

LINKED ITINERARIES, REMINISCENCE AND REPRESENTATION: THE CASE OF ADAM HENEIN AND FAROUK HOSNY

By: Khaled Hafez

LINKED ITINERARIES

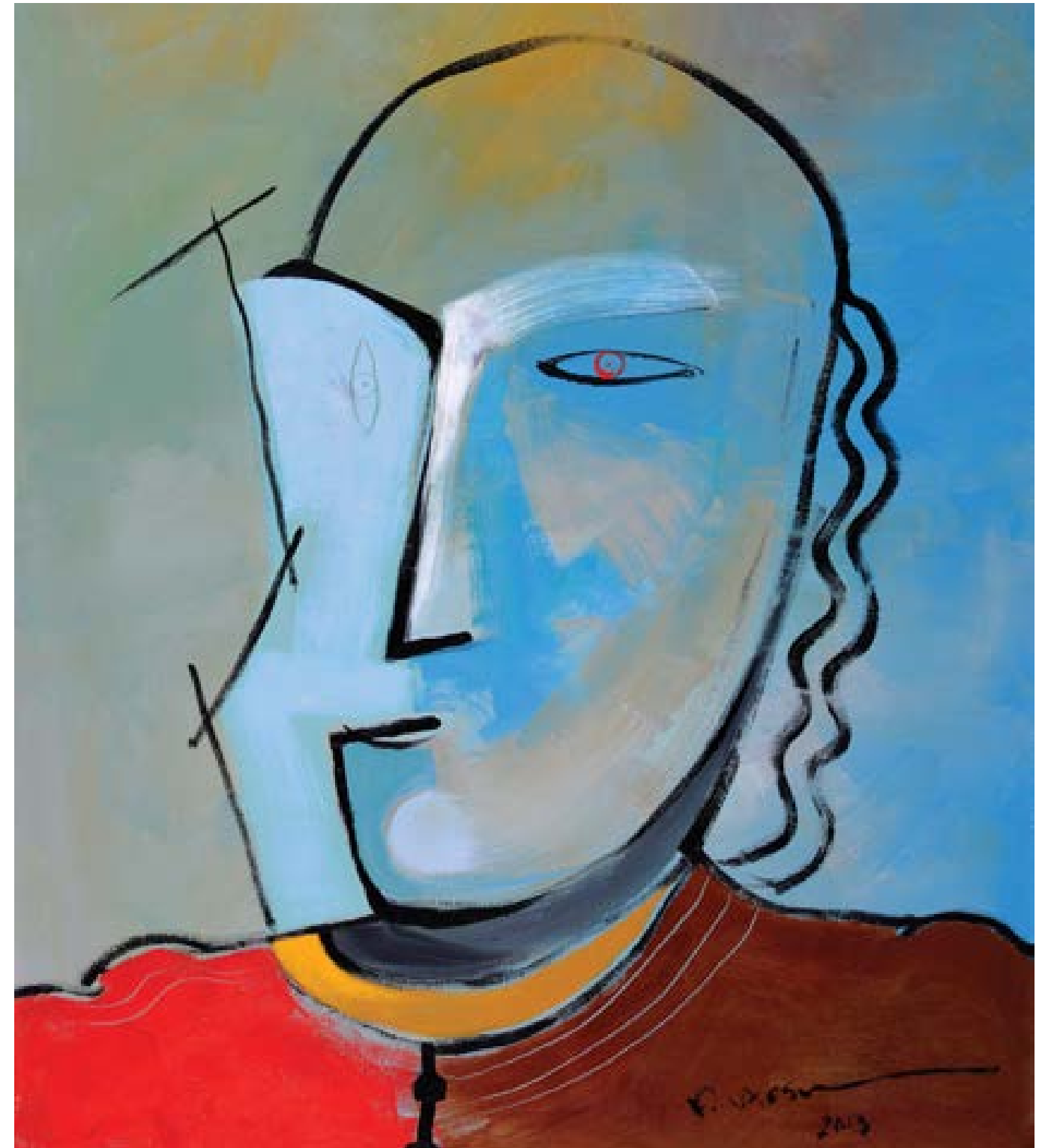
As early as 1939, Clement Greenberg⁽¹⁾ claimed that authentic avant-garde art is a product of the Enlightenment's revolution of critical thinking, and as such resists and recoils from the degradation of culture in both mainstream capitalist and communist society. He, on the other hand acknowledged that though the artist may be free in thought at all times, yet paradoxically, the artist many times is also dependent on the market or the state. Greenberg even used the term "*they (artist and market, or artist and state) are attached by an umbilical cord of gold*".

