activism, mostly by upper- and middle-class feminist groups... women were given the right to vote in 1956. This symbolised their new participation in all aspects of life, no longer just as guardians of the family. Nationalist songs and films with socio-political overtones reflected these changes and the new Arab woman, neither a colonialised North African nor an ‘orientalised’ subject, was widely celebrated in the press.”

It is worth taking the time to quote this introduction, worth the effort to think about what is actually being said because it typifies a double misunderstand about Avedissian’s work. For while it seems a safe bet to assume the artist supports female suffrage the odds would be stacked against the assumption he is unaware Nasser was the only candidate on the 1957 ballot paper over which this female voter stands.^{vi} Nor is it a coincidence that the example of “the new Arab woman” on which Chant Avedissian alights, “the new Arab woman” he chooses to re-frame in his stencil, is Eve. By retaining the original title and inscribing it in scarlet calligraphy he deflates any celebration. The stencil’s compression of narratives operates to foreground a subversive intent directed not just at the propaganda of the original but towards later, post-colonial formulations of which the “orientalised subject” of the introduction, an identity which this woman has purportedly escaped as she bends to vote, might serve as exemplar. Eve may be hailed as the “new Arab woman”, the representative of change, in an introduction which parrots the caption to the original image but in the image Avedissian re-imagines, and which retains the original caption, she is as old as the hills.

“Then,” writes Avedissian, “I moved to a larger format, which enabled me to assemble on one panel different subjects and thus tell a story. Made on corrugated cardboard – sold as packing item in the souks of Cairo, in rolls and by the kilo...

“Each panel has a cotton border, with attaching ropes to assemble one to the other. By attaching all the panels together, a whole space could be created. This gave me a large field of manoeuvre. The idea was also to replace the notion of one painting by a whole range of images that could be reused, replaced, interchanged and redesigned...”

It is a process that negates the possibility of any nostalgia for a supposedly Golden Age. By reusing images produced as part and parcel of the project to police the perimeters of identity, to promote a patriotism acceptable to the state and its approved narratives, the Stencils undermine, with humour and an often understated irony, the foundations of that enterprise. The carpet is pulled from beneath the Nasserist state’s attempts to construct identity. I would go one step further and argue that Chant Avedissian’s stencils express a profound antipathy to the hegemonic whatever form it takes.

Nostalgia, as any advertising agency will confirm, can be an effective marketing tool. But to brand Avedissian as its purveyor, to insist he is “inspired” by a golden age located in mid-20th century Egypt, undersells his achievement by misrepresenting his work.

“I don’t do art. I do fighting against influences. I paint, it’s not political art, but it’s an attitude.”

Another reduction of a complex problem to a soundbite and Avedissian is being as disingenuous as ever. For his work *is* political. It is at its most radical in the manner in which it opposes orthodoxies, and it does so all the time.

Back to the interview which passed in the manner of an amiable conversation: the photographer, when he arrived, was taken aback to find Chant had already sketched out the images that would accompany the interview. He had filters for lights, bags full of props. One of them was a red flag emblazoned with a hammer and sickle. I stood in front of it, dressed in a military uniform Chant had brought and which he insisted I wear. Chant stood behind me, in dark glasses and crumpled, collarless shirt. “There will be a photograph of you and me,” he insisted. “You will be interviewing, a military policeman, and I will be a Ukrainian spy.” But then I was working for Al-Ahram, source of many of the images used in the stencils, and a paper still owned by the state.

Building blocks

“Recreating an image in stencil is a process similar to printing, which involves assembling given forms like a brick wall...”

“My art master was the adobe brick. Putting three bricks together to make a wall, to make a pattern, it’s magic.”

In describing his own work Avedissian frequently employs architectural similes.

Architectural elements also form the subject of many pieces, be it the “*Touba*, a mud brick unit, with which Hassan Fathy built his unfinished masterpiece village in Kharga Oasis”,^{vii} or the decorative brick work of Samarkand. The artist’s photographs of details from the Bibi-Khanym Mosque and other buildings in Samarkand, and of brickwork patterns from Al-Qasr in the Egyptian oasis of Dakhla, appear prominently in *Patterns, Costumes & Stencils*: London, Saqi Books, 2009.

