

of gods and
superheroes

khaled hafez



Born and raised in Cairo, Khaled Hafez is undoubtedly one of the most outspoken and controversial figures to have developed out of Egypt's Contemporary art movement. Through a plethora of artistic interpretations of Batman and Anubis, the Ancient Egyptian god of death, Hafez stretches metaphors, so much so, that his figures are deciphered as one and the same.

TEXT BY JANET RADY

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Unashamedly independent, Khaled Hafez's has a legendary reputation as one of the most well-connected artists in the region – it seems that everyone in the Arab cultural world is either a good friend or has, at some point in their lives, met him.

First acknowledged in the 1990s for his role as an artist, critic/art writer for the *Middle East Times* and an *agent provocateur*, Hafez worked with artists and cultural figures like Adel El-Siwi, Mohammed Abla and, later, William Wells of the Townhouse Gallery to establish what is now known as the Cairo independent art movement – a successful manoeuvre counteracting the official Egyptian 'art establishment'. Today, Hafez has moved on and with his writing days behind him, he now works primarily (as he says, 95 percent of his time) as an artist. However, he admits that he still helps the official establishment to reform, alongside many of the artists who worked to shake the very same establishment over a decade ago.

Art is More Than Skin-Deep

Hafez is a man of many facets and talents. Recognised principally on the international stage for his 'Ancient Egypt meets Western Pop' paintings and his politically charged video work, his early career, as the son of an army doctor, was originally launched in a totally different direction. Following in both his parents' footsteps, he became a medical student in

Cairo in the 1980s, subsequently qualifying as a dermatologist in 1992. Having been painting, however, since the age of five, it seemed entirely natural to him to develop his artistic passion by attending evening classes at the Cairo Fine Arts School whilst still at medical school. It was there that he met and studied with two Egyptian painting legends: Zakaria El-Zeiny and Hamed Nada, in whose studios he subsequently worked for three years each. There he learnt his painting techniques, albeit at that time employing a Surreal-Expressionist, Neo-Realist manner, somewhat different from his style today.

Hafez started exhibiting his paintings in 1987 at the age of 23. His first show, *Delires* (delirium), took place at the Heliopolis French Cultural Centre in Cairo and was curated by his childhood friend, May El-Telmissany, now a Montreal-based creative writer and scholar. Circumstance is often the precursor of one's fortunes in life. Thus, in 1988, through El-Telmissany and her father, the guru filmmaker Abdel Kader El-Telmissany, Hafez went to see the then-famous Egyptian painter Enjy Eflatoon to seek her professional opinion of his work. The moment she saw it, she declared that "painting should never be done like that, nor should it have such colours" and went on to advise Hafez that he could and would

Previous pages: *Contaminated Idols*. 2007. Mixed media on canvas. 400 x 150 cm. Image courtesy of the Sharjah Biennial and Almasar Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cairo.

Facing spread fold: *God-Himself-Sighting Chromosome*. 2005. Mixed media on canvas. 180 x 120 cm. Courtesy of Galleria San Carlo, Milan.







never be an artist, suggesting instead that he become a graphic designer or cartoonist. Deeply depressed, and clearly subconsciously influenced by what he interpreted as criticism, Hafez stopped painting for over six months – the first and only time in his life that he has done so.

Then, as Hafez recalls, one day, by sheer coincidence, through the sculptor Mahmoud Emam, he met Mohammed El-Tahhan, an artist responsible for an ‘amateurs-of-art’ society at the time, who literally forced him to get back into painting, a debt of gratitude that Hafez has never forgotten. Already fascinated by the formalistic and narrative function of Ancient Egyptian art – to Hafez a misnomer as being too broad a term – he realised one day when looking at a small stone model

of the jackal-headed god Anubis and a Warner Brothers model of Batman of almost the same size, that both figures were identical when viewed from the front and back. He was astounded that both the ‘superheroes’ of past and of present had, beside their morphological resemblance, an identical function of protection against evil forces. Tellingly, he still has both original statues in his studio.

