

Life of Engravings

By Ati Metwaly



Untitled, 2002, ink using needle on paper, 50x50cm. - Courtesy of the artist.

Salah El-Meligy can look proudly at his life and achievements, which include participation in more than one hundred international and Egyptian exhibitions, and a dozen private shows. Professor at the Graphic Art Department at the Faculty of Arts, Helwan University, in Cairo, and, at the same time, head of the Fine Arts Sector, El-Meligy's career as graphic artist took off rapidly. In just a few decades, he has won many awards, including two international prizes, and his artwork is found in many private and public collections in Egypt and abroad. Born in 1957 in Suez, Salah El-Meligy was an artist since day one. When talking about his first inspirations, without hesitation El-Meligy points to nature as a leading voice that has shaped him as artist.

"I remember the 1960s very well. I still recall images of the sea in Suez and the mountains in El Ayat in Giza where my family moved when I was still a child," says El-Meligy. Suez and El Ayat were two cities that made a particular imprint on his childhood, while the riches of their natural environment have echoed throughout his whole artistic journey. "On the beach, I collected shells and played in the sand... The mountains, in their turn, gave me an enormous space for discoveries of colours and materials. It was an inspiring heaven."

Born into a family of pharmacists, El-Meligy always knew he wanted to become an artist and put his creativity and passion for knowledge above other activities with peers. He did not play football with friends, as he preferred



Defrential of Shape's Structure, 1998, Deep encraving on paper, 50x50cm. - Courtesy of the artist.

to spend time with paints and crayons creating things on paper or even on the walls of his house. Luckily, El-Meligy's parents welcomed his creative impulses (his mother kept all of his drawings), though they did not believe art was a reliable life path. Only later, the successes of El-Meligy as an artist calmed his parents who finally put their trust in their son's choice. El-Meligy's childish curiosity did not stop there and represented only the beginning of a long voyage that took El-Meligy from simple experimentations onto the deep waters of the art world. Since the very tender years, El-Meligy dedicated himself completely to arts practice, and art opened the most fascinating paths of knowledge to him in return. "I didn't see an art exhibition until

I was 10 years old. The only connection with 'culture' was through the culture centre in Suez which hosted sporadic music concerts."

Back then, El-Meligy imagined Cairo as the capital filled with art that he longed for and could not wait to become part of. Coming from a city deprived of artistic riches, he feared lagging behind his Cairo friends in knowledge. This worry proved unfounded once El-Meligy started mingling with arts students. When still at the secondary school, he would go to the Faculty of Arts to observe young students during their work. There was not one art exhibition that he would skip, and not one book about art that he would leave unread. He would become a constant visitor to all of Cairo's public

libraries and his reading would take him from art to all sorts of culture-related topics. If El-Meligy has ever feared anything, the fear was of knowing too little... This fear laid the foundations of his strong, self-imposed discipline where cultural development enriched him on many personal and creative levels.

Eventually, he began his studies at the Faculty of Arts, Helwan University in Cairo, in 1975, where he also obtained his PhD in 1993. Passionate about art since young age, when entering the faculty, he had already garnered a broad knowledge of art history and techniques. The choice of the Graphic Art Department paralleled El-Meligy's interest in what is unexpected and surprising. According to the artist, in graphic art there is an element of haphazard endeavors. While engraving for example, there are many different ways of treating the plates, and the final artwork can hold an element of surprise. "In graphic art, just like in all art forms, an inspiration gives a sparkle. There is a general mood, but the process of creation can take one into fascinating, not to say, contrasting directions."

El-Meligy uses several intaglio printmaking techniques: mezzotint, aquatint, etching, among others. He also ventures stenciling, such as screen-printing. From recognized shapes to dispersed doodles, from uncontrolled hatchings to planned engraving details... Imaginative, experimental, El-Meligy's engravings tell many stories which mirror the artist's experiences and knowledge, and become visual reproductions of all artistic triggers. Some of his works reveal faces or silhouettes, others seem to be abstract doodling, all present an artistic world that provides a new experience each time one looks at the artwork.

"I am not responsible for the result of my work," El-Meligy underlines when pointing to many shapes that cover his engravings. Many of El-Meligy's works are captured moments, captured thoughts translated to images, eternalized through art. In his work, he invites the viewer on a metaphysical journey and directs us towards the major inspirations of his life. A few decades of El-Meligy's dedication to graphic art becomes a fascinating book in which each chapter is an artistic documentation of El-Meligy's many infatuations that took him onto profound research topics.

