

CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES OF HAZEM TAHA HUSSEIN

By: Marwa Mady

Hussein's childhood and youth was full of excitements, such as traveling almost yearly to Europe, listening in his father's home to discussions about Enlightenment, Culture, Aesthetics, etc. At six , young Hussein found himself surrounded by art books, freshly mad sketches, unglazed ceramics, unfinished paintings, sculptures or video installations, objects, photography, prints, etc. Most of the Artworks were produced from Egyptian and German artists.

As a collage student, he got to know - first in Egypt and later in Germany- the Zero group Artist Günter Uecker, Dr Herbert Reckmann, the theorist and director of Folkwang museum in Essen, Dr Dieter Honisch the director of the West-Berlin Nationalgalerie, the geometric abstract artist Karl Pfahler, Thomas Link and Bernd Damke. In 1989 Hussein had for three month an artist's resident in Basel. During his stay he used to travel to Paris to meet his friends and visit museums. His studio apartment in the Foundation Christoph Merian was directly behind Basel Museum of modern Art where he saw for the first time the work of the informal artist Antoni Tapies, and the Kenitc Artist Tanqli. Hussein didn't react immediately toward the informal style, but gained better understanding for the aesthetics of the artwork of the Iraqi informal artist Shaker Hassan Al-Saiid and the collage of Muneer kanaan. During his stay in Germany between 1990 and 1998 he finished his diploma in visual communication design in Muenster WF and after obtaining his PhD in Design philosophy Wuppertal 1997, he moved to Cairo by the beginning of 1998, and based in Egypt till 2009. From End 2009 and till today he is working in Bahrain as Associate Professor of visual communication design, contemporary visual art, and visual semiotics.



AN IDENTITY CONFLICT - ISSUES RELATED TO MODERNISM

Hussein grew up under the regimes of Nasser and later Sadat. Nasser ruled Egypt from the mid fifties till the beginning of the seventies. Egypt was in good relation with the former Soviet Union. Most of the products were local or imported from the socialist or communist block countries like China, Russia, and Hungary. The education system during Nasser ruling's period was full of contradicted values e.g. between Conservatism and Liberalism, Imperialism and Socialism. The idea of "Late Imperialism" was almost absent from the entire life in Egypt. Even with the "Infitah" policy (literary meaning "the opening") during Sadat's era and the new friendship relation with USA and the West, most of the Artists and intellectual were not yet ready for this contra shift. Like many other Arabic Artists, Hussein's falls in the trap of "identity" and "nationalism" and start talking about "Modernity versus Tradition".

Hussein found himself in an ethical and moral conflict i.e. between being a strong believer or a liberal Muslim or an atheist. From other hand, there was no real Art market or art critic in the Middle East. However, the only first Aid for him was the ideas of his grandfather and some of his family members, who were practicing Islam with broadminded vision and the westernized liberal visions of his father's crises. These prevented him from the fall in the extremes of the Late-Imperialism and its materialistic perceptions with its supermarket and malls culture, or in the radical Muslim Brotherhood/"Salafi" ideas. He focused more on his art and chose three main subjects:

- (1) Religion (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) as his mother and grandfather encouraged him to read the Quran, the Bible, and the Torah and visiting the Coptic Church;
- (2) Personal experiences (love stories, family or close friend's issues, etc.);
- (3) Politic and national statement. His painting *The Communist are coming back*, 1987, was a description for the Egyptian collective life during the 1960's and 1970's, and maybe like the rest of the paintings in the late 1980's, a reflection of his modernist avant-garde perspectives in fulfilling own national interests.

Hussein act as social thermometer where he with full enthusiasm tackled sensitive emergent phenomena during his youth time such as racism, and radicalism. While subjects like religion, sex, and politics considered as untouchable and a real taboo, Hussein's stubborn nature, as well his neutral position toward all religions and other's beliefs, he used clear sexual gestures "female and male signs", "Harte", "Angels", "Cross" beside "half moon" and "David star", such as the paintings "Jesus" 1993-99 and "Welcome to the Hill" from 1999.



The Communist are Back, 1987, acrylic and pastil on wood, 70x100cm, Courtesy of a Private Collection.

