

Farouk Hosny: In Conversation with Khaled Hafez

Transcript of a series of dialogues at the artist's studio in Zamalek, Cairo.

By Khaled Hafez



Untitled, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 50x70cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Khaled Hafez (KH): To start with, I suggest we lead this dialogue/conversation in the artist-to-artist model, which will entail dropping titles. We need to find a starting point for the dialogue, and it is quite tricky as it will be impossible to drop politics out of this exchange, yet I would like to focus on your career as an artist, a successful veteran painter's career that spans around 5 decades.

Farouk Hosny (FH): I agree. It has always been about my painting and about my studio practice; those almost always took priority status for me despite the official state positions I held several times throughout my career as a painter.

KH: The rule goes when an art practitioner asks a senior peer about his career, we do not take any approach that deals with aesthetics; we need to talk about factual milestones that caused your painting practice to be where it is today. We need to explore every station, its location and its surrounding circumstances. We will attempt –because we need-- to find the “why” behind every change of style that happened to your painting on the technical and on the conceptual levels.

FH: We will need then not to adopt any journalistic or news collecting models. I am up to that challenge; it is always beneficial to reflect on past stations of one's career, and ruminate over what happened and what could have been done better, and the protagonists who existed during each time. Eventually each body of work or art project was affected by its surrounding circumstances: time, location and people. No one can deny that, and it is perhaps good to evaluate from time to time past moments that affected the creative process.

KH: I am intrigued to ask you about your formal training as a figurative painter; in your studio here in Zamalek you keep several landscape paintings, precisely seascape canvases depicting the city of Alexandria and its harbour. As a younger artist who have known your work since my debut back in the late eighties, I have –as well as artists of my generation and those generations that followed—known your work as of gestural abstraction nature, totally non representational. Please help us understand the shift of style, and comprehend the gap between Farouk Hosni's debut and his career maturity.

FH: Let me attest that the reason for this shift of style is obscure and mysterious even after over three decades of reflection on this matter. Eventually there is or was a reason. When I rebelled against figuration it was an act in search of identity at the time. I am speaking of the late sixties, when it was a very rich cultural time, and where every creator was looking for his/her personal language; I had not known yet what and how I wanted to express, and I went experimenting like artists do in such times and at this age. I needed to find a language that would represent “salvation” for me as a painter, an ultimate model of expression by paint and on canvas. I was lucky enough to have discovered as a student the works of Picasso, Chagall and other painters who had moved from figuration to the paths of expressionism, fauvism and other schools of figuration. The books and similar sources at that time did not lead me to a single abstract painter, not a single one. I find it a type of “ignorance” now as I reflect on this: how can anyone select in knowledge, and not explore and devour the whole international/global art movement? I, perhaps, should have gone an extra mile to read more about the state of the art on the international scene. In brief, my research and time was focused on the modernist masters who adopted figuration as their principal painting focus.

KH: So what was then your reaction when you discovered your first abstract painting and painter? It must have been a surprise.

FH: Indeed. But I had started abstraction independently before that, and it was that that led me to research into abstract painters. Understandably on the behavioural level I started to examine and explore the works of artists who are my international peers, whose painting practice simulated mine, i.e. artists who painted like myself, and those whom I adopted similar approach to painting like themselves. I then thought that perhaps it was for the good that I had not known about abstraction earlier, as my independent entry to abstract praxis rendered my language of expression specific to me, and faithful to my questioning self, all without tainting or driving me towards being a follower of some trend or school of thought. My entry there was self motivated and self instigated, and remember, I did not know precisely what I wanted to do then, like many artists of my age.



Untitled, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 80x80cm. Courtesy of the artist.

KH: When creators change style or shift direction, there is always a defining moment that does not leave the memory. The decision to abandon academic figuration - temporarily or permanently - must have engraved its birth in your memory.

FH: It was in 1969 in Paris, France. I do remember that moment very clearly: I was on scholarship/grant in Paris. I had decided for some reason to go to the city

Nice in the south of France, and I had to take the train for that trip. During the long hours inside the train, I experienced a totally different landscape than that I had lived back home, from Alexandria to Aswan. Landscape was different in nature and in colour, in light and in form. I have never experienced such colour scheme, such greens and such yellows, such colour clarity and intensity, the greys and the natural sunlight on the land

surface. There were shades and hues of obsessive greens. Red, yellow and white dots that represented flowers; All those colourful dots, the grey streaks, the ups and downs of hills and mountains, all this beauty during such a train trip flabbergasted all the values I learnt about aesthetics during my formal academic training. I knew then that there would be novel visual and colour values for me to explore. This was the moment for me, the moment you just reflected on. Upon my arrival to the southern city of Nice, I told myself that I wanted to paint the entirety of what I have just seen, all this beauty. Each time I attempted painting, I painted landscapes that did not reflect what I had just visually witnessed and assimilated, this new beauty of colour and light. The landscape painting was not myself and did not talk to me. It was –for a while—depressive; I told myself that I should forget it, as I will never be able to represent what I have just witnessed. This temporary incapacity to represent drove me to freeze painting for a while, then read a lot, write a lot and listen a lot to music, all activities I took in an attempt to get inspired to work. In my brief disappointment I was listening to Handel’s* Water Music, when I felt the urge to paint; in water colour on paper came my first abstract work that I can confidently say was able to represent what I had felt earlier and was not able to achieve. This was precisely the first thread that I can recall.

KH: As an art maker myself, I can imagine that it was not an easy nor smooth change of style. How comfortable did you feel about this first body of work?