Chant Avedissian’s association with Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1902-89) dates from 1981 when he began filing the architect’s papers and drawings and would last until Fathy’s death. Fathy’s purism, his insistence “that genuine Egyptian art and the revival of crafts had to be tackled simultaneously” and belief “that the merging of ancient and modern art would succeed only if no external interference in the adoption of materials, techniques, or cultural assessments” was allowed, would have a major impact on Avedissian’s work.^{viii} The architectural conceits which Avedissian has continued to use in describing his own methods, indeed much of the work he produced during the 80s, the period in which he worked with the architect, can be seen, in terms of both process and content, as the artist’s homage to Fathy.

In 1985 Avedissian held his first exhibition of textile hangings. The works exhibited were the result of a painstaking process of assembly. The basic unit – Avedissian’s own *touba* – were “the three basic shapes of the rectangle, square and triangle” from which “one is able to construct panels out of wood, paper or any other material”^{ix}. The results often echo the stark geometries of Fathy’s buildings.

The source patterns are eclectic, ranging from the painted triangular decoration of 18th dynasty sarcophagi to the marble decoration of Mameluke mosques. But while the patterns may be indigenous the form has a wider cultural resonance.

“It was in western Rajasthan, and particularly in Jaisalmer, that I first came into contact with the world of appliqué textiles which inspired me to make textile panels,” writes Avedissian. “Travelling by train through the Thar Desert one arrives at this ancient city through which merchants passed as they crossed Iran from Africa along the caravan route to India and China.

“The square is divided into rectangles and triangles. These squares placed together form the panels. Several assembled panels form the tent; it’s a movable space, easily disassembled, folded and transported.”^x

Caravan routes to India and China, travelling through the Thar Desert, movable spaces – tents – suggestive of the kinds of nomadic existence the imposition of national borders has eradicated: the appeal to pre-modern models is at once deliberate, and deliberately contrived. It is difficult – no, it is impossible – to believe Avedissian did not first come into contact with such textiles in his birthplace Cairo where an entire district is dedicated to the creation of the appliqued panels which are such a noticeable feature of the celebratory and funeral tents erected in the streets. But this is hardly the point. The post-event rationalisation of the origins

of his own panels which he elaborated when writing the text for *Patterns, Costumes & Stencils* – the panels predate the text by two decades – is telling. It seeks to delineate a cultural space where borders are irrelevant and posits a visual language that is not constricted by such boundaries. It insists that a triangle is a triangle in China and Egypt and France, that a square is a square.

The same impulse is present in his account of the costumes he created beginning in 1987.

“There is not much difference over a huge expanse of geography in the basic cuts of a traditional costume... Much as in Silk Road architecture, similarity is a constant feature...

“The *haik* of the Atlas resemble the *melaya* of the Nile, which also resemble the *sari* of India... Similarly, caftans are found from Morocco to Mongolia. They are variations on a theme, and all of almost the same cut.”^{xi}

Class boundaries are equally insubstantial.

“The wealthier the individual and the higher their social status the more expensive the material but from the top to the bottom of society the cut is the same.”^{xii}

To note that reality differs from the idealised space Avedissian delineates is again to miss the point. Utopias involve wishful thinking. A square may be a square but not all squares are equal, something Avedissian knows better than most

To mark the centenary of Kazimir Malevich’s black square the Whitechapel Gallery in London staged an exhibition – *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015* – which it described as follows: “This epic show takes Kazimir Malevich’s radical painting of a black square – first shown in Russia 100 years ago – as the emblem of a new art and a new society. The exhibition features over 100 artists who took up its legacy, from Buenos Aires to Tehran, London to Berlin, New York to Tel Aviv. Their paintings, photographs and sculptures symbolise Modernism’s utopian aspirations and breakdowns.”

Chant Avedissian was among the 100 artists included. However explicit he has been about the pre-modern origins of his own textile squares they can still be co-opted by an exhibition to celebrate abstract art and society between 1915 and 2015 and exhibited beneath a rubric that straitjackets them as symbolising “Modernism’s utopian aspirations and breakdowns”.

