

Khaled Hafez and the art of Revolution – from Premonition to Stockholm Syndrome

By Yasmine Allam

One month after the end of Egypt's 2011 revolution, Egyptian artist Khaled Hafez showed a large and striking painting work *Revolution – Snipers in the Field* (2011) at the Art Dubai fair. In Hafez's signature style, the four meter wide painting depicts clusters of protestors in Tahrir Square, tiny images collated and collaged from the media, confronted by oversized snipers and battalions of tanks weaving across the centre of the canvas. The painting generated considerable attention at the fair as an expression of Egypt's historic upheaval that had been watched by audiences around the world. In fact, Hafez had begun this work in the months prior to the uprisings, finishing it on his return to his studio after weeks of active protest in Tahrir Square.

The son of a medical doctor in the Egyptian army, Hafez's early memories are of his father polishing an army pistol in an upstairs room and a pervading fear that he might not return from the frontline. This early encounter with the politics of a war torn region may have contributed to Hafez's marked political awareness. It may have fueled the increasing political orientation of his work over the course of the past decade. His painting works, which often explore the binary constructs governing and limiting how Western and Eastern audiences perceive one another, have, since 2009, focused on the military iconography that shapes discourses within and about the Arab region. Similarly, his internationally successful video works, first begun in 2001, express his deep-seated disillusion with a stagnant political status quo and make an urgent case for change. As a result, Hafez's video and painting works today possess a strange premonitory quality, uncannily foretelling the events of Egypt's revolution months before they unfolded.

Given this deep-rooted political engagement, it is all the more interesting to witness Hafez's evolving responses to revolution. These include his 'premonition' works where Hafez engages astutely and humorously with the doubtful outcomes of the Egyptian revolution of 1952. In 2011, he documented Egypt's January revolution

when, for the first time, Hafez experienced first hand the physical, mental and creative 'stress' of protesting in Tahrir Square. Works created in the immediate aftermath of the revolution record his impressions of popular revolt. But by January 2012, on the one-year anniversary of the uprisings, his solo exhibition of painting works *On Codes, Symbols and Stockholm Syndrome* takes a conscious step back from these events. Having attained a certain temporal and critical distance from the breathless immediacy of revolution, this series of paintings expresses disillusion with Egypt's prospects for real political change. Instead, it portrays the political developments of 2011 as the 'kidnapping' or 'hijacking' of the Egyptian revolution by regressive forces.

A mid-career artist, Khaled Hafez is one of Egypt's prominent painters, video and installation artists. His early career began in medicine where he graduated in 1987. He subsequently attained a Masters specialty degree in dermatology in 1992, while pursuing evening classes at the Cairo Fine Arts School unbeknown to his parents. He soon moved into the arts. Over the course of almost two decades of practice he has successfully branched from painting to include video, installation and photography.

Today, Hafez's works have shown at international festivals and biennales including the 9th Bamako Encounters, Mali 2011 and 8th Mercosul Biennale, Porto Alegre, Brazil 2011, Manifesta 8, Murcia, Spain 2010, the 12th Cairo Biennale, Egypt 2010 and the Thessaloniki Biennale, Greece 2009. His museum exhibitions include group shows at the Saatchi Gallery and Tate Modern, UK, and the Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany, the MuHKA Museum in Antwerp, Belgium, the Queens and the New Museums, USA, among others. His works reside in several international collections including the Saatchi Collection, London, MuHKA Museum of Contemporary Art, in Belgium, the State Museum of Art, Thessaloniki, Greece and the National

Museum of Art in Bamako, Mali.

Hafez himself claims that this early transition from medicine into art left him with a need to prove his worth among fellow contemporary artists in Egypt. This has constituted a driving force in a prolific career and underlies the rigidly disciplined approach to his *métier*. He defines himself as a studio artist, first and foremost, experimenting in his work albeit within strictly disciplined confines.

A tumultuous year, in painting

Across a diversity of mediums (painting, video, installation), Hafez's work investigates notions of the complex nature of the Egyptian identity and what it means to be Egyptian in a post September 11 world. Hafez's central thesis revolves around the notion of the 'Big Mac Identity', a phrase coined by the artist. With the ebb and flow of occupying forces over the centuries, Egypt's cultural and political identity has become layered, cumulatively, like a 'Big Mac'. These layers encompass at once ancient Egyptian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and African elements, spiced with Judo-Christian and Arab-Islamic faiths. According to Hafez, problems have always arisen when certain factions have sought to isolate a single layer in this accumulated whole, treating this layer as the sole 'constituent ingredient' and ignoring all the other factors that make up Egypt's unique 'flavour.'