FH: Certainly it was not an easy transition. I can call it a transition since this first body of work is not what I would call today “resolved completely”. There were several conflicting elements in my head: first it was not at all easy to accept the abandonment –or near—of the skills of craftsmanship, the capacity to draw, a step almost indispensable for abstraction. Abstraction felt new, and what I had known till that precise moment in time was a skilful painting based on skilful drawing, or a painting based on the skills of drawing –and design sometimes-- and the skills of using the optimal use of paint to represent. To get immediately into the physical act of painting was an absolute but pleasurable challenge. Until that moment, prior to my arrival to Paris, my

most audacious step as a young painter outside the realms of craftsmanship was a body of work composed of six medium-sized oil on canvas paintings showing an affiliation and inclination towards metaphysics. Still those metaphysical surfaces saw figuration, drawing and design; it was just the painted figures that showed an element of abstraction techniques while applying the paint, some sort of a controlled audacity. I now perceive this body of works as the actual transition between figuration and abstraction in my practice. Today I can assess this phase as “stepping into the -then- unknown universe of abstraction”. Abstraction found me first; I entered this universe when it called for me.

KH: Like the Spanish Sufi scholars who describe Sufism, as “you do not find Sufism ... Sufism finds you”.

FH: it is exactly how it happened with abstraction. It called for me. It was a slight struggle in a transition of despair and a quest to find my personal language, yet it was the right time and circumstances to start a decades of dwelling together between abstraction and myself, and I loved every bit of it.

KH: We now, as we speak, notice that your three phases of: figuration, transition and abstraction happened in and between Egypt and France around the year of 1969. This year is critical both on the local Egyptian level and on the international scene: the world was boiling nationally and internationally. It was the first man on the moon, the Vietnam War, the immediate effervescence post May 1968 social revolution in Europe, the hippie movement and the summer of love. There was an international rebellion against standard sclerotic social systems. In Egypt, prior to 1969 you had lived what is known as the National Project**, the Pan-Arab movement and the defeat of 1967. There must have been some impact of the local and international social rebellion on your art then. I cannot be surprised that this transition, and let me call it “rebellion on figuration” happened around 1969.

FH: I guess the rebellion of figuration was a universal phenomenon then. In Italy there was the new Arte Povera, in the USA there was a similar phenomenon, the “Anti Form” term described by Robert Morris. I think all this started a decade earlier with abstract expressionism.



Untitled, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 100x140cm. Courtesy of the artist.

It was high time in 1969 for the world, and for my own practice, for deconstruction of all established rules and for attempting new painterly visual language. In 1969, there were Pop artists, Fluxus artists, conceptual artists, minimal artists, abstract expressionist artists, and abstract artists, all trying to find an individual language. I was no exception.

KH: Local art writers in the past two decades wrote about your painting projects almost exclusively from an aesthetical approach, many times only in descriptive manners or in critical jargon that would attempt to describe to the reader what s/he would see in an exhibition space; I personally find this as a shortcoming. What I personally—as an art maker and as an art consumer—like and crave to know about Farouk Hosni is your itinerary in detail and since its inception, and the motives behind what you did as a painter at various times in painting and around. Let me propose another angle now: Farouk Hosni the student. There is

one particular master professor I feel obliged to mention at the time during which you were student, as he was a champion of the National Project, a figurative painter a l'ancien and a native Alexandria: Hamed Oweis.

FH: Indeed he was my professor; he taught me both in high school and at the fine art academy. I also had master professors of high rank: Mahmoud Abdelrasheed, Hamed Nada and Seif Wanly. All taught me for long periods throughout my five years. At that time we, students, trained rigorously in painting models and still life; it was an absolute pleasure. I sometimes had trouble with each and all of them because of my nature: as student I never touched the divider or the T-shaped ruler, I used only my freehand sketches even to do perspective projects. I was a super figurative student; all my work then as a student promised a standard traditional figurative painterly praxis. But the times in the sixties were times generous and abundant in culture and in artistic wealth; to me it was a period where I explored my own creative desires and capacities; I

played flute to almost professional standards, I painted, I wrote prose and I did sing even a bit. I wondered about the path that I would or should adopt in my future. I questioned my own self and my capacities to be any or all of what I loved practicing then. Definitely painting is my oldest practice since my early childhood and the closest to my heart. I started by drawing my surroundings, landscapes, then my family, then friends. It is a pity I cannot locate those earlier works as they were taken by their owners at the time.

KH: Every painter has a physical starting point, in my personal opinion it could be prior to formal art education, and to many painters such moment of the physical beginning is ill defined. They can or cannot decide if such a moment came inside or outside the academy framework. How was it for you outside the premises of the academy?

FH: My natural development was to go into a type of landscape painting with non-realistic palette; I painted red trees and blue gardens. I loved painting in the Antoniadis Garden and at the zoo in Alexandria. I loved a particular black bear with golden-like colour around its neck. Many times I felt it was waiting for me to draw and paint it, seated on its rocks. My early challenge was to draw and paint the rocks; those helped me later to perceive acute and rounded surfaces with their shadows and lights, the sense of volume, mass and weight. It was then perhaps that I understood Cezanne. I was yet a troubled and insecure time as to which path I should take. Here I must say that neither my mind was set on a pathway, nor my soul either, I can relate that too to the natural immaturity that comes with the very young age. I was still searching in myself and not yet in my own creative process. I now know that I had to settle on who I am first, the multiple facettes of the “am”, the self, then I would decide later on my own philosophy that would accompany my physical self and lead me in my art, my personal vision as a creator of an art form. Then I guess I must mention the sea; that was paramount and omnipresent; it dominated over, and almost haunted, my practice of painting. The sea guided my thoughts and my perceptions.

