

DELAYED WISHES AND AN EVASIVE DREAM BAHAA AAMER'S PAINTINGS

By: Ashraf Ibrahim

Young artist, Bahaa Amer's style, is a new artistic trend to the Middle Eastern art scene. He has his own world and vision which are structured by his contemporary paintings. Despite having more than ten years of experience, his works of art reveal polished practices that are reflected in both painting and drawing. He builds a metaphysical world that reaches beyond our visual reality. The paintings skip the traditional frame and move to a world of fantasia and lyrical narrative. His paintings possess many layers, dimensions, and adaptations. They are full of signs, meanings, and connotations that are related in a surreal fashion. His works take the audience away from the usual visual world. Despite their simplicity, it is not easy to grasp the message found in his paintings, as it is challenging to comprehend the direct connotations implied by the relations between the different aspects in his work. Each work is a surreal complex sentence, where each word has its own meaning, but when put together, the meaning becomes even more ambiguous and complicated. It is similar to a stream of consciousness, where the senses go astray without any logical order for the audience. It is as if we are experiencing the world in James Joyce's Ulysses or something close to it.

We are confronted with pieces of art that depend on the sense of sight, and while the form is the artist's way to communicate with the audience, in Amer's work, we find that the form is very deceptive. It is easy to recognize the elements of the paintings as they are common aspects in real life, like a bird or a figure. This style attracts the eye because of its simplicity and at the same time gives the audience the chance to wander about among the different painting techniques. We can see two major stages in Amer's work. The first stage looks abstract and tends to be one dimensional with smooth treatments. In this stage the artist depends on a technique through which he uses the line and transforms it into threads that connect the elements of the painting visually. It also provides paths for the eyes to move around in the paintings. I believe that he is reflecting the relations between the real elements in life through the threads in the paintings that are similar to the strings controlling the marionette but they refer to indirect relations that seem more hurtful than in real life. So it makes me wonder why all the figures' limbs are pointy and sharp and they seem as if they are moving and never still.

There is, however, a romantic sensibility in his paintings through the smooth touch of the brush. Love is also reflected through his flexible lines and warm, sometimes bright colors. In spite of the absence or neutralization of light shown in the shadows, yet it appears in few paintings and glows in some other.

In this stage, the artist tries to express himself by skipping the "acrylic" technique favoring "pastels", maybe to emphasize the romantic atmosphere that he wants to evoke. He also tries to add depth to the surface of his painting through straight lines that mark the places which are usually closed, as if the self is a room in which the figures are trapped. We can see arms and legs crossed as if waiting. They reflect regret and sadness. An example of that is a hand buried between strong arms and hands that have the color of pale purple mixed with blue as an indication of the death of these limbs. Though the man looks alive, his death is spiritual. His head is orange and his hair drawn like electric waves that are engaging with the whole scene, creating a metaphysical painting with symbolic psychological dimensions as an expression of the self facing the world.

There is also some Geometric influence which reminds us of Malevich's abstracts with their motionless backgrounds. The division of the painting's surface also reminds us of ancient Egyptian art which is a major motive, hidden deep in the artist's memory and experience. The effect is that his figures recall hieroglyphic signs, emphasizing this state.

In the artist's other stage, we find that his texture looks like a carpet, a network of spontaneous bent & wrapped lines. The colors are cloudy, dark bleak and crowded. There is no explicit color, no single straight line. The elements are diluted in layers forming an astonishing ambiguity. It is as if the artist wants to capture feelings and evasive ideas and place them in front of him on a painting lest they escape. My interpretation is that he is in a journey of self discovery; a visual pondering and searching through drawing and Painting. Subsequently the paintings of this stage are charged with emotions. Even the predominance of grey and its shades is a reflection of a static condition of visual accumulations. So, we have glimpses of inspirations from the ancient Egyptian art, rural environment and

