Khaled Hafez: The Art of Dichotomy

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Good/evil. Secular/religious. Modern/traditional. These are some of the unfortunate dichotomies that have come to grip much Western political discourse about the Middle East. The political efficacy of these binaries for rendering manageable what are in fact messy situations persists, despite the fact that they have been roundly criticized, especially in intellectual and leftist circles. And even though most people in the international art scene also consider themselves part of these circles, sadly one often finds similar binaries of essentialist difference lurking in curatorial discourses on Middle Eastern artists. It is discouraging when artists’ work is understood through the dichotomous lens, and especially when this lens is applied in a way that denigrates contemporary work as traditional or lagging. But it is especially exciting when an artist talks back to the universe of divisions by analyzing their emergence, their different forms, and the work that they do in the world. The artist then becomes an analytical agent examining the circumstances of his/her production, and thus opens up possibilities for a contrapuntal visual practice that is not forcibly encased in the language of resisting power or challenging stereotypes.

For over 20 years, Khaled Hafez has explored the continuous reproduction of dichotomies within and between the popular culture of his native Egypt, of France where he lived for several years, and of the United States— the ultimate consumer society and locus of political power, which seems to thrive on the marketing potential of divisive binaries. Through painting and video, Hafez has concentrated primarily on the construction of certain categories and the overlaps between them: East/West, sacred/commercial, old/new, good/evil, animal/human, male/female, and static/kinetic. His work shows how these dichotomies rest on the international system of commodities which creates both the ideas of (cultural) similarity and difference, as well as affective attachments to certain histories and identities. Hafez explores out how each half of a dichotomy has come to be signified through particular visual forms, figures, or objects. This work suggests that it is the continual replication of these visual signifiers in mass media that creates emotions of love and hate, notions of collective memory, and visions of the future. Dichotomies are attractive, then, because they have become seductive visual commodities.

Hafez’s interest in extreme opposites stems from his formative experience growing up in Sadat’s Egypt in the 1970s, witnessing military confrontation (the 1973 war) followed by peace negotiations (Camp David), and the breakdown of Nasser’s socialist state amidst the massive spread of conspicuous consumption and capitalist ideologies. These dramatic changes resulted in a situation where Cairo, as Hafez states, is the place for opposing/conflicting extremes. Satellite channels offer intact (uncensored) products, versus official channels delivering static culture. In the past three decades, Egyptians have seen &ldquo;nouveau-wealth versus overt poverty. Extreme left political ideologies versus extreme faith-oriented right-winged ones. And they have responded, Hafez says, with a state of cultural ambivalence of love-hate towards the West. These dramatic changes in ways of living, of doing politics, and of visual culture in the postcolonial era have been a primary motivator for many contemporary Egyptian artists.

In the art scene, Hafez is part of a generation who inherited the common postcolonial artistic dualism of traditional/contemporary. In Egypt, this dualism was glossed as asala/mu‘asira, and continues to be signified by images and materials drawn from ancient Egypt or folklore vs. contemporary consumer culture and/or international contemporary art trends, and (frequently) by figuration vs. abstraction. Hafez’s generation has struggled to move beyond this dichotomy even as they have often divided themselves into groups becoming politically invested in one half or the other, as each attempts to engage productively with state institutions, with increasing private sector and international opportunities, and with the new consumer culture. In the wake of 9/11 and America’s wars, they find themselves, along with other Middle Easterners, forcibly locked into the pernicious dichotomies that strive to define them as either the progressive artists; against the so-called terrorists, or as the terrorist Middle Easterners; against the so-called civilized West.

Placed in such divisive circumstances, Hafez responds by analyzing how this plenitude of dichotomies is reproduced in and through the visual realm. He is especially interested in the process of iconization, in how certain images and figures (such as Anubis, Batman, and magazine models) come to represent certain halves of a duality by becoming commodified icons that muddy the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Hafez’s icons are not rendered with gestures of seriousness or reverence, but rather with the spirit of irony and humor. This act allows the viewer to make unusual connections; for example, between the superheroes of different ages who are meant to help repair divisive worlds, or between the crassness of Western consumer culture and Middle Eastern politics (the dominant view of one is that it is “liberating; while the other is described as “stifling.” But the humor also invites reflection on the absurdity of polarized thinking as stimulated by images.

The constructedness of dichotomies is revealed through the playful and often sarcastic act of recontextualizing images.
into new juxtapositions. In his paintings, this is usually accomplished through parts of magazine advertisements clipped and fixed to canvas or board, combined with the painted addition of forms and broad brushstrokes. The juxtaposition of different intentionally truncated advertisements along with frequently half-finished painted additions embeds the idea of constructedness in the process itself. The interplay between precision and vagueness in his paintings shows the constructed nature of binarisms, and acts as a dichotomy itself. That is to say that the painting and its technique, itself embodies a polarity.

