

Ahmed Askalany

By Yasmine Allam



Untitled, 2009, woven palm leaves, different sizes, edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist and Art Sawa.

from woven palm leaves and natural fiber, evoked the hardships and inequities that, for the artist, are endemic to Egyptian society. The ancient techniques of basket weaving, associated in Egypt with household goods, were transmuted from their customary functionality into forms that resonated with social and political critique. In one work, fifteen emaciated cats stared longingly at a wall. Projected onto the wall was the shadow of a large fish bone, the tiny bone itself enlarged and transformed through this chimerical projection. *"The Egyptian public is always deceived by the powers that be"*, explains the artist. Promises given dissolve into shadow while the man on the street remains downtrodden, "denied even the bare bones of a fish." In a further installation in this series, a pack of dogs were presented running towards the image of an open door painted on a wall: *"In every undertaking here in Egypt, you literally come up against a brick wall"*, explains Askalany. The exhibition culminates in a room littered with the forms of dead pigeons: *"in the end, our dreams will not be fulfilled and death is the only thing we can be certain of"*.

By his own admission, Askalany is best known internationally for his sculptural works in woven palm leaves and natural fiber, materials that have been used for millennia in Egypt. He combines these, with materials such as polyester in the series that was exhibited in Venice Biennale. This series is populated with polyester animals that include the ubiquitous Egyptian donkey, goats, elephants and hippos. Askalany's "donkey" and "goat" are emaciated and bowed, weighed down by hardship *"I choose animals such as the donkey, cat, or owl as a direct reference to our heritage as Egyptians. Our mythology, folklore and even our jokes center around stories of animals...for me the donkey embodies the lot of average Egyptians it is intelligent but powerless to influence the course of his life"*. Meanwhile, the large, life-size forms of polyester and fiber crocodiles, standing upright on their hind legs, represent the fickle ruling classes where an affable and ingratiating exterior conceals an altogether more sinister agenda. A large oversized man, in wicker and polyester, drives his donkey with the steering wheel of a car: *"we are always striving for modernity but never quite get anywhere."*

By contrast, works created between 2008-2010 feature the voluminous and exaggerated forms of human figures with tiny heads, created in bronze and polyester. In the bronze work, *"Kissing"* (2010), two androgynous figures come together in a distorted embrace, their lower limbs and buttocks protruding boldly and tapering into tiny torsos and small heads. For Askalany, these forms are a direct reference to Egypt's leadership that controls the population with displays of strength and military hardware, using muscle rather than rationality and, as a result, failing to develop the country's vast resources. In *"The Sleeper"*, that showed in a Cairo-based Gallery's acclaimed group exhibition, *"The Body"* (2010), a 3.5 meter form of a corporeal figure created from discarded car tires, lies stretched out on his back in apparent submission. The characteristics of the material related to the harsh living conditions that citizens must endure: *"The rubber denoted the extent to which the citizen's body is used up and discarded, and his ability to withstand the endless trials inflicted,"* says the artist. In these works, Askalany's solitary figures seem strangely isolated; poised in mid action and suspended in time. They are featureless and generic in form, reminding us that in today's Egypt there is neither appreciation nor hope for the individual, a theme to which the artist returns repeatedly.

The 2011 revolution wrought a change in the style of this prolific artist. In the ten works that make up *"Self Stories: Birds and I"* large and voluptuous human forms, created in bronze, lounge in poses of restful contemplation. Their large, fleshy bodies are topped with small and incongruous bird-like heads. In *"Monologue"* (2011) an oversized and headless form *"peers down"* at a bird gently balanced on its large outstretched palms. For the artist, the bird represents the new found freedom of expression ushered in by the revolution; *"the freedom and the promise of a better future...at the time, believed the bird had come to open up the political space for us and to give us voice for the very first time."*

By 2014, any early enthusiasm has been curtailed as Askalany demonstrates in the 2014, series *"And now... shall we dance?"* This exuberant series of sculptural works presents a troupe of voluptuous bronze dancers and musicians performing silently. They are poised on



