

Salon El-Shabab

By Ati Metwaly



Mai Hamdi, Interactive art, fragment. Wall at the Palace of Arts with sentences scratched out by the viewers.
Grand Prize of the 22nd Youth Salon.

The First Experimental Salon of Young Artists kicked off in 1989 as an initiative of the former Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni, aiming to patronize young graduates who, in his view, were deprived of exposure in the Egyptian art scene. Since its creation, the salon has undergone a number of ideological and regulatory changes. By the second edition, in 1990, the Fine Arts sector operating under the Ministry's umbrella decided to rename the initiative The Salon of Young Artists (aka Youth Salon, or Salon El Shabab), which then also opened the exhibition to standard mediums. Throughout the years the Salon has been housed in a

number of venues, starting with the Opera House Art Gallery, moving to the Akhnaton Centre for the Arts, and finally taking place in the Palace of Arts in the grounds of the Cairo Opera House.

Every year the Salon brought a new diversity of works and mediums, consequently welcoming forms such as photography, digital art and computer-generated works, among others. Over the two decades, the Salon brought to light many emerging young artists who later on took centre stage in Egypt's art scene. Many of today's well-established Egyptian artists, such as Shady

El Noshokaty, Ahmed Askalany, Hany Rashed, Salah El Meleigy, among many others, look to their beginnings in the Salons of Young Artists.

With the dawn of the revolution in January 2011, the 22nd Salon of Young Artists did not lack controversy. Wael Shawky, artistic director, left the Salon for personal reasons. His decision, nevertheless, coincided with the many changes taking place within the administration of the whole Fine Arts sector of the Ministry of Culture. The new management appointed Reda Abdel Rahman as artistic director. While reflecting the revolutionary spirit, the committee decided to cancel the selection and open its doors to all the artists, regardless of their skills. As much as the open door policy was favorable to many artists, it also carried a risk of compromising the quality of the Salon. Precisely that risk was why Emad Abu-Ghazi, then Egypt's Minister of Culture, aborted the committee's decision. The Minister referred to the Salon's regulations, which stress the importance of selection and competition. As the differences between the committee and the ministry were unraveling, they could not contain their bitterness internally. The audience got an unnecessary taste of the internal problems through social platforms and a large debate in local media.

The committee resigned leaving Salah El Meleigy, head of the Fine Arts sector, and Reda Abdel-Salam together with the Ministry of Culture to form a new committee and appointing a new director. Khaled Hafez was chosen as the artistic director of the 22nd Salon of Young Artists. The opening of the 22nd Salon, which took place on 15 November 2011, helped to bury tensions and refocus attention on the many interesting creative propositions of the new artistic generation.

Khaled Hafez believes that many of the artists whose works were displayed in the Palace of Arts have great potential to surface within the coming year. "There were a significant number of talents that we witnessed in this year's salon. In my opinion, at least half of them will make it in the near future. But history proves that this is not the rule, as not always the best or the most obviously talented survive. It is the most talented in terms of the person with the highest perseverance and the flame that will manage to reach the top of Egypt's art scene," Hafez asserted.

Artistic transformations

"They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself."