I used to sketch at night at a particular location in Ras el Teen at the far end of Anfooshy district. What



Untitled, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 100x120cm. Courtesy of the artist.

inspired me is the geography, the physical environment: right before the Royal Palace of Ras el Teen, the sand withdraws entirely in an almost surreal phenomenon that leaves a small and narrow pathway of sea stones, sufficient to seat only one or two persons right inside yet in front of the sea. You become literally surrounded by the Mediterranean.

I meditated and thought, explored my personal emotions, sketched and felt inspired. I was engulfed by an infinite black of the sea and of the night; only the sound of the ripples below my feet or the more parent waves indicated that we were on earth.

I have no precise recollection of specific thoughts I had or decisions I made, but I know it was an ultimate inspiring experience that affected and shaped my practice and my decisions. During many of those moments, nothing became impossible, yet everything was only a non-physical dream; perhaps this is the abstraction seed in me. This was a time before I touched abstraction, yet apparently it has always been there.



Untitled, 2013, 90x90cm, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

KH: Some artists reflect upon their praxis, and even project it to others sometimes as a solitary success story; they recount –perhaps out of belief- that their moment of discovery came to them “alone”, and they emerged out of art academies then success followed them because they were “chosen”; they often do not talk about the hard labour required to lead a sustainable career. This is

one aspect that has never, not to my knowledge at least been addressed while tracing your itinerary, I mean the way you “came out”.

FH: As an artist I came out with a group of creators of my age, the poet, the painter, the stage director, the folk dance choreographer and all of us wanted to “make it” in the real world. Again I want to reiterate that it was

a time wealthy and of and dense with a cultural flux and a diversity of streams of thought. There were heavy weight scholars and high profile intellectuals of high stature, all published and all written about, and all were role models to the young creators that were “us” at the time. I then became the director of the Anfooshy Palace of Arts, the famous public cultural space in Alexandria, and all those stars of the cultural scene and hard core intellectuals that we heard about and read about became my regular guests at the Palace. This leadership position at my young age allowed me to meet titans of culture, like the giant poet Amal Donkol, with whom and many others I managed to enjoy sustainable warmth and friendship. I must say that here I started to perceive art more profoundly as an indispensable element of life, an element that—with such friendships and encounters and exchanges—transcends the brush, the palette and the canvas; I learnt that such human encounters can affect people as much as art can. As a painter per se I can teach how to read a colour or a surface, but minds can be much more influential, and what we teach with minds is able to transcend the simple reading of colour or line.

KH: Now this painting in front of us, it is about 100 x 100, a square format, something that is one forcibly the standard format that has been your label in the past two decades. Black background, another exception, and there are semi figurative forms, yes in what we addressed now as metaphysical; it is just as if it is not your work.

FH: This is a 1972 work, perhaps 1973; a time between figuration and abstraction, and I was certainly insecure, both technically and conceptually. This is what we talked about when I said I was trying to define and choose my way, or which way to go; you can see the hesitance clear in applying the paint.

KH: We cannot compare the level of confidence between such times of hesitance as you call it in the early seventies, and today’s capacity to strike a brushstroke with a touch that simulates symbols or codes.

FH: In fact I relate that to the cumulative experience of the visual artist, and also on her/his intellectual built up, which is a personal choice; everyone chooses how to build themselves visually and intellectually, which reflects on their concepts rather than techniques. The

technical capacity needs only labour and hard work. In such work in front of us, it was clear that I was trying frantically to solve problems of forms, shadow and light, despite the fact the subject matter is not of realistic nature; such confusion is resolved by continuous practice throughout one’s career. Today I think of other issues to solve the painterly problematic as I work. The importance of such a historical painting - apart from its importance for me as its author and as an evidence of my personal evolution as a painter - is that it is a reminder of how I used to work in a quest to break the burdens of simulation that we were taught in standard art academia. For years we simulated nature and people and landscapes, then we broke the rules, now we paint what we know, not forcibly what we see. Such early works are like a scream that we lanced without knowing the maximum distance such a scream will reach.

KH: You mention simulation, which brings to my mind the seminal text of Jean Baudrillard: *Simulation and Simulacra*, where he addresses three orders of simulation, the first of which is the capacity of the artist to simulate nature. As an artist, I think such practice of nature simulation in itself simulates a prison.

FH: It is precisely how we felt at the time, and it was clear in my head that I wanted an alternative “genre” or type of painting that would be representative of myself and what I wanted to express. Representation was not certainly what I wanted to do. And note that we were speaking about the wealth and diversity of the streams of thought at the time, and every serious creator wanted to explore new realms, even if we had to step over the standards of the practice, or just take one step across its frame to the outside.

KH: Back to the sixties since you mention that again; I want to here touch on two elements we have been addressing for a while in this exchange: your need for abstraction versus the National Project social realist type of work of your own professors like Hamed Oweis, or even by a titan like Abdel Hadi El Gazzar at one brief stage of his life. Oweis was not, till his demise a few weeks back at the age of 92, to step out of his social realist Diego Rivera inspired type of work, despite the time and the day.

FH: My opinion is that many Alexandrian painters for the past 6 decades have been cocooned inside their own praxis, styles and even choice of subject matter; they swarmed in their own universe, most of them of course, we cannot stereotype nor generalize. Exceptions were professors like Seguiny, Hamed Nada, Abdalla Gohar, Ismail Taha, Zeinab el Seguiny and Sedky El Gabakhangy, some were Alexandrians and some came from Cairo to teach us at the Alexandria Fine Arts.

