

Khaled Hafez

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Interviews

Video Interview with Heba Kayal* for Tache Gallery Blog, Cairo, December 2010

HK: Once a dermatologist, you are painter and video artist who is recognized not only locally for paintings inspired by graphics and super hero cartoons, but also for videos that are not forcibly politically correct. You are one of Egypt's most successful names to succeed in both international biennales in addition to having sales of his work in international auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's. How did you get your start in art?

KH: My parents are both doctors, so there was no question about it: I went to medical school. In my first year, Egyptian artist Zakaria Zeiny, the then head of the painting department at the Fine Arts of Helwan University spotted my work and enrolled me in evening classes at the fine arts school. I studied behind my parents' backs for 6 years. They knew about it a decade later when this story was interesting to be published and they read it like everybody else and we speak about it now jokingly.

HK: What did you learn as a student in art school?

KH: I was a student of the giant painters Zakaria el Zeiny for three years and Hamed Nada for another three years. Nada was a persona in the Egyptian art scene. He never taught concept, but we learnt from him because he not only taught but also painted alongside his students at the school in the very same studio; we learnt what it is to be a studio artist and how to handle the studio space. But I learnt a lot from el Zeiny who was mentored --at a brief moment in his career-- in Italy by the great Italian painter Giorgio Morandi. El Zeiny helped his students discover and explore new mediums, I learned from Zeiny to work every single day in life, practice a lot and pick up new mediums every 2 to 3 years, hence my collateral practice of photography, film / video and installation.

HK: What mediums do you regularly work with in your daily practice?

KH: I'm a painter, photographer, installation and video artist. My international career was launched in 2004 principally with the medium of video, yet my gallery representation in Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Zurich and Paris promote my painting and drawing practices. My dual career as a painter and installation artist allows me both independence and a liberty to exhibit in a diversity of international events. In a nutshell: I am a painter who practices a lot of photography and film, drawing and writing.

HK: Presenting a large-scale project in the current 12th Cairo Biennale, your installation *Tomb Sonata in Three Military Movements (And Overture)* is an arresting piece of work. Your work plays with the notion of space, light, and as well as traditional media like painting and installation. How was that work developed?

KH: For over ten years I have been attempting to decipher the ancient Egyptian wall: why and how were those walls created, what narrative they presented and what impact this ancient iconography had on viewers. Ancient Egyptians invented the art of painting, as we know it today. Since 1995 I refrained from using the western post renaissance laws of painting, I literally put those aside and worked with what we can call "Ancient Egyptian lay-outing" because ancient teams of artists used to tell stories on their wall surfaces, a long narrative based on figuration. Painting was a practice that was used in the tombs and temples to document the lives, political propaganda, or stories of deities. So actually in my painting I try to reach this kind of practice of telling stories with the same techniques of Ancient Egyptian painting practice, which is why my surfaces are accessible, you can see recognizable images and forms. For *Tomb Sonata in Three Military Movements (And Overture)*, I recreated a tomb with four chambers, and divided each chamber to host an idea in a different medium: painting, installation, sculptural elements, and just light. I explored the notions of metal, phosphorus, flight and fear.

HK: Do you think it works? This combination of painting laws inspired from Ancient Egyptian painting and the blending with contemporary iconography?

KH: well I think the blend works for me. I use images from advertising, and I try to appropriate them on the canvas with ancient gods and goddesses; I try by that to break the barrier between past and present. In my paintings I apply the same ancient laws: graphic elements, flat, always in movement from one side of the painting to the other, shapes and forms, animals and things that we can relate to. For *Tomb Sonata in Three Military Movements (And Overture)* I try to use the walls of my installation in a similar pattern and constructed 4 rooms to form a tomb. In the first room, I painted and put *black light* – a form of ultraviolet neon lamp that identifies only white surfaces and make them shine-- so that you see only the white segments in the painting. The second room is dark, you can see forms of military gear, and the third room, which is the burial part, I try to create alphabets on the wall. Ancient Egyptian alphabet was based on forms and shapes of living animals, or solid things that are recognized by

everybody. What I tried to do was take pictures, images of things that are recognizable by everyone: like tanks, bombers, choppers and snipers, and cut them from sheets of stainless steel and arrange them in patterns that simulate visual alphabets/language.

The 3 military movements are represented by the 3 rooms, the first room is called "Canvas" and I'm referring to the painting, second room is called "Phosphorous" and I'm relating to the surfaces that shine like phosphorous –one of the prohibited bombs is the phosphorous bomb prohibited in ethical warfare, and the third room is called "Metal" and it refers to the principal element of the construction of arms in warfare. The fourth compartment is only a passage that leads the viewer to the three principal chambers.