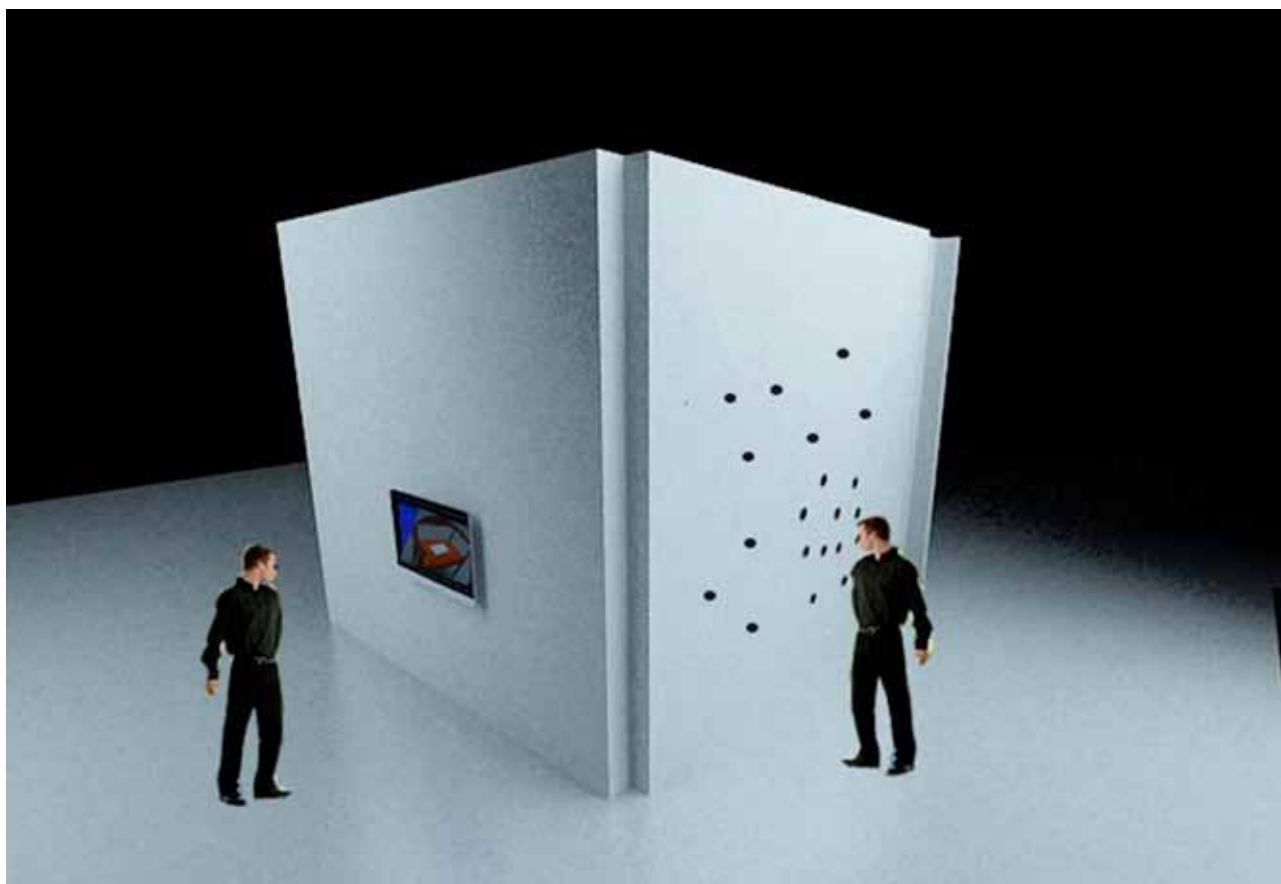
Thus, Andy Warhol (1928-1987), one of the most untamed artists of all times wrote in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975). It was in the 20th century that artists realized that their role was no longer one of aesthetes or as searchers for beauty in the ugly world surrounding them. Being active members of society, artists reflect on the social, political and ideological changes through their artwork, as well as express their personal concerns and longings in relation to the world. The 22nd edition of Cairo's Salon of Young Artists chose "Change" as its main theme. No other word expresses more clearly the reality that envelopes, influences and inspires the young Egyptian generation. No other term grasps the essence of all the transformations that the generation itself is subjected to. The exhibition was held at Cairo's Palace of Arts, situated in the grounds of the Cairo Opera House, and extended to El-Bab Gallery and the Mahmoud Mukhtar Cultural Centre, from the 15th November to the 8th December 2011. The Salon encompassed works from 269 artists, aged 20-35, all of who are characterized by a fizzing energy, aware of the realities surrounding them, and proposing personalized impressions of the crucial concerns of their generation. Emerging from the knot of Egypt's January 25 revolution that same year, the three weeks of the Youth Salon were caught in particularly intense political upheavals: November's Mohamed Mahmoud Street clashes with Central Security Forces that left several dead and many more injured; followed by the first round of the parliamentary elections that took off on the 28th November. Understandably, with such an accumulation of events, it was impossible to disconnect this year's Salon of Young Artists from the surrounding realities. Socio-political changes were apparent in many works. Nevertheless, the selection committee, headed by Khaled Hafez, artistic director of the 22nd Youth Salon, made sure that the concept of "Change" would not be limited to the literal translation of the term, nor its political jargon definition. Alongside a large number of works in all mediums that definitely mirrored Egypt's revolution, the Salon also looked at many other angles of a necessary transformation that emerges in



