

## Khaled Hafez

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### Interviews

#### *Unearthing the Past*

**Text and interview with Sophie Kazan for Harper's Bazar Magazine, summer 2013**

You can tell that Khaled Hafez began his career as an artist after studying medicine: Much of his work examines the human condition, man's place in the world and his journey through life. Through Hafez's work, we witness his, or our own, creative conscience where ideas are juxtaposed, images from the past are unearthed and brought into a modern context, childhood memories are prized above all else and cast (literally) in bronze. Hafez is Egyptian and so the iconic Egyptian deities and figures from the Ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and hieroglyphics form recurring themes in his work, where they are actualized and brought into contemporary life; Anubis, the jackal-headed guide of the dead is likened to Batman, the comic book hero, 1950s American Cars, Coca-Cola cans and other recognizable consumer icons, common ideals or measures of success, are painted or stuck in. Hafez's work seems to delve into our daily lives, using Ancient Egyptian and consumer-conscious 1950s America imagery to make connections, explore real abstract thoughts linked to violence, death, life and popular culture - the results are both startling and inspiring.

"I like to imagine that someone will excavate us archaeologically 500 years from now and try to learn how we used to tell stories, what our ideas were and what we talked about and did," muses Hafez. He has had a busy year. In April, the Meem Gallery in Dubai gave him his first UAE show, to great acclaim and before it closed at the beginning of May, he was already preparing to set up an ambitious installation entitled, *Drowning: On Noise, Sound and Silence* in the Maldives Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, which runs from May to November 2013.

I caught up with Hafez at home in Egypt as he planned his journey to Italy and negotiated the transportation of the necessary projectors, screens and other equipment to Venice. This year, the Maldives Pavilion has invited artists from Lebanon, Greece, Italy and Switzerland to take part in the pavilion's theme *Portable Nation: Disappearance as work in Progress*, to highlight to island's vulnerability to the rise of sea levels and its potential disappearance under the Indian Ocean. The pavilion will be at the Gervasuti Foundation, located in the old Castello area of Venice, one of the older neighbourhoods where woodcraft workers and shipbuilders lived and worked.

**SK: Khaled Hafez, in your works for the exhibition, *Moving Forward by the Day* at the Meem Gallery in Dubai, you seemed to focus on layering the Ancient Egyptian gods and the iconography of the *Book of the Dead* with modern images. Juxtaposing different ideas and images has been a theme of your work for several years - Is this a process or a result?**

**KH:** This is a process. Until late 1995, I was an abstract painter for about 8 years, after which I hit the wall and decided to go back to figurative painting – I wanted to tell stories; I loved the paintings of Jean Michel Basquiat, Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg, who used their own iconography. For the solo *Moving Forward by the Day* at the Meem gallery I used abstraction in the background and collages to give the notion of using ancient iconography and metamorphosing it into the modern world – moving backwards, as it were ... I use codes and symbols from Ancient History to look under the surface. This is a cumulative process and I am just scratching the surface.

**SK: You explored this layering of images, with paintings and installation in your *Tomb Sonata in Three Movements* which was exhibited first as *Tomb Sonata in three Military Movements* as part of the 12th Cairo Biennale in 2010 and then as *Second Sonata in three Archaeological Movements* in 2012 in Paris at the Institut du Monde Arabe, and finally as *Tomb Sonata in Two Military Movements: the sequel*, at the Havremagasinet Museum in Boden, Switzerland, that same year.**

**KH:** Yes, the *Tomb Sonata* was originally an installation and then it included paintings. I consciously look to flat, graphic art as a form of expression. Looking back to Ancient Egypt, we know that the Ancient Egyptians could probably paint in 3D because of the very realistic sculptures and yet they chose to paint in flat 2D for over 3200 years. Why? This documentary form is one used in comic strips and propaganda – it is powerful. Just walking into an ancient temple, you can feel it. *Tomb Sonata* tackles aspects of the concept of human encyclopaedic, cumulative knowledge. The first *Sonata project* [Cairo 2010] explored notions of flight as forced migration - be it physical or metaphoric, collective fear, instruments of war and subjugation. The second *Sonata project* [at the IMA in Paris 2012] explored notions of language, alphabets, time, enlightenment and the dissemination of knowledge across space and time. For the third *Sonata project* [the Sequel Movement, in Boden 2012] I worked on two notions: confrontation and the process of writing or scribing history.

The *Military Sonatas* are three-part installation spaces that resemble an ancient Egyptian tomb plan. It

isolates the viewer and the images of gods and machines of war and violence, and the silhouettes of soldiers in combat positions suspended in the dark are dimly lit and have intrusive ultraviolet lights showing that the patterns that emerge, which are reminiscent of hieroglyphs. The viewer is reminded of the inevitability of death – a modern *Memento Mori*.

Though its content is dark and morbid, the Tomb Sonata concept is a dark but strangely harmonious and airy arrangement. It focuses not on the violence and blood, but on the inevitability of life and death and on the writing of history and the continuity of language. A dim twilight reflects off the suspended images of tanks and gunmen. While the images themselves are frightening, they could also remind us of images seen on television and in history books.

**SK: You have mentioned 'Egyptian identity' in a historical context, relating to the ancient tombs and to the ancient gods, but what about the modern Egyptian identity? You show guns and tanks – what about the events that have taken place in the last few years?**

**KH:** I believe that Egypt is ancient Egyptian, Judeo-Christian, Islamic, Arab and much before all that, African, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern. . . All this is what I call the *Big Mac Theory of Egyptian Identity*. Egypt is all those layers, cumulative and combined. [As an Egyptian] . . . I host them in me. The problems in public discourse happen when a group with thought myopia belonging to a certain strata or stream of thought decide that Egypt belongs only to one layer of this cumulative cultural sandwich. In my video works, I draw from the Arab and Middle Eastern layers and in my painting I simulate the Ancient Egyptian layouts, using codes and symbols from the universal memory – Egyptian and non-Egyptian.

