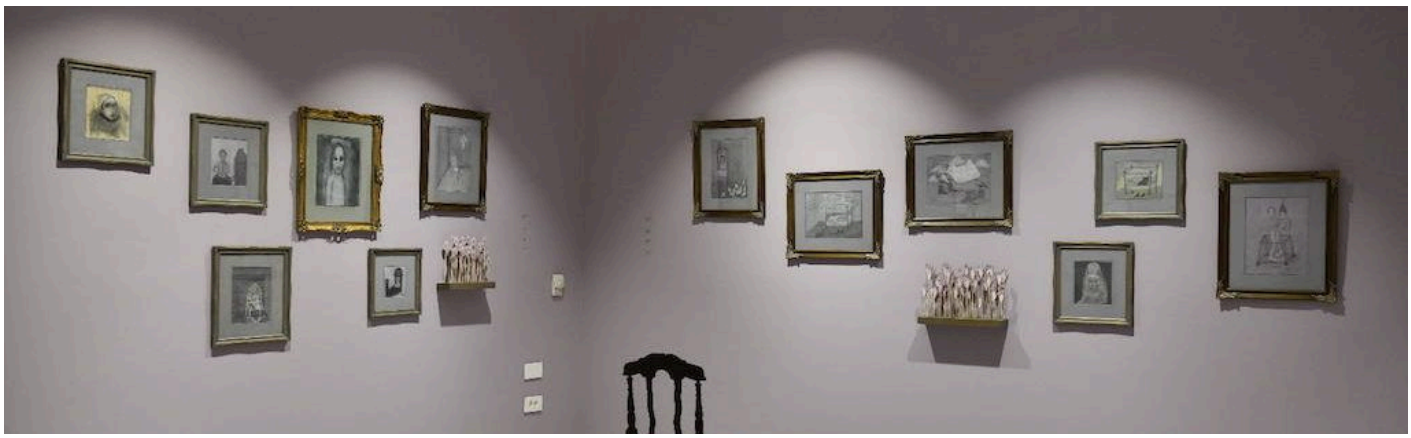
CULTURE / EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Huda Lutfi creates a captivating world of silence in AUC show



When Dreams Call for Silence at the Tahrir Cultural Center - Courtesy: The American University in Cairo

By
Sara Elkamel
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Prominent contemporary artist Huda Lutfi sifted through poems by French-Egyptian surrealist writer Joyce Mansour (1928-1986) and found a title for her new exhibition. She had just spent a year and a half producing a new body of work to show at the newly inaugurated Tahrir Cultural Center at the American University in Cairo (AUC)'s downtown campus, and it was waiting on a name. After a full day of consuming poetry on her computer screen, she emailed the curator, Shiva Balaghi,

suggesting: When Dreams Call for Silence, and received an immediate, enthusiastic yes.

Lutfi was pleased. Mansour was an inspiration for more than just her poetry; she belonged to a movement, now almost a century old, to which Lutfi feels deeply connected today.

“The surrealist movement emerged in the 30s and 40s, when people went inwards because what was outside was horrible,” Lutfi tells me at the press preview. “We’re now going through a rough time politically; there’s a lot of death, a lot of violence,” she continues. “It’s exactly at times like these when artists and writers look inwards. And that’s exactly where I found myself.”

Huda Lutfi, who was born in 1948, is a Cairo-based visual artist and a cultural and feminist historian. She holds a doctorate in Islamic culture and history from McGill University in Canada, and spent close to two decades teaching at the American University in Cairo. Her work has been shown in Cairo and abroad, and sits in the collections of major institutions, including the British Museum in London and the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah. She is perhaps best known for her bricolage work, but her practice also includes painting, video, installation, photography and more.

Her engagement with the January 25 revolution — she resides in downtown Cairo, and regularly participated in protests

— meant that for years, her work was unabashedly political. It was hardly possible for her to continue to practice as a studio artist; like many other contemporary Egyptian artists, Lutfi took her camera and went outside.

“We were on the street for two years straight. My health completely deteriorated. It was exhausting,” she says now.

And the post-2011 period left its marks on more than her body. She brings up “Cut and Paste”, her solo show at Townhouse Gallery in December 2013, which unfolded like a visual archive of the moment. I clearly remember how that exhibition drowned viewers in images typical of the

revolutionary visual discourse — policemen, newspaper headlines, and the portraits of martyrs.

“It was very political, because I wanted to express all the anguish inside of me,” Lutfi reflects.

Over the past couple of years, however, the artist gradually retreated: into her studio, and into herself. In a recent show in Dubai, she showed abstract work that she made by cutting up and destroying older work. “I just wanted to play with form and color. The work had no message, thank God,” she tells me, letting out an emphatic sigh of relief. And at Gypsum Gallery last year, she showed Dawn Portraits, a series of paintings that also abandoned the political.

In that 2013 Townhouse show and elsewhere in Lutfi's oeuvre, you'd find objects that she had collected in Cairo's many markets, like Souq al-Imam and al-Ataba, or on the street. Recycling and the use of found materials have long been integral to her practice, yielding work with strong traces of the external physical world. In When Dreams Call For Silence, however, the city almost disappears.

“Resting” by Huda Lutfi. Barry Iverson - Courtesy: Barry Iverson

The two rooms that hold the work are painted a dreamy lilac, so divergent from Cairo’s palette. Though she exhibits objects, sculptures and a video animation, paintings make up the majority of the show. In them, Lutfi indulges in depicting the body, though the forms are often ghostlike; they appear in fragments and bathe in hues of gray and lavender. The work, which extends Lutfi’s voyage into surrealist painting, alternately disturbs and soothes — a reflection of the artist’s bumpy grappling with silence, and with notions of life and death.

