



Opening of Dawn Portraits by Huda Lutfi at Gypsum Gallery (Photo: Soha Elsirgany)

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While Huda Lutfi is known for her sharpwitted social and political works, her newest exhibition, Dawn Portraits, at Gypsum Gallery offers a rare immersion into her lesser known, more quiet practice of portrait painting.

The renowned artist and historian, Lutfi, is constantly looking outward and around her, always collecting material to use for voicing her thoughts on her surroundings, capturing Cairo's pulse and aesthetic.

Looking at her oeuvre, we see Lutfi process urban dynamics to create works that evoke Egyptian collective memory, through collages, installations and video art, often using satire, paradox and humour.

A space of one's own

In Dawn Portraits, however, the critical commentary has gone quiet, clearing the way for a series of portraits that come from a different, quieter space within the artist, produced in the early, tranquil hours of the day.

There is no evocation of collective memory; no reference to events for viewers to knowingly nod at; no conversation with the city, but rather a conversation with herself.

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Though less frequently exhibited, this is not first time Lutfi has showcased her portraits. [Lutfi-Twenty-Years-of-Art.aspx](#)

Also titled Dawn Portraits, in 2002 she displayed the paintings she had produced the year earlier at Cairo's Townhouse Gallery and at the Fortis Circus Theatre Gallery in The Hague.

"It's something I do every few years, when I want to just take time out, to reflect and be by myself. To enjoy playing with paint and form and paper," Lutfi told Ahram Online during an interview at the Townhouse's Library.

Fittingly, the backdrop to our conversation was the Townhouse's exhibition of antiques and paraphernalia collected by Amgad Naguib.

The massive collection matches Lutfi's interest in old objects and history, but also — as it feels like an entire house or shop is being moved into the gallery — brings to mind temporary displacement, which was relevant to Lutfi's story in the past year.

"When the building that houses my studio [and part of the Townhouse's headquarters] collapsed, we were asked to evacuate right away and I left in a hurry," she says.

Only a week before the evacuation, she had just finished selecting and shipping many of her works to Dubai for a large solo exhibition at the Third Line Gallery, titled Magnetic Bodies: Imaging the Urban, a project that left her exhausted.

Between the demanding solo and being out of her studio, she welcomed the quieter, less analytical practice in her daily portraits, and "working small for the time being."



Dawn Portraits by Huda Lutfi at Gypsum Gallery (Photo: Soha Elsirgany)

A file on faces

Painted on Chinese gold leaf paper using gouache paint, over 60 monochromatic portraits are as meditative to the viewer as the artist's morning ritual that begot them.

There is softness in the grey, serenity in the closed eyes of some, and a meditation in the repetition because of the resemblance the faces often share. They are displayed on the walls in small, tight frames, with the exception of a few that have a coloured background or are large in size.

"I wanted them black and white, because it's [what it feels like] at dawn. I didn't want very bright colours, although sometimes I threw in some colours," she says.

The portraits are as pensive as they are playful. A line of accessories runs through the collection, an ode to Lutfi's time as a jewelry designer and her undying love for earrings.

She adorns many of the faces' ears with delicate ornaments. Some are simple, with just a pearl, while others are more elaborate, like tiny chandeliers.

Walking amongst the portraits, you can find yourself playing a game of comparison, trying to catch the similarities between the faces, hoping to identify little hints.

Are they self-portraits of the artist, with her slender features? Are they even the same person? An element of mystery surrounds the untitled grey-toned faces.

"I'm not painting anybody in particular. I don't intend for them to be self-portraits, but if you look to artists who do portraits, like Francis Bacon or Picasso, I think they end up painting themselves. So there are elements of self-portrait, I cannot deny it," the artist comments.

The resemblance to the artist can also be traced to her mother, whose face was recurrent in a number of portraits, "sometimes as a figure of authority, other times as a figure of beauty," according to Lutfi.