In his paintings, Hafez addresses the Pharaonic and Judo-Christian dimensions of the hybrid Egyptian identity. His works are striking, often large-scale, and characterized by a signature style that combines a bold colour palette and painterly brushstrokes with images extracted from 'glossy' consumer magazines. Deeply interested in iconography, he pursues the central themes of the circularity of history and the recycling of cultural icons through time.

Hafez is drawn to the similarities and cultural continuities between the ancient use of the painted image and its modern-day uses in advertising and media. He explores the tendencies of all cultures to create superheroes that stand between mankind and chaos. To him, all cultural and religious symbols are recycled. The symbols of Judaism and Christianity are all ultimately derived from ancient Egyptian mythology and script he argues. Even the Cross traces its etymological roots to

the ancient Egyptian ankh, or key of life. The striking similarities between the modern day Batman, and the Jackal Headed god of ancient Egypt, Anubis, extend beyond their common morphology to encompass their identical roles as protectors from Evil. Straddling a temporal and a physical space, Hafez's works feature the gods of ancient Egypt alongside modern-day comic heroes and collages of idealized human forms extracted from fashion magazines. These are the recurring elements of a life-long investigation into the cultural recycling of images and symbols, as societies construct their own divinities and accompanying myths.

Through this distinct vocabulary, Hafez probes the boundaries and contradictions between the media-enforced binaries of East/West, sacred/commercial, old/new, male/female, good/evil. His works highlight the irony of the use, by the mass media, of recycled (and ultimately shared) signifiers to simplify and obfuscate highly complex notions of identity, religion and culture. Truth is represented as entirely subjective as is our perception of reality. He warns us of the deceptive appeal of the media image; its potency and danger lies as much in what it reveals as in what it omits or obscures. Hafez's visual plane is defined by the flat graphic surface of the ancient tomb wall. His narratives are created using the rules of ancient Egyptian painting with flat graphic surfaces and human forms striding across rigid registers. This medium lends itself to the politics of his message since ancient Egyptian art always served a specific function, either to document the life and times of the ancients, or as a tool for religious and political propaganda. The rigidity of the ancient mural also reflects the discipline with which Hafez approaches his work. Claiming to avoid emotional gestures in his works, his paintings testify to the scientific and methodical pursuit of the issues that have engaged him over the years.

An important example of Hafez's so-called premonition works, *Tomb Sonata in Three Military Movements: Sniping the Day*; (Acrylic on canvas, 450 x 200 cm, 2010) is a visual assemblage of human figures, striding body builders and crouching forms in combat positions, migrating from one end of the canvas to the other, flanked by ancient Egyptian gods. Created before the revolution, *Tomb Sonata* was first presented as part of

an installation at the Cairo Biennale in December 2010 but was subsequently exhibited at the Shubbak Festival of Arab art and culture in London in July 2011.

Laid out in the flat graphic manner of ancient Egyptian art, it features elements of media-propagated imagery and war iconography. These globally accessible symbols of conflict become part of a new visual language – a narrative that explores perceptions of the ‘Middle East’ as a region perpetually engulfed in military conflict over issues such as ideology, wealth, power or religious supremacy. Hafez uses elements such as the chopper, the sniper or the tank to develop a generic alphabet inspired by media propagated war images – the type you see in broadcast media. These modern-day ‘hieroglyphs’ explore the stereotyping of the Middle East as a region solely defined by, and reduced to, conflict – a region viewed through the prism of war.

Dominating the foreground of the canvas, the oversized and featureless silhouettes of snipers intimate the idea of violence and military force. Representing Egypt, the Egyptian cow goddess Hathor, the nurturing manifestation of the sacred feminine, seems overwhelmed by their power, relegated to the far side of the canvas. All figures are facing from left to right united by the same inevitable narrative. Subsequent to the Egyptian revolution, this military iconography has come to denote additional layers of meaning, referencing the Egyptian army’s prominent role in the country’s revolution and current, post-revolution political context.

