

## Ahmed Kassem



Human attack, 2014, oil on Canvas, 220x180cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The age and looks of Ahmed Kassem make other artists wonder how come at such a young age he accomplished so much. Kassem, who's just turning 30, laughs as he tells about this. Kassem might be one of the most talented and imaginative among young Egyptian artists; in few years he was able to develop a very particular style and character that catches the eye at the first glimpse. The huge canvas 'murals' of Kassem are a *mélange* of scenes, symbols and messages wrapped up in a fresh and innocent fantasia. To discuss intense issues like

corruption, exploitation of the poor, women's causes, police cruelty, power of the media, etc. Kassem resorts to the typical Egyptian satire, borrowing symbols from the animal world or from story books and projecting them on the real world. A crow wearing a helmet, a car playing chess or checking facebook, bees gather over the dinner table, beekeepers, bears, chicken and many other symbols occupy a large space and have much weight on Kassem's surfaces. "We are a people that jokes about the pressing issues be it the lack of

bread or gas canisters. I don't use any more the tragic realistic approach; I already deal with tragic subjects and I guess this approach is much welcomed by the people. I make them think without giving them further pain. Moreover, the art public seeks joy and I have to give them some joy," says Kassem. About his last exhibition titled "The Hive" one must say that the first impact is quite mesmerizing. The paintings have depth, layers, very warm colors, very dynamic composition and elements that seem irrelevant to one another. But Kassem plays very well with the elements he uses to present the matter of exploitation; the bees, honey, bee hives, beekeepers, astronauts, bears and honey badgers. Those works are anything but static for he is quite clever as well at creating movement and obliging the eyes to follow this movement attempting to understand the story and decode the symbols. His color palette still reflects the same joyful spirit regardless of the serious subject matter. Kassem uses oil and acrylic paint. In 2010, 2011 and 2012, the ambitious artist participated in the Youth Saloon organized by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture; he got the Grand Prize in the first year and the first prize in illustration in both the second and third years. Internationally, Kassem was awarded a prize in the 6th Dubai Culture Creativity 2008/2009. The truth is, Kassem was lucky enough to find those who would foster his talent at a very early age. He was brought up in Qatar and in the small gulf country there were art clubs to which he was introduced through his art teachers. He got the chance to learn about drawing, painting, expression and art history and got the chance to exhibit while he was still a school student as well. After having had success with his very first attempts, the young Kassem was determined to enroll in the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo and leave the family to study in Egypt. His father whose background is military was not quite approving of the step but he had to yield at the end in the face of his son's determination. Ever since Kassem moved to Cairo, he realized his homeland is the greatest source of inspiration and decided to stay. "I can't live outside of Egypt. All my inspiration comes from here even if I spend some time with 'the porter' for instance, there is something to gain. When I got back from Qatar I realized the cultural gap. My spirit grows in this environment that has depth and originality," says



Chaotic Order 1, 2013, oil on canvas , 220x180 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Kassem. Cairo is very much present in Kassem's works; it can seem sometimes like an amusement park yet you can't miss the metropolis with its chaos, busy streets, high rise decadent buildings topped by satellite dishes, a network of highways, one would even imagine hearing the noise and smelling the exhaust. That's why though Kassem uses very warm colors like yellow, red and orange, a layer of grey tones always lies beneath. As early as 2002, he has been participating in group exhibitions in Qatar, Italy and Egypt. Before his graduation and in 2006 an eminent art practitioner, saw his work by coincidence and gave him the chance to participate in group shows. Over the last three years he was working with a reputable gallery in Cairo who gave him a solo exhibition every year. This year, Kassem started collaborating with a Dubai based gallery which will also give him a solo show every year. "The advantage is that I work with a professional curator both here and in Dubai who knows that I'm working on society and though it is the first time I work with him, he was the one who suggested the idea of the bees as a theme for the show. He's the kind of curator who can work with the artist and think with the artist," explains Kassem. Though Kassem's political satire transcends the revolution, his works are full of symbols that recall the events of the last three years; KFC, the niqabi parliament candidate, etc., Kassem believes that the revolution is not over yet as its demands still need to be met and that art keep playing an important role in the survival of any revolution.