In all that, we students had only one source of gathering information, books, principally from the art school's library. It was our only access to the so-called international artists. It was more or less assimilation of art history books, more than getting information about what happens in the world at that time. The knowledge was not forcibly state of the art, and we were still, in all that, imprisoned inside Alexandria, which brings the analogy I used earlier of cocooning. The interesting phenomenon here: whoever comes to Alexandria to teach we incorporate her/him inside our cocoon; as students we study their work and they become part of us. We never attempted to step out of Alexandria to expand the span of our knowledge. For instance, at time I knew Hamed Nada because he taught me, and was my direct professor, but I did not know at all the works of Abdel Hadi El Gazzar, since you mentioned him, despite the fact that he was Alexandrian, but he was living and working in Rome at that time.

Of all the names, perhaps again as a sign of cocooning, we were much impressed and inspired by Seif Wanly; Adham his brother had already been dead at the time. I used to go to his studio with other students; we were very inspired by his performance as an artist painting almost in public, surrounded by all of us. His techniques were world class exquisite and he treated painting as technical job and enjoyed every bit of his work. It was high time and the best moment for all of us students when he taught us how to use charcoal to achieve portraits. He was like a magician, wiping off and scrapping with his fingers the charcoal powder to create shadow and light and other effects; for young students of art those are magic feats. Then we discovered what we - artists of that time - like to call the vanguards: Said El Adawy, Mostafa Abdel Moaty and Mahmoud Abdalla, those were offering us and teaching us indirectly personal

research, experimentation and audacity. We were one step younger and we followed those - at the time - young artists; we were both admiring and jealous of how those audacious art guerrillas operated.

KH: You keep mentioning “we”.

FH: My generation; artists like Magdi Kenawy, Mohamed Salem, Abdalla Mohamed Abdalla before he left the country in immigration, among others. Those are the names that were almost partners in this wonderful quest for a personal visual language, and all were technically proficient creators. We all shared our books and our music, and we were obsessed by art, all art. We shared records, listening time, notes, thoughts and critiques, and we took that seriously. We believed that it was a mission to construct ourselves as artists by all knowledge of all art. Reading was paramount in all this; we did read a lot, and we forced ourselves to read texts of escalating difficulty, especially in philosophy. One seminal reading that left an impact on all of us was the body of work of Abdel Rahman Badawy, which was not easy to comprehend at the first reading. We read extensively in theatre, and then I personally gradually moved to read profoundly in history. Sometimes you fall into something intriguing, call it by serendipity that changes the course of your habits; one such thing is when I discovered reading in physics. Physics is one area that stimulates and challenges my intelligence, and this I fell in love with immediately, and that led me to the physics of the universe and cosmology.

KH: Back to Paris. I am intrigued to know about one thing that I personally had to go through several times in my career as a visual artist that is “work as a job” versus our “creative work”. In Paris you assumed the position of Director of the Egyptian Cultural Centre in Paris, which seems to be “a job”, while on the other hand you were a career painter who took the professional itinerary of an artist very much seriously. Every artist of us has of a way of handling that. How did you work that problematic out, especially that such position is core diplomatic?

FH: Well, let us say that I was diplomaticized. It was myself the artist in a suit of a diplomat. I was the very same artist who came from Alexandria, with the benefits of a



Untitled, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 200x200cm. Courtesy of the artist.

diplomatic passport, and some cultural responsibilities that I did not find a burden at all, in fact I enjoyed immensely, and again it help me meet wonderful people I would only read about otherwise and never meet. Let me describe why I found that position easy and enjoyable: my first leadership position at the Anfooshy Cultural Palace I made it a mission to introduce to the

audience of Alexandria the art and culture of the whole world; we had theatre, literature, music and art from all around the globe presented to one audience. Look at it as if I was a fins chef who introduced the arts of the world on several plates, while in Paris, I introduced only the arts of Egypt on only one plate to the audience of Paris. I enjoyed such responsibility very much.



Untitled, 2008, acrylic on paper, 50x70cm. Courtesy of the artist.

KH: So did such an enjoyable cultural culinary feed into your daily studio work as a painter in Paris?

FH: Unfortunately the sole downside of this period is that I was not able to lead a rigorous daily studio practice. On the other hand, I never regretted it because the Paris period that spanned over nine years was a period during which I assimilated every element that helped me throughout my career thereafter till today. I assimilated everything that led me to be the painter I am now. At that time back in the late sixties, I had not even dreamt to go to Paris in a regular visit, then I become the head of the cultural centre of the entire country Egypt in Paris, which means not only I could visit, but I could also stay, and not only that, I had authority and I could plan and implement and succeed,

and do something I know how to do and enjoy doing. Paris was a dream-come-true, and seemed at that time a one-in-a-lifetime dream come true. As a painter you always sacrifice time to go to museums to inspire, now what is the whole city of Paris is an open museum? It was worth sacrificing studio time to explore and “live” the museum that is Paris. It was living the experience of Paris and not just visiting or working there. I remember my very first experience as audience in an open air concert: it was in a park and we did not know where the music came from and we had to lay on our backs to see a light performance that is part of the music. I became flabbergasted speechless in awe, admiration, and actually love to this city; I was emotionally kidnapped. So looking back at it now, whoever was not with me there may think that I lived as a diplomat, but in fact