Such is the case of Adam Henein and Farouk Hosny: both free spirits who always chose independence in their practice, yet paradoxically, both were also during several times an integral part of the Egyptian art movement, the most dynamic, the oldest in terms of institutions and cultural infrastructure, philanthropy, state sponsorship, and most authentic in the region.

Both artists' linked itineraries started in friendship in the sixties of the twentieth century in the ancient cities of Cairo and Alexandria, a sculptor and a painter, though both crossed practices, either in experimentation, adventure, or in challenge. Then both had to travel to, live and work in the same seductive city of Paris: some sage man once said that Paris is like

Marquerite Monnot's and Alexandre Breffort's *Irma la Douce*⁽²⁾, seductive but impossible to own. In Paris Hosny directed the State's Egyptian Cultural Center in the gorgeous area of St. Michel, where both artists met and collaborated. Then comes the Italian station, when Hosny directed the Egyptian academy in Rome, and where both artists and long time friends already re-cross path.

When Farouk Hosny accepted to assume the responsibility of heading the cultural pyramid in Egypt --with its long heritage of cultural overload--, as the Minister of Culture, risking his career as a free-spirited artist, it seemed that the shared itineraries would phase out for a long period of time, an assumption that proved to evaporate when Adam Henein accepted -with an invitation from Hosny- to assume the responsibility of the Great Sphinx restoration after catastrophic interventions from incompetent parties, an operation that took over eight years of shared responsibility between the two artists, and was followed by the responsibility of creating the Aswan Sculpture Symposium, and the revival of the stone sculpture art, a dream that loomed in the minds of the two artists since the early years of Paris in the early seventies. Greenberg's golden umbilical cord best describes those two artists, free at spirit, linked to the state, and both extremely successful with the local and regional art market, a phenomenon that is seldom replicated, an fact that is tested and authenticated after both left their attachment to the State.



Bilad al-Sawad, 1993. Charcoal on paper, 9 drawings each 65 x 50 cm. Private collection.

REMINISCENCE

The shared itineraries of Henein and Hosny are much reminiscent of other cases that have occurred to us in collective memory and in our assimilation of art history. Color Field painters Mark Rothko and Clifford Still, both friends who shared studios and shared pedagogic itineraries; they, in one adventure, they even contemplated creating their own art education curriculum in 1947 while they both taught at the San Francisco Art Institute --Known then as California School of Fine Art.

Another example is life-long friends and contemporaries Matisse and Picasso are another example. They first met in 1906, and it was clear from the first encounter that a solid friendship had been born. One conspicuous difference between them is that Matisse drew and painted from nature, while Picasso was more inclined to work from imagination. Though Matisse and Picasso came from the rather classical modern art history, a third reminiscence --and a much more meaningful one-- is the

collaboration and shared itineraries of Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter. In 1963, Polke's and Richter's collaboration entailed the founding of the painting movement "Kapitalistischer Realismus" (*aka capitalist realism*) with Gerhard Richter and Konrad Fischer. Both artists shared the sixties of the twentieth century like Henein and Hosny, both artists were linked to the legendary Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, both experimented with photography and painting, though each artist was driven by a personal creative obsession, one by the observed, the other by the *felt*. Such is the case of Adam Henein, who for years --with exceptions over certain periods in his career-- inspired from his *seen* environment, while Farouk Hosny drew inspiration from his cognitive knowledge, manifested subconsciously. One last significant reminiscence is that of Jasper Jones and Robert Rauschenberg who shared adjacent studios for decades, shared meals, families, friends, and the same gallerists, Leo Castelli for the entirety of their careers that spanned almost five decades.



The Rooster, Paris 1979, bronze, edition of 8, 17x40x53cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Bilad al-Sawad, 1993, Charcoal on paper, 9 drawings each 65 x 50 cm. Private collection.

