

Redressing identity: The work of Chant Avedissian

The death this week of Chant Avedissian robs Egypt of one of its best known artists. Though his international reputation had grown steadily over the last two decades in his homeland, his best known work remains a handful of images from the extensive series of Cairo Stencils, portrayals of iconic figures from Egyptian popular culture of the latter half of the 20th century.

Chant Avedissian, artist, b Cairo, 24 November 1951; d Cairo, 24 October 2018

Chant Avedissian is a member of that growing band of artists whose name is more familiar than their work. That this is the case speaks volumes about what is deemed newsworthy in our cultures, and how that news is processed. Type his name in any search engine and the chances are that top of the results will be the news that, in 2013, he broke auction records at Sotheby's: click on images and what you will see is a selection from the series of works that broke those records – intensely stylised portraits of Umm Kalthoum and of a host of singers and actors and actresses from the golden age of Egypt's cinema, saturated and glittering portrayals – literally so, given the artist's liberal use of gold paint – of a very glitzy crowd. What you won't get is any suggestion these works are a typical: that they form a limited part of the stencil series from which they are drawn and an even less representative sample of Avedissian's work as a whole. They offer a lopsided representation of his output, one that has permitted the mistaken view to develop that the artist was somehow a purveyor of nostalgia for some glamorous but now lost age.

Of course no art is produced in a vacuum; neither is it particularly useful – whatever the attempts to impose a cordon sanitaire or to sterilise the

venues in which it is displayed – for it to be viewed in one.

Chant Avedissian was born in Cairo, Egypt in 1951. The name, place, date - they are all important. Avedissian – not an Arabic name but Armenian, though he was born in Cairo, and in 1951, a year before King Farouk was deposed in the 1952 Revolution planned by a group of army officers under the leadership of Gamal Abdel-Nasser.

Avedissian has made many images of Nasser, and more than a few of King Farouk. Both men appear in the extensive series of stencils he worked on between 1991 and 2004. The background of the image of Nasser on this page contains both the Eagle of Saladin, first introduced as a symbol of the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and which still occupies the central white band of the Egyptian flag, together with a simplified map of the Arab world, a very clear reference to the pan-Arabism Nasser would espouse.

Avedissian grew up during the heyday of Nasserist pan-Arabism, a subject which would have dominated what discourse was permitted in the state owned media after Nasser nationalised the press on 24 May 1956, transforming it into a tool for the regime. Now, I think it is necessary to ask ourselves what Nasser's pan-Arabism – which would have been a ubiquitous topic in the media as Avedissian was growing up in Cairo – might have looked like to an Egyptian of non-Arab descent. It is, after all, a project riddled with contradictions only partially glossed by the anti-colonialist rhetoric of independence, one whose overweening recourse to homogeneity rests on a flipside of exclusion.

I think it's a safe bet to assume any response would, at the very least, be complicated. Certainly, a very complex relationship with the press emerges in any close examination of the Cairo Stencils – all based on images which first appeared in the illustrated papers that proliferated in the years immediately before and, to a far greater extent, after the 1952 Revolution. There are more than 200 images in the series, and they are a motley bunch. The stencils include Sayed Jamaledine Al- Afghani (1838-1897), political

adventurer, anti-imperial campaigner, religious moderniser, Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, double agent or hardened opportunist – take your pick, alongside screen siren Hind Rustom (1929-2011), the Egyptian actress whose fate it was to be dubbed the Egyptian Marilyn Monroe. Gamal Abdel- Nasser (1918-1970), depicted in the kinds of heroic pose most readily associated with socialist realism, appears alongside a female shot-putter (another nod to the imagery of Soviet propaganda), political prisoners and pick-pockets.

Even a brief selection from the Cairo stencils is enough to show the range of subjects. It is a catholic gathering. In the great democracy of Avedissian's stencils Nasser shares equal weight with a sportswoman, with political prisoners and petty criminals.

The one thing the occupants of this pantheon share is that they were all depicted in the illustrated magazines and papers that proliferated in immediately before and after the 1952 Revolution. The Cairo Stencils are images of images. They can, as Avedissian noted, be endlessly reworked from the cut outs he made based on the published pictures. In each reproduction backgrounds can be changed, new juxtapositions created.

A single subject can be placed in multiple contexts. A soldier, symbol of our Arab forces as the calligraphic Arabic title declares, can charge heroically, Kalashnikov in hand, across a background of live fire and a battlefield occupied by ghostly silhouettes of other soldiers, but he can also charge across a field of heraldic eagles interspersed with the order NO PHOTOS, in capitalised Latin script, a once ubiquitous instruction in the vicinity of government or military facilities which, given the constant war footing on which Egypt was placed, could mean anywhere. They may be “our” forces but “we” cannot take a snapshot of them. We are not allowed to re-imagine them. But Our Arab Forces, as envisaged by Avedissian and symbolised by the soldier, can also be made to charge across a map of the Arab world, against fields of motifs drawn from 17th century Ottoman fabrics,

architectural details culled from the length of the Silk Road or landscapes populated with a menagerie of hieratic figures of the kind that march around the walls of ancient tombs.