I lived a “cultural vagabond” life of a painter whose thirst for arts was unquenchable. Paris was not only a museum; it was also a cultural hub for exquisite minds. In Paris I had worked with and known closely resident gurus like Lewis Awad I literature, Hamed Abdalla in the arts, Ahmed Abdel Moaty Hegazy in poetry, El Alem in social sciences, and painters like Ihab Shaker, Safwan, Georges Bahgoury, Adly Rezkalla and the great Adam Henein. At the Egyptian Cultural Centre I had fabulous encounters at different parts with geniuses like filmmakers Shady Abdel Salam and Youssef Chahine. As a young artist, meeting and working with such minds and names was beyond one’s dreams. I learnt a lot just by watching and listening to those maestros. I became acquainted for the first time with modern dance, contemporary music and experimental theatre, all never heard of back in my Egypt when I was student. It was a paradigm shift, and more lamps igniting in my young artist’s head; every new experience was a lamp, and every lit lamp expanded and stretched my scope as an artist and as an intellectual. I learnt how to see, watch, hear and listen to the city, all different levels of perception that made me “live” the city and not just live “in” the city. I learnt how to perceive the cities codes of architecture and small alleys in order to read the possible history of spaces and places. I had “open pores” all over me; all my senses were open pores to learn. Though I felt dwarfed in this unmatched historical and cultural cosmopolis, I took Paris’ lovely gift of culture, and I gave all my time to assimilation of the gift.

In Paris I savoured feelings I cannot give names too, and all feelings were positive. Today, each time I paint, I never succeed in recalling the feelings I felt throughout the nine years, and still I cannot give names to those positive feelings.

KH: My own experience in Paris had a lot of similarities with what you had lived. In fact I lived some almost identical experiences that you have just described, though to me my Paris period is much less successful than yours. At times in Paris I felt on top of the world, as I got swallowed in learning the city’s codes and I was able to learn every day of my three years between 1992 and 1995. At other times I felt like I had failed big time. To me the most unique feeling I felt in Paris and



Untitled, 1983, acrylic on paper, 50x70cm. Courtesy of the artist.

never felt anywhere else in the world is that “success is only a carrot away”. I could see the carrot, I could see success that is always only three steps away, and those three paces were never made, or I simply failed. The big dreams I came with from Cairo were demolished after only three months in Paris when I had to work as mason, painting houses and cutting tiles, to survive. Nevertheless I lived and loved every second in Paris, and till now, and I never felt that I was able to vanquish the city; every success seems to dwarf in Paris. Yet your “open pores” term may now explain my very own personal behaviour at the time, and why I always stayed in Paris despite the frustration sometimes.

FH: That is why in Paris I was a recipient more than an affect element. It helped me to open my senses to something I could have never thought possible.



Untitled, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 150x200cm. Courtesy of the artist.

KH: Now Rome for you, in another leadership position as the Director of the Egyptian Academy in Rome...

FH: The Paris years were fast in pace and I was much younger, but in Rome I entered a blender, a continuum that hosted artists and creators of all age groups and all nationalities, all colours and all streams of thought. Though Paris was generous to me, Rome was much more generous, dense and abundant with knowledge and skills for me. Rome was the greatest blender. It confirmed my identity as an artist and as an intellectual, and there I had my first encounter with serious critics who gave me true critique of my painting. I came to Rome as an Egyptian painter, never written about in any serious publication by any international critic. The press I got in Paris was all about the “promising artist”, the “young artist” or the “budding talent”, and all press clippings that cannot be seen as serious critical work I can be proud of. In Rome I had a cumulative experience

as an artist to allow me to compete internationally and be juried. This time my encounters were established at another level: giant Italian poets, writers and critics. One incident that left a massive –and very positive– impact on me was during the opening of my third solo presentation in Rome, when the great Italian critic Carandenti, who was also head of the Venice Biennale at the time, entered the gallery and exclaimed “Here, our friend has grown up and reached maturity!!!” I was massively surprised and did not know how to feel: my first thought was “well, what did he perceive me before?” but I came to the conclusion that this must be a positive reflection on my work, from a man whose friends were Calder. He later took one of my works for his collection. In Rome, apart from my official position and responsibility that simulated what I did in Paris, I was becoming much more confident as an artist playing at a much higher league.

KH: On the linear level, we can then think of Paris as inspiration-stimulation, and of Rome as a phase where your work attained maturity.

FH: In Alexandria I could not find the phrase or the note; I stumbled on that in Paris sometime during my nine years there, and developed my full style in Rome during another nine years, and authored ever since.

KH: I am curious now to know about maturity. When a painter reaches maturity, the evolution of his/her artwork demonstrates always a different curve than that seen during the learning process, or during the search for the personal style. How is maturity attained in Rome and the Rome studio different from the last twenty years in your Cairo studio?