STAGES AND STYLES

Hussein's socio-cultural and educational backgrounds encouraged his experimental nature to grow up fast and stable. In most of his stages, and like in the pop art, he didn't try to hide globally known icons and signs or modified its forms. In his first drawings series "Wrong and right" in 1981-83, he discussed religious aspects. The surfaces of the paintings look like equally splitted parts, as if he distinguishes between the Heaven and the Hill. Crossing these parts appear falling's bodies and a lot of "X" signs in the foreground. The usage of Indian ink and Pastel color on grainy paper helped him to emphasis the illustrative idea of the religious stories. At this period, the passion of using etching techniques and the fine overlapped lines reflect a talented graphic artist rather than a painter. During his stay in the guesthouse of Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany, he saw interesting collection of constructivism, neo-expressionism, neo-pop, minimalism, and arte povera. Hussein turn back to Egypt and start painting, for the first time, on big surface and use mixed media technique such as acrylic color, pencils, ink, and charcoal on freshly starched self-made primed canvas or paper starched on wood or directly paint on wood sheets. Remarkable here to mention is the act of covering his paintings with white-pinkish semi-transparent layer so that the shapes and colored forms become barely visible. Unfortunately, after a couple of hard critic and miss success, Hussein froze for few years the idea of hidden elements, but likely on 2006 appeared once again in informal way of expression. In 1986, the Cairo-based French gallerist, and art dealer Christine Champy-Roussillon visited the annually organized "general art exhibition" in Cairo, and decided to open the season of 1987 in her Mashrabia gallery with a solo exhibition for the young Hussein, where great Egyptian masters such as Monier Kanaan, Inji Aflaton, and Hamed Nada had their shows. He transformed in his drawings, paintings and small objects every human body, natural element, and industrial object into stick figures. He depicted the "real" world and its physical components in order to transform them into his own virtuality. The stick figures appear on the surface beside icons, symbols look like hieroglyphic script. They functioned one time as storytellers of Myth or old stories, on other time as performers acting with full vitality and freshness to deliver in every artwork different story. Hussein reflects understanding for the language of neo-expressionism, and graffiti. In his paintings and colored wire-objects appeared the same stick figures in different positions, with limited number of pastel colors and mostly were pink, light purple, light blue, light yellow, and a bit of black or grey painted over white background. The stick figures in the small objects were welded and over painted and seems to be created to narrate once again religious, personal, and political stories in theatrical way of visual expression.



Untitled 2 Wrong and Right series, 1982. Acrylic and pastel on paper, 50x70cm. Courtesy of the Artist.



Untitled 1 Wrong and Right series, 1982. Acrylic and pastel on paper, 50x70cm. Courtesy of the Artist.

The hierocratic letterforms performed as human figures and like in animated films, they communicate with each other by using human gestures. In the object "Good Bye Grand Father" Hussein's borrowed the pharaonic Myth of the bride of the Nile, and replaced her body with the one of his dead grand father. In his second exhibition in La Part Du Sable gallery in 1988, Hussein presented with the same style new stories like "Spanish fighting bull", "the Harp player", "the Talking flowers", "My Daughter Hanna", "the journey to Basel", "the television", "My Mother", "self-portrait". It was relatively strange to find an Arabic young Artist using the idea of Goethe's "Faust" to express his inner intent. Using hidden elements mixed with ancient scripts and in "Lettering" way of expression sound as if he is about to create a new Myth, he literally wrote what ever he wants without fear to be directly understood. That was extremely interesting approach in the Arabic post-modernism.

Between 1989 and 1991 Hussein his work was exhibited with big success in Basel and in Zurich. His artistic approach was full of enhancements, where he adopted the idea of using pre-existing objects of the dada to create new single work of art or an installation. The ready-made, covered with Islamic colored patterns objects have been integrated in the installation "Room of the Television" in his Basel exhibition in 1988. The founded wood sheets covered with light transparent paper sheets painted with Islamic patterns. Each painting consist of single letterform occupied the entire surface. The single element is extracted out of Nabatian and Aramaic script, and transformed sometimes into from of a television, a fish, a face, or used as abstract form. But this improvement doesn't stop him to continue producing Myth-narratives. Only Christian narratives like "Jesus cross", and "the last supper" have been often repeated. It is obvious that his paintings in the mid of the 1990's and the mid of the 2000's were more mature, and manifest his capability, not only of memorizing narratives and interprets them in a huge amount of work and in a very short period, but also on generating new stories. In his second interesting installation project "The children room and Khayyam stories" in 2000, Hussein turned the main exhibition hall into installation, full of wood sticks, and wood sheets covered with the same painted paper with Islamic patterns. Only three small paintings with three different selected verses out of Khayyam hang on the wall, the rest of the work occupied the flower and the room edges. This Exhibition was once again full of personal narratives reflects memories of his own childhood, and love stories. Most of the artworks were produced in Germany or in Egypt between 1992, and 2000. This Exhibition was unsuccessful and brought him into depression. Aside from that, his personal problems and the separation from his daughter increased his depression in a way that the normal styles and techniques he used to use enabled him to reflect his inner

