



# Hazem Taha Hussein Portrait and Interview

*by: Karin Adrian von Roques*

Untitled - paint on Paper - 2010 59X41,5CM



Hazem Taha Hussein is one of Egypt's internationally-known artists. He first studied graphics and design at Helwan University in Cairo and the University of Applied Sciences in Münster in Germany. He completed his studies in Egypt with a Master Degree and in Germany with a Diploma of Visual Communications Design. From 1993 to 1997 he enrolled at the University of Wuppertal in Germany. There, he studied Design Philosophy and Communications Theories and received his doctorate in 1997 for his scientific work, «Analysis of the Arabic letter forms. Historical analysis and future perspectives. « Since then, in addition to his ongoing artistic practice, he has developed a remarkable scientific career. He taught as a professor at several universities in Egypt and Germany and is currently the Head of Art and Design at the Faculty of Art and Design of the Royal University for Women in Bahrain.

Hazem is an artist who grappled early on with other cultures. His regular visits to Europe helped him get to know the local culture and way of life and taught him to look from a distance one's cultural heritage. His regular confrontation with strangers enhanced his interest in questions of identity and led to the creation of his characteristic effort to combine oriental and occidental art as he seeks to penetrate western and eastern ideas and concepts.

An interesting project that reflected Hazem's intercultural approach was the exhibition «Occidentalism», curated by the Karim Francis in Cairo in 2007. In «Occidentalism» – the inversion of Orientalism – Hazem contributed studies in which identity, the perception of the stranger and the Other played an important role. Hazem, who moves from childhood to the various cultures, wrote in his catalog essay: «Although we may view the East as a

monolith, it is still in search of identity yet it is interwoven in text with the West as and unified cultural. Together, they emerge as a new fabric, sometimes leaning westwards with hybrid texts where different elements can coexist and come together, other times leaning towards the Arab modes of thought that have intruded upon us as Egyptians, and that, by and large, reject Western mechanisms.»

New fabric «is like a keyword that could be applied to his recent work in a wider sense. His new works are a compelling form of synthesis between oriental and occidental design elements, which show that Hazem draws from European paintings and Islamic art. He paints faces and figures, which he covers with a geometric shape pattern.

His designs, which he paints by hand, have not only a rhythmic function. Geometry and the game are also important as a means of expressing an abstract idea. The artist expresses himself by playing with abstract and stylized motifs, creating art with a complex formal and intellectual density. Juxtapositions, linkages, rhythm, repetition, stacked systems, layers of patterns and colors are superimposed formative principles which Hazem makes use of. Here he takes something out of his traditional background, but he creates something new.

For this interview, I met Hazem Taha Hussein in Bahrain where he has taught since 2009 at the Royal University. We meet in his apartment, which is also his studio. It was hot for the season, almost 44 degrees. Fortunately, we had the air conditioning on and I was able to view his latest work and some still a-work-in-progress.

Hazem often works on various works, large and small, simultaneously. At the time of my visit, two works were finished. They were ready for collection for the exhibition «Mirrors of Continuous Change - Global Art in a Global

World», which will open in October in Seoul, Korea, and they set the scene for our interview.

**Karin Adrin Von Roques** Hazem, you were born into an artistic family in Egypt. Your father is the famous artist Muhammad Taha Hussein. Your mother is a famous sculptor. Did this home environment affect the choice of your profession?

**Hazem Taha Hussein** Absolutely. I had already started to draw and paint at six years old. My parents supported me. My mother taught me techniques. But they did not influence or force me to imitate their style.

**KVR** When did you seriously considered becoming an artist?

**HH** Between 18 and 20 I was already studying at Helwan University. I now had contact with others, with younger artists' circles. I was also influenced by my family. We were often in Germany where we visited museums and exhibitions. I was particularly impressed, at that time, by the the Museum Folkwang in Essen.

**KVR** Does having such a famous father pose problems for your career?

**HH** In the beginning, yes. Or, as we say, yes and no. Of course, as a son of two famous artists, it was not easy for me as a young man not to be seen as a follower. Especially as I could also learn so much from them. From my mother, I learnt how to build up a group of figures, so that they would look like one piece. From my father, I was influenced by his idea of repeating elements, and his way of creating a surface that is full of points or triangles. He also hid things in his work, but in a different way to what I am doing now. What bothered me then, was that my father exhibited in public galleries. I did not want any interference from the State or from the

family.

After Sadat's assassination (1981) we saw the first private galleries in Egypt, like those of Christine Roussillion in Cairo, where I had my first major exhibition in 1987. Many artists were set for an open market after this time. This led a new groups of artists to form and I was one of the youngest.

**KVR** What is painting for you?

**HH** Tough question ..... painting means to me, a visual system to find a visual language through which I can make my abstract ideas of things visible.

**KVR** What did you paint at the beginning of your career?

**HH** At first I painted figurative, at first very simplified figures, preferably in pastel colors. I had a fondness for the color pink. Then, faces, heads, from people I knew. I gave my works titles such as «I and the love» or «I and the mother» or «My father is dead.» I was interested in European painting, where I studied more closely particular works representing religious and family issues. I was interested in this but also in the art of ancient Egypt with its symbolism and the hieroglyphic script. In my early paintings, many Pharaonic motifs and symbols, such as the ankh hieroglyph, were used.