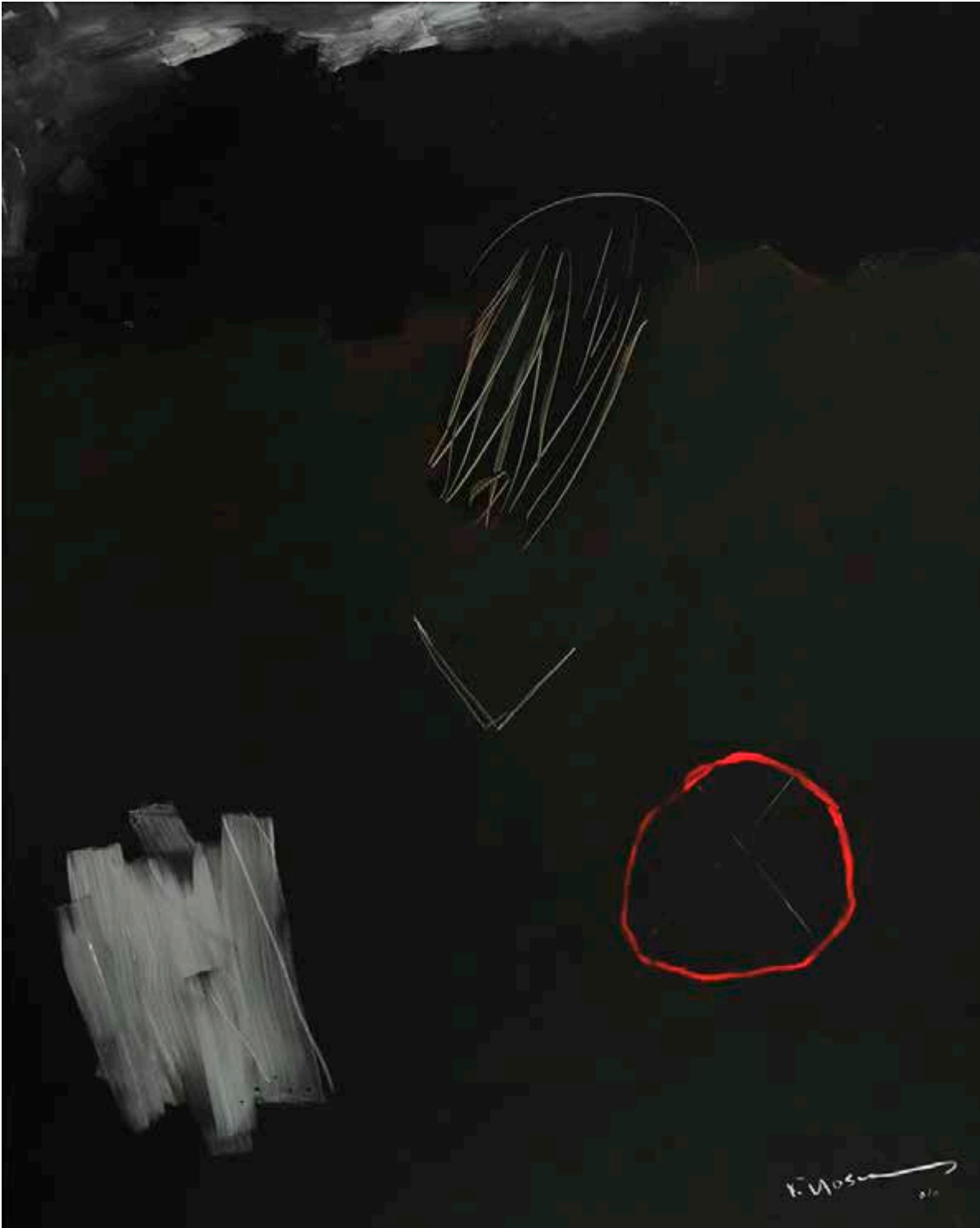
FH: Apart from the very natural progress in my process and final art production, I can claim that the taste of the two studios is entirely different; there is a time that has elapsed of course, and the taste eventually differs as regards my personal cumulative experience and the change that an artist passes through as s/he ages and as s/he as well gains experience. The taste of the Paris studio, the Rome studio and the Cairo studio all developed in response to my very own surrounding atmosphere and “simulative” climate at the very specific time where I existed in the city, my contacts, my cultural environment, even the subtle changes of light, summer, winter, and what I did and had to do then. Everything contributed to how I experienced and led a studio practice. I could almost be a different person with each different relocation in a new city, though I am still the same; the constant is myself but time and aging are not constant, and they did in fact render my perception of each studio as a very unique taste/experience. I think that also the interaction with people, no matter how subtle, renders an experience unique. In Rome the dialogue and interaction on the cultural level is unmatched in my experience, and I cannot explain why; as an element in such an environment I enjoyed being part of such dynamics, yet I cannot make a rationale as of how and why, and why can't w in Cairo have an equally fulfilling and enriching interaction.

Once in Cairo, many things changed dramatically and categorically. It is not bad or worse nor better or best. It is different; the noise, both physical and metaphorical,



Untitled, 1979, acrylic on paper, 50x70cm. Courtesy of the artist.

and the energy spent on running around to attain basic logical results in humongous. To get back to the core of your reflection: I came to Cairo from Rome in the early eighties, at a very difficult time. I came to a frontline leadership position from a creative position as Director of the Egyptian Academy in Rome, to become a full blown statesman: the Minister of Culture to the oldest and historically the most civilized seven-thousand-year old giant country, Egypt. I was instantaneously rejected by a conservative stratum of the society, led over by some journalists and politicians who thought I was too young, too soft and too liberal for the position. At that time, a minister of culture had to be an academic and a man of age and enough experience to wheel-and deal in the local politics; I was a painter, and visual artists were not perceived nor esteemed as sufficient to assume public office. This was the type of atmosphere that I found myself surrounded with as I came to Cairo from



Untitled, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 120x150cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Rome; Rome was the macrocosms—and I say “macro” as gigantic—of cultural and intellectual fulfilment, while in Cairo I am trapped by professional politicians and media leadership who wanted anyone else but a young painter who spent 18 years as a professional artist and in non-career diplomacy. Eventually I did not feel at home at first when I went back to my studio, this time in Cairo where I was relocated, while I kept still for a while my Alexandria studio.

