

Shaimaa Kamel, Warmth of the South and Boldness of a Rebel



Cupid, 2011, mixed media, 152x100 cm. Courtesy of Mashrabia Gallery.

“She’s daring, isn’t she?” These were the first words of the art gallery curator about the paintings of Shaimaa Kamel. The energy that Kamel transmits in the place is vividly reflected in her works. Her Nubian roots don’t only show in her features but also in the very vibrant colors of her works. It might be shocking that a woman from Upper Egypt would be that daring in expressing women’s issues and dilemmas but another genuine trait – determination – is what moves Kamel. “I’ve always been working and working without thinking or paying much attention to the taboos and restrictions that society impose on us,” says Kamel. Her latest body of works titled ‘Cinderella Tales’ says it all. She uses nude female figures, figures of women entirely covered in black, several cartoon characters combining these contrasting elements to emphasize the contradiction between reality and how society vision of women and other times to emphasize the pain. Kamel’s use of collage is not at all excessive but very carefully employed. She resorts to materials that are not quite commonly used like fabric of old dresses, fragments of nylon table cloth and crochet table mats. “I’m not a feminist. I believe in equality and justice and nowadays there is no room for denial. The way Egyptians see women, mothers, daughters and wives, has become quite exposed lately and it is very obvious that there is a great deal of disruption. The problem is not only how men treat women but also what women do to women,” says Kamel. This body of works is a documentation of an era according to Kamel. The project is full of icons much relevant to the two years that followed the revolution within the context of women’s struggles. The male dominated culture, the abuse of religion, the fake images projected to children about how a woman should be. When Kamel first started, from 1997 to 2004 she was totally focused on herself, her sufferings, dreams and issues. She sees that the real turning point in her career was her decision to get away from the personal and focus on issues of public concern maybe also global concern, “It was believing that I should move from the very personal and subjective issues to the issues of public concern and of human concern in general. I believe that the genuine artist contributes to changing the world so he should have a globalist approach.” In spite of all the boldness and the overwhelming passion for art, she had failed

to convince her family that she should study art. She studied psychology instead, yet managed to enroll in free study courses at the same time, whether with artists or at the Faculty of Fine Arts. This issue with the family dissolved after the success of her first solo show in 2004. At that point she decided to be fully dedicated to art. With the same vigorous attitude Kamel has been very serious about polishing her skills, enhancing her vision, enriching her experiences and getting more exposed to the outside world. Now she exhibits abroad once a year. Following her first show in 2004, she started taking part in exhibitions and events in Egypt like the National Exhibition for Fine Arts, Youth Saloon and other group shows and events. Furthermore, over the years she got a number of residencies in Greece, Germany, the US and most recently, in Switzerland for three months sponsored by pro-Helvetia. Following this residency she had a very successful show where she capitalized on the use of collage. One of the main features of Kamel’s works is the use of animal figures. She sees that animals like cats, rabbits and lions are very handy symbols and very effective in conveying messages. And just like the cartoons, animals help Shaimaa convey the comic yet sad contradictions the Egyptian are living. “What we live everyday is really “farce” and this is what I’m trying to say,” says Kamel. Being part of the generation that made the revolution Shaimaa fully believes in the vitality of change. She still has hope and believes that regardless of all the disappointment, the revolution has done much, She is also enthusiastic about internet being such a great tool for knowledge and believes that in few years it can compensate for the long years of a deliberate state of ignorance. “The 18 days of the revolution were heaven, all Egyptian from different classes, religions, genders, colors were there, living together in harmony in a very civilized manner. Tahrir was a model to follow it was orderly, clean and full of love,” Shaimaa says with much passion in her eyes. The ambitious artist thinks that the revolution created a big market for the arts and gave room for variety. From her point of view, Graffiti made a big change even for the layman, “because the visual aspect in our life is very ugly; we don’t have color so that’s why people welcomed Graffiti so much and I think they will want to have more of it and more art and beauty in their lives in the future.”