Alter Egos

This discovery led Hafez to start exploring, in more general terms, the visual metamorphoses of the iconic human form. By extension and by traversing temporal and spatial boundaries, he began probing the universal binaries of old and new; East and West; the sacred and profane; good and evil; animal and human; male and female and the static and kinetic. These explorations could quite easily have manifested themselves in a bland, neo-Pharaonic symbolist narrative style. However,

Previous pages: *Mighty Hands of Gemmis*. 2008. Acrylic on canvas. 200 X 250 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London.
 Above: *Nute Exiting All Skies*. 2002. Mixed media on canvas mounted on MDF and stretchers. 100 x 70 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
 Facing page: *Seated Anubis on Red*. 2002. Mixed media on MDF mounted on stretchers. 140 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the Roques Collection, Germany.



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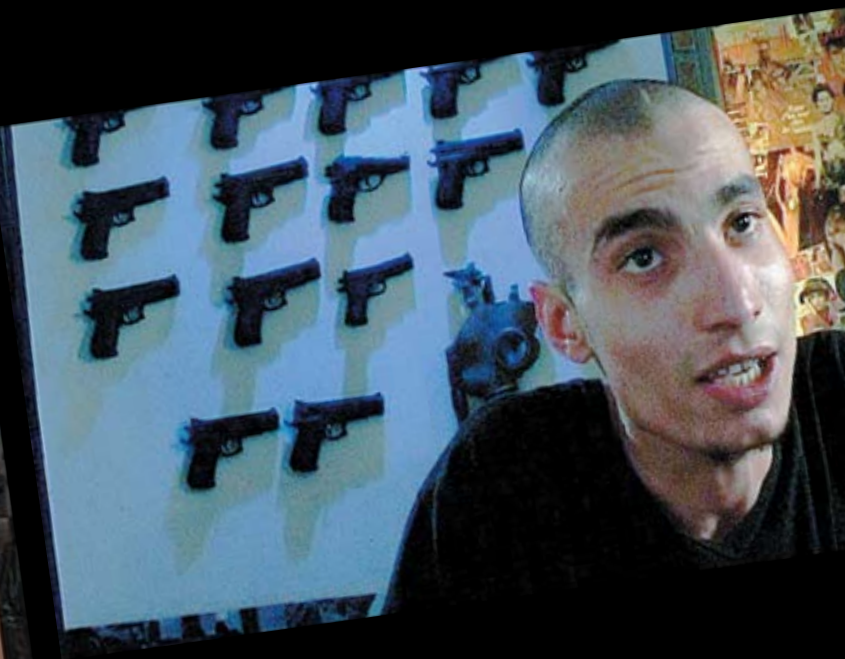
what sets Hafez apart in his work is his astute observation of the world around him. As an Egyptian who had lived in France for a number of years, he was particularly sensitive to the new 'ferocious' audio-visual material of budding mass-consumerism which was propelling the previously slowly-progressive societies of the Middle East into a global visual culture. This in turn, he saw, had led to a dramatic confusion of identities, especially among the young, and a state of cultural ambivalence of love-hate towards the West. It was this dichotomy which he wished particularly to expose and attempt to overcome in his paintings.

And so it was that Hafez started to produce the work which has become his signature style – boldly painted and wittily composed 'comic strip' formative amalgams of Ancient Egyptian deities and modern-day symbols of this all-pervasive consumerist culture. Hafez's career as an artist continued to develop and in 2001, propelled by a number of critical factors,

he took a conscious decision to focus on his own painting and to actively manage his potential. Participation in the *Cairo Modern Art* exhibition in The Netherlands, a co-production between the Fortis Circustheater of The Hague, Holland and The Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, led to his first notable commercial success outside Egypt, when he sold a significant number of smaller paintings to independent collectors.

Video Steering

The same year witnessed the development of his interest in video as an alternative medium of expression. In contrast to his focus on the world of Ancient Egypt and its links to the West so prevalent in his canvases, his video work is preoccupied with the notion of being Middle Eastern/Arab in the post-9/11 world. In his first video, *Visions of a Cheeseburger Memory*, he employed film and advertising images to probe the effect of the neo-aesthetics of violence on an urban protagonist.





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profile



The work was screened at the second Al-Nitaq Festival in Cairo, an initiative instigated by Espace Karim Francis and the Mashrabiya and Townhouse Galleries.

When asked what prompted Hafez ostensibly to change direction in his work so dramatically, his response was, “I grew up in politics; my awareness increased over the years, with my ‘formation’ as an artist, aided by my father, who had spent the last 15 years of his career in the army in service on the frontline (he is 82 today) and his strategic knowledge of politics, political history and political economy among other fields. My childhood and my upbringing drove me to observe and probe changes. In my work I do not try to criticise or comment; I have no answers, I just try to raise questions and probe, probe and probe all the time.”