KH: I think it is only old fashioned popular culture, perhaps a myth, this notion of “an artist is too loose to be a great manager”; André Malreaux was an author / novelist of great literary merit and a full fledged statesman, winning the prestigious Goncourt literary prize and serving as a Minister of Information (1945–1946), Minister of State (1958–1959), and Minister of Cultural Affairs, serving during De Gaulle’s entire presidency (1959–1969). I think there are loads of artists who did loads of activities including politics or statesmanship: the Czech Vaclav Havel is a great playwright, essayist, poet and politician, and he was a president of Czechoslovakia and later again of the Czech Republic. There also those creators who served in other functions and had alternative careers like Anton Chekov who was a practicing physician and a phenomenal literary figure. Somerset Maugham had studied medicine and wrote his first two books in medical school before devoting his time to writing. I think success and failure is a question of who does what. There are stages in the creator’s life during which there are different roles and tasks that add to her/his creative practice more than take from it.

FH: I had several of those phases. I reflect always on those eighteen years between Paris and Rome were a great learning curve for me, and a great maturity station too, a station that help me lead a local career as a statesman, while still being the artist who I am without losing bit of my integrity as an artist. As a professional painter with international exposure, I was able to overcome and absorb the negative perception within the public sphere and got to work, bot at my studio and as the supreme cultural figure in the country; I tackled the daily problems as a minister creatively, and extorted my battery of international experience in Paris,

Rome and the time spent in Egypt prior to assuming the minister position, all to come up with solutions that reflected both quality and sustainability. I used all my creative and management skills to come up with a formula that worked, I hope, for over two decades. I put all my knowledge and experience of the years of living with filmmakers, theatre troops, visual artists, writers and creators of all sorts to help found an infrastructure that I hope will still work even in difficult times like the ones we live now. Again, despite the many successes and some failures, to this day, when I evaluate the past three decades, I find it difficult to compare my studio praxis in Rome and the sublime minds I met with anything else that I lived after those nine years in Italy. In Egypt I worked with some brilliant minds, but I observed and suffered that in Cairo I had to deal with a majority stratum of “specialized” intellectuals, who know only and are specialists of their own practice, and do not bother to develop their own praxis to incorporate interdisciplinary creative collaborations, or even just knowledge. Those entire daily problematic must have reflected also upon my creative practice as a painter, and hence the studio “taste” that we started this thread of dialogue with.

KH: So, do you think that for over two decades you did strike a perfect balance between your own practice and what you had to offer in creative leadership?

FH: On the contrary. I believe that sustaining such a position subtracted from my studio achievements a lot. With every success as an artist, there is always someone who attributes this success to either abuse of power from my side, or due to natural order of things: limelight goes already to the famous and those in power. It did hurt a lot sometimes, in fact it always did, especially when I worked at my studio every single night for hours, and when I gave to my studio just as much as would any other independent artist who is only a studio practitioner and not in office. Sometimes even art professionals, local or international, would not work with you for one thousand reasons that have nothing to do with your merit as an artist. The public office subtracted a lot from my career and it actually did not add anything. I have to take this challenge for over two decades, accepted it, worked hard to overcome this



Untitled, 1977, acrylic on canvas, 80x120cm. Courtesy of the artist.

perception, and I still do. I had to work hard to make the viewer interact with my painting because of its merit, neither with nor because of the “minister behind the painting”. You know, when you paint and have hundreds of people at the opening, you must not get cheated: those are not “real” or “authentic” audience. Those may be coming for the minister, not the artist; only very few come to see the art because they follow the art, not the persona behind the art, or in other more precise words, the “minister”.

In the past years I think I succeeded to attain a certain audience and followers who were really able to “feel” and “live” my work”. This group is satisfactory and much sufficient for me; I feel complete as a painter when I succeed in talking to an audience that follows my work, regardless to how big or small this group is. I

think an artist must always fetch for such audience and seekers of one’s art. Again this plays a paramount role in what we call the “studio taste”. Such audience came in flux in Rome, while in Cairo I had to work hard to find it or develop it. In return I felt my freedom and absolute liberty to create in Rome with audience in and out of my studio, while in my Cairo studio it is always a struggle to develop a long term painting project; in fact sometimes I enslave myself to produce in such a “relatively slow” environment.

KH: I here come to what I like to personally call the “positive circuit” or “positive circle of adepts”. I belong to a younger generation of painters, who in fact benefited a lot from your presence in public office. In your time there was the creation of the Salon of Young



Untitled, 1977, acrylic on canvas, 80x120cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Artists that am a veteran of, if I can say so. I personally believe that the Salon of Young Artist is the second most important institution in the visual art sector that you directed for over two decades. Though younger, I live the same challenge every day of finding the audience and peers who are able to “live” art in all its disciplines and not just “know about” it. For that I open my studio every Friday for the past four years for an exchange with younger and older peers, sort of a trans generational sharing of best practice. What do you do?