emotions. In the 1991 started Hussein to experiment the technique of his Swiss friend and abstract expressionist Hanz Schaffner and produced for more than fifteen years semi-abstract paintings. The funny pastel colored elements and figures stick disappeared and replaced with semi-representational forms, textures, and selectively chosen symbols mostly in black or dark colors. The period of his neo-expressionism, and informal between 1991 and 2006 was full of political, and private statements, and goes far away from his previous inner desire in reflecting visually his identity. But again, this act wasn't an act out of deep understanding of the essential shift from modernism to post-modernism, but somehow shifting to different direction, away from his Egyptian colleagues and their Identity conflict. Hussein focuses on the informal language, and the usage of complicated materials and techniques like asphalt, self-mixed pigments, car oil, car grease oil, thick paper, and wood strokes rather than on the detailed narratives, or known acrylic colors, canvas and brushes. We could recognize his abstract vision by flattening the perspectives and giving depth through colored layers, and emphasizing the textures. The newly used concept and technique mirroring his depression, anger, and aggressions. Even there were many unhidden icons that could deliver "hopes" such as the light yellowish Heart inside the black areas. Hussein continued using the "Cross" and the "X" to signify the Torment, and negative pre-judgments or social vital mistakes.

THE ISLAMIC GRIDS AS JUST A BLIND OR A VEIL OF IGNORANCE

Till the late 2007, Hussein paint almost parallel in informal, neo-expressionism, and in neo-pop style. That was schizophrenic and unexplained, maybe because the messages that he directed to be easily understood painted in neo-pop style, and the once that he wanted to hide its meanings in informal or neo expressionism. The Idea of using Islamic grids is closely connected with Hussein's previous concept of "hidden elements", which he had started at the beginning of the 1980's, and later with his usage of dots screen and collage paper in the 2002. Hussein's vision was partly inspired by the neo-expressionism and neo-pop way of using overlapped Materials such as paper as layers. With the intention of maximizing the "gestalt of the space", the "unnecessary effects" have been removed. He wanted to reach a unified "Hue"-like effect, so that all elements will depend more on their semantic quality rather than on their colorful attractive effects. Hussein directed his attention toward any socio-cultural phenomenon and treated it as "Illusions" of well-known aesthetical signs. Social well-known scenes like street chat between man and woman can easily be interpreted-in the Arab world-as mysterious act through adding a screen over the bodies. He considered that any scene such as a sign, could be neutrally or differently perceived when it is partly

isolated from its natural environment by removing the backgrounds and isolating the main objects with painted solid flat color or occupying it with motives or extra overlaid dot screen. Between 2008 and 2013 continued Hussein working with the technique of layering. He was inspired by the John Rawls idea of "Veil of Ignorance", and started to imagine people, faces and later angels in an original position behind a veil. Especially the usage of bodies and faces with unclear features behind the grid veil, was very successful in embodies the Rawls's Idea. Hussein chose special scenes looks like snap shoots, where the heroes acting as if they don't know anything about themselves and their natural abilities, or their position in society. They know nothing of their sex, race, nationality, or individual tastes. Behind such a veil of ignorance all individuals are simply specified as rational, free, and

morally equal beings. Hussein's vision was continued with Ingarden's ideas of aesthetic experience and aesthetic object. He assumed that the Viewers during their aesthetic experience would identify the faces and bodies behind the veil as part of their own "real world". We as viewers will try to depict any plastic effect and interpret it as an extra sign or an indicator or a natural assets and refection for the hidden abilities. By the end of our experience we will be ready to differentiae between the sex, race, and culture of the painted figures or faces. His research about the idea of the veil goes deeply and with more understanding for his entire previous experimentations and artistic stages. Before start painting his latest work of 2014-15, created Hussein a new sketchbook titled "between the acceptable and the rejected" where he wrote his different concepts and notes



