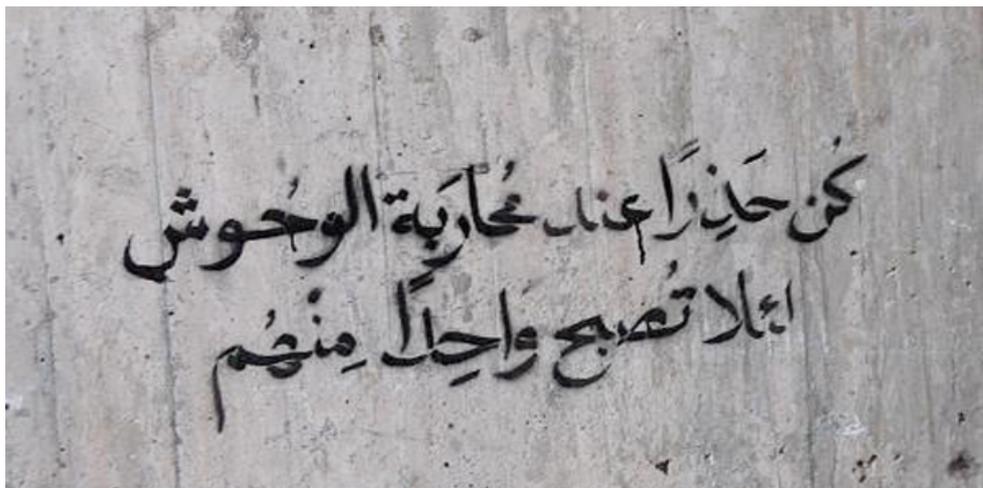


COMMENTARY: An unknown future for Egyptian art



Graffiti reads, "Be ware when fighting monsters lest you become one of them."

By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt**

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There is concern about the future of art in Egypt after last year's uprising. Questions on the impact, longevity and artistic merit of the works tackling the Egyptian revolution are heard at every gallery opening, with answers ranging from the wildly optimistic to the dimly cynical.

This year, with over 70 percent of the vote going to the Muslim Brotherhood's party and the Salafi Al-Nour Party, the question is even more pressing with a particular emphasis on the possibility of censorship or sanctioning entire subject matters altogether.

Before assuming the worst and, in my personal opinion, distant scenario of a bearded police force slashing artwork off gallery walls in the name of an innocent religion, one has to analyze the range of artwork being presented today. Before the revolution, and despite claims to the contrary, there was not a lot of censorship in the visual arts sector in the shallow way most international audience would assume.

The little number of nudes created over the past decade made their way into private galleries. Large sprawling pieces featuring a range of styles of figural representations were widely celebrated, and controversially provocative videos, paintings, installations and photography were rampant even in public, government-owned exhibitions. Censorship existed in the realm of national security, and in that way, art mirrored our lives. Only those who would speak of, analyze, discuss or criticize Mubarak (and the royal family) were censored. Otherwise, bring on anything from forgettable social traumas to the obscene.

The position of visual arts was no different than the film industry. El-Sobki style movies are filled to the brim with obscenities and an abundance of bad taste, and that's accepted. However, a movie discussing the way the country is run in any manner other than the carefully implied will suffer months, even years, of censorship and editing.

Censorship is essentially in the mindset of the censor, the government employee. With the exception of a few sensationalist journalists who misconstrue artwork for a good article, most works were "allowed" and praised. However, every working artist in the city will tell you a story of how they were approached by national security, questioned on the intentions behind some of their work, and "advised" to stick to benign subjects. The government dealt with visual arts as decorative and marginal, with little to offer in terms of social change or incitement. Regardless, local politics were off limits for all, just in case.

Very little exercised resistance to that rule, and with Farouk Hosny, a painter himself, as minister of culture, and being heavily involved in visual arts, artists tried to avoid career suicide without compromising too much of what they wanted to say. Huda Lutfi said it best after her installation "Remembrance" was attacked for its use of Sufi script: "Every culture establishes its structure of restraints, but there is always a space in which mobility and restraint have a complimentary relationship. Censorship presents a challenge to the artist — how do you continue to say what you want to say in a manner that is acceptable?"

