

## Khaled Hafez

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### Interviews

Jenny Meier - Khaled Hafez

#### **JM- What is your recent work about?**

**KH-** For over a decade my work, whether painting, installation or video dealt principally with "identity": all possible aspects of identity.

I believe that Egyptian artists (together with artists from "specific" or "particular" parts of the world) enjoy a multiplicity of identities: due to the geographical position of Egypt, along with its cumulative historical civilizations, and its "detritus" layers of cultures, Egyptian creators can relate to and "lean upon" several identities; Egypt is in the African continent, the first country from the right hand side in the south of the Mediterranean sea, it lies in the PERFECT middle of the Middle East, it was governed throughout its history by regimes that adopted ancient Egyptian religions for 3500 years, then judo-Christian faiths that reigned for around 600 years, then an Arabo-Islamic reign of a thousand years: so you see, "identity" research can reference the ancient Egyptian elements (like in the works of several other Egyptian painters including myself), Judo-Christian elements (like in the works of artists like Huda Lutfi, Maha George, George Fekri among others), and an Arabo-Islamic elements (like in the works of artists like again Huda Lutfi, Ayman el Semary, among others.

There is a trend in the works of painters like Amre Heiba, Hesham el Zeiny, Ahmad Nosseir, Hazem Taha Hussein, Sabah Naim, Mohamed Abla, Adel el Siwi among others, and sculptors like Hazem El Mestekawi, Hesham Nawar among others, to relate to the more western trends of a Mediterranean contemporary nature.

I believe that artists from Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Palestine and Jordan enjoy a similar multiplicity in "identity", since those countries are Mediterranean, Arab, and Middle-Eastern and with a correct "mixity" of Islam, Christianity and Judaism as a reference-heritage.

#### **JM- I know that you are focused on political issues, but what specifically?**

**KH-** in fact politics per se is a major driver to my approach to subject matter, but solely it is NOT THE driver; what I care about are the social changes that came as a consequence to political and military "experiments" that Egypt, the Middle East region and the culture had undergone in the past 40 years. See, I am 43; I lived the death of Nasser and his theory of Pan-Arabism in 1970, then the assassination of Sadat in 1981, then September 11. In 1996 I created a small series of collages called "visions of a rusty memory"; in one work I had Bin Laden (totally incognito then to those who live outside the Middle East) and a semi nude Claudia Schiffer juxtaposed on one surface; to me I had a premonition of September 11, 2001 as early as 1996, five years before the apocalypse; I am not the only artist who could see it; in Lebanon Walid Raad and the Atlas group, Akram Zaatar among others could apparently foresee "something".

The major driver in my work is the social and behavioral change that happens today as a result of globalization and "hegemony-inflicted democracy".

#### **JM- Why are you drawn to your subject?**

**KH-** good question?; when I was a kid, that is slightly over 30 years ago, my father was a doctor (radiologist) in the Egyptian army, an army worn out by wars with Israel and other regional conflicts).

My father (who happens to be my first and most precious mentor), was always absent "in action" most of the times (from 1956, six years before I was even born, till 1973, the Yum Kipur War, also called in Egypt October War).

I grew up in an Egypt always in war, my father used to brief me as a kid of how I should avoid war when I grow up. My father, though a fan of Nasser during Nasser's lifetime, was the first to applaud Sadat when Sadat decided to end it in 1977 by going to Israel and

offering to end the military conflict). My father was supportive to Sadat due to the fact that no body wins in a war, and he (my father) had two sons who would consequently be at risk of losing their lives in a military/ideological adventure where no one REALLY wins. As a "fighting" physician", he spent his last 15 year in the service on the frontline. I grew up in politics; my awareness increased along the years, with my "formation" as an artist, by the aid of my father (he is 81 today) and his strategic knowledge of politics, political history, political economy among other fields. My childhood and my upbringing drive me to observe and probe changes. In my work I do not try to criticize or comment, I have no answers, I just try to raise questions and probe, probe and probe all the time.

**JM- Which artists directly influence you? (Western and/or Middle Eastern)?**

**KH-** Robert Rauschenberg, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Andy Wrhol for the "concept" or the "lack of concept?"), Rauschenberg again, Picasso and Jean-Michel Basquiat for the technique.

JM- How would you describe your process?

