

Khaled Hafez

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Interviews

On sleeping at night, angels, and politics: A Trialogue
Conversation between Khaled Hafez, Omar Donia* and Samar Faruqui for the 2013 Abu Dhabi Art Fair Meem Gallery fair participation catalogue.**

OD: So Khaled Hafez, how do you sleep at night? I know the answer as we have lived that together for at least 21 years before you left home, but what's new?

KH: As always, I got to bed around midnight, sleep for 6 hours, drop dead as my head touches the pillow, and dream of angels. Recently I dream a lot of Leica: both the camera and my German shepherd dog. I dream of painting, travel, deadlines, film, film and more film.

SF: For this year's Abu Dhabi Art, Meem Gallery has commissioned the work *How do you Sleep at Night?* The theme of the exhibition is based on John Lennon's 1971 – how did you interpret the title?

KH: There is no interpretation: there is music, playfulness, games and a lot of subconscious. Since I was twelve I painted and did my drawings on loud surrounding music. At that time there was disco, but there was also the Beatles and what came after: Paul & McCartney and their Wings who did the score for the Bond movie *The Man with the Golden Gun*, John Lennon & Yoko Ono, Tracy Ullman and a lot of what remained of the Bs. There was the ABBA and a lot of music that spoke about their versions of "I have a dream". In fact, I was crazy –and still am—about the ABBA, and their own version of "I have a dream" in which Agneta Faltskog (the blond member) reiterates repeatedly "I can dream of angels". This is what I interpret in my painting: angels. In the work, you see loads of dancing angels, a combination of "dancing queen" and "I have a dream".

SF: Can you explain the work in more detail? Is there a narrative? What do all the different elements mean stand for?

KH: There is no "meanings", but there are possibilities. The metamorphosed sacred angels come from very ephemeral consumer advertising; they all dance and float and interact. There is the possibility of dialogue, bridging gaps, tolerance, having to live together under one sky, and there is also the possibility of struggle of power to dominate the skies and the earth. What the viewer sees clearly is only the angels, the sky and the earth, and everything else is liable to personal interpretation. I prefer it that way as I prefer a combination between the accessible and the esoteric. This formula is accessible to different age groups and different cultures.

OD: I was reading this article on a Middle East "sister" publication about "Arab Representation" in the 55th Venice Biennale. How does it make you feel when referred to as an Arab artist?

KH: I think –and this is strictly my very subjective opinion– that what applies to me as Egyptian, and perhaps to certain artists who come from tangential points and from melting pots like for instance Turkey that lies within Europe and Asia, you can describe from a geo-biological perspective. I am in fact Egyptian; which implies that I am African, Arab, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Egyptian (i.e. ancient roots); I am tainted with Judeo-Christian and 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, humor and an insatiable desire to live, to share and to learn. I am also African artist, Mediterranean artist, Middle Eastern artist, international artist, local artist, and just an artist. You remember our stories as kids: we were born Muslims, but our parents put me in an Irish catholic only-boys school because it was good education. Many years later they shifted you to a mixed school because it became a better 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.

SF: What do you think of Jeffar Khaldi and Mahmoud Obaidi's work overall? Can you talk a bit about the prospect of working with them on this project?

KH: Those are two great artists who share a similar approach that characterizes also my very own practice: irony, and I mean IRONY in all capital letters. It is a pleasure to work and show together with both. For years Mahmoud Obaidi and myself wanted to work together and we have a few potential plans that need tweaking when we next meet. The thing is that many of us meet in such places as Venice, London, Paris or elsewhere and it is always semi-planned, plus each of us has international plans and deadlines. It is indeed a brilliant opportunity to find a proper occasion to work together.

SF: How does your work *How do you Sleep at Night?* relate to your other works? How would you say it fit into your oeuvre?

KH: Just the playfulness of the title, and the love for music; nothing more, there is no exaggeration. I paint every day and my process is uninterrupted with particular interpretations. The elements of dancing angels and the clear earth line are the only element added. Khaldi and Obaidi have their own practice and I trust their creative minds.

OD: In your term you “maintain military discipline” in your studio working hours, and for your last solo *Moving Forward by the Day* you planned a production plan with Charles Pokock eight months in advance and you stuck to it; is this an obsession with planning? How does this affect your process and your selection of what to do and when?

KH: I am a studio artist and indeed I maintain a military discipline and long studio hours. Since 2005, I go to my studio around 8.30 am every day and leave 12 hours later. I write a video/film a year, use installation and photography frequently, but I paint every day. Selecting the works is not a problem, as I usually— or almost always—exhibit works from one series of paintings or one project. For the *Moving Forward by the Day* solo all the works were executed within the six months prior to the show. Two large-scale works from an older (2010) project entitled *Tomb Sonata in Three Military Movements (& Overture)* that were part of the site-specific installation commissioned for the 12th Cairo Biennale 2010 were also shown, as they shared the same reference as the whole set of canvases for the solo, all drew inspiration from the ancient *Book of the Dead*. The rigorous production plan happened in my Cairo studio, though we had settled the production plan months earlier in Paris. I believe in this management proverb “fail to plan is plan to fail. O hate failure, though I accept it when it happens, and it always happens, o just like to minimise the losses, learn and move forward.