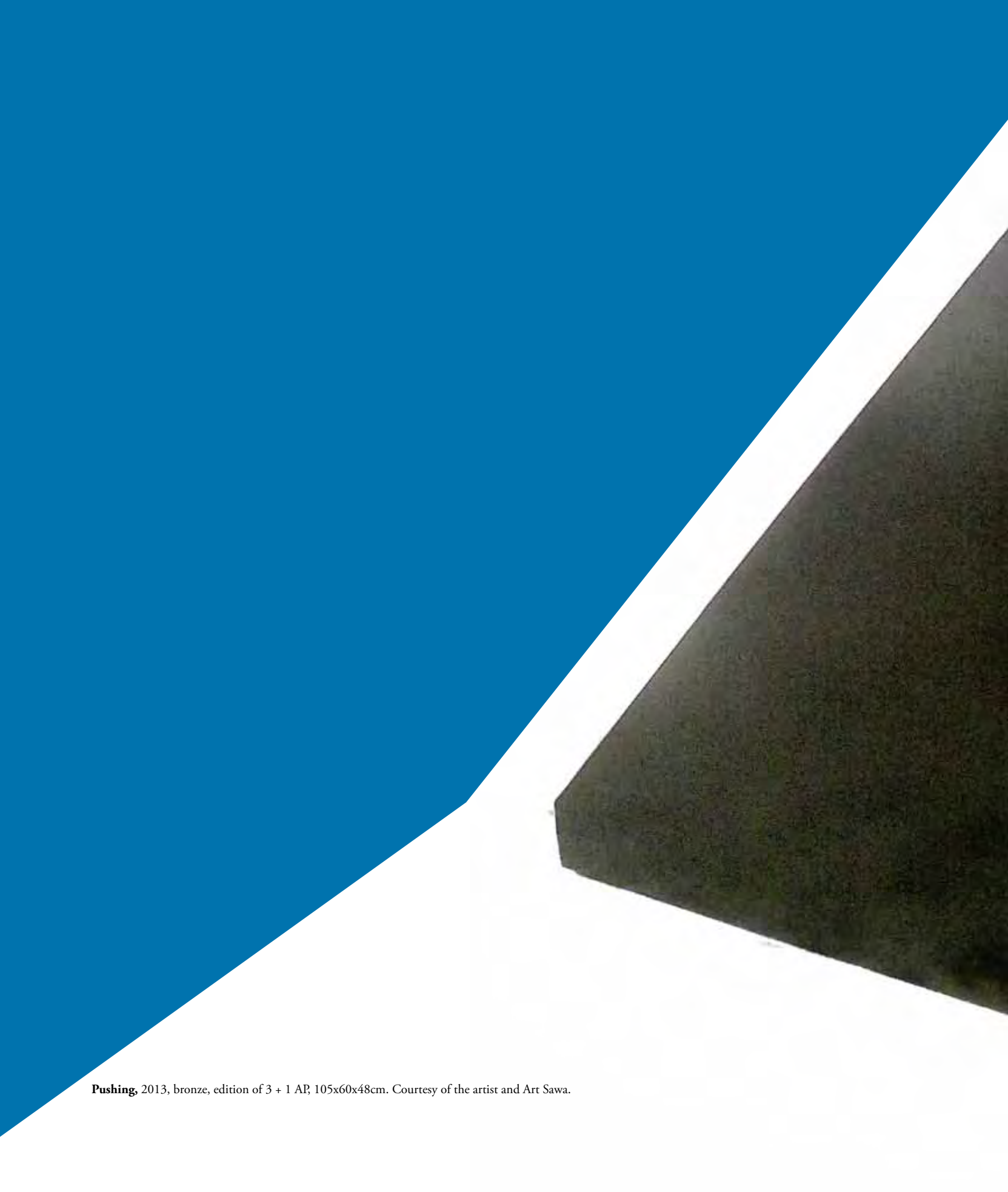
The Thinker, 2011, bronze, 114cm edition of 1 + 1 AP & 40cm edition of 8 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Art Sawa.



The Cat, 2009, bronze, edition of 8 + 2 AP and polyester (exhibited in Venice Biennale 2009) edition 24. Courtesy of the artist and Art Sawa.

mid dance, hands raised above their heads, or sway to the rhythms of a musical instrument that we cannot hear. Yet none of the troupe are performing together in unity. Instead, each is performing for himself, thinking he knows best and referencing what the artist believes is the broader fragmentation of the political space in Egypt and the country. Some musicians are even wielding their instruments without playing: *“they don’t know how to, despite their claims to the contrary”*, says the artist. Askalany is a prolific in his practice with so many ideas he wants to get out. He works in a variety of media, and with a range of themes, yet it is possible to detect, across his practice, a naivety or spontaneity of form resulting from the artist’s conscious invocation of his childhood in a small town. Beneath the direct political satire, there is an intentional innocence that references the goodness of citizens in his hometown, a place that is both the subject and inspiration for all his work. In this way, Askalany’s sculptures become talismanic in their role,

using humor to invoke a life that is uncomplicated by modernity and to guide our eyes away from ugliness, even while acknowledging its existence. Askalany both satirizes and resists a society where the individual has no value. His choice of traditional materials for his art can be read as a celebration of the value of individual human effort by reviving Egypt’s ancient crafts that face eradication in a modern, consumerist society. In all their voluminous solidity, Askalany’s figures occupy their place in time and space, speaking to us directly of the injustices of the present moment, but alluding in their aesthetic forms to something far more timeless and enduring. As in his career, so in his art, there is a compulsion, or a passion, for giving form: his sculptures must exist, they must come into this world despite the hopelessness of the reality which they portray. In this way, his work feels often like a song passed on from generation to generation of singers who have no choice but to continue to give voice to its tune.



Pushing, 2013, bronze, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 105x60x48cm. Courtesy of the artist and Art Sawa.