REPRESENTATION

In the exhibition he curated for the Los Angeles County Museum of art in 1964, Greenberg coined a term that fits perfectly the early practice and painting rationale of Farouk Hosny in the seventies: *post-painterly abstraction*.

Greenberg had perceived that there was a new movement in painting that derived from the abstract expressionist trend but demonstrated more *openness* and *clarity*, as opposed to the dense painterly surfaces of that painting style, and that describes well Hosny's early works. In his introductory text for this seminal exhibition, Greenberg quotes the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, who used the German word *malerisch*, which simply translates as *painterly*, to describe the formal qualities

of Baroque art, and identify it from High Renaissance or Classical art. *Painterly* would mean in this case: the blurred, broken, loose definition of color and contour. The opposite of *painterly* is clear, unbroken, and sharp definition, which Wölfflin called the linear. The dividing line between the *painterly* and the *linear* is easier to write about than actually see. For the past six decades, there have been many artists whose work combines elements of both *painterly* and *linear* acts, where *painterly* gestures can go with *linear* design back and forth, which is the very conspicuous case that perfectly describes the more recent works of Farouk Hosny, who combines lines with colored areas, and mixes the sharp with the blurred. We can speak of Color Field painting or Lyrical Abstraction, and even better or best, not to even try to give a name, and just float with the visual pleasure of sheer painting.



Bilad al-Sawad, 1993. Charcoal on paper, 9 drawings each 65 x 50 cm. Private collection.



The Standing Owl, Nouba 1961, bronze, edition of 8, 47x22x45cm. Courtesy of the artist.

HOSNY: FROM THE SYMBOL OF THE REAL TO THE REALITY OF THE SYMBOL

One way to approach the practice of Farouk Hosny is to apply Jean Baudrillard's hypothesis of simulation and simulacra where Baudrillard attempts to examine the relationships among reality, symbols, and society⁽⁵⁾. To Baudrillard, simulacra are copies of elements that depict things that either had no original to begin with, or that no longer have an original. Simulation -as an engineering term-- can be perceived as the imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time⁽⁷⁾. Baudrillard's discourse on *Simulacra and Simulation* explores the use of symbols, signs, and how they relate to our life today, or in Baudrillard's terms *contemporaneity* or *simultaneous existences*. Baudrillard claims that our contemporary society has identified all its reality and its meaning

with symbols and signs, and that our daily life and human experience is of a simulation of reality⁽⁸⁾. Since Hosny's early adoption of the *Informel*, his early abstractions, signs and symbols found their way on his layered canvases. Brushstrokes, sometimes wild and erratic, other times mathematically and meticulously placed, are loaded with simulations of signs that mimic the coded street messages, from sign boards with significant messaging to seemingly banal graffiti. Those codes may have an original for Hosny, or may not, and he keeps the process of repetition of coding in perseverance over surfaces and over time. For Baudrillard, a simulacrum or simulacra are not always merely mediations of reality, or even deceptive mediations of reality. Hosny's codes are not found in the real, nor are based in a reality, nor do they hide a reality. Those symbols simply hide over and underneath layers of paint, to remind us

that perhaps and may be those simulations are perhaps relevant to our current understanding of our lives. Baudrillard classified the process and notion of Simulacra and Simulation identifies three types of simulacra and identifies each with a historical period:

First order, associated with the period before modernism, known as *pre-modern period*, where representation is clearly an artificial place-marker for the real item. The uniqueness of an artwork, an artifact or an objects makes it irreproducible, and hence *signification* seeks this reality. The second order is linked the age of modernism and the industrial revolution, where distinctions between representation and reality break down due to the proliferation of mass reproduction of copies turning them into commodities. The commodity's ability to imitate reality threatens to

replace the authority of the original version, because the copy is just as "real" as its original⁽⁹⁾.

Hosny's work can be described by understanding Baudrillard's third order, that he -Baudrillard-hypothesized as linked to the Late Capitalist age, aka the Post-Modern era, and we can claim that this sustains till today.

