

Points of Departure: Conversations with Hazem el Mestikawy

by: Kinsey Katchka, Ph D, Associate Curator of Contemporary & Modern Art, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, and Adjunct Professor, Department of Art, University of North Carolina--Chapel Hill



Hazem El Mestikawy, *lg*

Hazem el Mestikawy's sculptures have very distinct qualities and influences: formally, they are very structural and architectural; thematically, they relate to urbanism, recycling and language. In the abstract, there are elements of numerology and script. His process is one of repetition and precision through which he creates deceptively light forms—deceptive, because the sculptures look solid and impenetrable. But they are defined in large part by the empty spaces. The materials he uses are quite light, but the process of construction gives them structural integrity and volume that belies their delicate nature.

Our conversations started in 2007 at a time when the artist was completing work on *9A Letters*, a sculptural installation that encompasses many elements of his creative practice. This was also a time when el Mestikawy was beginning major undertakings in which he explored architectural forms, script, and space. This occasion revealed integral elements of his material and process, which underpin the substance and concept of his work.

Kinsey Katchka People are constantly amazed that you create sculptures that seem so solid, yet are often light enough that you can easily lift them in the air. Could you please describe your materials and process?

Hazem el Mestikawy I start with a two-dimensional layout, like an architectural plan or design; the square and the sharp angles are, for me, a starting point. From there, I start to build the shapes as a three-dimensional form using recycled cardboard and recycled paper. These (and glue) are the two basic materials I work with. I use these them because they offer the possibility of being both strong and light, massive and fragile. This contradiction is inherent in my sculptures. Also, recycled paper has a certain color that is a very neutral color, and that emphasizes the form.

KK Does the way that you work with and put the cardboard together make it strong, or is the type of cardboard you use strong in itself?

HM The cardboard I'm using is quite simple. It's a recycled cardboard sheet and it becomes strong by the interior construction, because all of the bits of paper you see from outside have very strong cardboard support pieces inside. It's

not just a hollow volume. With the glue and the paper, and the many layers, it gets very strong. The cardboard structure creates quite hard or sharp angles, but at the same time, the paper is torn rather than cut (so that it has a soft edge) and its application is quite random. This is one of the contradictions I like in the work, hard or sharp angles with random surfaces.

KK You once told me that 9A Letters represented a new direction in your work, and that it provides a salient point of entry into understanding your creative practice, especially your most recent work. Could you comment on the concept behind 9A Letters?

HM 9A Letters presents the first letter of nine different alphabets used in Egypt since the ancient period: Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, Demotic, Coptic, Old Roman, Old Athens, Kufic, Neskha, and Modern. In general I was tracing the cultural history of Egypt and searching in the multiple layers of this cultural history. The letters are an architectural visualization, taking the letter “A” as a starting point. I was using the letters as a kind of building site and also a three-dimensional urban design. The letter, literally and visually, represents the language, and the language represents the culture. This is the main thing and, for me, the most interesting. The letters are very concrete, but they are abstract at the same time.

KK For me, the meaning in the work is in the deep history and changes that take place in one location over time, and the different languages that pass through it, passing in and out of use. It’s about process, both in the way that you make the work, and also in the course of human life over time.

HM This was the basic idea, especially considering the last several years of the political

scene. The question of whether Egypt is Arabic or Coptic or Mediterranean or Middle Eastern or all this was disturbing me a lot. Egypt is a very special case. It’s all of this together.

KK Repetition figures prominently throughout your work. What are the different ways that it is manifested here [i.e., 9A Letters], and what role does it play? What is the significance of repetition?

HM The repetition here is related to the basic form, the letter A, and that all of the letters are just the letter A. And the letter A is the starting point of a language, it’s the starting point of a culture, it’s the starting point of an era. So, when you start and you follow the path of the letter “A” here it moves you through time and space. It’s where it starts, and there is no end.

Because the next letter is starting again with another A, so it is from A to A, and A to A, and this by itself is a kind of repetition.

KK You’ve often talked about the number nine, and that number as an element of repetition in your work.

HM The number nine has this quality of repetition: When you multiply it or divide it, it always goes back to the number nine. When you multiply it by any number, and add the digits of that number, the result is nine. So it has this kind of loop, it’s endless. There is repetition and the infinity of existence. This is why it’s a very important element in my work. But, for me, there isn’t a mystical association with numerology. I’m interested in more practical aspects. In ancient Egyptian history, “nine arms” was a standard measure of length, a module. This was the starting point of my interest and my exploration of what I can do with it. Geometrically, it’s also related to the nine squares pattern.