Untitled, 2002. Collage, acrylic, newspaper and printed paper on paper, 20x30cm. Courtesy of a Private Collection.

about his entire previous artistic achievements. He personally believes that modernism still exists, especially in the Middle East. He rejected once again the what ever the new gallerist or young curators call it cutting-edge. Beside the written texts and the brainstorming diagrams we identify drawn figures, elements, and objects in all the styles that he previously used. In a very sophisticated way, he manifested his capability to create a new visual language carry his own signature. With more abstractive vision and illuminations of decorative effects including scratches, and freely color drops, Hussein painted in limited number of used mediums with mixed new color palette figures, numbers and other elements in geometric forms. Back to the modernism, back to the constructivism, he built his paintings like mosaic pieces that connected with thick or thin lines, numbers or written text. The idea of Rawls lost yet its previous position and turned to be part of his plastic elements. The veil of ignorance and the idea of hidden bodies turned off, the veil can deliver visual excitement as a globally understood Islamic motive. Interesting, the broken parts in the veil and the jumped elements that come out of it. The elements are sometimes looks like his old figures in the 1980's, the abstract scratches looks like his doodles from the 2000's, and the entire color palette is a mixture between his the color palettes of the 1980's and 2000's.

REMIXED PHOTOMONTAGE

The known series of Hussein's photomontage are full of fluidness of narratives and reflecting different complicity grades. Most of his subjects depend on heterogeneity and elastically. Out of his beliefs that the meaning can't be found in the artwork itself, but more in its surroundings, Hussein directed his attention toward present common stories from the street, or brought old narratives back to live through new interpretation. In most of his artworks exist overlapped scenes of mixed-communities or hybrid ideas and beliefs, where certain visual codes of cultural and traditional alignments can encourage its appearance to be easily perceived. In a certain grade, Hussein built his own visual paradigm for the usage of overlay paradoxes. For example in his photomontage series "Occidentalism", he focused on the uncertainties in the Egyptian society, and its schizophrenic or dichotomies behaviors. He considered himself as an Occidentalist, and chose a globally known pudgy catholic Anqle to fly over Egypt and explore the narratives for the viewer. This artistic approach seems to be "component-based" mental and visual remixing of Arabic (Islamic and Christian), and Western norms and values. The freshly captured images and the updated codes were behind the success of such integration of socio-cultural hybrid elements. They permit the global readings with high dynamics' grad.

Despite the fact that the combined elements are being borrowed from

different and contradicted sources, in many cases they are carefully chosen to deliver a clear message. In the series Facebook Hussein had ironically chosen the painting "Napoleon Crossing the Alps" to represent the new fake Egyptian Napoleon Mohamed Morsi. Hussein used the same intention of the romantic artist Jacques-Louis David (1805), where its original function was part of Napoleon's propaganda to contribute to his rise to power, legitimate his regime, and establish his image for posterity. The background scenes of the Egyptian street chaos, violence, and poverty are ironically mixed with the image of the great Leader Napoleon, who invites the viewer to ask questions about what happened, and how it happened? The whole series symbolize the "fake" power of the Arabic spring; and embodied the unknown forces that stand behind this unknown replica or the puppet-leader! Eventually, the physical existence of Hussein's artwork will not be enough to deliver a comprehensive aesthetical judgment. In fact it is an invitation to start cultivating our visual vocabulary in order to be able to encode its new "visual texts". His visual language depends on in many aspects on socio-cultural dimensions that can be found not only between the normal interpretation of a code or symbol but also between the dots, lines, shades, colors, and textures. An essential reading of Hussein's socio-cultural background and a general knowledge about the development in the orthodox will be recommended. But like many Arabic artist.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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Celebrity of the Moon with the Cross, Occidentalism Series, 2006-07, photomontage, inkjet on paper, edition of 3, 196x145cm, Courtesy of Bahrain Polytechnic.