

## Artist Khaled Hafez's latest solo exhibit: Depth and sophistication



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By **Mariam Hamdy/ Special to Daily News Egypt** **January 15, 2012, 6:34 pm**

Currently at Safar Khan Gallery is artist Khaled Hafez's painting exhibition titled "On Codes, Symbols & Stockholm Syndrome." His first solo show in two years, the collection of works presents a new twist on his earlier style, albeit with more depth and sophistication.

Heavily involved in all the tumultuous happenings, Hafez, like many artists in the past year, was instantly reactionary with literal depictions of the revolution. Creating his controversially named video "The A7a Project: On Presidents and Superheroes" which won the Bamako Biennial of 2011, Hafez managed to rise above the otherwise documentary strew of photography and graffiti masquerading as fine art in the past year. However, and despite the video's wide reception, it was not the kind of message that had digested the full spectrum of events of 2011. It felt as though it was a quick response, a comeback fueled by the relief of handcuffs broken, or a prisoner released. As art, the video presented an exceptional and humorous take on our past presidents, but it does not have the longevity of a seasoned thought process translated into visuals.

"On Codes, Symbols & Stockholm Syndrome" is, on the other hand, just that. Stepping back and digesting the events of the last year, the artist created paintings that questioned what it was to be a modern Egyptian today: "I pose questions without forcibly asking for an answer. I'm trying to figure out how last year has panned out, and see where all the happenings will take us." The paintings resulting from this thought process are less enticing than his videos, but more thoughtful and observant, mirroring the general pensive and skeptical attitudes of the people towards the outcomes of the revolution.

The title of the exhibition explains a lot of its content. The work is a collection of large pieces that are variants of the artist's trademark style, with the exception of a few small canvases. The inclusion of Ancient Egyptian symbols, collage, a bright palette and an unpredictable application of paint are seen again in this collection of paintings. However, the change appears in how they have been included, with emphasis on paint rather than collage and sizes of the elements in each painting rather than how they are manipulated.

In the large pieces, the ancient Egyptian symbols have been blown up to a comical size, rendering their otherwise regal nature somewhat null. Here they became empty symbols, removed from their context and consequently impotent, yet because we recognize them they conjure up memories of what they were, but now they are out of place and time. Very much like what is happening in Tahrir for the last few months now, the fight is for and against symbols, with very little tangible or realistic solutions being suggested in either end of that fight. Hafez presents this struggle to maintain symbols in or out of power is evident in how he has placed these elements in his paintings, often left or right to the middle, with interrupted outlines and blotchy filling in of paint. These paintings are a solid progression of his earlier works, presenting a seasoned approach to the recycling of these ancient gods and their meaning in our modern day and age.

Modern iconic symbols such as Om Kolthum are commemorated in one of his paintings, with a repeat image across the canvas reminiscent of Huda Lutfi's collages. Both artists have used the icon in the same manner: to evoke the sense of peace and strength in our recent history and the belief that we can be as great as we once were not so long ago. As one of my favorite pieces in the exhibition, the painting presenting Om Kolthum has equated her with the ancient divinities of our heritage, putting her side by side with Hafez's representations of Hathor and Sekhmet.

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The smaller pieces in the exhibition do not fair as well; Hafez is an artist who presents himself best on larger canvases, and his smaller pieces lack the punch and flair of the others. Painterly brushstrokes make them interesting, but they fade in the midst of the larger pieces mainly because they don't have what makes the larger pieces in this exhibition most successful: the color palette.

The most exquisite element in the exhibition was the artist's approach to paint, which was previously blended, smoky and abstracted. In this collection, the palette is bright and primary, with each color dripping independently from the top of the canvas to mix to a grey or muddy brown towards the bottom. The combination of colors, and how their brightness fades to grey is an excellent metaphor to what the artist is skeptical about in regards to the revolution. "I feel that the revolution is being hijacked by certain regressive forces, and I'm pensive with regards to what will happen." The general withering of excitement, and sadly, hope that has taken over in the past year can be beautifully seen in the artist's degradation of colors, interrupted only by the oversized symbols and upon a closer look, random elements of collage that appear as codes yet to be deciphered.

It has been a year of searching for any exhibition relating to the 2011 revolution that was interesting enough to stand a chance among the works that mould the contemporary Egyptian Art scene. 2012 has witnessed the first of these with Hafez's current show, and hopefully there'll be more to come.



Stockholm Hathor.



Stockholm Kalsoom.

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For information on SITES OF PASSAGE, an exchange exhibit between Egyptian and American artists organized by Tavia La Follette and Kathryn Talcott, with responses to the Egyptian Revolution, visit: <http://www.mattress.org/index.cfm?event=exhibitions>

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