The painting Alex Chromosome (2007) contains clippings from an upscale magazine of the kind produced in the Arab Gulf and increasingly marketed in Egypt. On the right side are glued images of the heads of models wearing black face veils and white pearls. Facing them on the left is a similar clipped image from a Western magazine of a model whose legs are objectified rather than the eyes. Around these clipped images, Hafez paints half-completed forms that suggest both the Pharaonic Egyptian god (read: ancient superhero) Anubis and the American superhero Batman. By laying bare the actual process by which the painting is constructed, including letting the paint drip, Hafez invites the viewer to think through the myriad, and often gendered, ways that iconic figures are themselves constructed &ndash; and built on polarized visions of the world as a place of threat, danger, and fear.

The Anubis image alone navigates the binaries of life/death, good/evil, past/present, and animal/man. The god was supposed to protect souls from evil as they made their journey from life to death. Interestingly, Anubis later became the symbol of the primitivism of Egyptian thought to early Greeks and Romans; and then today the idea that a god could be an animal (especially a dog) is anathema to most Muslims and is sometimes used to draw distinctions between past and present, and between the ignorance of other religions vs. the enlightenment of Islam. In contrast, Pharaonic Egyptian symbols are today icons for Westerners (and many Egyptian artists) of Egypt's past greatness, whereas veiled women become icons for Egypt/Middle Eastern/Muslim backwardness. Thus, the same dichotomous system of images can have similar meanings to different groups of people throughout space and time.

There is a significant gender component to the process of dichotomizing that appears in the paintings. The Alex Chromosome shows us that just as Middle Eastern women become objectified in international political discourse, they also become commodities in local advertising in a way similar to how Western female models are objectified in European and American fashion magazines. And the positive iconization of Western woman in Euro-American discourse as liberated, versus the oppressed&mdash; veiled Muslim woman, is belied by her skin-baring visual objectification. Meanwhile, the contemporary god&mdash; the superhero, meant to save Westerners from evil like the kind represented by the Middle East, is usually male. Batman and Anubis' iconization depends on the construction not only of dichotomies of good/evil and domestic/foreign, but also on male/female. He is the hyper-male, as Hafez makes clear by juxtaposing his image onto male bodybuilders in paintings such as Cameroun Chromosome (2006).

Hafez's work not only challenges civilizational polarities by showing the traffic and constructedness of images that create them, but also by deliberately blurring the boundaries within and between them. Anubis, for example, had both male and female qualities. Both Batman and Anubis are human and animal. Both veils and naked legs can be sources of oppression and liberation. Despite the so-called clash of civilizations&mdash; that demarcates an East/West or Muslim/Christian boundary, people are linked through commoditization &ndash; a global process. Commoditization produces both similarities and the idea of essential difference.

In his painting, Hafez also juxtaposes different artistic modernisms to examine the dichotomies that are typically drawn by art writing and art institutions both in Egypt and in the West. In Alex Chromosome for example, the center of the painting contains an image of a tank rendered in the art naif style common to the traditionalist asala school of Egyptian modernism. In my view, when Hafez uses other Egyptian modernist painters' techniques to render a subject they would reject (they tend to reproduce figures of authenticity such as peasants, not images of war), he pokes fun at the postcolonial tradition/modernity divide in the Egyptian art world. He also gestures to the military machinery that is both the engine and consequence of binary thinking wherever it takes place.

In Kazimir, the President's Necktie, and Batman Undressing to Go to Bed (2002), we see a similar juxtaposition of artistic modernist references, which include Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Yves Klein, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Mounir Canaan. Additional references, easy for Egyptian artists to spot, would include the stars in the American flag rendered in Pharaonic style, along with the Nut-ization&mdash; of the European female model. The recycling of the stars, the Nut image, and other ancient Egyptian symbols is not uncommon in Egyptian modernism. Although in some contexts all the referenced artists would be grouped together as Western&mdash; and Egyptian;&mdash; for (the case of Canaan), in fact the dichotomy is complicated by the fact that Malevich was Eastern European -- a nod to Egyptian artistic exchanges with the Eastern Bloc during the Nasser period (and note Nasser's image in the painting.) Binaries such as &mdash; East/West&mdash; are also muddied by the fact that Warhol and Johns are Americans who deal with icons of international commodities like people, soup cans, and flags, and that Mounir Canaan &ndash; the Egyptian -- was greatly influenced by the American abstract expressionists. These juxtapositions in this painting and others by Hafez call attention to the cross-pollination that has always existed in artistic modernisms no matter where they have been geographically located.