Osama Abdel Moneim, Alley Museum, Walls of one of the corridors of the Palace of Arts. Photography and acrylic. Grand Prize of the 22nd Youth Salon.

every artistic soul. Using painting, drawings, graphics, photography, sculpture, ceramic, video, installations, multimedia works, interactive art and computer art, the generation of late 1970s and 1980s brought to the table a much broader understanding of “art”. Rebirth or reincarnation, metamorphosis, development, progress or continuity, undefined searches for the unknown, evoking memories or looking into the future, study of body and gender through its transformative parameters, were some among many of the issues tackled by the emerging artists playing with the theme of “Change”. Whether sending direct messages or speaking with symbols and oblique translations of the reality, all works carried a time value that allowed the artists to move from one place to another - either literally, or metaphorically. The sense of the internalized dynamism allowed them to move within the change. Dozens of works displayed in six galleries of the Palace

of Arts presented a multitude of sub-themes generated by young minds and expressed through conceptual research: a studio praxis (Galleries 1 and 2), obsessive self-examination and gender probing (Gallery 4); a voyage or an escape towards a dream and an unknown or alternative reality (in Gallery 5). At times technique took over the conceptuality (Gallery 3) displaying computer works, printmaking, pencil works, graphic techniques, among others, while a number of artists presented their works truncated (Gallery 6). This common thread of fragmentation raised some interesting questions on global perceptions amongst some young artists. Microcosms With the multitude of mediums, techniques and concepts, the 22nd Youth Salon exhibited an important spectrum of today’s emerging generation of artists. Modernity and change pulls them towards the future, yet none of them are detached from Egypt. On the one hand, this is the generation that pushed



Fatma Sabry, Plan of the installation *Connect 4*.

towards the change in the country, and on the other hand they have become active observers of the Egyptian urban, social and political transformations. Recordings, through their artwork, become the quintessence of Egypt's past decades. As much as the artists all depict change being a movement through time and space, alongside a transformation of ideological values, none of them crossed the boundaries of their very national identity. On the contrary, their observations of people and behaviors materialized in the Palace of Arts and invited the audience to participate in an active experience.

Dynamic change soaked in the collective conscience, influencing the behavior and ideas of the nation was one of the strong messages of Osama Abdel Moneim's Alley Museum, which won the Grand Prize in this year's Salon of Young Artists (shared with Mai Hamdi). Abdel Moneim (b.1984) used one of the corridors in

the Palace of Arts and transformed it into the street realities of Imbaba, one of Cairo's more humble districts. Characters in Abdel Moneim's works are regular people: a seller, an old man, or a middle-class young man. At the same time they represent a collective that is deeply ingrained in the history and heritage of the community and the country. For Abdel Moneim, those are the heroes; the same ones that struggle daily for a better life and later on demanded change in Tahrir Square. Though the revolutionary theme cannot be disconnected from the work, the artist was not using the revolution as a pretext for his work. Regular people are genuine characters regardless time and space. Thus, the Alley Museum becomes a reservoir of a collective conscience: individuals and histories, behaviors, traditions, religions, habits and relations between them all. The artist looks at them from a birds-eye view, a fact which he underscored by the cartography painted



Marwa Adel, *Momentum*, 2011, Cp Print, edition of 3, each 100x100cm (total 300x100cm).

on the alley's wall. While Abdel Moneim recreated an Imbaba alley, Mai Hamdi (b. 1984) lured the Palace's audience with an interactive practice. Yes, practice. She wrote a series of statements, poetry, political statements, and short reflections on one of the Palace's 3m x 4m walls. She then covered the wall with a grey, peelable paint. At the Salon's opening, the audience was invited to scratch off the top layer to reveal the hidden messages. This process is just like the one the millions of Egyptians who recharge their mobile phones with scratch cards go through every day. This was Hamdi's first time engaging the audience in an interactive experience, as usually she works in photography and installations. Through this interaction, Hamdi allowed the audience to be active participants in an artistic creation, which won her the Grand Prize and which she shared with Moneim.

Works by Hamdi and Abdel Moneim, among other examples, used the Salon's architecture as either a backdrop or as an important canvas for the artistic expression. As such, the 22nd Salon of Young Artists stepped closer towards the artists as young creators, leaving them freedom to incorporate their work within the surrounding architecture and, as such, removing one of the limitations that exhibition halls often place on the vitality of the artwork.

