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All that is human

A retrospective of the work of Egyptian artist Mounir Kanaan has recently opened in Cairo, writes **Nagwa Al-Ashri**

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A retrospective exhibition by the late artist Mounir Kanaan is being held in the Masar Gallery in Zamalek. Born in 1919, Kanaan was one of Egypt's most outstanding painters, innovative stylists, and memorable illustrators. Ironically, he never received a formal art education.

At the age of 20, Kanaan started working for a design company specialising in printing catalogues. Then he found employment with Dar al-Hilal and Akbar al-Yawm. In the 1940s, he made a name for himself as a pioneer of surrealism and collage on Egypt's art scene. He died in 1999.

In his work as an illustrator and designer, Kanaan developed his own style of folk painting that was much admired and imitated by younger artists. But he then rebelled against this style of art on which his career depended, experimenting with abstraction throughout the 1950s and 60s and producing work containing quasi-psychedelic imagery.

In later years, he combined collage-making with painting, turning his art into a journey into the esoteric aspects of private reality.

The critic and artist Ahmad Nawar has said that Kanaan was one of the pioneers of modern art in Egypt, whose lasting contribution can only be matched by the likes of Antoni Tapies in Spain.

Painter Ahmad Fouad Salim said that Kanaan was always inquisitive, as if his surroundings were inadequate for him. "Kanaan was forever looking for something new. He had a dynamic mind that thrived on tension. He was the only artist I knew who would paint everywhere, in his office at Al-Akhbar, in his house, or in my house," Salim said.

Salim lived next to Kanaan in Mohandiseen, and he recalls Kanaan's habit of collecting cardboard, film canisters, and all sorts of discarded objects. "He saw the potential for art in everything," he said.

Kanaan also reminded Salim of Picasso because of the way his art kept changing over time, from classical to expressionist and then abstract.

The critic Fatmah Ali cannot forget Kanaan's designs for the covers of Akher Saa, the magazine for which he was illustrator and designer for many years. Kanaan's innovative style was considered a breakthrough in the world of media design at the time.

In his work for the media, he also went through several stylistic periods. In 1940-46, he focused on illustration, while from 1946 to 56 he experimented with abstraction and contemporary trends. In 1956-59, he explored the potential of geometric abstraction, later exploring the use of new materials

along with oil in his paintings. In 1966-1967, he turned to collage and pop art.

The poet and cartoonist Salah Jahin once said that Kanaan had been impelled to try out new things, even when his contemporaries were baffled by what he did. "How sad that no one understood what Kanaan wanted, that no one was able to accompany him into this private world that he created for himself," Jahin remarked.

Kanaan held about 23 solo exhibitions in his lifetime, and his work was exhibited in Brazil, Yugoslavia, Canada, Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Mexico and India. His paintings were bought by the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, the Egyptian Academy in Rome, the American University in Cairo, the Hawaii Museum, the National Bank of Egypt, the Arab World Institute in Paris, the Modern Art Museum in Alexandria, and the Jeddah International Airport.

In 1956, Kanaan, along with Ramsis Younan and Fouad Kamel, co-founded the art collective "Toward the Unknown," which went on to hold a major exhibition in the Hoda Shaarawi Museum in Cairo that was hailed as historic at the time.

According to the poet George Henein, "Kanaan planted nails to obliterate space and used thread to untie knots and created wooden shutters to explore what's beyond them. Using iron threads, he built walls. A master of contradictions, an invincible painter, he made matter speak for all that is exclusively human."