Hazem ElMestekawi - 02 *Nine Red Squares nr3* - 2010

KK That leads to a more recent work, *Nine Red Squares #3*, which you made in Japan for the 3rd Kokaido Art Show, Morioka–Iwate (January 2010). How does this installation differ from some of your past work?

HM *Nine Red Squares #3* is a larger-scale sculptural installation than many of my past works; it is about a seven-meter high linear floor installation.

KK Looking at the photos, it looks very industrial and glossy, like the metal rails of a subway station railing.

HM Yes, in fact this is one of the things I like a lot—that I’m working to have this very massive industrial form with this fragile sort of material. I like this contrast. To have very clear sharp edges, and then the random texture from the paper.

KK *9A Letters* and *Nine Red Squares #3* seem similar in that their surfaces are misleading. With *9A Letters* many people think the pieces are carved from weighty materials like marble or stone, or even concrete. The modules look very massive, suggested in part by the form. When people understand that it is made from cardboard and paper you can read a series of expressions on their faces: first confusion, and then surprise, and finally realization and wonder. For the *Nine Red Squares #3*, it is the same sort of dynamic effect: The red tubular forms simulate a different, heavier, more industrial material.

HM I made the decision there (in Japan) because I wanted glossy...because in the rounded, curved forms, you have a special kind of reflection. And I wanted to investigate that; otherwise it would have a very different feeling from the works in which I use a matte finish glue. The floor component of the installation has one Arabic word printed on Japanese paper, repeated over and over: *morabaa*, which means “square”. In Arabic, the word is composed of 4 letters, as the square has four sides. This is something I like conceptually: the layers of existence of the square shape, the number and the written word for it [the number] together.

KK In your most recent work there is a striking new element: in the last year you’ve introduced the color red.



Hazem Elmestikawy - Pavilion -2009

HM Pavilion (2009) was one of the earliest works in which I used the color red. It is very light, and also very architectural. The most important thing for me was the light. From different angles of the piece you can see the windows, composed of nine squares. As usual [in my work], there is the positive and the negative space [the solid and the open]. There is the nine-square, and also the mafrouka, which is one of my favorite patterns. There is red just on the side, like a light shining through the wall. Pavilion is one of the key works with the color red. Red doesn't indicate something specific, but it is a pure, essential form, like the square, and it is a primary color. Since I've been working in these neutral tones for such a long time, maybe I needed something to break it up.

KK Red does pose a very stark contrast to neutral tones.

HM Yes, since I worked so much with this neutral, dusty color, maybe the red is a competitor to it; maybe contrast is the right word. It stands out within the [neutral] forms. The installation Red in Space in the exhibition Why Not? at the Cairo Palace of Art (December 2009) is a special case, this work—it is all red.

KK Yes, it is extreme in that it is entirely red, unlike Nine Red Squares #3, where the red rises from the neutral tones. It is drastically different from all your other work, especially in terms of scale!

HM It's totally different from everything. This is the most minimalistic work I have ever done in the classical aspect of minimal because others

put together this work. I designed the work and they executed it, so it is industrially produced out of wood panels suspended by wire. And, it's made for this particular location and space...

KK It's amazing that something that looks so massive and structural is in fact suspended.

HM ...That's why it is called Red in Space.

KK We've talked about architecture in your smaller, more modular works where there is an architectural component, but this is the first thing that is actually on the scale of an architectural element, and becomes one in a space where it humbles the human form. But also, it is false, a trick of the eye—since it isn't supporting anything—in fact, it's entirely dependent on a support mechanism. There's something very playful about it...you're playing with space and architecture in a very different way. And, as you said, it is a marked departure from your other work in that it is entirely red and has no neutral tones or references to language.

HM It was a good chance for me to do this experiment, to work with this size, and to do something site-specific that was designed for that space.

KK But for your next projects, such as Nine Red Squares #3, you returned to your signature materials - cardboard and paper.

HM Yes. There is a change that happens in those materials. If you are aware of them, you usually know where the change is going. And this is why I really like the kind of paper I use. It acquires a special tone over time. You sense that it's getting old, but not destroyed. It has a kind of life - existence. This is what I like in the work - that it's living. This is why when I refer my works to the masters of minimal art (as with Red in Space), for example, I admire them

a lot, but I have something different in not using industrial materials. I like to use my hand and my existence in the work itself, my circumstance is in the work. This is why I'm not casting my works or I'm not building this out of aluminum. I like to do it like this- it's there, I'm there.