Though reluctant to take a political stance, this inclusive view emphasizes the richness and diversity of Egyptian culture and indeed that of human existence. Hafez goes beyond social classes and political ideas and though he mixes different ideas and shapes regardless of time and context, Hafez could be described as a pragmatist and a realist; He observes the evolution of shapes over time and notes which picks up on the enduring images, collecting and recasting them in his own gallery of thoughts and ideas. Is this what we all unconsciously do? Pile up ideas, things that we have seen, memories and ideas piled up haphazardly in our minds, without much thought for proportions or perspective? In Hafez's art, often these are the popular and easily recognizable shapes such as a coke bottle or a car, because of mass-production these familiar images can also be the ancient Egyptian deities such as Anubis and Hathor so often seen on documentaries, in Egyptology books, or reproduced on trays and tea-towels, calendars and mugs.

"I am inspired and draw from contemporary advertising and consumer goods, visual idioms and designs. I incline to this process because I want the entire element that I use to have been a déjà vu for all audiences; this is part of globalization and international popular culture. The final art production - and I care a lot about that too, not just the process – thus becomes more accessible to audiences from East and West, and across all age groups. Or at least I attempt to achieve that!  
Guns, tanks, helicopters and war machines are part of every broadcast news bulletin and every printed news material, hence part of our daily life. Such imagery chases us no matter where we go..."

**SK: Your graphic style and recourse to so many elements of popular culture have meant that you are often compared to Andy Warhol and your work has been likened to that produced during the Pop Art movement.**

**KH:** Warhol is a God I am not. I am inspired by Pop Art. Robert Rauschenberg is one of my five gods of painting. Basquiat, Klimt, Schile and Picasso are the other four. My inspiration from Pop Art has a reason: I believe that our Middle Eastern societies adopt a pattern of consumerism reminiscent of American society in the late 1950s and early 1960s . . . However our Arab societies also have a diversity of cultural specificities that would make art . . . be Pop Art yet [also] visually unique – no better and no worse. In the Arab world, it seems as if there has been an advertising flux as there was fifty years ago in the West and the impact is different now because the world is not the same.

**SK: Mixing ancient deities with commercial goods must have repercussions – has there been any resistance to your juxtaposing sacred and commercial images in Egypt or abroad?**

**KH:** Twice. . . In 2000, I was interpreting icon-paintings from the Egyptian Coptic Museum through collages, and the paintings hurt [the sensibilities] of some Coptic students. I agreed immediately to replace four of the works. It was not my intention at all to hurt anyone or any group. My intention was to question notions of the sacred and notions of profanity. The second time was in 2010, and this was personal: a journalist with a pan-Arabism, national-socialist ideology did not like one of my videos that were shown in Cairo. He led a media campaign against me, claiming that my work defamed national and religious symbols; I went to court and won, a year later.

**SK: Can our readers have a sneak preview of the work that you are showing in the Maldives Pavilion in Venice this year?**

**KH:** There will be a video installation on three screens with sculptural elements. The videos were shot in Hong-Kong, the Philippines, Egypt, Dubai, Venice and Brazil. Drowning: On Noise, Sound and Silence is a poetic voyage through the black box of memory, nostalgia and voyages that mark childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

In many ways, then, it is a coming of age piece. Yes, the memory box is personal to me. I cast objects that are either an integral part of my memory or stuck in my memory for a reason. The camera is a cast of my father's 6x6 camera that I carried with him as a child. . My father took pictures for mother, my

brother and me.

The watch is a replica of my father's watch. I used to borrow my father's watch till I got my first watch when I was 11. A pickpocket robbed me of it one afternoon in Dokki, a suburb of Cairo. The seashell is similar to the shell that my grandmother used as an ashtray. I remember her vividly. The Coca-Cola bottle is a cast of the kind of bottles of the late 1960s and early 1970s that are now back in fashion. Back then it was our bonus at the end of a hot day on the beach.

One of the consequences of Hafez's mixing – almost like a modern music DJ – of old, sacred and modern new images is that it can be interpreted as sarcastic and disrespectful. In her book, *Modern Egyptian Art*, Liliane Karnouk suggests that Hafez's art reflects a 'post millennial mood'. Perhaps it could also be seen as an important act of 'post millennial' demystification. As we are often reminded in the media through disagreements over ancient tribal objects or the activities of sensationalist media icons looking to emulate powerful religious or historical icons, the questioning of past symbols and their demystification is a process that mankind invariably undertakes over time... While Hafez may not give images the same recognition that they held in their original context, he looks at their graphic shape and iconic power. He 'plays' not so much with their image, but with their context, taking the menace and fear from a threatening image of a sniper or an armoured tank and the respectful idolatry from an Ancient Egyptian deity, making them as familiar as any day-to-day household object and encouraging us to look upon them with a comfortable familiarity. Is this a bad thing? While Hafez's art is made up of juxtaposed and layered images, it is important to note that he also works hard to strip away the meanings and associations behind each individual image – reducing them to their original, graphic shape and reversing the automatic associations we have through the media and social consciousness, unquestioningly and habitually come to give them. This is not a simple task but one that we must not be afraid of exploring if we are to set about building new ideas about art appreciation and aesthetic theory.