In Hosny's work, we see the artist's obsession with creating the codes and symbols -we can look at them now as simulacra - in repetition that they turn to become originals, or surpass the original inspiration, if those ever existed in the real world. Baudrillard in this third order thinks that the simulacrum precedes the original and the distinction between reality and representation vanishes. There is only the simulacrum, and originality - in Hosny's case here means the inspiration from reality - becomes totally irrelevant.



Bilad al-Sawad, 1993. Charcoal on paper, 9 drawings each 65 x 50 cm. Private collection.



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HENEIN: FROM FIGURATION TO THE INFORMAL MASS, TO NEO-FIGURATION

One way to approach the practice of Adam Henein is to use a painterly term: *neo-figuration*: why not, as Henein is also a painter as much as a sculptor, since the early years of his career. If such a term as *neo-figuration* describes an expressionist revival in modern form of figurative art, it fits the practice of Henein who started in figuration and moved slowly to abstraction of the French painterly style of the Informel in the late sixties and early seventies, and slowly moved back to figuration till he attained his sculptural style of the past three decades. If such a term that describes neo-figurative trend emerged in the 1960s in Mexico and Spain to represent a new form of figurative art, it fits perfectly the moods - and for that we can also use the term *moots* - of a studio artist like Henein: coming from Egypt, having assimilated the cumulative and complex Egyptian identity of the ancient Egyptian, Judeo-Christian, Arab-Islamic, African and Mediterranean influences of the local culture. Similarities in indigenous -and endogenous - southern cultures of Egypt allow us to

approach the works of Henein in a term that describes practices from Spain and Mexico. Artists like Henein paved the way to generation of sculptors to retrieve both style and medium, skill and concept, perseverance and research; this is best explored in the indispensable well-researched omnibus *The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture*⁽¹⁰⁾. In this important work, writer and editor Ralph Rugoff, with his five co-writers, explore the trend of neo-figuration in the past three decades through five interesting and informative essays:

The Human Factor⁽¹¹⁾, *Standing Sculpture at the Turn of the Century: Exchange Values and Metamorphoses*⁽¹²⁾, *Post-Abstract and Data-Mapped: The Conditions of Contemporary Figure Sculpture*⁽¹³⁾, *After the Fall: The Re-Emergence of the Figure in Sculpture*⁽¹⁴⁾ and *Bodies Politic*⁽¹⁵⁾. In all five articles, we find the historical references and drivers, set and established by artists like Adam Henein that would lead to the current adoption of figuration in current sculptural styles. Here the story of Henein is the story of sculpture itself, and the change of Henein's style over the years is the same change that happened to figurative sculpture. Figuration in



The Donkey, Egypt 1964, bronze, edition of 8, 80x116x31cm. Courtesy of the artist.



The Tin Holder, Cairo 1952, bronze, edition of 8, 61x10.5x7cm. Courtesy of the artist.

painting and sculpture was the standard throughout the ages, an integral part of human history making, much linked to the evolution of language, the creation of myths and the development of culture. This persistence of figuration survived until the early sixties of the twentieth century when the visual on figurative -and sometimes anti-figuration occurred. The three decades that followed saw the absolute relegation of figurative sculpture to the category of *persona non grata*. "Caro's pioneering painted metal constructions were hailed for 'liberating' sculpture from its hidebound association with the figure, while forming a more abstract and medium-specific language"¹⁶¹. During the Renaissance, the figure - human or animal - regains its rightful place as *one acceptable form* of sculpture in society, perhaps further nailing the lid on the coffin of the *fundamentalist-like, post-modern absurdity* of what is or is not acceptable or fashionable as trendy art. Martin Herbert tried to put the situation in perspective, and confirms that there was a period of perhaps 40 years when it was not particularly acceptable to adopt overtly figuration styles in sculpture¹⁷⁷. In case of Henein, his return to figuration was innate and self-motivated, and the progression towards such an end was slow and predictable, as seen by his successive projects from the works exhibited at the Institut du Monde Arabe in the early nineties that inclined towards abstraction, juxtaposed to his works in the past fifteen years when he started his decade-long project *The Boat of Adam*, where the entirety of the body of work is overtly neo-figurative, where an element of abstraction is still perceived. That particular aspect of figuration with abstraction taste is explored extensively in Penelope Curtis's essay *Standing Sculpture at the Turn of the Century: Exchange Values and Metamorphoses*¹⁸¹, where