Chant was very clear about what he perceived as the advantages of his stencilling technique.

“Stencilling gave me the possibility of variation,” he said. “Once the drawing was cut out I could concentrate on colour, or different backgrounds.”

The process also imposed formal qualities.

The schematising of the figures, the paring down of all pictorial elements to areas of flat colour, turns the construction of a national identity pursued by the Egyptian regime following the revolution of 1952 – for that is, to a great extent, what the big state owned publishing houses were engaged in, alongside the Ministry of Culture or, to give it its full name up until 1970s, the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance – into an essentially decorative enterprise.

Avedissian’s simplification involved an acute compression of narratives. The subsequent emphasis on variation and the creation of new contexts by juxtaposition serves, ironically, to amplify the pick and mix techniques of the propagandist. The caption that accompanied the source image was usually retained, allowing the inclusion of calligraphy, that most privileged of Islamic art forms, in the overall design.

“Then,” Chant wrote, “I moved to a larger format, which enabled me to assemble on one panel different subjects and thus tell a story. Made on corrugated cardboard – sold as packing item in the souks of Cairo, in rolls and by the kilo...



Abdel-Nasser

“By attaching all the panels together, a whole space could be created. This gave me a large field of manoeuvre. The idea was also to replace the notion of one painting by a whole range of images that could be reused, replaced, interchanged and redesigned...”

It is a process which negates the possibility of any nostalgia for a supposedly Golden Age. By reusing images produced as part and parcel of the project to police the perimeters of identity, to promote a patriotism acceptable to the state and its approved narratives, the Stencils undermine, with humour and an often understated irony, the foundations of that enterprise. The carpet is pulled from beneath the Nasserist state’s attempts to construct identity. Indeed, I would go a step further and argue that Chant Avedissian’s stencils express a deep antipathy to the hegemonic, whatever form it might take.

In describing his own work Chant frequently employed architectural metaphors.

“My art master was the adobe brick,” he has said. “Putting three bricks together to make a wall, to make a pattern, it’s magic.”

Architectural elements also form the subject of many pieces. Chant took many photographs of details of the glazed brick walls of mosques and other buildings in Samarkand and of brickwork patterns from buildings in the Egyptian oases of the Western desert.

His acknowledgement of the influence of the adobe brick, of the process of building with a single unit, on his own practice is a roundabout way of paying tribute to the influence of the visionary Egyptian architect Hassan Fathi (1902-1989). In 1981 Chant began filing the architect’s papers and drawings, an association that would continue until Fathi’s death in 1989.

Fathi’s purism, his insistence “that genuine Egyptian art and the revival of crafts had to be tackled simultaneously” and belief “that the merging of ancient and modern art would succeed only if no external interference in the adoption of materials, techniques or cultural assessments” was allowed, would have a major impact. The architectural conceits which Avedissian continued to use in describing his own methods, indeed much of the work he produced during the 80s, the period in which he worked with the architect, can be seen, in terms of both process and content, as the artist’s homage to Fathi.

In 1985 Avedissian held his first exhibition of textile hangings. The works exhibited were the result of a painstaking process of assembly. The basic unit – Avedissian’s own toubā – were the three basic shapes of the rectangle, square and triangle from which, he says, “one is able to construct panels out of wood, paper or any other material”. The results often echo the stark geometries of Fathi’s buildings.

The source patterns are eclectic, ranging from the painted triangular decoration of 18th dynasty sarcophagi to the marble decoration of Mameluke mosques. But while some of the patterns may be from Egypt the form has a wider cultural resonance.



Avedissian

“It was in western Rajasthan, and particularly in Jaisalmer, that I first came into contact with the world of appliqué textiles which inspired me to make textile panels,” wrote Avedissian. “Travelling by train through the Thar Desert one arrives at this ancient city through which merchants passed as they crossed Iran from Africa along the caravan route to India and China.

“The square is divided into rectangles and triangles. These squares placed together to form the panels. Several assembled panels form the tent; it’s a movable space, easily disassembled, folded and transported.”

