

## Marwa El Shazly - Painting Against The Norm

By *Mariam Elias*



After conceptual art, it was said that everything could be an artwork or transformed to be an artwork, and many claimed that “painting is dead”. Such a debate made many people feel trapped by the medium used, thus, with the introduction of electronic and digital media, many lost their appetite for traditional means such as painting. This was true to such an extent that in many cases the form came to substitute the substance and many artists were focusing only on the technical aspect with no innovation.

Very few were able to challenge traditional mediums to trigger questions about visual metaphors in general or to translate thoughts into contemporary imagery. However, for El Shazly, what was thought to be a conventional matter was transformed into a vibrant tool

that is used to depict visual patterns in Egyptian society or create a contemporary abstraction.

In two consecutive youth salons at the Palace of Arts, the first award in the painting competition was awarded to Marwa El Shazly. Her huge series of paintings were the highlight of the Youth Salon Exhibitions of 2009 and 2010 due to their distinct composition and skilful creation. Born in 1983, EL Shazly has always pioneered various fields of work despite her young age. For example, at the Fine Arts College of Helwan University where she studied, El Shazly succeeded in being the top of her class. She later became an assistant professor at the university and has been awarded for her work in various competitions.

Proud of her manual skills, El Shazly did not quit

painting like many of her generation, however she began to use the canvas to convey her ideas about recurrent issues and to develop new aesthetes using her brush. Later, collage became an important aspect of her work, in which she mixes with paint in a way that makes it hard to realize the various layers in the art piece.

Although El Shazly's work developed from minimal abstraction to pop figuration, she kept her signature and maintained a distinct line of aesthetics. "Even when figures were introduced in my artwork, they were introduced within the composition as an abstract element," El Shazly explains.

Her choice of Minimalism might be justified as kind of revolt on the figurative and academic painting that is always taught at the Fine Arts College, but it later became her area of research choice for her Masters, which was entitled "The Influence of European Abstraction on the American Abstraction in the late 20th Century". The research aimed to prove that art is not like science and that you can build new things on to ancient things and do not necessarily always have to work from the latest innovation. For example, in the Youth Salon of 2008, El Shazly had three abstract paintings in the middle of the hall painted with strong shades of pink and gold creating a futuristic space.

In the next version of the salon, figures were introduced but they were still blurred in the background. What was interesting was how the series of paintings all had similar colour schemes but different results, creating a harmonious visual experience. On each canvas stood a figure of an average person, a young man wearing casual clothes or a woman with a veil, each painted in one colour, still with all the details clear, yet being partially abstracted within the background but also distinct from it. Her work, *Scared Holiness*, which she presented in Cairo Documenta of 2010, coincided with the events of the parliamentary election that was described as the most fraudulent ever in the recent history of Egypt. In the work she compared the representational imagery of the political figures with the imagery used in religious iconography. In her visual research, El Shazly analysed stills from talk shows, news and political campaigns to examine how these famous figures represented themselves as prophets of the society giving themselves noble and holy characteristics.



By looking at the posters of the election candidates that has been spread all over the city during that time, El Shazly examined themes of fake heroism, power, doubtful promises, big slogans and the failed attempts to sell ideas that were presented in the portraiture of the candidates with the symbols they chose to be represented by. She then created her own visual interpretations by creating repetitions, exaggerations or resemblances with fierce animals.

Emblematic statues like the sphinx, symbolic buildings like Bank Misr, the Egyptian Ministry of Exterior and the overlapping of architecture with billboards and traffic jams have also been integrated in to several compositions. The approach creates visual intensity in these series about the political icons, such as the juxtaposition of a portrait for the ex-first lady Susan Mubarak lecturing at the FAO organization with a backdrop of a photo of the crowded city.

In other series of the same theme, group photos and incidents were introduced to highlight a class of decision makers who derive their influence from the support of both the authority and media. They manipulate people by their daily appearance in the papers, as well as on television, and are perceived as trustworthy people with the knowledge and ability to make important and critical decisions. "I believe that this class group, which



can produce a great amount of illusions most of the time and a small amount of truth sometimes, is rising to form an enormous horizon of trusteeship imposition”, explained El Shazly.

Sarcasm has been an important aspect in most of El Shazly’s work. All at once she might make a ploy through the symmetry of Donald Duck or a mirror of Barrack Obama, two lions might guard a famous TV presenter, pigeons and eagles would surround Obama and Hosni Mubarak while shaking their hands and an aura would surround these celebrities to turn them into saints.

Although El Shazly’s political icons were created before the Egyptian revolution, they held a lot of indirect criticism of the past regime and forecasted decay by cynically portraying them in a fake magnified glory. Her work can also be looked at as a visual documentation of how politics and the media became an important

element of the popular culture of contemporary Egypt. In Egypt, religious practices are not only spiritual or mystical, but are also representational, graphic and even fetish. As you walk around the country it is common to find people hanging stickers or frames for a famous saint or holy verse.

This Coptic and Islamic iconoclasm became another source of inspiration for El Shazly, and rather than choosing traditional iconography, she used the daily modern sacred objects to compose her own holy canvases that depict miraculous power and myth through abstract ornaments and visual contrast. It is interesting how she choose to hail anonymous people by merging them with folk or spiritual phrases to highlight another manmade wisdom or an attempt to connect with a metaphysical unknown greater power. With the appearance of famous Lebanese singers such as





Haifa Wahbe, Nancy Agram and Elissa, the standards of beauty in the Middle East that most women imitate were set to such an extent that these women were turned into goddesses that should be worshiped. *Made In Lebanon* is El Shazly's latest work in which she uses a collage of glitter and cloth to emphasize the manufactured glamour and femininity of these singers or exaggerate what they wear in order to turn them into clowns, or fake dolls in other art pieces. "The ancient Greek goddess Medusa has been my inspiration for this project," explains El Shazly commenting on the destructive beauty of these icons. Rather than sticking to acrylic on canvas only, El Shazly has also explored other mediums such as digital paint in which she was able to keep her style and transform it into a computerized format. At Cairo Documenta in 2012, she presented *Samak, Laben, Tammer Hindy (Fish, Milk & Dates)*, a visual jumble of pop icons and incoherent correlations with brands such as Nido milk or with national products such as wheat and corn. Using the same kitsch aesthetics that are usually used by most Photoshop users and digital products in Egypt, she created several visual spoofs such as: a repeated pattern of the Lebanese singers Carol Samha and Elissa dancing, or the comedy actor Talat Zakarya surrounded with chickens and oranges, or a portrait of SCAF with corn and sunflowers. All these images were juxtaposed beside each other to create a



mélange that raised questions about our fake heroes, hegemonic imagery, common aesthetics and symbolic representations. Without following trends or becoming influenced by peer pressure, El Shazly's work is witty, blunt and questions many seemingly untouchable taboos. What keeps EL Shazly's work distinct from many others of her generation is how she manages to make strong statements while keeping her colours vivid and creating a visually pleasant composition where all aspects are put together so that 'Heroes' collapse within her canvases and the daily images that we usually take for granted suddenly take on different associations. Apart from being an artist, El Shazly has a daily mission to introduce contemporary arts practice to students of the old academic organization. "They have stopped at Picasso and are disconnected with the current happenings in the arts and it is governed by stagnant laws that can be hardly changed," commented El Shazly. And in fact, it is through daring young professionals, who are not prepared to bail out on the rigid system but instead challenge it, that change can come to bureaucratic places such as Fine Arts Colleges or the government's exhibiting halls.