FH: I benefit from the presence around me of brilliant minds. I have my Fridays open studio for years now, for my closest friends, all writers, artists, musicians and creators of all sorts with whom we charge each other with the energy required to produce and sustain creative production. I have friends who are regularly around me

like Mohamed Darwish, Inas Luka, Tarek Sharara, Hany Shenouda, Waguih Wahba, Nadim Elias and a selected few. In the past, In Rome and Paris, even in Cairo, I enjoyed the best exchange with people like the late Salah Marie, the great stage and light artist and cinema art director who was among my first audience; he loved my work. I enjoyed the company of the great Shady Albdel Salam, the colossal feature and documentary filmmaker, painter and film art director, who always exchanged with me at my Rome studio about my work. He was a role model and a friend. He also collected my work, and I always refused to take money from him and he always insisted to pay and he did, as he said it was “ethically essential”, I argued continuously though. I followed his circle too, and he had his talented student the sculptor Mahmoud Mabrook, Salah Marie who worked closely

with him among others, all were inspired, and inspiring to me at that stage. There was the great sculptor Adam Henein during my Paris years; Adam was my closest artist friend in Paris, and we shared the same “great minds circle”. Up to this day, Adam is my first audience and I am his. We recharge each other, and we enjoy this inspiration sustainable friendship for over thirty years now. There was also, at the time, a phenomenal personality around me, who grew from a semi-literate household help to one of the most astounding critical eyes vis-à-vis painting as an art practice that I ever saw. His name was Sokar. At the beginning I trained him to be around artists and creators; then to everybody’s astonishment, just by listening to conversations and dialogues, he was able to assimilate the theory and practice of painting, all painting. He shortly developed opinions that he could articulate beautifully, and for over two decades painters in our circuit always asked for his opinion. He could speak about art much more profoundly than many graduates of art schools.

I guess it is the tight thing to do: to surround oneself with brilliant minds for cross-inspiration. They should also be honest enough to be your mirror, without flattery or hypocrisy.

KH: I think, judging from far, that one of the challenges for a creator who assumes a position in public office, like yourself, is to find those who would act as your mirror and who are at the same time disinterested; those who are close enough for you to allow in your comfort zone yet who are able to provide feedback as first audience.

FH: It is hard to find those, though I consider myself lucky enough to have managed to find and develop such circle. I always longed for a circle of students too though. I always imagined myself in a mentoring role, to disseminate my knowledge and experience; I wanted to leave a legacy through younger creators who will have worked closely with me. This is the true challenge: you try to take that desire into action, you allow some people close to you, they enter your studio and learn how you approach your artwork, then suddenly you discover that they are cloning your work. This happened with me more than once now, so I decided to freeze this till some time later, perhaps. I long for developing a model to disseminate this knowledge though.

KH: I think this is possible now. You are commencing a new phase now, in my opinion will be equally productive, and disciples, assistants and students who will potentially join your studio - should you decide of course - will come to you as the artist, not the minister and and official of the government. They will be inevitably disinterested, and will come because they follow your art. In fact, I think it makes you at last more accessible to those who want to learn from your experiences; I for one, always felt reluctant to approach your office, though I personally owe you my first solo show at a public space, back in 1989. I felt reluctant because I hated to have someone think that I was close that circuit for an interest.

FH: It is funny what you say, though it makes sense. I never felt like a minister. I always felt like painter possessed by a poltergeist that is also a painter. Even in the darkest of assignments for the government, I maintained the spirit and the humour of the artist. Being an artist is not a job, it is something you live; you wake up possessed by the artist, you read, eat and drink as the artist, not as the public servant you sometimes are. What remains is your own definition of yourself, and I could never, and I mean never, see myself as anything but the painter from Alexandria who lived as a cultural vagabond in diaspora in Paris and Rome, all as a painter. I consumed art and I produced art along decades. I constructed cultural policies and demolished others, never feeling for a second as anything but the painter from Alexandria who swallowed his first cultural shock in Europe, specifically Paris.

The artist never joins a political party, and I never did, in fact at times I disdained politics whilst assuming a minister position; it was for the best, as I always remained faithful to my true love of art. I always believed that any position would eventually go way, not that I ever liked it. I knew that what will remain for me is the art I create. I never cheated myself and always kept this integrity to my art, and to myself as an artist. I served society; I was a servant to this society, and I avoided dealing with politicians as much as I could. I worked best that way. I think Egypt, as a country needs an artist to run it. In my humble opinion, an artist with good management skills will run this country better than any politician.

KH: If you can evaluate that period of over two decades, and give a final reflection on your time in office as an artist and as the supreme head of culture in Egypt. What would be your instant thought and what would you do better?

FH: I would say without hesitation that I am proud to have served Egyptians, and that I would do it again despite the obstacles and challenges. I lost many people because I adopted a strict code of ethics; I applied that in my studio all my career, in Paris, Rome and Cairo, and I applied that during my public responsibility. As an artist I love people: to be surrounded with people, to learn from people and to share best practice. As an artist it was one important technique to get inspired. I learn from younger peers and I teach them; we feed into each other's praxis. I would have more students and be surrounded with more people if I have to do my career again; like that I would make sure to learn more.

About the Writer

Khaled Hafez is born in Cairo, Egypt in 1963 where he currently lives and works. He studied medicine and followed the evening classes of the Cairo fine arts in the eighties. After attaining a medical degree in 1987 and M.Sc. as a medical specialist in 1992, he gave up medical practices in the early nineties for a career in the arts. He later obtained an MFA in new media and digital arts from Transart Institute (New York, USA) and Danube University Krems (Austria). Hafez practice spans the mediums of painting, video, photography, installation and interdisciplinary approaches.

End Notes

** Handel, George Frideric (1685–1759), German composer and organist, resident in Britain from 1712; born Georg Friedrich Händel. He is chiefly remembered for his oratorio Messiah (1742), his Water Music suite (c. 1717), and his Music for the Royal Fireworks (1749).*

*** National Project is a term used by cultural anthropologists and critics to describe the state of the creative practices in Egypt during the late fifties and the sixties. The term describes the period when slogans of pan-Arabism flourished and the local cultural environment simulated at many aspects the soviet model of state sponsored and guided creative practices during the cold war.*