The overtly political vocabulary of the premonition works becomes clear when compared to earlier works such as *Dakar Running* (2006). Here, the figure of Batman, with the perfect masculine body form, takes his seat as Pharaoh in the centre of the canvas. To his side, the uniform images of human figures running insinuate the idea of flight of identity, of power, or the flight from faith to agnosticism and from agnosticism to faith. Ironically dressed in the western fitness attire, the runners also refer to the notion of forced migration, both in the physical literal and the metaphoric senses; the escape to another space or reality. This metaphorical investigation into power and commercialism is devoid of any military iconography. It is an ironic reflection on the power equations underpinning modern Egypt,

but it does not foreshadow the political upheaval and military violence yet to come.

Hafez has spoken of the shock of revolution when it came on 25th January 2011 and of his sudden feelings of having been ‘programmed’ politically and socially to accept the status quo. During the revolution, and in the months that followed, a number of Egyptian artists experienced difficulties in creating work. Like them, Hafez was at that time engaged in a personal struggle to avoid overtly personal or literal expressions. Speaking then, he notes the importance of not abandoning the discipline of work despite the overwhelming changes in the surrounding context. He equates the importance of protesting in the street with producing art.

Created only a few months after *Tomb Sonata*, Hafez’s post-revolution painting works may be seen as a series of succinct responses to his first-hand experiences of the uprisings. For example, in *Two Gods and Two Cats* (2011) Sekhmet, the ancient Egyptian goddess of war, flanks two perfect masculine body forms, idealized symbols of strength and power. Sekhmet is the manifestation of the divine feminine in her most angry and ferocious mood. Dominating her space, the goddess reminds us that the sacred feminine (in this case a reference to Egypt) is capable of an infinite capacity for bloodshed and war. Begun in 2010 and completed in 2011, the painting addresses the struggle for power and for wealth and is a reflection on the events of the revolution and the chaos that soon followed the early days of euphoria.

In *Digital Sniper* (2011), as in *Tomb Sonata*, the central figure of the sniper dominates the foreground, but now the symbol has been softened, created from a collage of newspaper cuttings that remind us of the extensive role of the media (new and mainstream) in Egypt’s revolution. The sniper hovers above a sea of protestors, representing the millions of citizens who demonstrated in Tahrir Square during the uprisings. Two winged protestors are suspended overhead beyond the sniper’s reach. Even Sekhmet, the goddess of war, has been softened, her belly pregnant with silhouettes of protestors symbolizing the power of non-violent confrontation. Only two faces are turned towards us, while the remaining protestors form a seamless border - a ‘strength in numbers’ - along the lower part of the

canvas. This may also reflect Hafez's view of history as being less about individuals and more connected to a constant cycling of power matrices and events.

Sister Julia (2011) is a noteworthy painting project of this time, described by the artist as a 'step backwards'. The painting features a life-size image of Julia Roberts veiled in black Islamic hijab. Hafez merges the ubiquitous and loaded symbols of the Western film star and Eastern veil to break the barriers between East and West, past and present, sacred and commercial. The paintings were created in response to a protest by Egypt's Islamic far right in response to reports that a Coptic woman had been prevented from converting. Sister Julia points to the rising Islamist discourse in Egypt and ponders its impact on the country's future.

With the approach of the one-year anniversary of the revolution, Hafez's work adopted a quiet introspection; perhaps a reaction against the more literal depictions of revolution, which he feels he, like others, has fallen victim to over the past year. In his 2012 solo exhibition in Cairo, *On Codes, Symbols and Stockholm Syndrome*, Hafez likens Egypt's current political disorientation to the psychological phenomenon of Stockholm Syndrome where prisoners show loyalty to their captors, turning to their violators for protection.

Hafez draws on French philosopher Jean Baudrillard who, in his seminal research of cultural specificities wrote about simulation and simulacra or, simplistically, the fake and the authentic. Baudrillard argues that in a world where the original is always preceded by the sign, and where the simulated copy has superseded the original, reality becomes a meaningless concept. Taking this idea as a starting point, the project explores notions of what is real and what is unreal in a contemporary culture loaded with codes and symbols of faith, ideology, wealth, subjugation and the quest for power.