Even while some faces are imbued with the spirit of real people in her life, she paints them all from memory.

"I look at faces a lot, to watch how the shadow plays on the face and the shape of the features, and looking at other artists' treatments of portraits. So I have a huge file [in my memory] on faces, but then I close the file and just paint, letting them form as I go. I throw in the paint and see what happens."

Lutfi compares the process to making pottery in the way that the object emerges from the material as the sculptor works, and that the potter can't foresee what the colours will look like until after they are fired in the oven.

"I cannot predict how the portrait will turn out in the end, and that's the nicest part about this. The element of surprise is what I love," she says.

Though her portraits are not sculpted like pottery, having little spatial depth, and mostly no background, they share with pottery a certain aesthetic or texture.

It's as if they are molded on two-dimensional slabs of grey clay. Perhaps in one interpretation, the muted grey color even suggests cement, a notoriously abundant material in modern Cairo, Lutfi's muse.

While that may not have been Lutfi's intention, the link to cement might complement the artist's choice to frame the portraits very tightly, deliberately referring to Cairo's claustrophobic energy.

"The framing was a conceptual choice. I think we are framed as beings. We're culturally framed and socially framed," she says.



Dawn Portraits by Huda Lutfi at Gypsum Gallery (Photo: Soha Elsirgany)

Gold under grey

In Dawn Portraits, this conceptual side of Lutfi is not in the forefront, yet it isn't entirely absent either. In fact, the seemingly subdued portraits carry with them many of Lutfi's signature themes; gender, repetition and archiving.

True to her feminist oeuvre, here she also plays on gender, depicting androgynous figures hovering between man and woman, which brings in the slant of gender equality her works are known for.

"I try to reduce the distance between the feminine and the masculine," she says, adding that sometimes she starts by painting a man and in the end it turns into a woman. "I always bring out the feminine side in men."

In her work Lutfi profusely uses repetition, to reinforce an idea, and a similar effect can be felt through the portraits, which share enough for them to feel like a recurring face.

While Lutfi's art and background as a historian are concerned with archiving events outside herself, the portraits are like a personal psychological archive of emotions and moods.

She tells Ahram Online how the portraits are about looking inward and going inside herself, in a moment where she felt uninterested in being "too confrontational."

Recently, the political seems to be taking a backseat in many artists' works, while some are perhaps nervous about tackling politics, especially in light of a crackdown on some cultural spaces that took place last year.

Her 2013 exhibition Cut and Paste — which was charged with political and social commentary tackling subjects ranging from the revolution to sexual harassment — might have faced censorship if it were exhibited in the current political juncture.

Lutfi is one of the artists who, for the time being, chose to pull her material from within. Yet, she likes how the conceptual themes (of gender, for example) found their way through her portraits.

"Some people were asking these questions about gender, and I was very happy they did," she says.

Lutfi's next exhibition will be with a group of artists from different generations, something she feels will help counter their shared mood, feeling a little confused or a little discouraged.

"Maybe now it's time for artists to come together, to form groups and have a support system," she says.

Her 2001 Dawn Portraits were slightly different than those at Gypsum now. A number of them had beige colored flesh. The gold leaf peered through the paint in some parts to reveal itself, and the eyes were painted with loose strokes of black charcoal.

This time she covers the gold leaf paper completely. The eyes are similarly depicted, but no longer stand out in black, but blend with the soft grey faces.

In the spirit of Lutfi's multilayered work, one way to further appreciate the portraits is to be conscious of the gold leaf underneath the layers of grey.



Dawn Portraits by Huda Lutfi at Gypsum Gallery (Photo: courtesy of Gypsum)

Programme:

The exhibition opened on 12 January and runs till 6 February. Open daily from 12-8pm. Friday 4-8pm, Sundays off. Gypsum Gallery, 5 Ibrahim Naguib Street, Apt 2, Ground Floor, Garden City, Cairo

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