Caravan routes to India and China, travelling through the Thar Desert, movable spaces – tents – suggestive of the kinds of nomadic existence the imposition of national borders has eradicated: the appeal to pre-modern models is at once deliberate, and deliberately contrived. It is difficult – no, it is impossible – to believe Chant did not first come into contact with such textiles in Cairo where an entire district is dedicated to the creation of the appliqued panels which are such a noticeable feature of the celebratory and funeral tents erected in the streets. But this is hardly the point. The post-event rationalisation of the origins of his own panels which he elaborated some two decades after the panels were made – is telling. It seeks to delineate a cultural space where borders are irrelevant and posits a visual language that is not constricted by such boundaries. It insists that a triangle is a triangle in China and Egypt and France, that a square is a square.

The same impulse is present in his account of the costumes he created beginning in 1987.

“There is not much difference over a huge expanse of geography in the basic cuts of a traditional costume,” he wrote. “Much as in Silk Road architecture, similarity is a constant feature...

From the Atlas mountains to the Nile, from Morocco to Mongolia Avedissian identifies variations on a theme.

Class boundaries are equally insubstantial.



Avedissian

“The wealthier the individual and the higher their social status the more expensive the material but from the top to the bottom of society the cut is the same.”

To note that reality differs from the idealised space Avedissian delineates is again to miss the point. Utopias necessarily involve wishful thinking.

A square may be a square but not all squares are equal, something Avedissian knew better than most.

To mark the centenary of Kazimir Malevich’s black square the Whitechapel Gallery in London staged an exhibition – Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015 – which it described as follows: “This epic show takes Kazimir Malevich’s radical painting of a black square – first shown in Russia 100 years ago – as the emblem of a new art and a new

society. The exhibition features over 100 artists who took up its legacy, from Buenos Aires to Tehran, London to Berlin, New York to Tel Aviv. Their paintings, photographs and sculptures symbolise Modernism's utopian aspirations and breakdowns."

Chant Avedissian was among the artists included. However explicit he had been about the pre-modern origins of his own textile squares they could still be co-opted by an exhibition to celebrate abstract art and society between 1915 and 2015 and exhibited beneath a rubric that straitjackets them as symbolising "Modernism's utopian aspirations and breakdowns".

Perhaps it was an attempt to escape such straitjacketing – to sidestep a discourse so hegemonic it can shamelessly portray artisans in Central Asia as taking up the legacy of Suprematism, transforming them – without a blush – into workers at the coal face of a European avantgarde – that in his last works, the panels included in the exhibition staged last year by Casa Arabe in Madrid, Avedissian foregrounded the designs that once formed the backdrop to the Cairo Stencils. He dispensed with figurative elements drawn from the pages of Egypt's national press the better to focus attention on what is most often overlooked in the schema of earlier works. It is a reductionist ploy, though one which has the effect of opening up hitherto concealed vistas and, in so doing, amplifying concerns that had long been central to his work.

The panels that were included in the exhibition illuminate, rather than conceal, complexity. This time the juxtapositions were of abstracted forms drawn from designs on Bukhara caftans, Khiva mudbrick wall patterns, the geometries of the polychromatic marble floor of the 14th century Mosque of Sultan Hassan in Cairo, the çintamani of Ottoman velvets embroidered in gold thread.

The panels themselves are pared down, elegant. They serve as milestones on a journey that follows the Silk Road across the steppes of Central Asia. The destination, Samarkand, is both fabled city and a real place. It is a

confluence – the intersection between the story/fable and reality/the city with its material culture, that Avedissian always explored, juxtaposing privileged narratives with unseemly facts.

Chant always took the long view: in examining the nexus of myth and reality he refused to allow hearsay to pose as history, expediency to dress up as fate. The exotic is just one trope he repeatedly shoots down.

Among the milestones along the journey is a panel which superimposes the Ottoman *çintamani* – as seen in the ceremonial robe of Murad IV – a triangle of three spots and a pair of wavy bands – over repeated Bukhara floral designs. Of course, there is little that can be neutral about an Armenian artist deploying Ottoman motifs. It cannot help but be a loaded gesture. But nothing in Avedissian's work is as simple as it seems. The tiger stripes and spots of the *çintamani*, a typical feature of Turkish textiles and ceramics for centuries, may appear quintessentially Ottoman but the motif predates Ottoman rule by several hundred years. It can be traced to the Buddhist period in China when the lines represented sanctity. It was used by Tamerlane (1336-1405) on coinage and to mark property. The spots could allude to leopards, the pelts of which were worn by heroes in the Persian tradition. In China the circles represented pearls.

Take the long view and symbols cannot be reduced, just as identities cannot to be constructed at the whim of the state.

The deceptively simple decorative motifs which Avedissian appropriates reverberate across the vast spaces traversed by the Silk Road. They echo in a space where boundaries are negated, where hegemonies cannot distort and identities need not be improvised.

It is in this space – capacious as a continent – that the artist carved out a home. Throughout his career he focussed on a single point, a geometrical abstraction, the parallel lines at the centre of a complex equation – the place where a square can be a square can be a square.