An exquisite journey into colour and form, the Stockholm series purposely leaves unanswered the nihilistic questions conjured by the political upheavals of the past year: what does it mean to be Egyptian in the aftermath of revolution? What is the value of Egyptian citizens' current type of existence or of the ideologies they have adopted to face the future? What are the appropriate aesthetics to follow now?

In the end, Hafez concludes, everything in life is 'sellable'

and 'packagable.' As a result, modern Egyptians exist in a web of symbols that they struggle to decipher from the real. In the ensuing confusion, he claims, some have even used Egypt's first free elections to vote back old familiar faces rather than face an uncertain future.

As in earlier works, Hafez uses the ancient Egyptian wall as a space within which to explore these questions of purpose and identity. However, *On Codes, Symbols and Stockholm Syndrome*, transforms the artist's signature use of ancient Egyptian symbols. Now, his large canvases feature fewer simplified and oversized symbols, no longer elements in a broader composition but the culturally loaded subjects of his work. The ancient Egyptian goddess Hathor has been transformed from a simple pictogram of the cow, signifying the maternal, sensual manifestation of the divine feminine. Now, she stands strong in the centre of the canvas, embodying a particular space and time that is bountiful, giving and nurturing to those who live in it, prepared to sacrifice her own flesh so that others may eat.

On Codes, Symbols and Stockholm Syndrome seeks critical distance from the visual narrative of conflict and confrontation. Hafez is alienating himself from the events of revolution, allowing himself the physical and mental space to contemplate and produce accurate reflections of his experiences. This impetus to disengage and return to the studio reflects his disillusion with the turn of political events in Egypt. He describes post-revolutionary politics as the kidnapping of the revolution by regressive forces.

The notion of distance as a way of seeing more clearly is reflected in the size of the symbols used. Some canvases appear to contain only a single element; but upon closer inspection one detects smaller elements of painting and collage invisible from a distance. This interplay of space and vantage point underscores Hafez's efforts to retreat and review recent historical events while revising his long-held beliefs about the future.

Hafez's bright colour palette has been applied more thickly in these paintings than in previous works, using colour to fragment the painted surface into parts. Drawing attention to the paint in this way emphasizes its metaphorical importance to the work. The bright colours dripping in thickly layered lines across the canvas represent the diversity of people in Tahrir Square,

all coming from different walks of life. The surface of the canvas is a field of expression, just like Cairo's streets and squares, and the 'dripping' is the protestors and demonstrators all expressing their different lives and their intermingling narratives. The bright lines of paint that run from the top of the canvas, only to accumulate in darker tones along the bottom edge, also evoke the artist's gradual loss of faith in the promises of the January 2011 revolution.

Video and Revolution

The broken promises of an earlier revolution take centre stage in Khaled Hafez's 2009 Video work *The A77A Project: On Presidents and Superheroes*. This work won the Biennale award at the 2011 Bamako Biennale for Photography in Mali and was shown at the Rotterdam Film Festival in the Netherlands (2012) where it featured alongside the video project *Revolution* (2006). For Hafez, film is a story telling process using images, sound, rhythm and pace. Inspired by filmmakers such as France's Claude Lelouche, Hafez's video works are approached as short films always using his own scripts as the starting point for each project. Like his paintings, Hafez's video projects are investigations into the complexities of the Egyptian identity. But, through the medium of film, he pursues the Arab-Islamic layers in the 'Big Mac'.

Numbering among his best-known premonition works, *The A77A Project* is a three-minute single channel video combining 2 and 3D animation and internet-extracted imagery. It is an ironic investigation into the 'hybrid' nature of the Egyptian identity and the social changes that the artist has personally lived through, both growing up and as an adult in Egypt.

The video explores the complex figure of the 'superhero'. In this work, Anubis, the ancient Egyptian god of death, is resurrected on the surface of one of Hafez's paintings and takes us on a walk through the streets of modern Cairo, witnessing paradoxical citizens and situations. These range from the chaotic and comical, to the uncomfortable, as the god strolls past mountainous heaps of refuse, protestors attacked by thugs, and citizens pleading with rows of helmeted riot police. Anubis moves through these scenes of poverty and disorder with cool detachment. He is the silent narrator of this matter-of-fact documentation of the deterioration of a

city centre once described as among the most beautiful in the world.