certain relationships are highlighted: the exchange between figure and ground, between body and material, an exchange she describes as *haptic*, i.e. tactile, and she claims that it unites a diverse range of artwork. She believes that such exchange cannot lead to simple conclusions about figurative sculpture in the early twenty-first century, other than to accept that it is being as abstract as it is figurative¹⁸⁹. Curtis finds this dialogue between figuration and abstraction today healthy, and finds it more interesting than previous decades when no interrogation and re-assessment of the figure took place. Henein's work always astounds viewer, as it does not fall completely into any category of full academic figuration or deeply founded abstraction. Personally I think that this effect was attained in ancient Egyptian art during the eighteenth dynasty, where details were simplified and abstracted, which helped the viewer focus on the sublimely perfected figurative representation of the sculpture.

About the Writer

Khaled Hafez is a visual artist and filmmaker. Born in Cairo, Egypt in 1963, where he lives and works. Hafez explores through painting, film/video, photography and installation local identity exposed to the global consumer goods culture, and uses irony to explore subjugation, games of power and changing social politics. Hafez work was shown at the 55th Venice Biennale (Italy, 2013), Manifesta 8 (Spain, 2010); New Museum and Queens Museum (New York, USA), Saatchi Gallery (London, UK), Kunstmuseum Bonn (Germany); MuHKA Museum (Belgium), Thessaloniki State Museum of Art (Greece); Uppsala Museum of Art (Sweden) and Hiroshima MOCA (Japan) among other places.

End Notes

¹⁶¹ Clement Greenberg (January 16, 1909 - May 7, 1994), was an American writer and influential art critic closely associated with American Modern Art of the mid-20th century. His body of writing in promotion of the abstract expressionist movement earned him his fame. He was one of the early critics to recognize the work of Jackson Pollock.

¹⁶² Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." *Partisan Review*, 6.5 (1939) 34-49.

¹⁶³ *Irma la Douce* is a 1963 romantic comedy starring Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine and directed by Billy Wilder. It is based on the 1956 French stage musical *Irma La Douce* by Marguerite Monnot and Alexandre Breffort.

¹⁶⁴ Grafik des kapitalistischen Realismus. KP Brehmer, KH Hödicke, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Wolf Vostell. Druckgrafik bis 1971.

¹⁶⁵ Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation* (The Body, In Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism). Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995. ISBN 10: 0472065211 ISBN 13: 9780472065219.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson. *Landscapes of Capital. Information technology*. St. Lawrence University. Retrieved 4 December 2012.

¹⁶⁷ J. Banks, J. Carson, B. Nelson, D. Nicol (2001). *Discrete-Event System Simulation*. Prentice Hall. p. 3. ISBN 0-13-088702-1.

¹⁶⁸ Jean Baudrillard. *For a critique of the Political Economy of the sign*. Telos Press Ltd. ISBN 10: 0914386239 ISBN 13: 9780914386230.

¹⁶⁹ Same source.

¹⁷⁰ Ralph Rugoff, editor. *The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture*. Hayward Publishing, London, UK, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-85332-322-5.

¹⁷¹ Ralph Rugoff. *The Human Factor*. same volume.

¹⁷² Penelope Curtis. *Standing Sculpture at the Turn of the Century: Exchange Values and Metamorphoses*. same volume.

¹⁷³ Martin Herbert. *Post-Abstract and Data-Mapped: The Conditions of Contemporary Figure Sculpture*. same volume.

¹⁷⁴ James Lingwood. *After the Fall: The Re-Emergence of the Figure in Sculpture*. same volume.

¹⁷⁵ Lisa Lee. *Bodies Politic*. same volume.

¹⁷⁶ Same source, page 11.

¹⁷⁷ Martin Herbert. *Post-Abstract and Data-Mapped: The Conditions of Contemporary Figure Sculpture*. same volume.

¹⁷⁸ Penelope Curtis. *Standing Sculpture at the Turn of the Century: Exchange Values and Metamorphoses*. same volume.

¹⁷⁹ Same source, page 24.



The Owl, Cairo 1963, bronze, edition of 8. 22x28.5x19cm. Courtesy of the artist.