HK: Why the recurring motif of Catwoman, Batman, and (the Ancient Egyptian god) Anubis?

KH: It just try to identify the popular culture across time; I believe that whether we like it or not we live every day a process of cultural recycling, on all levels including our universal collective memory. When you look at Anubis and Batman from the back and front, when you look at their head from behind, their ears and the manner in which they point up, in addition to their naked torso, the six packs and power position, there are more than visual similarities. They both also assume the same function: protection against evil, which demonstrates that the concept recycles across millennia. There's also Catwoman and Bastet (the goddess of Domestication) and so forth. I am trying to interpret this form of visual recycling. I take images from advertising; for male figures I recycle the images of body builders from men's magazines; Ancient Egyptians always pictured the male and female deities in perfect bodies. So today's male perfect body is the body builder, and the perfect female body is the anorexic top model that illustrates the advertising and the fashion businesses. I transform all into gods and goddesses. Perhaps like this I break another barrier: that between what is sacred and what is profane.

HK: Do you think it's an automatic subconscious association, the visual?

KH: I think so, I don't think there was or is any theft of ideas that took place at any time. The hieroglyphs were invented to document religion. So this idea of gods, and the 9 gods of Creation represented without masks, while their earthly representations all have masks of animals or birds. So you have this whole mythology of religion that travels to Greece, Rome, Persia and beyond and is a process of a continuous propagation of thought. Eventually in the 20th century, we're speaking about 5000 years of all those heroes, suddenly it comes back from the United States or elsewhere in the forms of Anubis as Batman, Catwoman as Bastet or Gebb (god of the earth), who was always pictured as a reclining man who is all in green-like the Incredible Hulk. If you look at Spiderman with all those webs, and if you look at any mummy with shrouds --with linen gauze crisscrossing in opposite directions--: it's almost visually very close. The idea here is not somebody inspired by something but it's a process of continuous recycling, because everybody owns the history of the world. Egypt belongs to Egyptians now, but Egyptian history belongs to the world. And the culture itself was so influential that it contained and attenuated and hybridized with every invader. Invaders too left with something of Egypt. Eventually, in every big museum in Europe and the USA there is an Egyptian collection. The whole world considers this part of history as belonging to the whole world. If those were the artifacts, what about the visual culture? It's a process of recycling. This is my theory that I believe in, and I don't think it's far-fetched.

HK: When one considers your installation for the Cairo Biennale and compare it to the paintings in your studio, what are the commonalities and themes in style, structure, and themes-if there are any?

KH: They're the very same. I have the same elements of my paintings in the piece for the Cairo Biennale. I moved the elements from the canvas from paper to stainless steel to place on the wall. I took my 2D work and made it more 3D using the space. The use of space is an Ancient Egyptian practice as well. Temples and temple walls were all covered by various narrative. There were always four walls and columns in between as functional pieces --including the sculptural elements--; all elements worked harmoniously to engulf the viewer in a spiritual and awesome experience. This use of space is reminiscent of what we call now *installation art*. Imagine, contemporary installations are ancient Egyptian practice, and in this practice, as with global contemporary culture the audience becomes an integral part of the space, interacting with the space, just like ancient temple goes. In *Tomb Sonata*, that's what I tried to create working with light and creating a choreography inside the space. The irregular tunnels where you go in from one spot and leave the door as you enter: I would not want the audience to leave from a door at the other end. I wanted my space to be obsessive enough that you have to see what you see going in as when going out. That is exactly how Ancient Egyptian tombs are; as you come in is how you go out.

HK: How would you define your themes?

KH: If I can describe my whole practice in one word is "identity." Whether in video or painting I tackle the same notions and elements that help me explore the concept. I explore through different aspects of this complex identity. I have a theory, I call *the Big Mac Theory of Egyptian identity*. Egypt is African, Middle Eastern, Arab-Islamic, Judo-Christian, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and before all: it is Ancient Egyptian as well. Each of those aspects is a strata, a horizontal "slice". It is a big mistake to consider only one layer to describe the Egyptian identity, and leave other layers. One layer is never sufficient. All the cultural problems happening today in the public sphere question the Arab / Islamic versus the Ancient Egyptian or Mediterranean aspects. There are certain parties or certain groups of people that consider Egyptians today as belonging only to a sole stratum. When you look at Egyptian identity as you tackle a Big Mac, you know that if you take one layer off it is not a big Mac anymore.

*Heba Kayal is an art writer and scholar who writes for several English language Egyptian publications. She currently pursues MA in art history, Columbia University, USA.