Though not prized, Fatma Sabry (b.1990) invited audiences to a different kind of interaction. Fomenting

at the same time curiosity and anxiety, her installation titled *Connect 4*, analyzed the relationship between people. Surveillance cameras and magical eyes in one wall of the cubic room allowed the viewers to spy on one another. Four characters, set inside and outside a room, and the collective movement of the audience, brought the realization that the "spy game" only reflects the human condition in a large sense. Trapped in social, traditional, religious or political reality, audiences were brought to the realization that each one of us is at the same time a follower and being followed. The circle becomes a collective trap. Sabry's work was among the 38 installations displayed during the 22nd Salon of Young Artists, the highest number of installations in the Salon's history.

While some artists invited the audience to a place of self-assessment through an interaction in the reproduced human microcosms, other young creators chose to challenge and even mock realities. The work of Ramy Dozy (b.1982), seeks an alternative reality and speaks poignantly to the viewer. His three photographs included in the 22nd Salon came from the series titled *Eshta (Cool!)* and represent artists' liberation from fixed preconceptions. By placing the statue of Nahdet Masr - glorified by Egyptians - on a truck, not only did Dozy move it in space, but he also ridiculed the

generations of awestruck worshippers of this sculpture. Photography from the Eshta series was also presented in the previous Salon of Young Artists (21) and brought Dozy an award. This year's continuation reassures the artist's journey through hyper-reality, which to Dozy compensates the world filled with prejudices, clichés and fixed visual expectations promoted in the media and affecting all social strata. Following the 22nd Youth Salon, Dozy held a solo exhibition of the Eshta series at Cairo's French Institute (8-29 February 2012).

Dozy's work results from personal observations and the accumulation of impulses that stem from ideological clichés, as reflected in urban settings. A similar accumulation of urban experiences is found in works by Menna Allah Assem (b.1987) who created a series of collages that shed light on Egypt's contrasting realities. The artist uses irony to juxtapose the poverty and capitalistic praise of symbols, showing the Western iconic brands as the backdrop of the under-privileged Cairo districts.

On her part, Eman Ghandour escapes to her dreamy reality. Sphere-like patterns placed within what can be considered as sea and sky add to the surreal settings as we discover a tiny girl on a swing swaying in the space. A sensation of an illogical dream and irrational relations between pieces of the world are also characteristic of canvases by Mohamed Moftah (b.1975), winner of the special Prize awarded this year by Ceramica Royal to three participating artists. Moftah's palette sparks with bright colors, yet his work leaves some spaces blank as if intentionally unfinished.

Some artists presented their canvases truncated into sections. As much as this is not a new procedure, the analogue thinking of some of the young artists was an intriguing element of the Salon. Whether six representations of a child in photography by Sara Mostafa (b.1986), or hands reappearing in nine squares in Khaled Ahmed's (b.1988) painting, or abstract shapes and body parts dispersed around eleven fragments of a painting by Nada Baraka (b.1990).

those and a number of other works were characterized by a similar dissection that either truncates the reality depicted or subsequently builds its own whole through all consecutive elements.

Cocooning and freedom

As much as an alternative reality is an indication of an escape, a different aspect of movement was grasped by the artists examining their human condition. Lamis Haggag (b.1986) painted a gigantic figure seated on boxes indicating emigration. Straightforward portraits, meanwhile, were the thematic choice of Samar Hussein (b.1987) and Fatma Ibrahim (b.1983). The self-examination and gender probing in Nahla Sebaei's (b.1983) installation seemed the most shocking and brave in its thematic content. Though she was not awarded a prize, her work titled Sewing Hope is mature, artistically, and lies at the intersection of a number of concepts tackled by the young artists. Sebaei's work is based on her analysis of butterflies and cocoons that symbolize a continuous transformation. Sebaei used three canvases depicting the legs of a girl who is being transformed into a woman while three videos on the screens below each panel showed flowing blood and then looping butterflies. The installation was complemented by three forms hanging above the canvases: larva, cocoon and a butterfly. Several lines indicated time as an essential factor, marking change. Another layer of Sebaei's butterflies was expressed through their ability to mirror human behavior. It is their determination to reach the light, to liberate themselves from the chains, that intrigues her. Sewing Hope was Sebaei's first installation as until now her work was mainly limited to photography and jewellery, where butterflies keep returning as a main motif.

