

INTERVIEW WITH HOSSAM DIRAR
by art journalist and writer Lisa Pollman



Hossam Dirar, *On the bench, waiting*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 106 x 110 cm

In an interview last year in Cairo Scene, you mentioned that your work in 2011 focused on the Egyptian Revolution. Besides the change in themes from then until today, have your techniques or mediums changed? How?

In the beginning, during the revolution, I used to rely on actual footage that I took during that time. During that period, I was playing with collages and mixed media. Later, this technique developed into a more traditional form of oil painting. My work was much more flat and one-dimensional when I started. It's now more about the actual texture, with depths and reliefs.

Your work often addresses the inequality of women in modern-day Egyptian society. In your opinion, what is the mission of artists in contemporary society? Does art have the power to change people's minds?

I discovered that the key to change in the Middle East is in its women. So, I focused on their struggles and attempted to look for solutions in the hopes of solving the problems of the region.

I'm convinced that art is a powerful tool in shaping people's minds, and artists therefore must point out the issues of their time. I believe it's the artist's obligation to see the problems in society and try to solve them through his/her art so that we can change people's perceptions. Maybe this is the beginning of the solution.

You spent time in Spain (and several other cities in Europe) recently. Have you been inspired by any themes or motifs that you saw during your time there? If so, have you incorporated them into your work? How?

My trips to Europe give me a lot of inspiration because of the conflicts that happen in one's mind when exposed to different cultures. Spain specifically affected me greatly as I saw the Arabic culture and how it was living there in peace with the Europeans – and in turn, this union paved the way for major developments and progress. The acceptance displayed by all these people of different cultures, frames of mind and religion, proved that our differences can actually be a good thing, because we worked together. Unfortunately, these differences today take us to conflict, thus negatively affecting everyone.

Where would you like to travel next? Why?

I yearn to visit Scandinavia next. I feel that the differences there will be even greater, allowing me to explore different ideas.

You've said that you particularly like the works of Austrian figurative painter Egon Schiele. What do you like about his work and how does it inspire you?

Yes. I admire the emotional aspects of his work, more so than his technique. I'm intrigued by how he brought out what people hold inside to the surface. He even did this with nature. For example, in his scenic work, you sense the emotional aspect of the space.

Is there room for nostalgia in your work?

Of course because I believe history repeats itself, and that man has always had the same emotions, desires and mindsets. That does not change with time. I believe that looking at history is the best way to see the future. It's like a mirror for the future.

Please tell us more about your work for the Copelouzos Family Art Museum in Greece. How does it address the collection's theme "Conflict"? What particular emotions do you seek to portray in your multi-layer "texturized palettes"?

Over the last few years, I have spent a lot of time in Europe. In my mind, there's a conflict between all these cultures. So the piece I did for this collection, represented all the conflict that I was going through at that time. The black and white painting with abstract movements, with streaks of red that symbolized my desire, were aimed to reflect my internal conflicts.

Tell us more about your recent exhibition "Invitation Au Voyage". What narrative does your use of the bicycle in these works seek to expose?

This collection talks about the lack of freedom Egyptians have, how they even have difficulty doing something as simple as riding a bike. This is a huge problem in our society! So via this exhibition, I wanted to talk about women's rights. It's their right to ride a bicycle in the streets of Egypt freely and feel safe. I wanted to challenge the traditional ideas and mentality that refuses to change the rights of women.

How would you explain the Egyptian contemporary art scene to someone who is new to the country and its creative traditions?

We don't have a strong contemporary art scene in Cairo, there are only a handful of venues. Most of the art is modern. The problem is more with the artists, as they still don't understand contemporary art. We don't have exposure or the education needed for that to happen and there is this lack of galleries that exhibit real contemporary art. Despite all this, the audience loves to see contemporary art and enjoy its themes tremendously.

Has the art scene there changed since the Arab Spring? How?

Of course. We now see a lot more political themes in art than before. Both artists and audience are aware of this, specifically the importance of the art making these statements more important than the quality of the work. A lot of artists changed their voice to a more political one.