KH- I personally am concerned with striking a balance between concept and craft; I trained with two important painters (and professors at the Cairo fine arts): Hamed Nada and Zakareya El Zeiny; both were technically excellent, especially the latter who helped me (among other students) to use my senses to observe, assimilate then probe before I get to work. Though this helped me immensely in painting two decades now, it also DID help me in my approach to video making and photography: I write loads before I shoot, a process very similar to filmmaking.

**JM- Are you most influenced by events that are personal or just current events that affect a wide range of the population?**

**KH-** I believe I have the interest, the desire and the perseverance to apply both "drivers" and make them interact conceptually together. In my painting I use sacred icons of religion of ancient Egypt, and probe the similarity between Gods like Anubis and a superhero like Batman, an overt symbol of consumer-goods culture. By this "gaming", I try to break barriers between East and West, past and present, as well as the sacred and the ephemeral/commercial.

**JM- Who would you consider your target audience to be?**

**KH-** A tricky one again?; I will be very honest with you here; in my practice I NEVER pretend to be an expert in "urban interventions", of "creativity for development" or of "mass public art". The nature of visual arts, all over the world, has never been a type of art that is enough entertaining to make anybody rich (please exclude Jeff-Koons-like, Damien-Hirst-like or Paul-McCarthy-like entities and practices?). I am down-to-earth and am much aware of the dynamics of the local, regional and the international art worlds. I operate there acceptably well.

To answer your question clearly in one phrase: my audience are ONLY those who come to the exhibition venues and get interested in my work, either in dialogue, curiosity, disappointment, liking, disliking or collecting?.

**JM- What do you do to appeal to your viewers and bring them into your work?**

**KH-** Technical perfection, irony and sarcasm. In real life I am like that.

**JM- What do you think makes your work distinctly "Middle Eastern" (meaning what in particular do you think sets your work apart from that of Western artists-something that is due to your cultural and geographical differences)?**

**KH-** It is much simpler than that in fact; I just do not think of issues like "Middle Eastern", "Arab" or "African", the three geo-political classifications through which international curators approach my work and me.

I just focus on my work; I paint a lot, write a lot and read a lot; my reading is around political economy, social and behavioral change and modern history. What comes out in my work (in terms of iconography) is a reflection on my own interest around those subjects; I sometimes think I am lucky since I lived three presidents, (a phenomenon that is so seldom in the Middle East?), and saw the change form a soviet pattern of socialism to a very abusive open-market economy. The cumulative observations eventually come out one way or the other in my work, especially the video projects. I always believed that "the medium dictates the content", the political content, and hence the Middle Eastern "nature" is omnipresent in my video works more than paintings (since the medium of

painting is very subtle and much less expressive than the kinetic image), especially in my video projects *Idlers' Logic* (2003), *Revolution* (2006) and *Visions of a Contaminated Memory* (2007).

**JM- What would you say is an event, movement, or idea that has spurred or shaped contemporary art in the Middle East?**

**KH-** it is just in fashion now, after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, when the need for a dialogue between East and West became a necessity, not just a luxury. Local and Regional artists became more aware of the need to speak an international language; there is a whole generation of artists in the Middle East who manage and lead very successful careers between their countries, home towns and their "markets" in international cosmopolitan cities like New York, London, Milan, Berlin and other similar places.

There is still a major defect though, is that Egypt (I speak here for my local movement) has absolutely no critical work done, not a single qualified critic of international exposure (there is always in every country in the Middle East a couple of "wannabees", but they stay wannabees), and absolutely no curatorial practice in Egypt (apart from a brilliant budding "model", a young lady called Aida el Toraie, there is a couple of not-very-successful models though, and other "wannabees' cases). This is very positive though, because trials, though unsuccessful at their beginnings, will eventually lead to something interesting in the near future.

Most of the curatorial work done in the Middle East is done through European and American curators; the local professional curators are namely Jack Persekian, a Palestinian curator who operates from Jerusalem, Christine Tohame who operated from Beirut and is now in London, and Salwa Mekdadi, a Palestinian curator who operates from the occupied territories and from around the globe, and Abdellah Karroum, a Moroccan curator who operates from Rabat and Paris.

The international experts who show sustainable and continuous interest in Arab / Middle East art are notably the Italian Martina Corgnati (an art historian, critic and curator who operates from Milan and Turin, and is by far THE specialist of the field, since her field research extends to over 15 years, and is currently finishing her book about contemporary Middle East art practices), and Marilu Knode who started her interest in the region as early as 1996 (currently senior curator at the Scottsdale Museum of art).