Previous Pages: Stills from the video *Idlers' Logic*. 2003. 24-minute experimental video, mini-DV. Francophonies Prizewinner at the Dakar Biennale (Dak'Art) 2004.

Above: *Lun Sans l'Autre*. 2004. Acrylic on canvas. 50 x 70 cm. Courtesy of Andrea Alashkar Collection, Germany.

Hafez knew that he had discovered a tool of expression needed to complement his work but he had to experiment with the medium for over two years in order to produce his second film, *Idlers' Logic*, in 2002. The video, depicting three variously talented idlers of North African/Middle Eastern features locked up in a space, acted as a catalyst for propelling him into the limelight when it won him the Francophonie Prize at the Dakar Biennial of 2004, after which, he says, his “international career took a massive turn upwards and forwards.” Success continued in 2005 when he received a highly competitive and prestigious Fulbright research grant. As a result, he was awarded the post of visiting artist for six months at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and was given faculty status that allowed him once more to focus solely on his painting.

From this period, he produced perhaps his best known body of work, *Philadelphia Chromosomes*, where he draws, as usual, on the two-dimensional Pharaonic repetitive anti-aesthetic canon as his visual point of reference. Hafez plays

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with figural patchworks, knitting together images in a style reminiscent of Rauschenberg or Basquiat's compositions, creating witty cross-cultural fertilisations. Thus he depicts images of Anubis and Batman extracted from body-building magazines; elongated figures of Nute (the goddess of sky and earth) straddling Western supermodels stepping out directly from commercial fashion shoots and the sanctified figures of Bastet (the solar deity), superhero cat woman and Sekhmet (lioness-headed female, goddess of the ferocious). Eschewing any post-Renaissance form of shadow and light, he sets his figures against lusciously daubed impasto backgrounds of naïvely drawn Egyptian rock carvings and temple motifs.

Contemporary Deities

On further examination of this work, however, elements beyond a simplistic juxtaposition of mythological icons start to reveal themselves. The beautiful human body takes on a new meaning and for the first time, flowers figure significantly in the compositions. Hafez uses these to represent beauty, perfection, regeneration and metamorphosis; and in the case of red roses and tulips, they carry a profane carnal/sensual reminiscence readily identifiable in today's post-MTV, post-film and post-CNN culture. Indeed Hafez goes one stage further, likening the making of his work to the concepts contained therein. “In my painting practice, I have a belief: The process of painting is a carnal process; you enjoy every bit of it. Good painting leaves you satisfied, while bad painting reflects only the cheap physical part exerted, just like a bad carnal experience.”

Whether it was the apparent wit in his paintings, or his ability to bridge the gap between East and West with such ease, or perhaps another factor, remains a subject of debate.

However, this new work proved extremely popular. Thus, after leaving Philadelphia, Hafez went on to sign with Galleria San Carlo in Milan, which has subsequently taken him on to at least eight international shows and inclusion in more than one sale in the burgeoning Contemporary Middle Eastern art auction scene. His latest accolade in this long line of achievements has been the acquisition by Charles Saatchi last year of a work from his new *Gemmanism* series, the *Mighty Hands of Gemmis*. Scheduled for exhibition later this year, the inclusion of his work in the collection is an achievement considered by many to be the ultimate aim of any Contemporary artist.

Where to from here, one might ask? Hafez is not resting on his laurels; instead, he says, “I am working in my studio, painting like there is no tomorrow. I am finishing a new two-minute and 56-second video-animation work called *The A77A Project: On Presidents and Superheroes* which is due out in early May. In this work, I animate the figure of Anubis and one Batman figure, insert them into 3D figures and make them walk through the urban architecture of Cairo today, to synthetic loop music that I created for the work, with excerpts from the [Gamal Abdul] Nasser 1967 resignation speech.” Let us hope that Hafez's powerful gods and superheroes continue to wage their battles of light and dark across brightly daubed universes for years to come. Man by day, Anubis by night, and the world hurtles ever on. 🗨️

Khaled Hafez is represented by the Almasar Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cairo, Egypt. For more information visit www.almasargallery.com