

Rania Ezzat

By: Isabella Ellahab Hughes



Yellow Ball, 2.5 m. diam, road safety mesh, 2010

Rania Ezzat is best known in recent years for her fantastical, yet minimalist sculptures that blur the line between fragile and durable, often transforming everyday mediums that one rarely gives a second thought to (construction hard hats, nails, to name a few...) into contemplative symbols, which can be appreciated on a multitude of levels. However, it would be wrong to confine Ezzat as merely a

masterful sculptress and installation artist. Rather, she is an artist whose practice cannot be encapsulated by a specific style or recognizable 'artistic mark.' Unsigned to any one gallery, her practice is free from being responsive to commercial pressures. Unlike some artists who work in an identifiable style that subsequently comes to define their practice, the only identifiable characterization of Ezzat's practice

is conceptual rather than concretely visual. The underlying concepts characterizing her practice are: movement, repetition, embracing a meditative state of mind and renewal, often with an effervescent touch of wit.

Born in 1975 in Cairo, Egyptian Ezzat currently lives and works in Dubai. To fully grasp her work, one must understand Ezzat's artistic evolution through the years.

Ezzat is very much a 21st century incarnation of the Surrealist movement, often embracing working in automatism and describes the physical process of creating as, "like meditation, without really thinking." It is Ezzat's subconscious, liberated from calculated thought, which is integral to her practice, often initiating new projects or at the very least, influencing the direction of her work.

Originally trained as an engraver, Ezzat had a very formal, if not classic training in the arts while attending Fine Arts Faculty, Helwan University in Cairo, where she earned her BFA in 1998. From this formal training comes the beginning of her intrigue with the line. Following her studies in Cairo, she briefly worked in graphic design, fashion and interior design. By the early 2000s, feeling that she was losing touch with art, coupled with a keen interest to study contemporary art (this was something that the curious Ezzat felt she didn't understand), she moved to Switzerland to embark from scratch on a BFA in fine arts at HEAD in Geneva, where she graduated from in 2007 (with mention from Jury). It was while earning her second BFA abroad that Ezzat's practice matured and developed as she found her true voice. The artistic training Ezzat received in Geneva emphasized a new freedom and room for the experimental. It was during this time period that Ezzat felt the need to go from two-dimensional to three-dimensional, specifically in regard to a series of free flowing, automatically produced pencil line drawings. Transforming these drawings into the three-dimensional, Ezzat used galvanized steel wire as her first foray into sculpture with *La Boule*, 2004, made out of galvanized steel wire.

Weighing 30 kilograms, *La Boule* is a physical manifestation of Ezzat's interest in lines, a

meditative creation process. Ezzat explains the lines that make up *La Boule*, "as if they [the lines] are thoughts materialized," which overcame Ezzat when repetitively twisting the wire to create this piece. An interactive sculpture, Ezzat invited visitors to engage in an activated experience with *La Boule*-due to the malleable wire, visitors could physically penetrate into it, subsequently making it both a sculpture and living, organic performance piece all at once. A jarring contrast of delicate vs. durable, *La Boule* offers a platform for discussion on the intersection between protection and the duality between softness and hardness. Some visitors, such as Ezzat herself, were very comfortable inside *La Boule*, cocooning into fetal position, with the galvanized steel serving as protective armor to the outside world, while other visitor interaction veered towards the uncomfortable, feeling trapped, much like an insect caught in a spider's web.

In 2007, during her last year of studies in Switzerland, Ezzat created *Ininflamable 1*, a seemingly indestructible steel metal flag, and then came *Ininfammable 2*, another flag in chain mail, displayed at half-mast in reverence to war, the lives lost and grief.

The materials for *Ininflamable 2* were carefully chosen as the chain mail cannot be burned and is the same material that has been historically used in armor, referencing protection. Ezzat's inspiration for *Ininflamable 1*, was a response to burning of national flags broadcasted every day by the media at that time in 2007, following the disrespectful cartoons attacking religion. Although directly referencing politics and international events, one cannot deny the undertone of wry humor that these two flags exude in all their indestructible might. The highly iconic insignia for patriotism has been cleansed of all cultural and nation-specific meaning, yet *Ininflamable 1* and *Ininflamabl 2* remain instantly recognizable, encouraging viewers to reflect on the universal potency of patriotic symbols.

One cannot deny the parallel between the Surrealist practice of automatic writing and drawing and Ezzat. Ezzat openly welcomes the meditative state of mind that repetitive movements can bring and

sees a correlation between this and the repetition and pattern that one often finds in her work. Since her student days in Switzerland, Ezzat has embraced automatism, creating automatic writings and drawings. In *Map* and *Intercultural communication*, both from 2006, Ezzat's automatic writings are conceptually intelligible. An amalgamation of lines, which at first glance appear familiar and a reference a specific alphabet and culture, upon deeper contemplation, it is apparent that her writings are entirely indecipherable. The lively, repetitive movement of the lines that are found in these two pieces suggests Arab, Asian and Western calligraphies; appearing to be primordial originations from all of these cultures, yet belonging to none. This results in Ezzat creating a truly fictitious new alphabet that is transnational in appearance and resonates globally,

thus escaping the traditional barriers that language and cultural mores frequently impose.

Ezzat moved to the UAE in 2007 and approached some galleries with a proposal for a performance piece that consisted of her using an electric saw to destroy paintings and canvas as a response to how art is perceived and rendered to a "nice painting", the kind that goes with a living room. Hence, the painting, *Nice painting that goes with the living room*, came to be. (It should be noted that her performance was not encouraged by Dubai galleries). Created partly out of frustration and whose image says it all, *Nice painting that goes with the living room* showcases Ezzat's thoughtful humor and commentary on the galleries and commercial art market.

Ezzat has undoubtedly matured as an artist over the years, yet the core of her practice remains grounded



La Boule, Galvanized steel wire, 1.5 m.diam, 2007



Yellow Helmets, 2009, 1 x1 x 4m.400 plastic working helmets. Private collection

in many of the concepts that were integral to her earlier work: pattern, thoughtful use of materials, repetition, automatism. These concepts are perhaps best reflected in two recent installations, *Yellow Ball*, 2010 and *Yellow Helmets*, 2009, both inspired by and subsequently are tributes to workers. There is a particular reference to construction workers and the incessant development of Dubai; given her choice of materials which both are in the distinct construction yellow that Ezzat associates with the UAE.

Constructed out of plastic road safety mesh, *Yellow Ball*, references Ezzat's earlier work, such as *La Boule*. Manually wrapped by Ezzat herself and standing 2.5 meters in diameter, *Yellow Ball*, primeval in its egg-like shape, is a symbol of renewal and growth, as much life, such as the very human existence, originates with an egg. *Yellow Helmets*, on the other hand, although created out of materials of the same concept and color as *Yellow Ball*, is a striking contrast in shape and shoots into the sky at 4 meters high. Constructed out of 400 construction



Inflammable 1, 2007. Metal. 3 meter h. Private collection

helmets, pattern and repetition are prominent in this monumental installation. From far away, the circular helmets appear like organic, nodular growths that one finds in nature, such as fungi growing on trees. Up close, one cannot help but gaze in awe at the masterful construction and wonder what holds all the helmets together. Subtle social concerns are raised in both of these biomorphic, glowing yellow, yet minimalist installations. One cannot help but think about the numerous, invisible construction workers who toil away, and are the labor and life behind the tallest towers, largest malls and most expensive hotels that have made Ezzat's present home-base an internationally recognized city. Ezzat, on the other hand, has grown into an internationally recognized artist whose perpetual growth and renewal makes her an artist who will surprise and inspire for a lifetime.

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