Egyptian folklore. The black line that contains the whole painting is also a direct consequence of this inspiration along with some other elements such as, the dog, the bird, and the human, the rose and nature in general. Another element is the figures that appear as a surprise that are made of flesh and blood and live in the crowded space of the paintings in this stage as well. In some of the paintings of Bahaa, we notice the cloudy color treatments that enrich the surface with a velvet touch and which is embroidered by lines that look like jewelry. There are many ornaments, levels, and dimensions, yet they are not too many, reflecting warm emotions. The woman is manifested as a basic element. She is a heroine in these paintings that have these emotions which hide behind visual masks driven from the simple folkloric treatments of the typical day in the lives of the Egyptians. We notice this in the flowery clothing of his female figures and the interactions between the shades of green and blue.

We see the full woman with her rich luxurious features and fertility in the use of the all shades of brown and green. This female dwells in his consciousness in her mottled clothes. She does not stand gloriously as Ishtar but lays on her side referring the audience to "Ishtar's seduction" which is also the name the artist chose for his last exhibition. We see the first woman in this seductive yet chaste position with a glory that only he sees. However, she appears in one of his paintings dressed like the Amazons with one breast, yet sitting and holding what looks like a zither or a musical instrument that brings melodies to our ears; melodies that are as dreamy as the dreamy blue and the pink in this painting. In another, she is hugging a horse which reminds Egyptians of the festival doll or "*Arouset El Moulled*"^[1] and in this painting there is another horse on a circle in the distant horizon. The circle looks like a table and with the free association of these features the Arouset El moulled is clearly manifested that we almost feel the sweet taste of the sugar which the doll made of. It is as if the artist wants to remind us of the doll and the horse as elements of childhood. The sky in the painting is also decorated by a playful brush as if referring back to a childlike and innocent atmosphere. One cloud is passing overhead in the painting and sometimes the skies of his other paintings are crowded with pink or white clouds that are transformed by sharp lines into creatures piled adrift. Below them in the center of the painting,

lies Ishtar and the earth below her, as if she is floating or hanging between heavens and earth like a delayed wish or an evasive dream that has no roots. The artist has also painted in the ground of some of the paintings plants that look like cactus. The cactus comes from beneath not from the heavens like fate or a divine gift. I believe that the significance and connotations of the cactus symbolize dry land and suffering from desertification without the hanging floating dream of Ishtar. The land is covered by tiles to indicate the impossibility of growing or planting this dream. The woman we see in the artist's imagination is headless. In most of his paintings, the head is neglected or too small compared to the magnificent body which makes her look like a pointy rock. It is as if he sees this head as a danger zone. The body is incomplete in most of his paintings, bent on itself as if it is a flower with many petals, the brush strokes of the body are preserved in swaddles piled on each other without any explicit colors like most of the colors treatment that the artist uses in this painting. They are dark and smooth without any lumps or drags from the palette knife. The brush has very soft touches that are never rough.

With his dreams, thoughts and wishes, the artist takes us in a pure poetic and colorful journey through a contemporary visual treatment that goes beyond the usual and the familiar. His paintings are as simple as his personal mark or signature with an original voice in an enjoyable visual song. It is a sedate thoughtful endeavor that can develop and grow and become something magnificent that feeds experiment, worlds, and a more mature and radiant spaces for the ingeniousness of the artist Bahaa Amer.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Ashraf Ibrahim is a curator in the Egyptian Ministry of Culture (*National Exhibitions Department*) and writer who works out of Egypt. He has numerous articles publication. Previously he was the Director of Cultural Affairs, Mohammed Mahmoud Khalil Museum, Cairo.

END NOTES

[1] A doll made of sugar riding a horse that is sold in the celebration of the born of Prophet Mohammed



1) Untitled, 2014, oil on cardboard, 80x120cm. Courtesy of the artist.

2) When Time Stops, 2013, oil on canvas, 120x240cm. Courtesy of the artist.

3) Untitled, 2013, oil on cardboard, 100x70cm. Courtesy of the artist.