



Waleed Abdulkhalek

"A gallerist is like a referee; they know the rules and they don't take sides"
Collected and written by Mona Gamil

Waleed Abdulkhalek has worked in the fine art arena since 1988. Having received his B.A. in Interior Design from the Fine Arts University of Alexandria in 1985, he went on to work as an assistant for art and design to the Minister of Culture Farouk Hosny. His responsibilities included the selection of works from the national, permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art for touring exhibitions in major institutions across the globe, including shows at the Louvre in Paris, the Palais Harrach in Vienna, the Nicolas Sursock Museum in Beirut and the Sharjah Art Museum.

In 1995, Abdulkhalek also curated the exhibition, *Abstract Egyptian Paintings* in collaboration with UNESCO for the Miro Gallery in Paris as well as the Meguro Museum of Art in Japan (1998), The Kuwait National Museum (1998), and the *Contemporary Egyptian Artists and Heirs to an Ancient Tradition* exhibition in The Metropolitan Museum Of Art, New York (1999-2000).

In 2002, he founded Art Arena (gallery by appointment) during which time he both collected and sold contemporary Egyptian art. His latest venture was to found ALMASAR Gallery for Contemporary Art. The gallery opened on 4th of May 2008 as an extension of Art Arena's mission to collect, exhibit and promote modern and contemporary Egyptian art.

Waleed Abdulkhalek speaks to The Art Review about the difficulties and joys of working in the Egyptian art scene, both in the private and public sectors:

Art is a room that consists of four corners: the artist, the collector, the critic and the gallerist, which are all highly interdependent. They all meet at the "art well" which fills or dries up as a result of a multitude of social, political and economic factors. An environment that is supportive of individual artists started in earnest 21 years ago with concrete support of the arts taking on the form of artist grants, youth salons, biennials and the opening of new galleries' doors. This is very encouraging for artists as the more walls there are to show their work, the more artists will want to produce and the more active the scene is going to be. It's a cycle.

At the moment, the well is full and Egypt is booming with art, but as a gallerist, you still have to actively seek out undiscovered talents. Not everyone on exhibit is an artistic genius so you have to do your homework by getting involved in the local art scene. Scan local exhibitions, meet artists, collectors, writers... You also have to be aware of the history of Egyptian art by going back to the books. Publications like Aimée Azzar's research on the Egyptian art movements in the 1930s through to the 1970s, Jessica Winegar's exploration of the effects of colonialism on Egyptian art practices and the writings of critics like Edward Kharat are all excellent resources. It is also very important to follow the art world on an international scale. There are amazing developments in Dubai for example, where new branches of the Louvre and Guggenheim museums are being built now. Research is indispensable, whether in the form of active involvement in cultural activities or reading text upon text. It takes up a lot of time, but the hard work does pay off as it all comes together to feed the range and depth of the gallery's activity.

Once I've found my artists and it's time to "compose" an exhibition. I try to see artworks from a particular perspective. As a student of décor, my focus has always been on the chemistry between various aesthetic factors.

I see artworks as elements of design which interact with each other, creating complementary or contrasting effects. Like an artist, I have to get inspired with an idea for an exhibition and there is such a thing as "gallerist's block." Having said that, I am happy to say I rarely suffer from it for long.

There is so much to inspire me here especially at this exciting time when artists are so full of ideas for projects. Many are addressing common subjects such as the city and collective memory, but the list of topics is endless and I always enjoy following the artist's process. As a rule, I think the artist-gallerist relationship is a complex and intimate one. I will not go so far as to commission works myself but in terms of being subject to the highs and lows of an artist's inspiration, the practices of gallerists and artists are very similar. Still, I would not call myself an artist by any means.

I think a gallerist who is a practicing artist themselves is in danger of being biased towards a certain type of art or style. Think of it this way: if art is a game where artists are the players, a gallerist takes on the role of referee; they watch the game and they know the rules but they are not on anyone's side.

And the game is rich! The diversity that characterizes Egyptian art is not particular to the present time however. It is actually a continuation of an increasingly strong growth in Egyptian fine art since the first batch of students graduated from the Fine Art University in 1912. The involvement of the state in arts in the mid twentieth century with the establishment of the National Museum of Modern Art and the inauguration of a biennial in Alexandria helped to solidify the presence of modern art in Egypt by bringing to the fore artists like Mohamed Owais, Margot Veillon, Ibrahim Wanly and his son, Seif Wanly, all of whom are recognized as national pioneers today whilst many Egyptian artists have also gone on to gain recognition abroad.

Sources on the movements of Egyptian artists and the art scene in general are few and far between however. It is a terrible shame that we lack a comprehensive encyclopedia of modern and contemporary Egyptian art. I hope that one day, art lovers will have a historically accurate, rich text to refer to; a text that would describe and analyze the art within a historical context. Some of the most affecting works evolved out of difficult circumstances. It would be fascinating to explore the relationships between the major social, political and economic changes in Egypt in the last century and the nature of art works produced during those times. Art giant Abdel Hadi El Gazzar produced one of his best pieces, *Denshway*, a sketch/poem addressed to the king as an expression of his frustration with the political regime of the time. Likewise, Ingie Aflaton's best known works were produced while she was behind bars, which translated into the strong sense of imprisonment in her works from that period. Gazbia Sirry's series *Suez Houses* were painted in response to the destruction of the Suez cityscape during the Suez Canal crisis and there are many other such examples. I am optimistic that today's artists will reflect today's experiences just as strongly. Art history is unfolding before our eyes. I feel privileged to be in a position to witness it so closely.