

## Khaled Hafez

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### Interviews

Interview with Kinsey Katchka, Ph.D.  
 Curator at North Carolina Museum of Art

**KK- In your recent work, the paintings I saw in Cairo you were using some Arabic script in your new paintings--what was the text; particular words or phrases?**

**KH-** those are phrases written in Arabic calligraphy; the words give the impression that they are "sacred" texts, though in fact they are not; they are just adages or wise phrases used throughout the last few centuries tackling issues of hard work, perfection, manners and other day-to-day advice used immensely by Sufi cultures. I use those for the visual aesthetics as additives to the content, and they are used in final layers of the paintings when I am finishing, like the last applied elements.

**KK- Maybe a place to start would be to ask, what is 'Sufism' in your mind? And what draws you to it now?**

**KH-** Sufism is Sufism, not just in my mind?. Many Egyptian artists of all disciplines are drawn to Sufism as a source of inspiration for research in themes of identity, gender, spirituality, as well as a reference to rely on in juxtaposition to the current state of mainstream religion in the Middle East; as a matter of fact, not just the Middle East, but also global Islamic trends today are much influenced by those dominating the Middle East; those trends are much ignited, supported and financed by certain countries and religious organizations in the region as part of struggle of wealth and power.

I personally am drawn to certain streaks of liberal thought of Sufi nature rather than Sufism as cult. My reason, I guess is the tolerance, and the existential yet disciplined love of life. While traditional streams of Islam did not/does not encourage (and even some prohibit) artistic and creative forms of expression, Sufism encouraged and developed chant, music, dance, poetry and multidisciplinary creative expression as a meditative tool to explore the way to the ultimate creator.

**KK- what I have in mind is that though Huda Lutfi is the only one who spoke overtly about the relationship between her work and Sufism, several aspects of her work that she connects with Sufi elements I also see in the work of other Cairo artists: you, Hazem el Mestikawy, Adel el Siwi, even some of Maha Maamoun's and Sabah Naim's work. Thoughts?**

**KH-** we should never also forget Nermine Hammam; I think with Huda Lutfi, those two artists are the most conspicuous examples of Sufi-related art practice today. In the sixties and seventies there were artists (now in official local mainstream art history considered masters) like Hamed Nada and Abdelhadi el Gazzar who tried to "consciously" and "voluntarily" identify themselves as interested or probing or curious about Sufi elements. In the seventies and eighties this became even more talked about in Master's and PhD thesis, identifying artists like El Nashar among others as having Sufi trends. With all due respect to all "official masters", I personally believe that the practices of several contemporary artists working today, like the names you mentioned, Nermine Hammam and Huda Lutfi are much more "authentic": they reflect true research, commitment and involvement in the practice and theory of Sufism.

**KK- It would be helpful if you could tell me more about the connection to Sufi is as you have been thinking about this new direction in your work.**

**KH-** I have seen Egypt changing over three decades; I have seen the change of a liberal society with a multiplicity and diversity of thought onto a closed conservative society, nearly mono-voiced that thinks-talks-and-walks religious slogans in which moderate tolerant voices are undermined by a noisier fanatic monologue that adores death and worships the fear of the after-life.

If you see several contemporary Egyptian artists today approaching or tackling Sufi issues, it is due to the tolerant and flexible perspective of the Sufi culture, a culture that approaches the Creator through meditation, beauty, love, perfection, exquisite performance, and a near-carnal love of life. So you see it is this struggle of the love of the after-life versus the love of life that drives artists to the latter option as a refuge from the current dreadful religious monologue.

In my own work, I am interested in this love of life and perfection in Sufism, though my imagery may not be as overtly connected like the work of Nermine Hammam, or like that of Huda Lutfi.

**KK- You say that your work has been about identity for a long time (this I know), 'so it relates somehow' to Sufism. It isn't readily apparent to me how this necessarily follows. Could you clarify?**

**KH-** Of course, I always had a problem there; perhaps I suffer "flight of ideas", a condition in which my thoughts are faster than what I am able to say or describe?.

In my use of Arabic calligraphy as a new element in my painting, I try to probe my Arabo-Islamic identity. In

my painting I worked for around 20 years on examining the ancient Egyptian aspect in my identity, while the Arabo-Islamic "facets" of this identity have been probed only in my videos, particularly *Idlers' Logic*, *Obsessive Compulsive Neurosis*, *Idlers' Clip* and *Revolution*.