I tried painting with a layer of bright pink color or cover. I interpret this as a precursor to what I do today with the grids with which I overlay my pictures. I had time to work in this approach with the idea of different layers. I was fascinated by the theater and let my discussion on the subject flow into my works.

After this phase, I had a long phase where I painted abstractly.



Angel-44-R-1

**KVR** You came into the world around you. You got to know other cultures. Part of your training was in Germany and you were an artist in residence in Switzerland. You speak several languages, and are fluent in German. Has your cosmopolitan life had an impact on the topics of your work?

**HH** Yes, absolutely. I found it a great addition to concern myself with different cultures and to learn life other than in Egypt. I was interested in strong religious themes. I was not only interested in my own religion, Islam, but my work also deals with Christianity. My mother had Christian friends. In Zamalek (Cairo), we often saw Christian art. Eight years ago I got

the opportunity to read the Bible. The Torah of the Jews also interested me. The preoccupation with religious themes was a precursor to what I would translate on to the screen.

**KVR** How?

**HH** I started to draw and paint stories from the Bible. I tried to implement figuratively verses of the Bible or the Koran. Jesus fascinated me.

**KVR** Jesus?

**HH** The idea of Jesus. The idea is his story: the torture, crucifixion.

**KVR** Muslims do not believe in the crucifixion.

**HH** So, it was not 'me' at all. I went to it for the story. I am not interested whether the story is true or not. I am interested in the symbolism. What is the story of the crucifixion, for example?

**KVR** From this perspective, this story is a metaphor for the crucifixion of the truth which is always repeated and often connected with the suffering of those who advocate the truth.

**HH** That would be one interpretation. I am interested in the symbols of religion such as the Cross, Star of David, the eye, and so on. So, I suppose the form is important and the content is secondary.

**KVR** What has vexed you to work so closely with religion?

**HH** It was a kind of search for identity. Somehow I did not know to what religion I belonged. I was, and still am, interested in the theme of identity. While I tried to implement the picturesque through verses of the Koran or the Bible, I also tried to find my very own symbolic language. I was adding verses of poets, those of Omar Khayyam Al, in which he speaks of mosques. Churches exerted a great attraction for me. To this day I am fascinated by the silence in them. In these places, I feel in the hand of God. This feeling I have tried to implement, as well as figurative abstract, in my work.

**KVR** Why angels in your work matter?

**HH** Yes, angels are important in many of my works.

**KVR** How so?

**HH** They are a symbol of purity, and are linked to notions which are concepts that are important to me. For example, mercy, not only in humans, but also in animals and nature.

**KVR** In the Bonn Kunstmuseum you exhibited a series of photo montages with the title «The Egyptian Baroque Angel» (2007), which was a continuation of the project «Occidentalism» curated Karim Francis.

**HH** In the series the role of the observer was from different scenarios of Egyptian history. My work is always the sum of the impressions I have collected over the years. Thus, there are different creative cycles. The series issued in Bonn also reflected my struggle against the Orient and the Occident, with the West and the East.

**KVR** You've photographed a lot and displayed the results. Among other things, I enjoyed your wonderful series of photographs of yourself, digital prints, entitled «Memories from the East. On my way to Muenster.» This sounds like another work in which the theme of "East-West" was also strong – is that right?

**HH** Oh yes, I made the series when I had spent a long time in Münster, Germany. I travelled an hour every day by train. The impressions I had during these trips mixed with my memories of my homeland of Egypt, of which I wanted to tell my daughter. This was how the photo series came to be.

**KVR** Has Islamic art influenced you?

**HH** Yes. I often went to the Sultan Hassan mosque in Cairo. I had a studio in that area for a long time. The ornaments on the walls, the repetitions of each pattern had an impact on me. The design forces one to move one's head. With this observation I began my involvement with Islamic ornamentation.

**KVR** Sequence and repetition are the basic principles of Islamic ornamentation. The rhythmic structure and the complete filling of the surface are characteristics. They represent a





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variation on a theme, as in music. The surface ornamentation in Islamic art has favored the prohibition of images since the beginning. This restriction played an important role. The infinity of the lines actually appear like they are in perpetual motion. The eye of the viewer moves and is moved. It follows the lines, the colors. Sometimes it is interrupted in its movement, the eye is confused and amazed because the lines intersect and are woven together like a net. These designs features all have a reason like the repetitious recitations of the Koran have a reason. It is interesting that these things “play” in your new work. The ornament (grid) has such a central role. How did you get that?

**HH** One day in the Sultan Hassan Mosque I met a German architect, Walter Thomas from Berlin, who gave me the basic principle of Islamic grid pattern (grid). From him I learnt how to deal with Islamic grid pattern (grid), how lines come together to form a geometrical pattern. For about a year I was his assistant.

