

THE VOYAGE OF AYMAN ELSEMARY “AN IDEOGRAM” BRINGING DOWN THE MEDIUM

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It is not surprising that the Egyptian artist Ayman Elsemary has chosen to frame/footnote his latest body of works with the title “The Journey”. It is no surprise that the verb (to travel) is the vortex of his latest visual expression. Anyone who has followed Elsemary’s voyage from its commencement till its present port of rest must have found in his continuous adventure of travel a major key to unlock the mysteries of the whole experience, and its creative process.

Since his first beginnings, Elsemary has been passionate about experimenting with means of visual expression, never giving in to settling at any point, pushing his boundaries and pinnacle. He has the passion for discovery, trial and experimentation. During his artistic journey, he has shown an excellence in taking on visual techniques, using a versatile way of combination and innovation. He has constantly shown a capability to bring out a visual context from within the realms of a crude element. He found his sought out treasure early on, when he set upon unraveling the unprecedented signs within walls and surfaces, making use of the basic beauty in its elementary structure. The wall became a platform for layers of a geo-humanistic recollection, which he used as a conscious visual starting point giving way to creative perception, once the fine line between the actual and the creative subsides and vanishes. Elsemary thus substituted from an early stage the canvas with the wall, preferring the use of its course surface to the subtle objective nature of the canvas. However he did not stop at the boundaries of the regular visual concept of the wall nor its usual characteristic surface appearance. He delved into experimentation with various materials and mediums, sometimes imprinting them into the wall, drawing from the ancient history of building, when the decorative elements were allowed to unite and integrate with the constructive essence of the buildings. He sometimes embarked on freeing some materials from their natural predictable usages, turning them into his wall-like working space that can carry the results of visual combination. This was clearly apparent during his work period with metal surfaces. He addressed the metal with a deep understanding of its physiological aspects, bringing out its various possible diversities in color and feel, by sparsely scratching, scraping and coarsening the metal. He attained this through minimal usage of simple electrical tools, generally

operated for working metals industrially. Elsemary forced them out of their common practical world, elevating the industrial into the aesthetic. However, in spite of this voyage of modern experimentation, he was equally keen on drawing from his available local tradition, and its solid agricultural roots. Its particular visual continece, and its natural substance capabilities gave his experience a framework difficult to associate to anywhere other than his place of origin. He continued to experiment and uncover mortar and color substances that had been used by his rural counterparts for thousands of years. Those same substances and materials had built and colored walls, made paste suitable for engraving, ink to write religious texts, commemorated local celebrations and grievances, thus ultimately defying the oblivion of time. The mysteries of those materials were unraveled to Elsemary during that period, giving him an analytical view of history as portrayed on those walls, revealed in the peelings and the cracks, the deterioration of the color and mortar away from each another. This gave his own creative perception a major element, where he used clay and lime to replace usual moldings, driving the modern manufactured medium out in favor of the old classic traditional.

Elsemary latest voyage is a discovery of a new port in the mural world. He has chosen wood as a vessel of adventure, in resurrection of an ancient medium of the human civilization, and contemplation into its creative possibilities. He takes it on as a substitute space ready for mixing and matching, etching and sketching, coloring and depicting. In doing so, he breaks the otherwise conceived theoretical barrier of visual handling of the medium and its specifics: a theory that tantalizes the artists who chose to remain oppressed by the traditional customary treatments. If we look closely into Elsemary’s approach to his pictorial details that he typesets on his layered surfaces, we realize that they clearly belong to a kind of sign depiction ancient in human civilization. It belongs to a point when writing was still in its second stage of evolution, out of five stages: that of Ideography. Man used that technique to symbolize abstract ideas or notions with pictures. A dove for example symbolized love. It was thus possible during that stage to depict a short story using a series of pictures of people and actions. Writing therefore evolved



1. The Journey 11, 2012, mixed media on reclaimed wood 120x120cm - Courtesy of Ward gallery.
2. The Journey 12, 2012, mixed media on reclaimed wood 120x120cm - Courtesy of Ward gallery.
3. The Journey 13, 2012, mixed media on reclaimed wood 120x120cm - Courtesy of Ward gallery.
4. The Journey 31, 2012, mixed media on reclaimed wood 100x100cm - Courtesy of Ward gallery.

from (picture/word) to (picture/symbol).

