



Takallan, Framed C, Print Mounted on Aluminium, 43 x 80 cm, 2010

Folding paper, building a boat ... a childhood memory
Folding metal, building ... a memory
The memory of a place yet to see
The place I belong to, a changing reality of existence and
oblivion ... my memory...
Reflection: Mine, yours ... Distorted.

By: Alia Al Senussi, Art Patron

The Arabic language is oftentimes used as the defining attribute of what it means to be an Arab—the singular trait by which outsiders sometime unite people from the Maghreb through North Africa, the Levant and the Persian Gulf in the term “Arab”. But would a Copt from Egypt say he was an Arab? Or a Berber in the Maghreb? An individual from these minority groups is likely to define himself by nationality and/or ethnicity. Post-World War II politics has often dictated that politicians, revolutionaries and protesters define and identify themselves in some specific manner, applying unnatural labels to large swathes of society. It is a simple action to name someone but through such repeated action becomes complex and problematic.

Ayman Yossri Daydban’s own identity illustrates the problems inherent in such an attempt to define groups and individuals in the Middle East. This, of course, relates to the global movement of the new economy (people, labor and commerce) but also to the political conflicts in the Middle East. An ease of mobility has scattered communities of people, giving rich material to artists embracing these juxtapositions. Daydban is of Palestinian origin, has Jordanian nationality and resides in Saudi Arabia. The artist utilizes all these influences to produce bodies of work that speak to a universal audience and creates disparate dialogues between viewers of various backgrounds. Is his work documentation of a local environment or a commentary on the state of geopolitical situations?

Daydban only speaks Arabic but is a fan of English-language movies, incorporating these somewhat incongruous images of Western actors with Arabic subtitles in to his work (Subtitle series), but also embracing the Egyptian cinematic tradition and using iconic Egyptian movie stars and singers in other bodies of works (Maharem series). On the surface and in the most obvious way, the Subtitle and Maharem series’ speak to a particular cultural viewer: an Arabic language speaker and also someone familiar with certain historical Arab cultural as well as political figures, such as the superstar Um Kulthoom, who play a prominent role in the Maharem series. However, the works also delve in

to a conversation on misread allusions. According to the artist, the basic function for the Arabic language associated with a foreign language film shown on the screen is translation. It works in the context of the film as a narration of the story and an explanation of the action that accompanies it and thus the meaning of the picture precedes that of the language and specifies it. The language, when deducted from its simple context and re-exported with the image of the new still captured photo, changes its function from confirming the meaning to producing it, by transforming itself to a unique source of new mental images with no past or function. Daydban is fascinated by what is merely language and what is reality: does the subtitle speak for itself or is it contrary to the reality, he asks?

As the curator Nour Wali wrote, “The artist emphasizes that the art of communication, translation and re-interpretation presents itself to us not merely on our television screens but in all aspects of our lives and the objects we use. We just need to capture the moment and suspend it in time so as to instigate debate for the moral benefit of our society.” The Maharem series utilizes a similar cinematic language but in the opposite way, by portraying iconic Arabic and Western figures, such as Charles Bronson, Um Kulthoom or 1950s era pin-ups on household objects, primarily tissue boxes. Tissue boxes are a pervasive presence in most Arab households, appearing on a majority of table surfaces, side tables, countertops, etc. This is a unique cultural experience. In Daydban’s words, “The Middle Eastern man is an emotional man, primarily driven by feelings and often governed by them... We are not materialistic, our emotions take over.” Daydban frequently shed tears while watching these movies and the tissues he drew from the tissue boxes are an example of the humanity he saw in cinema as well as a tribute to his family and the emotions he shared with them. As is typical of many Middle Eastern households, and particularly those in Saudi Arabia where Daydban now resides, the artist only interacted with the outside world through his family and through the cinema. According to Maya El Khalil, “The movies revealed the outside world while the family acted as



Muhammed Ali 02, Lightbox, 59 x 103 x 6 cm, 2010

a protector and shield. The artist has frequently shed tears while watching these movies and the tissues he drew are witness to a humanity shared.” Daydban uses this experience in the hope that his own work stirs emotions and provokes reaction (whether it be positive or negative), to him, an intrinsic quality to his definition of a work of art. Maharem is a journey for Daydban and is his most sincere revelation of his personal self, his anguishes and anxieties, be they related to politics, gender roles, or historical moments. Each work depicts a world in motion, a story.

In Daydban’s newest series of work, the Flag series, he applies these political symbols of nationalism to sheets of stainless steel transforming them in to works of art. These crude objects become elegant and the machinery that produces them provides the viewer with a wealth of material open to interpretation. The Flag works offer a more abstract but physically concrete concept of the artist’s practice. Like the Subtitles series, the Flag works evoke differing feelings dependent on the “identity” of the viewer. This is not to say that an Arab, or in particular a Palestinian, understands the work any better but

simply that any person interprets this work (as any other) using their own vocabulary of life experiences. One of the works provokes a visceral reaction in the viewer by using an onion grater paired with the grooves of the embossing of Braille paper folded to suggest a flag. An onion grater is an aggressive object, cutting, shredding and scraping food and in this work it evokes such a reaction in the viewer. Braille, of course, is a language only understood by the blind, and although rough to the touch, is more innocuous than a grater. Furthermore, the whole work is encased in glass so that it is even further obscured from definition. For Daydban, these are almost ephemeral works, making an imagined homeland real, and a marriage of opposites.

Artists have long played prominent roles in the evolution of societal mores and values by pushing politics and society to embrace alternative models. There is an argument as to whether or not artists must embrace this as a responsibility but there is no doubt as to Daydban’s own involvement in this debate. The current geopolitical situation in the Middle East is so young that those who take part in this discussion feel that the future rapidly becomes

the past and that there is an enormous compression of space and time. Daydban believes contemporary artists are to be involved in the production of daily facts not only to transform their reality through sculptures and portraits that are exhibited to the public, but also in order to reflect and record real life. The primary mission of today's artist is to learn and perfect how to abstract the "big picture" along with the minor details and the accompanying contradictions in to a simple expressive work. Daydban feels that simplification, however, does not mean clarity but, rather, portraying reality in such a way that impacts people; moreover, for Daydban, it should not be a puzzle that needs to be worked out, rather a topic for positive thinking for the individual on his daily milestones.

Daydban believes "realistic existence is a public matter", or in other words, no one lives in a vacuum. As an artist, he says there is no doubt that politics is involved almost in every aspect of our lives and it is not only limited to governmental agencies or international gatherings, but it is part and parcel of our lives beginning at infancy. Daydban does not deny these realities but embraces them and says politics is a pervasive social institution, in and of itself, and political discussions are the norm. As a result, we grow up and mature depending on the social, economical and political circumstances that surround us. While there is a physicality to travel and moving from one place to another, Daydban identifies himself according to "the mental place", in such a way that this belief in an ephemeral identity becomes permanent when translated in to works of art. Instead of creating an era of alienation among these refugees, exiles, immigrants, we assimilate various groups and meld them in to one, breaking apart a homogeneity, on one hand, but creating a new idea of cultural heritage and national integration, on the other.

It can be argued that art is created in relation to the society from which the artist comes, but in Ayman Yossri Daydban's case, it is hard to correlate his identity with the art he makes because it is hard to say what that identity actually is. Daydban's art is simply art, be it political, linguistic or creative,

for the viewer to misconstrue, misunderstand and ultimately decide.

Written by Alia Al Senussi, Art Patron

Courtesy of Selma Feriani Gallery, London and Athr Gallery, Jeddah



AYD-Mirror Flag, 112 x 47 x 26 cm, Stainless Steel, 2010