OD: And how does this process drive you as you work for a much-solicited event like the Venice Biennale?

KH: For Venice it is a different story; some events favour some mediums over others. I had to create something in a medium like installation, video installation, or develop a project that transcends a traditional medium. I had to resort to the studio pipeline, i.e. written projects that are delayed for production costs, and then start a process to solicit such costs. I developed the project *On Noise, Sound & Silence out of footage bank* I have been collecting for several years now. I selected footage of the sea, seashores and maritime communities. I wanted to explore issues of childhood memories and nostalgia. This is the third project that hovers over this terrain, after *Visions of Contaminated Memories* (commissioned by Sharjah Biennale 2007) and *The Third Vision: Around 1:00 PM* (2008 production, 3rd Guangzhou Triennale 2008 & 2nd Thessaloniki Biennale 2009). I think my studio pipeline has several written projects in the same line that are delayed for a reason or the other. I also think that one reason for my delayed video and photo-projects is my addictive daily painting and drawing practice.

OD: Your works, especially the video works were not always politically correct. While your painting –and I here am statistically speaking—thrived with the Egyptian contemporary art scene, or at least it did till 2012. How do you see yourself as a part of this almost renaissance-like movement?

KH: If you look at the story from the beginning, I think it may make sense. I believe it is not a coincidence that the interest in Middle East contemporary art practices started after September 11, 2001. With the –then– 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. The question then was: As an artist, where I am in all this? I had been working in my studio for over 20 years. I started my career within a state-funded art movement, what we in Cairo call now “the official establishment”. This establishment became futile as we progressed in our careers. I personally could not just answer questions about “local aesthetics”, or enter in debates of “the heritage versus modernity” and similar obsolete critical terms that still in fact prevail today as they did fifty years ago. I wanted to probe the social changes happening in the nineties, the new behavioral traits in the society shaped and marionetted by the bombardment of media propagated imagery and the advertising universe. In the nineties, then among others, I decided to refrain from counting on this official establishment. I started exhibiting in private galleries in 1996 with the then Cairo-Berlin gallery (now closed down after the demise of Renate Jordan, the German owner). This early “weaning” from producers and funders forced me –among others—to be autonomous and finance our own art productions that was not always, as you say, politically correct. My videos since 2001 addressed consumer behaviors, democracy issues, subjugations, political leadership, revolutions, fundamentalism and elements of the sacred, all in an ironic approach, but not forcibly in a manner favorable by neither the old nor the new regimes. I personally do not care. I will do as I want even if I get in trouble, I cannot do otherwise. I do not think of myself as resistant to anything. For years I approached my own political and social observations with irony, and that was harsh to some, but it does not make me a freedom fighter, I am just an artist, and this is part of my role as an artist.

Painting is a different story; by default, painting has unique aesthetics, and is accessible to painting collectors who are not always the general public. The general public, across all age groups, interact more with video and film.

SF: So do you agree that your works in the past were considered politically charged?

KH: There is no past, and I think it is not past yet. My practice spans the mediums of painting, film/video, photography and installation. Apart from painting, yes I agree that my films and installations are heavily political. My painting is less so, though politics is not absent. I guess the case for photography and painting is different as aesthetics play an indispensable part during the viewing process. My international career boomed in the last decade with video/film much more than painting, though galleries deal easier with painting for obvious reasons: less risk, bigger collector base and blue chip auction propagation. I guess to get back to your question; politically charged works have a better shelf life in museums, while collectors for the aesthetics favor relatively safer works.

SF: **So, what do you think about the art scene in the Arab Gulf?**

KH: It is very particular: not good and not bad and I am not judging. I am just observing. This "particular" art scene is a unique model and time will tell if it is built to last or not. The right constituents are there: museums, collectors, galleries, and artists; there is just too much politics; too many cliques that is capable of poison any budding movement. Such poison come also from culture-non-for-profit institutions in Cairo, Beirut and other non-Gulf "locations": those are the weirdest and the worst, but they affect the new art fairs and the young museums.

OD: **Do you think that the international interest in the Arab / Middle East art exist today to stay for some time, or will it wear off after some time?**

KH: There has always 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 the artist, the gallery and the critic. Today there are curators and there are museums and there are major collectors and the giant institutions. Remember that Germano Celant in 1967 was introduced as "critic" when he proposed the Arte Povera movement artists; the same applies to Achile Bonito Oliva when he introduced what he described as *Transavanguardia*. They both were playing the parts of curators then. Roles and names and titles change, and powerful players enter followed by auction houses. There is a whole new economy there, and only time can tell. If a powerful Arab / Middle East infrastructure, with galleries, museums, collectors and major institutions is created, the interest will be self sufficient and sustainable. Only if.

*Omar Donia, MPA, is the founder and director of Contemporary Practices Journal. He is chief art consultant for the United Nations World Food Program. He is brother of Khaled Hafez.

** Samar Faruqi is PhD candidate and curator at Meem Gallery, Dubai, UAE.