Elsemary's technique in his current voyage invokes signs much related to that stage of pictorial depiction. Isn't that in itself a voyage through time? It most certainly is. However, if we look a little closer, we will see the amount of accumulation that such an invocation must involve. We will perceive in his depictions, sometimes engraved and sometimes notched/incised, combinations that take us back to the early markings of remains from Gerzeh and Naqada in Egypt. They sometimes even take us to the drawings of the early man on the mountainous walls of Prehistoric Tassili caves of North Africa. It may entice us to envisage the early cuneiform writing of Mesopotamia. Elsemary used a visual impact of an optical effect, using the nail as an actual element much related to the wall in essence, together with the technique of puncturing and holing. In this way, cuneiform was an imperative effect on his wooden murals. But it is an effect different from previous ones we perceived in his work. Here he did not depend on a protruding nail, but only a sign of its presence, through the appearance

of its head on the wooden surface, while the rest was deeply imbedded in the wood. But Elsemary did not only depend on this alternative perception of nails in his murals. He actually uses the nails' heads as a constructive component of his creation. We see them as dots crossing the space of his perceived surfaces, adding to it. They are a frame around it, or a strict line of calculated separation, or sometimes the centre of some circles lightly engraved in the wood. They sometimes line up in vertical, horizontal or bulked design, controlling the visual rhythm of the surface and its perceptual structure, giving it a specific detailed comprehension.

We find that Elsemary's nails have emerged to draw the boundaries of his voyage, somehow assimilating the ancient concept of the circle as the symbol of the sea surrounding the world. The circle has once again emerged in Elsemary's wooden murals, as sign for his ongoing amazing voyage. Elsemary's choice of the boat, this particular visual item, as the major component of his current voyage, was very successful. The boat, in the human collective consciousness, is linked to the ideas of voyaging and departure, in their

physical and spiritual contexts. It has served as a symbol for both meanings in the history of civilization. In Ancient Egypt Ra's boat was depicted on the temple walls, and sketched in tombs, taking its everlasting trip between the kingdoms of light and darkness of the here and the hereafter, avoiding traps set by Ra's eternal enemy Apophis. In Greek Mythology, Charon's boat resides in the space between the edge of tombs and the beginning of the other world, waiting to transfer souls of the departed in a one-way voyage. The boat has remained throughout history a synonym for the sorrow of departure. However Elsemary was not satisfied with the philosophical aspect of his prize element, but brought on its visual context and its diversities. Sometimes it was a simple manifestation, reminding us of children's depiction of boats in rivers and seas. Other times his illustrations was close to the impulsive abstractions that identified primitive sketches of early man. He also gave special attention to perspective and angle from which the audience would see his boats. Sometimes it was a side view, others a bird's eye, in addition to the instances when he chose bold compositions where his boat's body

appeared split in a partial structure. It is as if he had decided through these various depictions, to accentuate the idea of a continuous journey through time and the inevitable changes the boat must experience in form, direction and state. During the manifestation of his voyage's stations, he was clever enough not to let his professional expertise run wild, taking on a forced color manipulation. His extreme understanding of the existential concept of his topic and its historical roots, and his respect for the new medium he was using, made him conscious of his color choices. He neither exaggerated nor ornamented his pieces, but depended in most cases on the variation of a specific color, harmonious with the natural wood texture and hues in addition to veils of soft gold that crowned his creations.

Elsemary's deep understanding of the nature and direction of his voyage, and his excellence in depicting the forms of his adventure, enabled him to break the conventional use of the medium and bring down the fictitious boundaries between the materials and the context. His voyage is therefore surrounded with a halo of noble elegance.



1. The Journey 35, 2012, mixed media on reclaimed wood 100x120cm - Courtesy of Ward gallery.
2. The Nile 2, 2012, mixed media on reclaimed wood 200x300cm - Courtesy of Ward gallery.
3. The Journey 34, 2012, mixed media on reclaimed wood 50x50cm - Courtesy of Ward gallery.