Though El-Meligy's work can be classified within

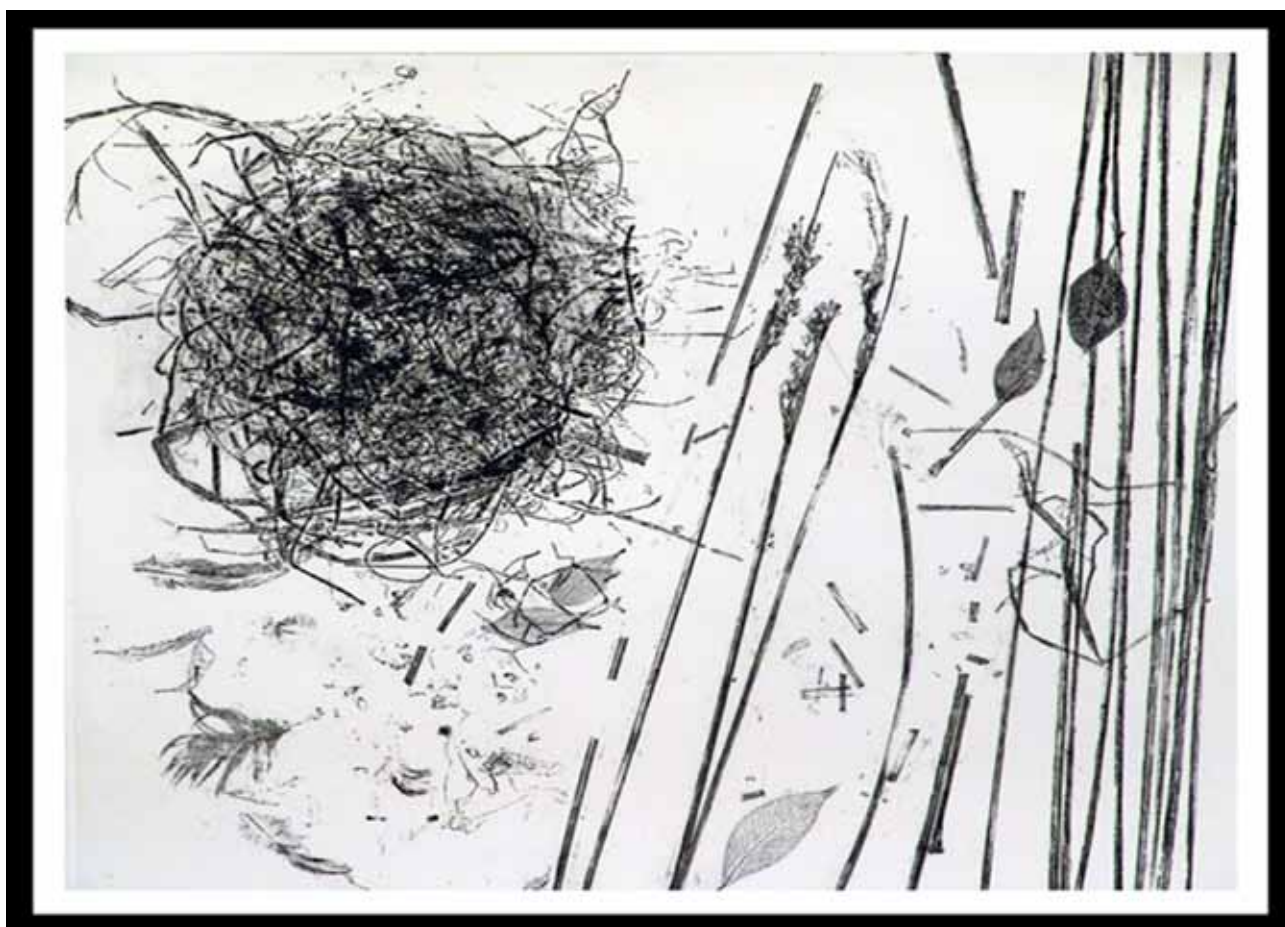
different periods of thematic preferences, the artist underlines that there are no definite lines between different periods and that one can neither find explanation for specific fascinations, nor make conscious decisions about thematic shifts. El-Meligy explains, "An artist is following many paths, and his creative sensitivity is often triggered by unexpected events." As such, El-Meligy classifies his work based on academic requirements. As the images of his life appear, we witness inspirations linked to nature, trees, or sea; in some works he reaches towards space, while in others he depicts a village that he has never visited and the name of which was sufficient to trigger his creative curiosity.

One of the first inspirations he recalls was space, a concept which occupied him for six years (between 1979 and 1985). "It was time of space discovery with astronauts completing their moon-landing missions. While reaching towards space, the concept of Suez and El Ayat started reappearing through presentations of the sky and stars."

His following work is more personalized, with elements reflecting the people and nature that surrounded his early years. Thus came the series titled *The Bird* (1985-1991), which consisted of representations and unique referrals to a hoopoe, a bird that is popular in Egypt's rural areas. While experimenting with graphic techniques, the theme of the bird was yet a new infatuation of the creative soul where imaginary is combined with a sense of freedom. The series has brought El-Meligy a few awards, such as a prize at the Graphics International Triennale, Norway; and garnered him an award at Egypt's Youth Salon, an annual visual arts competition in which El-Meligy participated several times, including the very first Salon that launched in 1989.

