

Figurative Encounters: Exhibition Haphazardly Crosses Space, Time

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Born in 1911, Egyptian national artist Salah Taher has lived through many

important periods of world history and modern Egyptian milestones. Among many impressive years of work and created collections, Taher is well known for his 'tribal communities' series, where the artist masterfully and romantically combined human figurative outlines with the layered and flowing fabric robes.

This elegant and efficient style was influenced by Islamic geometry and Arabesque forms. He was once quoted as saying "Islamic art is the foundation of the European abstract movement". I wonder how Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko would feel about that statement if they were still alive today.

Another reason allows additional insights and nuances for Salah's seemingly effortless precision of human figures, was that the artist was a competitive boxer for many years. Years of stretching, weight training, and endurance exercises gave him first hand experiences in muscular structure and human anatomy that until today his expertise is rivalled by few counterparts. He proudly proclaimed, "a painter who does not practice any sport, will not have the potential to perfect his art."



Living out in the desert village is not always easy. Although at first glance, Salah's work is figurative in form, viewers sense an augmented, almost

optimistic mood of the subjects' existence. This is not a superficial glorification of the proletarian class but more a delightful, respectful commentary of the strength and impossible grace the subjects demonstrate in their everyday chaotic-and at times-disorderly lives.

At a later stage Salah adopted a more abstract approach to his creative process. At "Figurative Encounters", an art exhibition hosted by Art D'Egypte and Mashrabia Gallery, people will be able to witness this evolution for themselves.

The painter tries to use colours, lines, and curves to record the narrative and debate of the invisibles; the rhythms, hums, and tunes which are more musical than visual. Art critic Sobhy El-Sharony once admirably mentioned that Salah would often immediately paint after he read a curious passage of a book, flooded by a poem's emotion, or after a particularly joyful experience at the opera house.

One could go on for days about how talented or how immensely Taher has contributed to Egyptian modern art scene as with later pioneers. That is why it was good to see this lineage of 'abstract figurative' approach of a new medium, and a new conceptual level.

Meanwhile, Ahmed Askalany, 41, is known for his oversized bronze sculptures which capture the everyday scenes of upper Egypt, where he is originally from before moving to Cairo.

While his bronze creations of donkeys and hippopotamuses are highly sought after by international collectors, at 'Figurative Encounters' visitors get to see his equally famous series of conceptual sculptures made with dried palm tree leaves- a material that is so prevalent and universal in many countries and communities along the equator. The Artist carefully weaved by hand the life sized figures. Some figures pray alone on the ground, while some sit or stand

in a circle.

Askalany wishes to “represent village people and all the simplicity and goodness associated with village life, where people wake up before dawn, and sleep soon after dark. Everyone sits like this [the sculptures], arms crossed, as a sign of respect.”

Askalany is interested in capturing this quality of innocence, which is often lost after one moves to bigger cities. Perhaps this is what the artist wants us to remember, calling on us to return to innocence when we can.



There are embracing sculptural lovers, and their intimate connection is not through their lips but rather via a tender touch of their foreheads. There was also a set which steered away from the pattern with the rest of his work: an arrangement of three female figures, standing next to each other appearing to be all covered up in their traditional clothes. Only one figure has her eyes exposed, while the second one only has her mouth exposed, and the third has both her eyes and mouth shut. These women might have their senses blocked but they continue to stand tall with poise and dignity. If Salah was alive, he would be so proud to see his courage and spirit have been passed on.

Askalany has taken something ordinary and transformed it into a social commentary. The survival skill of residual palm leaves weaving: the artist elevated a traditional artisanal technique to a fine art medium which enters the hallways of international museums, biennale pavilions, and tasteful collector’s homes. Come over to the gallery space and get lost in time tracing the peculiar, endless lines and curves on Salah Taher’s drawings, and feel the

meditative power which seems to radiate from those majestic, yet subtle palm leaves figures weaved by Askalany.