Now with exceptionally stylized calligraphy introduced in the painting, there is an insinuation of poetry and calligraphy, two disciplines of the Arabo-Islamic culture that were encouraged and developed by Sufis for centuries.

**KK- I recall that you have spoken about having pulled back from Islam and aren't a devout believer in your adult life despite your upbringing. Is this rejection of Islamic practice also mean a distancing from the tenets of Sufism?**

**KH-** here I must say that rejection is not at all against Islam as a religion, but definitely against the current mainstream Islam and the prevailing Islamic institution; the struggle between different factions and currents is reminiscent of what happened with the Nation of Islam in the sixties of the twentieth century, where everyone is apostatizing everyone else, and everyone claims to be the "official agency of God".

The problem today that it is no more the sixties when more or less law was respected. Today there is techno-terrorism, and religion became a business, just like the pharmaceutical business and the arms business. I personally renounce all that; I saw it coming with the assassination of Sadat, I was 18 then, and I had lived a very liberal adolescence, and saw the country "closing down". As someone who had seen the past (liberal) and the present (conservative), I renounce the present state.

As an artist I renounce the current religious intolerant ideologies.

Sufi practices, writings, music and poetry became a recognized source of inspiration to artists today; it is literally the only form of a link to any religion that is acceptable for me. It is attractive for me to use such elements in a process of cultural revisionism.

**KK- One thing that recurs in my work in Dakar and also in Cairo is recycling and repetition, both literally and more conceptually; this element of Huda's work is overt and conscious, obviously. But this comes into play in your work/aesthetic, even in your work, though i know you don't think of it in terms of Sufism. Any thoughts?**

**KH-** See, in ancient Egyptian art as in the few figurative Islamic illustration/painting that came to us, there is always text to illustrate the painting, or painting to illustrate the text; they do not forcibly have to relate or describe each other, but they are "visual complementary", sometimes indispensable for the overall visual aesthetics of the work. I try to probe and experiment in the mindset of those artists, sort of contemporary interpretation of elements, themes, subjects and thoughts that have been done over and over again; it is my own personal historical recycling.

Technically, in both ancient Egyptian painting and Islamic painting, artists never used what we know in the post renaissance painting as "composition"; in both historical periods the artists used a style of "lay-outing" used today in graphic designs for the purpose of creating simple narrative; I try to apply this in my painting, also aiming to some extent to attain a visual narrative simple and attainable yet aesthetic enough to be art ?.

**KK- You say that you've explored your Arab-Islamic identity in your film; does this include elements of Sufism or not so much?**

**KH-** In film I do not use written texts to express ideas; I did that in *Idlers' Logic* (2003) and before in *Visions of Cheeseburger Memory* (2001) to express certain ideas; I used slang Egyptian, arabic or English texts of words or phrases that were/are déjà vu and accessible to the layman. I even always use very scarce dialogue to accentuate the imagery; I am interested in depicting the image of Arabs/Middle Easterners in action, like in *Idlers' Logic*, *Revolution*, *Idlers' Clip* and *Obsessive Compulsive Neurosis*.

Sufism has nothing palpable to do in my film works; it is not a concern here. As you know and as I always say, "the medium dictates the contents"...it would be too much to incorporate political and social, then add overt religious research...I cannot do it, perhaps someone else can:)

**KK- I'm not necessarily trying to draw firm parallels by comparing Dakar and Cairo, but pointing out certain resonant elements that seem to operate in similar ways to affirm relevance of urban experience--this despite the fact that they are embedded in distinct, and disparate, local local/regional/national histories. What do you think?**

**KH-** I think you may have a clear point there; don't forget that Senegal and Mali can confidently represent the moderate African Islam, while Egypt for centuries played the same role for the Middle East.

For Egypt, Just let's pretend to forget the rising extreme religious right in the past three decades, especially after the military (and consequently ideological) defeat of 1967, and the terrorist attacks of the nineties; Egypt still represents moderate Islam in the Middle East; Egypt played a massive inspirational role in the independence of many African countries, and memories of the good old days of the fifties and sixties are still remembered. This on the ideological and political fronts; on the urban experience front, I would say there may be some resemblance in terms of the new laws and players of globalization: richer rich, poorer poor, multinational-transcontinental corporations, too rapid social change, corruption, political abuse, etc.

Also the most important point of resemblance, both cities are major points of attraction for international art projects.