The overtenss of the juxtapositions further challenges the erroneous polarizing notions of Egyptian artistic difference from or inferiority to, European and American art; all on the basis of its supposed traditionalism or blind imitation of the West.
Beyond artistic references, Kazimir, the President’s Necktie and others in this series also call attention to the existance and commoditization of other masculine idols. Here we have the commodification of Egypt’s post-independence president Nasser made plain by the Andy Warhol-style repetition of his image. Nasser has become the object of much recent nostalgia in Egypt, and has been nearly sacralized for his heroism and in fighting Western tyranny. This revivification suggests the need for a political hero among ordinary Egyptians overwhelmed by American-driven neoliberalism. But this painting questions the efficacy of the empty hero image, particularly when Nasser is juxtaposed with the ephemeral Batman figure. The attempt to sacralize a hero, a country, a culture, or a history, always reveals the profanity of the gesture. This idea is also found in the objectified (Western female) body of the Nut mother goddess image. It is also found in Hafez’s recent video work Visions of a Contaminated Memory (2007), in which he juxtaposes a funny television children’s story with images of all the so-called heroes put forth by Egypt’s political system—Muhammad Nagib, Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak and with President Bush, in Hafez’s video works, the breaking down of dichotomy through analysis is especially overt. In the work Revolution (2006), images of a secular military leader with a gun, a businessman with a hammer and nails, and a religious extremist with a sword and Barbie doll form a triptych on the screen. Juxtaposing the three main worldviews and political programs of the postcolonial era on one screen, we see that although perceived as a kind of tripartite polarity, they are not that different after all. All rely on a masculine aesthetics of violence applied in different ways. All are commodified images.

In Idler’s Logic (2002), another video work, he breaks down notions of the evil Arab male other held by many Americans, and notions of the authentic Egyptian or Middle Easterner held by many Egyptian and Arab intellectuals. Hafez’s three on screen are either busy singing Arab oldies; or funnily manipulated ways; or often with vulgar overtones, drinking whiskey, or playing Australian aboriginal (e.g., non-Arab) music. One idler also plays with toy guns; acting out James Bond-like scripts taken from American movies. Hafez comments on this character: Through his North African / Arab features and his toying with guns, he delivers a virtual message that defies all labels: “I am Egyptian, I am African, I am Middle Eastern, I am Arab. I like guns that I did not invent, I get all my ideas and inspiration from your movies, and I do not care if you terrorist-label me or not.”

Here Hafez alludes to another dimension found throughout his body of work that dates back to the earliest paintings and the allure of commodified images of love and violence in creating contemporary identities and historical attachments. For example, in many paintings from his series Visions of a Rusty Memory (done mainly in the 1990s), he offers repeated images of final kiss scenes from Western films; commodified scenes which are memorized and on which people build attachments and gendered identities. The kiss scene in Egyptian movies appears now in video work such as Idler’s Logic.

The most recent video work, Visions of a Contaminated Memory (2007), plays on and perhaps problematically reproduces notions of a past Cairene grandeur and contemporary decline. It juxtaposes images of colonial era buildings in their so-called heyday with video footage of their dilapidated state now, and it places old photos of Egyptian women in Western dress with coiffed hair side-by-side with lower class veiled women (some in full face veil). Without the additional techniques that show construction, which are more evident in the paintings, it is unclear whether the artist is getting caught up in the common tale of past beauty and current decline. But even if he is, isn’t the real message that a comment on the seduction of such tales as they are created through visual imagery?

In the end, Hafez’s work does not merely cause us to view dichotomies with suspicion. Most contemporary art viewers do that anyway. Rather, his paintings and video work encourage us to take seriously the visual components and constructions of dichotomies, and to acknowledge that within them lies a certain pleasure that may be key to their life force in today’s world. And as we enjoy the humor in Hafez’s art of dichotomy, we may find that there is some positive creative potential in what has otherwise been the source of much pain and destruction.

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For a fuller discussion of this process among European, American, and Egyptian curators and critics see Chapter 6 of my book Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt (Stanford University Press, 2006). This quote and others are taken from the artist’s statements at www.khaledhafez.net. Additional insights are based on a set of formal interviews with the artist conducted in 1996 and 1997, along with subsequent conversations in 1999, 2000, 2003, and 2007.

For more on this issue, see Creative Reckonings, Chapter 2.

He also analyzed these circumstances in his many art writings, especially as former art editor for the Middle East Times, and in articles published in Cairo Times and Egypt Today.

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