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Painter Taha Hussein reveals his art-world between East and West

Sara Elkamel, Tuesday 6 Mar 2012

Renowned 83-year-old artist, Mohamed Taha Hussein uses his now open East...West exhibition to emphasise cross-cultural dialogue, soaked in his artistic and international experience



The exhibit, East...West pays tribute to Taha Hussein's nearly six decades of seasoned achievements in the arts as he celebrates his 83rd birthday. The collection was painted between 2009 and 2011, but it reflects the artist's sustained encounters with world cultures and civilisations.

A rich cultural context embraces Taha Hussein's artwork. In this solo exhibit, he strives to represent interrelations between Eastern and Western cultures through recreating famous paintings by foreign artists, including Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and Van Gogh's *Poppy Flowers*.

Hussein, with his long artistic experience and Eastern roots, starts a cross-cultural dialogue of style and artistic direction across the ages and geography in his re-rendering of iconic European and Oriental works.

This body of artwork is stimulated by the 19th century musings of Goethe. In his book *Westöstlicher Diwan* (The West-Eastern Divan) and through his journals, Goethe explored how to grasp alternative cultures and his relationship to the East. The poet strived to enhance his understanding of "the other and the self in the other" through thought and philosophy.

The versatile artist's career starts with sketching, in which he excelled and earned his nickname as "the teacher of drawing." Then Hussein explored abstract art, using thick lines reminiscent of Georges Rouault's work. Continuing to test the boundaries of his artistic abilities, Hussein delved into calligraphy. Hussein studied art in Egypt and in Western Germany, experiencing contrasting and converging cultures and styles.

East...West demonstrates Hussein's accumulated skills, as paintings blend calligraphy with thick strokes of paint, each canvas telling a different story and revealing various aspects of Hussein's talents.

"This exhibition is about the East, and the West," Taha Hussein says slowly on the opening night of his solo exhibit at Al Masar Gallery in Zamalek. Leaning on his brown cane, the artist peers through his thick glasses at the crowded room and continues, "I am exploring communication between different individuals, relationships between one and the other, and one and the self."

Growing up with the Al Azhar and El Hussein mosque in the vicinity, Taha Hussein's childhood was bedecked with Islamic architecture and rich, cultural diversity. This contributed to the strong Islamic influence in the artist's work. Hussein finds the influence of Islamic civilization on foreign culture fascinating, reveling in Egypt's sheer influence on world culture.

Hussein confesses that he was reluctant to launch this exhibition, in light of the unfolding revolution's highs and low. "I didn't want to paint in the middle of all this," Hussein starts. "But I felt like I had to produce a bright spot through my art and dedicate it to the revolution and to Egypt."

Taha Hussein's exhibition is best characterised by movement. Wandering through the white-walled rooms at Al Masar, the audience is captured by the artists' prolific lines and webs of intertwined colour. The buzzing crowd on opening night mirrors the motion that pervades the series of canvases.

On Hussein's canvases, there is a balance between refreshing spontaneity and calculated strokes, rendering each piece expressive and telling.

Even though Islamic art is the foremost influence on Hussein's art, some works are evocative of African art, the Australian Aboriginal art form, and even artists such as Jackson Pollock. Hussein's artwork spans through various generations and spaces. His exhibition, then, provides a vortex leading to a unique world of art that bridges gaps of time and space.

In one painting, Taha Hussein recreates Italian artist Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Hussein replaces figures with calligraphy, while maintaining the grandiose effect through bold, thick strokes of black, yellows and red across an appealing turquoise background.

Another powerful adaptation is *The Dance*, which draws from the work with the same title by Henri Matisse, and *Pan and the Children* by Arnold Böcklin. The painting is not as congested as others; it enjoys an airy feel, as loosely contoured abstract figures twist and twirl across the canvas against a green field and deep, blue sky.

The artist also tackles issues of hope and freedom in *East... West*. *Windows and Birds* depicts hundreds of birds, outlines with red lines, creating a sense of chaotic ecstasy. Inspired by Tahrir Square and the January 25 Revolution, this painting is an expression of freedom and change. Another painting, *The Chant of Freedom* calls for freedom through thick, red strokes of calligraphy.

Programme:

Currently open - 29 March

Al Masar Gallery

Baehler's Mansion 157b

26 July Street, Side Entrance on Isaac Jacob Street (ground floor)

Zamalek, Cairo

Hours: Saturday – Thursday, 11am-9pm

(Closed Fridays)

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