“*If parents tell their children that Paris is at the centre of art - that is abuse*” becomes less a provocation than an indictment when artisans at a market in Jaisalmer can be portrayed as taking up the legacy of Suprematism, can be transformed into workers at the coal face of a European avant garde.

Back to the fore

In the 2017 exhibition *Transfer, Transport, Transit* Avedissian foregrounds designs that once formed the backdrop to his *Cairo Stencils*. He dispenses with figurative elements drawn from the pages of Egypt's national press – the inhabitants of the “pantheon of the Golden Age” frequently misrepresented as the primary subject of the stencils – the better to focus attention on what is most often overlooked in the schema of earlier works. It is a reductionist ploy, though one which has the effect of opening up hitherto concealed vistas and, in so doing, amplifying concerns central to his work.

The stencilled panels included in the exhibition illuminate, rather than conceal, complexity. This time the juxtapositions are of abstracted forms drawn from designs on Tashkent caftans, Khiva mudbrick wall patterns, the geometries of the polychromatic marble floor of the 14th century Mosque of Sultan Hassan in Cairo, the *çintamani* of Ottoman velvets embroidered in gold thread. Pared down, elegant, the panels serve as milestones on a journey that follows the Silk Road across the steppes of Central Asia. The destination, Samarkand, is both fabled city and a real place. It is a confluence, the intersection between the story/fable and reality/the city with its material culture, that Avedissian has always explored, juxtaposing privileged narrative with unseemly facts.

Avedissian takes the long view: in examining the nexus of myth and reality he refuses to allow hearsay to pose as history, expediency to dress up as fate. At its heart his vision is humanist but a humanism shorn of illusion: the exotic is just one trope he repeatedly shoots down.

Among the milestones along the journey included in *Transfer, Transport, Transit* is a panel which superimposes Ottoman *çintamani* – a triangle of three spots and a pair of wavy bands – over repeated Bukhara floral designs. Of course, there is little that can be neutral about an Armenian artist deploying Ottoman motifs. It cannot help but be a loaded gesture. But nothing in Avedissian's work is as simple as it seems. The tiger stripes and spots of the *çintamani*, a typical feature of Turkish textiles and ceramics for centuries, may appear quintessentially Ottoman but the motif predates Ottoman rule by several hundred years. It can be traced to the Buddhist period in China when the lines represented sanctity. It was used by Tamerlane (1336-1405) on coinage and to mark property. The spots could allude to leopards, the pelts of which were worn by heroes in the Persian tradition. In China the circles represented pearls.

Take the long view and symbols cannot be reduced, just as identities cannot be constructed at the whim of the state.

The deceptively simple decorative motifs which Avedissian appropriates reverberate across the vast spaces traversed by the Silk Road. They echo in a space where boundaries are negated, where hegemonies cannot distort and identities need not be improvised. It is in this space – capacious as a continent – that the artist has carved out a home. Throughout his career his compass has been fixed on a single point, an algebraic formulation, neither here nor imagined, where a square can be a square can be a square.

©Nigel Ryan, July 2017

ⁱ Chant Avedissian: Go east young man, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 2 April 1988.

ⁱⁱ In 2010, the year before the uprising that forced the removal of Hosni Mubarak as president, the tourist industry in Egypt employed 12 per cent of the population and accounted for 14 per cent of the country's hard currency revenue. Egyptian Ministry of Finance statistics.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chant Avedissian, *Cairo Stencils*, Mostyn 20 November – 19 February 2011. My italics.

^{iv} President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the press on 24 May 1956, transforming it into a tool for the regime.

^v The Eagle of Saladin, first introduced as a symbol of the Egyptian revolution of 1952, still occupies the central white band of the Egyptian flag

^{vi} Article 1 of Law 73 of 1956 on the Exercise of Political Rights granted women the right to vote in Egypt. Women participated in national elections for the first time in 1957.

^{vii} *Stencils 1991 - 1996* by Chant Avedissian, November 1997

^{viii} *Modern Egyptian Art 1910-2003*, Liliane Karnouk: Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 2005

^{ix} *Patterns, Costumes & Stencils*: London, Saqi Books, 2009.

^x *ibid*

^{xi} *ibid*

^{xii} *ibid*