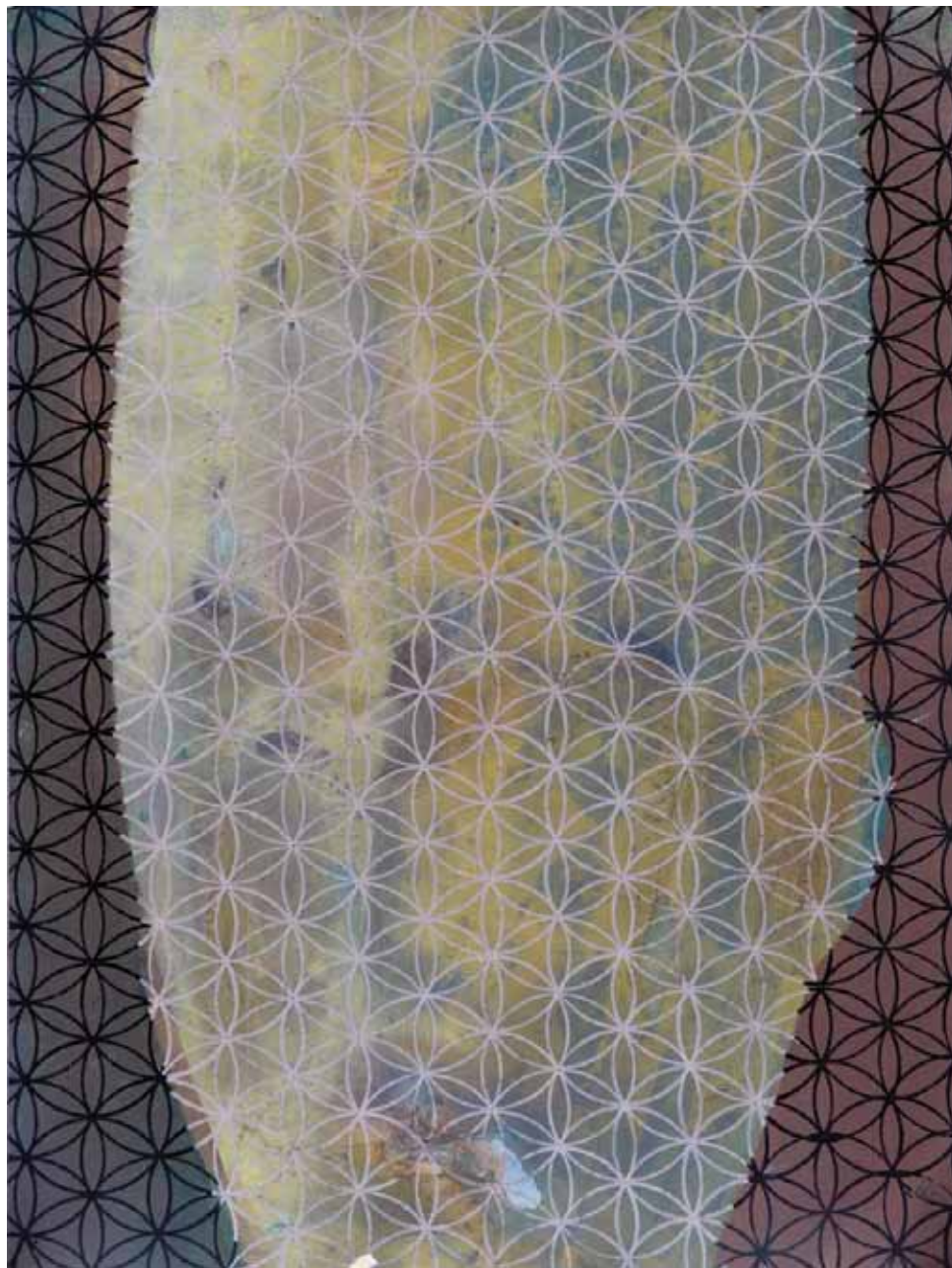
In 1992, in Germany, I developed a new geometric font that was created from this grid. I was inspired by the oriental carpets as well, but then, as I already told, I was inspired from the work of my father. I had already experimented with the surface ornament (grid) in my work. The topic had me hooked. In 2007 I began again with the surface ornament (grid experiment). For the first time I realized that I this grid pattern (grid) was a spiritual and optical instrument that I could see. It is not just about the aesthetic part here, but also about spiritual meaning.

To this day I try to explore the meaning associated with the system of the grid. In my work, I combine the grid with abstract and figurative forms and figures. Faces and objects from the grid are coated and concealed underneath. I paint many layers to achieve a certain depth in my work.

«Nudity to cover», or to conceal, is certainly part of our culture. The concept of hiding is very oriental. In our countries we hide ourselves behind clothes or windows.

**KVR** That [hiding] is what you are doing with the layers in a figurative sense. It has something to do with the cognitive process: before we recognize the essential, the truth or the divine, we must work through layers of knowledge. There are pictures: Seven Veils, eleven heavens, etc.

**HH** I play with such thoughts when I paint my pictures. But I'm more concerned with connecting both worlds, East and West, with one another. I have the feeling that with the work that I am doing now with what I do now, my idea of synthesis, that I have come very close to achieving this.



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