Running as a soundtrack to the god's journey through Cairo is a looping disco tune and the 1967 resignation speech of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser with lewd interventions in the voiceover. Echoing over the desolate scenes of the city, his words remind us of the collapse of the Pan-Arab ideology in a modern Egypt where the super heroes of religion have replaced this superhero of the Arab world.

Another important premonition work is Hafez's much acclaimed 2006 Video *Revolution*. Inspired by the Polish Film maker Krzysztof Kieslowski's "The Three Colors Trilogy", this work takes an ironic view of the discredited ideals of Egypt's 1950s revolution. Divided into three screens, the video simultaneously features the same actor in three separate scenes: a corporate figure striking nails, a military figure loading and pointing a gun, and a religious extremist repeatedly decapitating a Barbie doll. For Hafez, what remains of the promises of the Egyptian revolution are the social equity of the gun, the pseudo liberty of the corporate economy and the religious unity of chopping heads. It is perhaps significant that these same three categories of protagonist continue to dominate Egypt's political arena today.

Unlike the *The A77A Project* and *Revolution* (that criticize Egypt's political leadership and the decline of the urban space), *11.02-2011: The Video Diaries* is Hafez's only video work, to date, to emerge from the physical experience of revolution. It was shown at the Mercosul Biennale in Brazil (September 2011) and the Copenhagen Film Festival in Denmark (November 2011). *11.02-2011: The Field Diaries*, is a large body of photographic works that accompanied this video project.

11.02-2011: The Video Diaries is a three-channel video (3 screens) featuring an identical timeline duration of 5 minutes and 30 seconds inspired by the events of January and February 2011. Displayed across three screens, playing side-by-side, horizontally, the *11.02-2011: The Video Diaries* project combines video footage taken by Hafez with stock footage extracted from social media and from several other sources. These are assembled to create several parallel narratives that intertwine on the

three screens as the real footage of collective doing and sometimes violence.

Hafez's choice of medium blurs the distinction between the artist as detached observer and active participant in the events of revolution. Inspired by Alfredo Cramerotti and Khaled Ramadan, who coined the term 'aesthetic journalism', the work is characterized by a use of reconstructed TV footage from Egyptian State Television as well as cable satellite images, building them alongside a panorama of real life professional and amateur video footage to formulate a personal perception of a particular moment. With its myriad footage and sounds, the video seeks to capture the immediacy of that minute-to-minute transition, away from autocracy and oppression and towards a new, albeit uncertain, future for Egypt.

Hafez places official media footage on a par with the documents of personal interaction and experience, positing himself as artist-citizen and challenging the authority of the myriad media narratives that surrounded the 18 days of protest. This stance reiterates Cramerotti's basic thesis that "the blurring of margins between artistic and information practices is a main feature of contemporary culture."

The political studio

Despite his self-professed emotional detachment, all Hafez's works are intensely personal manifestations of his personal experiences and wider political context. Whether a humorous glance at the broken promises of a past revolution, or a quiet contemplation of the country's future, Hafez's work is shaped by his exploration of the complex Egyptian identity. He is interested in the repercussions of politics and of history on the social fabric of his country. This has left Hafez open to criticism from certain quarters who suggest that his work may be excessively 'local' in its orientation.

Hafez himself admits that his works are representations of, and reflections on, his particular space and time. They are readily accessible and indeed this accessibility is intentional on the part of the artist, who believes local audiences should always derive meaning from his art. In some ways, this too is reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian tomb wall that was created in order to be read. His commitment to disseminating his political message and personal experiences to others also shapes Hafez's

activities outside of art. When not working, he runs a well-established political studio space in Cairo where young cultural practitioners come together to share thoughts on the arts, politics and society. The idea for the political studio came about as a small mentorship initiative in 2008. Initially, Hafez elected to open his studio every Friday for his younger peers to come, exchange ideas and to receive career guidance. Two years later these Friday encounters had become so popular that, at times, 20 artists would meet in his 130 meters square studio space discussing the concepts and craft of art production. After the revolution, the numbers attending the open studio rose dramatically and the subjects discussed turned from art to politics. Today, each Friday morning brings crowds of artists, musicians and writers to discuss the future of Egypt and its cultural institutions.

About the Writer

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