

Khaled Hafez

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Interviews

Interview with Predrag Pajdic, curator, for the projects This Day and Recognize, at the London Tate Modern and Contemporary Art Platform, respectively.

**PP- Egyptian contemporary art scene is certainly thriving at the moment.
 How do you see yourself as a part of this almost renaissance-like movement?**

KH- I must say that it not a co-incidence that the interest in Middle East contemporary art practices started after September 11, 2001; with the current American administration and the decision to lead a new "crusade" of the "free world" against "terror", I think the "real people", and I mean by those the whole world who is not in the American administration, anticipated the disaster, and tried to look for activities and event that would initiate a dialogue and enhance bridging between East and West.

The 9/11 disaster was just the peak of misunderstanding between "components" of certain cultures, and sage voices would look then for methods to dialogue, while some interested parties would ignite war.

So where I am in all this; I have been working in my studio for around 23 years; I started with a state-funded art movement, what we in Cairo call now "the establishment"; this establishment became futile as we progressed in our careers: I personally could not talk about just "aesthetics", or enter in debates of "the heritage versus modernity" and similar obsolete critical termes still in fact prevailing today; I wanted to probe the social changes happening in the nineties, the new behavioral traits in the society acquired by the bombardment of parabolic satellite images.

So I, among others, decided to go independent even if we do not exhibit; I started exhibiting in private galleries in 1996 with the then Cairo-Berlin gallery (now closed down after the German owner deceased). In 1999 I went with the Townhouse gallery, which by then was already considered as stealing artists from "the establishment".

The advantage of being independent is the liberty of auto-production; with painting it is attainable, more difficult though when you work with digital media.

Despite difficulties, today I work in Cairo in a beautiful and dynamic movement of independent artists, who belong to two generations, and whose work reflect a certain quality on both technical and conceptual levels; the work is also representative of the current social change.

The practices of those artists just demonstrate that exquisite art always existed here; it is just the international interest that comes always late.

PP- Do you think that such disaster as a terrorist attack has to happen in order for world to take a notice, in this case the Middle East?

KH- Not really; it does not have to be terrorism; it is terrorism because the Middle East region is currently congested: eternal political regimes/autocracies, mal-distribution of wealth among the arab states, and the sudden behavior change due to globalization and the open skies phenomenon.

Notice that interest in Russian artists came only after the perestroika; interest in the Chinese art came later; before it was latin American art, etc; you see, I personally think that the "interest" has limited resources like everything else?: it cannot smile for everyone at the same time; so it wakes up and demonstrates only after "something" happens. It was nice in the case of the prestroika, even nicer in the case of Berlin wall, interesting with the reform of the Chinese system, but in case of the Middle East, it came after havoc, that's all.

PP- Do you think that this "interest" in the Middle East is here to stay for some time, or will it wear off as any novelty after some time?

KH- See, so far there has been a pattern for this "interest"; I personally could always sense a three-to-five years pattern, especially that the international art scene gets new players every few years too; twenty years ago there was nothing called "independent curator"; the game involved only 1-artist 2- gallery 3-critic; remember that Germano Celant in 1967 was introduced as "critic" when he proposed the arte povera artists, the same applies to Achile Bonito Oliva when he introduced the transavanguardia: though they were both playing the parts of curators.

After the Magiciens de la Terre and the first introduction of African artis to the world in the late eighties and early nineties, the game now involves the following in order: 1-curator 2-gallery 3-artist 4-critic.

I must say the first "premonition" of an internationa interest started in the nineties with the introduction of Mona Hatoum, then Sherin Neshat and the mid-nineties with Gada Amer: you see, all girls from the Middle East; the perspective then was insinuating a new genre of "neo-feminism", not THE Middle East, but women from the ME. Not a single name of a male artist from the Middle East comes to mind.

Of course names like Dafrawi in Switzerland or Marwan in Germany do not count AT ALL in the formula: they were career artists who lived in the West for many decades and were recognized on a small local (in the host country they became citizens of) art scene as "of so-or-so origin", i.e. good art of exotic origins.

There was an "authentic" individual interest from two curators I know of who sensed a potential interest in the region: the work of Marilu Knodel of the Scottsdale Museum in Arizona (then at INOVA in Milwaukee), and of art historian Martina Corgnati who is now finishing her book about Middle East contemporary art practices, the first on the subject.

So the real "interest" started in 2004, and I would say it will go on for perhaps 2009; some artists will stay and sustain later as "international", not Arab.

PP- How does it make you feel when referred to as an Arab artist?

KH- I love that question? well; you know I think what I will tell you applies to me as Egyptian, and perhaps to Lebanese artists as well if we adopt the same approach, I call it the geo-biological approach: I am in fact Egyptian; which implies that I am African, Arab, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Egyptian (i.e. ancient roots); I am tainted with judo-christo-islamic genes and whatever God (or whoever is up there) put in me and/or my chromosomes.

I ACTUALLY AM an Arab artist after all; I am who I am with my Egyptian specificities; I guess it makes me feel like a mobile bank of ideas, thoughts, complexes, humour and an insatiable desire to live, to share and to learn.

I remember in our talks in Cairo that I told my story as a kid: I was born Moslem, but my parents put me in an Irish catholic school because it was good education; at that time we all had Egyptian names, I mean secular names, Moslems and Christians alike shared similar names because the idea was to be Egyptian. It was a different time then, it is a different time now, but I believe that this is the beauty of being Egyptian; you are everything, Arab is only one part.