From space and hoopoe, El-Meligy moved to myths and legends, enveloping them with a touch of magic and tradition. This resulted in the series *Magic Symbol* (1992-1996) followed by *Surface Rituals* (1997-2000). "I felt I started talking about myself, looking into my origins but, at the same time, I started experimenting with metaphysical concepts, where symbols express more than words."

"I like stories whether they are popular, folk and those we read in the Quran or the Bible." El-Meligy has always been interested in tales, finding in them the



Bird's Nest 2, 2007, Deep engraving on paper, 50x50cm. - Courtesy of the artist.

natural human tool that explains many phenomena. As if inviting us into his dream, we see in El-Meligy's engravings a variety of unknown shapes and figures. In his works we find, for example, a head erected on what seems to be a tree branch, or symbolic symmetrical shapes. El-Meligy also shares with us one of his especially interesting experiences: Kom El-Hawa (2000-2002), the name of an Egyptian village that he has never visited. Though on a linguistic level, Kom El-Hawa doesn't have meaning, its literal translation would be a 'Pile of Air'. El-Meligy became interested in the concept of the village's name taking it from the perspective of an emptiness that is piling up. "There is no such thing as an empty space. The void between two elements has in fact visual values," El-Meligy explains how Kom El-Hawa has pushed him towards researching what can be found and seen in emptiness. This new creative curiosity

resulted in artworks and research on the "void as value in the printed artwork." Not having even visited the village, El-Meligy imagines its people and nature, while going deep into the understanding of a void.

El-Meligy was approached by another artist, Mostafa El-Razzaz, who asked him to create an artist's book for the Alexandria Library Biennale, for the Artist Book 2008. The project resulted in the creation of *At Night*, a book in five copies consisting of engravings accompanied by El-Meligy's poetry. "I was writing since I was very young but I never considered it to be poetry, scribbling maybe..." The book was produced in five copies, among which the artist kept one to himself. *At Night* became one of El-Meligy's most important artworks, an interesting retrospective where thoughts are presented in a form of engravings and personalized poetic commentary. Not aiming to create an illustrative



Bird's Nest 1, 2007, Deep engraving on paper, 50x50cm. - Courtesy of the artist.

book, at first sight there is no relation between poetry and engravings. His work is yet another way of capturing different moods and inspirations, translated into the visual realizations of an artist.

Being an artist and a researcher, El-Meligy's curiosities lead him towards doodles. He was the first artist to write about the concept of doodles in Arabic. "When

we doodle we are not aware of creating a personalized artwork. It comes from inside, however doodling is not accidental. We doodle when we listen to a lecturer, when on a phone call." El-Meligy became obsessed with the doodle, discovering its history, which is much more profound than we imagine, and goes all the way back to the 18th century. Research into psychology allowed



untitled, 1999, Ink on paper, 45x25cm. Courtesy of the artist.

him understand what triggers the need for doodling. “Having studied doodles, I discovered that there was a lot of doodling in my work already, without me being aware of it,” El-Meligy states. The doodles that became conscious led El-Meligy to the surrealist games and automatism, where collage becomes a visual poetry. As such, El-Meligy found a strong link between art and doodling while his engravings remain immersed in well balanced artistic visions.

While immersing himself in the concept of doodles, El-Meligy looked back into nature. In the series *The Sparrow Nest* (2006 – 2007), he used the trees’ bark as plates for the graphic work. “People always engrave in trees, leaving messages of love,” he said. In addition, while collecting many photographs of messages left on tree bark, El-Meligy began working on research for *Message on Love* in which he creates bridges between graphic art and engravings on trees.

Being one of the ‘rare species’ in the world of traditional printmaking, El-Meligy challenges this art form taking it on to a new level, giving it many abstract meanings and discovering new expressive possibilities. El-Meligy also experiments with tools and materials. He would go as far as using dried Aloe Vera cactus’ leaves as plates for his artwork, something that he started toying with in the last couple of years.

Today, overwhelmed by many managerial responsibilities related to his post as Head of Fine Sector, El-Meligy doesn’t deny that he has less time for art. “I still practice art as this gives me oxygen. Art is not an ordinary thing. It demands an absolute dedication. I used to create every day, but today I need to divide my time. I am still able to produce some smaller graphic works though in my workshop that serves as my asylum.”

About the Writer

Ati Metwaly is a Polish/Egyptian journalist currently living in Egypt. She was co-founder and Editor in Chief of the first English language magazine on arts published in Egypt, The Art Review (2004-2009) and is now the Arts and Culture Editor of Abram Online, English online news platform, part of Al Ahram news organization (the biggest media organization in the Middle East). Metwaly also writes a weekly critique for the printed newspaper, Al Ahram Weekly. Her articles also appear in international publications.