

Reda Abdel Rahman: an artist inspired by the ancient writings on the wall

By Rowan El Shimi



Untitled, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 250x285cm. Courtesy of the artist.

A truly Egyptian artist in every meaning of the word, Reda Abdel Rahman draws his inspiration for his artworks from Ancient Egyptian art, which Egypt's Nile Basin cities are drenched with. From sculpture, to murals to painting on the temple and tomb walls - parallels can be derived between the paint that has survived for thousands of years on the lime-stone walls and the contemporary works that portray Abdel Rahman's contribution to the global art scene. The

artist spends most of his time, painting and mentoring students in his artistic studio - in this case a two floors house on the banks of the Nile on Dahab Island right off the Cairo shore. The Island is in the middle of the city, yet isolated by the water into a scene more similar to Ancient Egyptian times where agriculture along the river bank was the main activity of the people. Abdel Rahman uses drawing, painting, sculpture, mosaic and other mediums to explore the simple, happy life - as



Untitled, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 220x240cm. Courtesy of the artist.

the artist sees - of the ancient Egyptian. Inspired by not only the ancient Egyptian, but also the female figure, which often appear in his work, he uses his art to pay homage to women and their undeniable role in the society. Often one sees food elements in his works, from bread, vegetables and fish that play a role in symbolizing the Nile a source of food and life; but also plays on the everyday objects that make that simple life the artist portrays through his layers of paint and sculpture.

Born in the Red Seaside city of Ismailia in 1966, Abdel Rahman went to school in Al-Tal Al-Kebeer, a village turned into town, near Ismailia, where he showed interest in drawing and painting since the young age of six. Mentored by his art teachers and nurtured to become an artist by his parents, Abdel Rahman spent his University years in Minya obtaining his degree from the - at the time - newly opened Fine Arts College there. Minya, one of the oldest Egyptian cities, hosts several



Untitled, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 140x200cm. Courtesy of the artist.

important - often overlooked - monuments. The city is also one of the most unique in Egypt in terms of its almost equal population of Muslims and Christians. These two themes over arch many of Abdel Rahman's works over the years. The city even inspired his graduation project from college, a mural painted on the walls of the University's theatre using the same materials used by ancient Egyptians in art such as egg yolks and wax. Before dedicating his time to being an independent artist, holding exhibitions and devoting his time to creating art works, Abdel Rahman spent ten years working on commissioned work for the Red Sea and South Sinai Governorate where his works can be seen. The artist would present his ideas to the Governors and they would pick on idea, usually more nationalist in taste, and the artist would go on to create his murals. These commissioned works include the leaders sculpture in Sharm El-Sheikh, the Light House, The Seahorse, and others. However, Abdel Rahman does not really consider these pieces his own - as the concepts for them were not his, but rather only the technique. The artist was working to make the money he needed to start his

life as he did not want to fall into the trap of being a bohemian artist. During this time Abdel Rahman also spent his time teaching and pursuing further Academic accreditation finishing with his PhD in Mural Painting along with participating in several exhibitions locally and regionally. After this phase, Abdel Rahman decided to get back to solely focusing on his art. In 2003 he hosted a painting exhibition in Al-Salam Art Space entitled 'My Days in Hurghada'. This exhibition orbited around a question; "What would the ancient Egyptian paint if he lived in contemporary times?" and after reading and studying the simplistic painting techniques of the objects where the viewer would easily grasp the imagery, he went on the paint contemporary imagery in ancient Egyptian style. The exhibition was a success, with most of the paintings selling well - and Abdel Rahman was certain of his decision to focus on his art. Until the revolution, Abdel Rahman participated in various collective exhibitions along with hosting several solo shows. His work continued to be inspired by the livelihood of the ancient Egyptians, the Nile and the life around it. During this time also, the female figure kept

re-appearing in his work. From nude figures, to large scale portraits; Abdel Rahman's projects on women varied from figures that resembled ancient Egyptian women to ones that were representative of women in contemporary times. Using an array of colors and painting and printing, the artist brings these women to life, forcing the viewers to take them as a symbol of not only beauty but of life and power.

Abdel Rahman's body of work consistently features figurative painting and portraiture, combined with a commitment to incorporate symbolism.

Besides his own work as an artist, Abdel Rahman has always been seeking ways in which he can help the art scene grow as a whole. Between 2005 and 2010 the artist founded and continued publishing Portrait Magazine, dedicated to visual arts along with running the art space by the same name. He also worked on several other governmental, and non-governmental, initiatives that sought to promote and support young artists.

Like many artists working in contemporary times, the revolution played a major role in not only the artist's life but in shaping his body of work in the years that followed it. Abdel Rahman participated in the initial 18 days of the revolution in Tahrir Square, and in many of the events that followed. On February 8th, 2011, days before Mubarak's ouster, the artist took a large scale mural to the Square and asked protesters to jot down the names of any martyrs they knew of from the previous days. More than 3000 people participated in this 280x250cm piece which again featured ancient Egyptian symbols such as Horus, but also more contemporary Egyptian icons such as the Lion from the sculptures at the entrances of Kasr El-Nil bridge which not only leads to Tahrir but saw some grotesque battles at the wake of the revolution between the protesters and the police forces. The piece, entitled 'Angels of the Revolution' was first exhibited in the Beirut Art Fair, and later shown in Paris. The artist also made another revolution inspired piece 'Six Days Make a Revolution' featuring female figures resembling ancient Egyptian females that are screaming at the top of their lungs, along with silhouettes of people supporting their cries with the significant dates of the uprising. The revolution also inspired the artist to create self-portraits where he places himself in the position of the revolution's martyrs and icons - commenting on the

iconography the revolution imposed as well as giving himself the space to really empathize with these people and their families. The exhibition was displayed in the Cairo Opera House, and represented for the artist's his first truly revolutionarily solo-exhibition.

In 2013, Abdel Rahman was the co-curator of the interfaith Caravan exhibition for the annual Caravan Festival of the Arts, along with Caravan's founder Paul Gordon Chandler after participating with art works several years in a row. The exhibition, which was hosted in Cairo's St. John's Church and later in London's St. Paul, brought together 45 artists from Egypt and around the world, to each produce two works promoting religious tolerance. The festival also featured talks and film screenings. However, the exhibition did not leave the mediums open for the artists. Instead, Abdel-Rahman gave each artist two fiber-glass donkeys, that he sculpted himself, for them to paint in anyway they pleased. Abdel Rahman's two contributions manifested themselves in one donkey resembling at the time Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi half dressed as a civilian and half in military clothes, signifying how little the president tried to change the reality of military rule in Egypt. The Morsi donkey also carries a basket of goods representing money with that the artist shows the religious, military and business elite who dominate the rule. His other donkey, more hopeful and less satirical featured the Ancient Egyptian sky goddess Nut. Coinciding with the Caravan exhibition, the artist also produced Eight paintings featuring donkeys and ancient Egyptian figures which were auctioned for sale in London's Sotheby's.

A multi-talented artist who is not afraid to use new mediums for expression; Reda Abdel Rahman represents a unique style in his art which draws inspiration from his own natural environment and repackaging it in a contemporary setting.

About the Writer

Rowan El Shimi is a culture journalist using writing, photography and video for reporting, featuring and analysing Egypt's cultural scene. She is also interested in social development and concerned particularly with its relationship with the arts. You can follow her work at www.rowanelshimi.org



Untitled, 2010, acrylic on paper, 70x1000cm. Courtesy of the artist.