Last year there were little to no paintings that spoke of the revolution, with documentary-style photography and graffiti taking center stage instead. What was lacking in terms of pieces presenting digested thoughts and thorough analysis of last year's events was slowly made up for in January with a few solid shows already hosted by galleries around Cairo. It's too early to



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tell how this trend will fare, with a busy year of post-revolutionary revolutions, elections and economic strife.

What is in fact missing from art production is an art form that is otherwise available in our writings, talk shows and, in mediocre doses, in our films: satire. Fleeting seen in the graffiti around the city, political and social satire is essential to bridging the gap between art and the average layman, a successful example of which would be the works of caricaturist Mostafa Hussein.

It is unfortunate that this art-form in Egypt is usually associated with clumsy lines and an unstudied approach to anatomy, composition or water color, not to mention a vacuum of wit and an abundance of naiveté. Elevated forms of artistic satire in the footsteps of Pulitzer prize winner Mike Luckovich, or the classic works of the late William Hogarth is much needed, if only just to include the average Egyptian in forms of arts that he/she will easily relate to.

In fact, it is the average layman that poses the biggest threat to censorship of the arts — not the government. This can be blamed on education and a lack of museum culture or their sufficient marketing, but it is also a problem with artists' language and whom they are ultimately addressing. Seeing that there is a large disconnection between the arts and the general public, people will be quick to see the detrimental qualities of freedom in art expression and how it can destroy the supposedly conservative social fabric, versus its enlightening virtues.

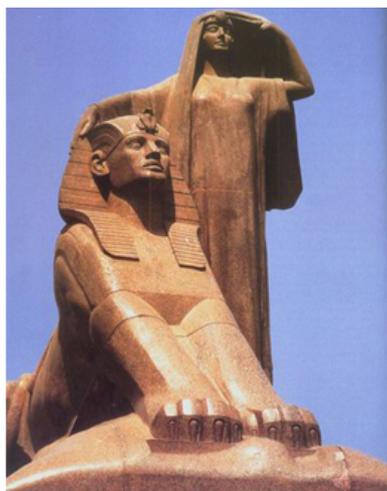
Furthermore, the majority of art students in the country are women, who as artists (that is, if they take art as a career at all) are culturally less accepted to speak their minds in the unabashed and more liberal fashion than their male counterparts. The majority of these students are also veiled or in niqab, which in itself presents limitations and self-censorship, as they continuously question their own approach to subject matter and content versus their religious dispositions.

The minority of young male artists graduating from art school will further dwindle with those lost to more lucrative fields such as advertising and graphic design, and so the amount of actual artists graduating every year is gradually decreasing, creating an easily erasable community with little influence to the public. Obviously, an 'Islamic' restraint on the visual arts poses a whole new wave of problems, with the possible prohibition of figural representations, social subject matter, text and even the use of calligraphy in artwork.

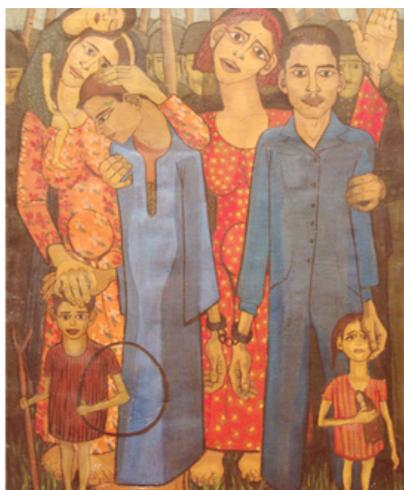
However, one feels that there won't be much room for discussion or negotiation if that is in fact how matters will evolve, and how the fine arts will fare in such a scenario would be the least of the nation's problems.

What is proposed here is a new method by which art can speak the minds of the people in a way that not only artists, curators, galleries, collectors and buyers will find clever, but more importantly, a method that the people will understand. Many perceive this suggestion as a call for over-simplification, but on the contrary, names that are remembered by the average Egyptian today like Mahmoud Mokhtar, Mahmoud Saeed, Yousef Kamel and Gazbia Sirry created works that were far from simple — but their art resonated and illustrated how the people spoke, thought and felt.

When art becomes an integral part of our day-to-day consciousness, it will be impossible to censor or meddle with. Till then it will remain a pastime for the more fortunate, vulnerable to quick extinction by any social, economic or religious wave.



"Egypt's renaissance" by Mahmoud Mokhtar.



"Rebellious peasants" by Gazbia Sirry.



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