Karim Abdel Malak's (b.1980) canvas presented the five stages of a woman reaching symbolic liberation with the backdrop of a clock; Bassem Said Moussa's (b.1982) exhibited drawings of a man seated and then standing up to run; Mohamed Abdel Kader's (b.1990) photography presented a man's black silhouette flying towards the sky.... Though using different mediums and artistic language, those and many other works expressed longings to break through and reach a form of liberation. Two paintings by Hend Al Falafly (b.1989), Salon award works, revealed human figure interwoven by a cloth as if trying to get free. Fatma Ezzat's figures entwined in what resembles tree-branches, and hold the silhouettes strongly. For this work in ink, Ezzat received an award named after the martyr Ziad Bakir. Bakir, a



Ahmed Assem, *Game Snake and Ladder*, oil on canvas. Prize of the 22nd Youth Salon (Salon Prize).

graphic designer, was shot dead during the most intense clashes between the protesters and security forces on 28 January 2011. This year's Salon also offered a prize named after martyr Ahmed Bassiouny, also killed on 28 January 2011. The award-winner, Yara Mekkawi (b. 1987), created a sound art installation titled *Digital Pray*. In it, a series of intertwined tubes carried the sound to 18 speakers representing the initial 18 revolutionary days that lead to the ousting of the president Mubarak.

Mirroring the revolution

Liberation returns with much more direct messages when linked directly to Egypt's 25 January Revolution. Many artistic propositions become plain mirrors of the unveiling political and social changes. Although it is admirable that they depict a number of ideological and religious concerns, a question remains. Is it simply too early for the artists to approach the on-going revolution? Bassem Abdel Gelil's (b.1983) Salon award-winning

three-part graphical work in wood combined all the revolutionary symbols: the word *Irhal* (Leave!), a black ring representing Tahrir Square, a throne that is being removed, demonstrators, martyrs and cell phones. Direct messages from Tahrir and the transformations that Egypt has been undergoing in the year after the revolution began to return in the works of many young artists. Egypt's flag and revolutionary chants dominated their canvases, while several photographs presented shots from Tahrir Square during the days of intense protests. The necessity to depict the revolution is a trap for creative minds. However, the energy that wants to bubble through art is the same youthful energy that was one of the main triggers of the revolution. Political transformations and social discontent are still part of an open chapter in Egypt. Only time will allow many artists to gain the needed distance from the events they are involved in and which they illustrate.

Nevertheless, works that include symbols of Egypt's revolution are among the most straightforward indicators of "Change," the theme of the 22nd Youth Salon. Thorough in all layers and axis, the Salon managed to cover all aspects of its core theme. The diversity of mediums became a strong manifestation of a generation that is experimenting with a multitude of forms and subjects. The artistic probing is also an indication of a new status that the generation has already created for itself in the contemporary art scene in Egypt.

All reflecting on "Change," the 269 works stand for the individual visions of their creators. All young artists represent a specific momentum in Egypt's art scene. The young generation is characterized by a high dynamism and continuous search for a change, either personal or collective. They are also a generation that is closely following the international art arena, keeping up-to-date with all trends and developments. When all those factors are translated into artistic propositions the results are promising. The Salon of Young Artists offered a wide range of mediums with many young artists possessing brilliant technique. Interdisciplinary approaches in many works are proof of the generation's flexibility and the ease with which they operate in art without compromising techniques and concepts.

This year's Salon was an interesting journey through works that testify to the integrity of their creators

among whom, as Khaled Hafez underscored, many will become regionally, if not internationally, recognized artists. Though some are still paving their way to artistic originality, the dozens of young minds represented in the Salon operate within a fascinating language of arts and aesthetics, possess a good technical backbone and, as such, present a hopeful future.

The 22nd Salon of Young Artists offered a number of prizes, including the Grand Prize shared by Osama Abdel Moneim and Mai Hamdi, followed by a number of other prizes, such as Salon Prizes and Merits. Additional prizes and recognition were awarded by the Salon's supporters, Royal Ceramic and the Commercial International Bank (CIB). The latter organization has purchased a number of artworks displayed in the Salon for their art collection. CIB also published a book titled *Egypt the Promise*, presenting the young artists' works.