

Chant Avedissian is one of the most significant visual artists to have emerged in the Arab world in the last half century.

Born in Cairo in 1951, he studied at Montreal Museum of Fine Arts School of Art and Design and later at the École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs in Paris.

His grounding in Western art practice, though important, has had far less influence on his practice than the decade he spent working with the visionary Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, beginning in 1981 when he began archiving Fathy's papers, and continuing until Fathy's death in 1989.

Fathy's purism, his insistence "that genuine Egyptian art and the revival of crafts had to be tackled simultaneously" and belief "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, changed the direction of Avedissian's practice. Of equal importance were the travels Avedissian undertook, first through the oases of Egypt's Western desert and later to the Far East, taking in India, the countries of the ancient Silk Road, China and Mongolia.

It is from these two experiences – working alongside Fathy and exposure to the artisan traditions of Asia – that Avedissian contrived a breakthrough in his own work, producing a series of textile hangings - a painstaking process of assembly utilising local Egyptian cotton which was hand-dyed and then pieced together in large scale panels using three basic units, the triangle, square and rectangle - which 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 some of 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."

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 the pre-modern is an attempt by the artists to distance himself from both the Eurocentrism of Western art school teaching and from the derivative modes that have dominated art production in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East.

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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup>

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 the textile hangings and costumes Avedissian created in the 1980s oppose a hegemony that can portray artisans at a market in Jaisalmer as taking up the legacy of Suprematism, transforming them into workers at the coal face of a European avant garde, then his best known works, the series of Cairo Stencils, casts the net further, articulating Avedissian’s profound mistrust of the hegemonic whatever form it takes.

The Cairo Stencils lend themselves to a host of interpretations, the laziest and most pervasive of which is based on the assumption they purvey nostalgia for some lost golden age of Egyptian culture.

“The reflected nostalgia in Avedissian’s work is overpowering,” writes one critic of the Stencils. “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,

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Armenians, Palestinian refugees, Europeans and a great number of Middle Eastern intellectuals mingled.”

It is a strangely ahistorical description of a series of works that examine the historiography of the period, not least in its misrepresentation of the 1950’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”.

The subjects of the stencils are a motley bunch. They 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.

The one they 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 never less than partisan – that Avedissian uses as his source material.

The Cairo Stencils, then, are images of images. They can be endlessly reworked from the cut outs he made based on the images published in state-owned magazines and newspapers. 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.

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, pulling the carpet from beneath the Nasserist state’s attempts to construct identity.

In his most recent panels, first exhibited in 2017, Avedissian foregrounds designs that once formed the backdrop to his Cairo 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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.

He 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. The deceptively simple motifs Avedissian appropriates reverberate across the vast spaces of Central Asia. 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.