“Instead of the outside world of Cairo, we’re seeing the inside world of Huda,” Balaghi tells me amid the opening day rush. The

esteemed cultural historian curated this show, along with a corresponding exhibition by Los Angeles-based artist Shirin Guirguis, also at the Tahrir Cultural Center, as part of her new role as provost for AUC's arts and culture program. "This is Huda's most personal show to date," she adds.

Among the strongest pieces is a portrait imbued with shades of gray and titled "The Last Gaze." In it, an androgynous figure with long, stringy hair — topped with a comically large ribbon — turns slightly and gazes sideways. The eyes are bold and wide-open, standing out among the show's other slumbering portraits. Below a stunted neck, the torso hangs flat and lifeless, evoking the

body of a doll. The face appears distorted– the lips pursed and tiny, the forehead a little too large. You can't quite tell how old the subject is, or what gender. It is common for Lutfi's work to challenge gender representations; some of the portraits she showed at Gypsum Gallery last winter kept the gender of the subject ambiguous.

“The Last Gaze” by Huda Lutfi - Courtesy: Barry Iverson

Lutfi is standing beside me when I tell her this piece is one of my favorites. I like how it defies gender and beauty norms, I say, and I suddenly spot a trace of resemblance between her and the captivating creature gazing back at us. Lutfi glances at the portrait briefly before her face contorts, tears simmering behind her glasses. For a moment, I see her face as a replica of the portrait on the wall, brilliantly animated.

“I gave it that title as if to ask: What if this was my last gaze?” she says. More tears escape as she confesses that death frightens her. “I’m scared of being nothing.”

This concern with erasure and disintegration can also be felt in “Broken bodies,” a box crammed with decaying dolls

and placed in a corner on the floor. The box of toys seems like it could belong in a children's playroom, until you realize that some of the dolls are actually headless, some limbless, and some stripped and muddied.

It is not too difficult to deduce, from the work's title and by looking at the strong presence of human figures in the remainder of the show, that Lutfi's use of dolls here, as in many of her other projects, is symbolic.

"Dolls are copies of us," she says. "I always love working with them as a way to reflect on the human condition." This particular piece, Lutfi explains, is about the dissolution of bodies. Behind it is an earnest desire to find out: "What happens

to us?” She says this with a desperate gusto, like she really wants to know.

“Broken Bodies” by Huda Lutfi - Courtesy: Barry Iverson

Elsewhere in the show, Lutfi presents human bodies that are “broken” or fragmented. Pinned atop uneven wooden sticks and mounted on protruding wooden shelves are sets of paper-thin eyes, ears, and palms. Dubbed “Touching,” the set of floating hands perhaps works best, particularly since it is configured in a way — with the help of a light fixture — that has the palms leaning against the lilac wall, as if trying to reach across it and into another dimension.

It is less effective when a life-size hand creeps up from under a white lace veil perched on a small table with long legs nearby. The hand — made from synthetic resin — is pale and stiff, and the index

finger is pointing upwards, rendering the installation slightly too eerie—in a much less elegant way than the rest of the work.

Lutfi's grappling with the idea of rupture is best expressed in a mesmerizing painting titled "Edge of Dissolution." Two figures, seemingly a man and a woman, hover over an unidentifiable vehicle with four small wheels. Their eyes are closed, and their arms and torsos vanish behind washes of purple that resemble mist. Inside the odd vehicle are two legs, one of his and one of hers, conjoined at the hips and hardly useful. The piece exudes a sense of suspension, and of intimacy that is doomed yet persistent. The couple's hair flows

upwards, the strands like roots, magically tethered to the sky.

“Edge of Dissolution” by Huda Lutfi. - Courtesy: Barry Iverson

Furniture that Lutfi brought from her apartment — including a chair, chandeliers, and a table — are scattered across one of the exhibition rooms.

“I was trying to make this room look like a home,” Lutfi explains. It was important for her to demonstrate that this preoccupation with life, death and silence permeates her reality. “I wanted to give this sense that I am inside of all this. This is my campus,” she says. “I wanted to say that what’s outside is so difficult, that all I want is to go inwards.”

These domestic objects, however, are not working as well as they could be. For one, it is not made clear that they belong to the

artist; some visitors on opening day were a bit confused as to whether or not they were allowed to sit on the chair facing one of the walls. And because the walls and floors are so manicured, the objects lose any hint of domesticity. It would have been more successful perhaps to create a replica of a corner from the artist's home; or simply to bring in a few more objects.

Though the show features a large number of works spanning various mediums, it by no means feels disjointed — the pieces work exceptionally well together to create a captivating showground of unidentifiable creatures dealing with different forms of loss and disembodiment. The degree of intensity with which such loss is expressed,

however, is masterfully manipulated by Lutfi, to make it at times sharp and blatant, other times more delicately poignant. The different ways she uses shrouds, for instance, illuminate this dexterity. In “Hands of Silence,” a wooden vitrine holds two rows of miniature portraits, each of them tightly wrapped in shrouds that cover the “body.” A couple of them keep an eye open, but the rest have their eyelids fastened. A single life-like hand creeps out from under the muslin to gently cover the lips, as if in expression of mourning. The figures, all curved at the top and shaped like coffins, are trapped behind glass that asserts their silence even further.

Elsewhere in the show, muslin reappears. This time, portraits of women hang from the ceiling on thin wires, their faces tilted tenderly, their eyes closed. Some even have hints of smiles on their faces. This time, the muslin clumsily wraps around their bodies, and drapes down charmingly towards the floor.

“Floating” by Huda Lutfi - Courtesy: Sara Elkamel

“For this one, I really imagined a state of silence,” Lutfi says before a long pause. She starts to explain what she was trying to do with this piece, but quickly trails off. After struggling for a few more seconds, she decides to show me.

“Look what happens when you walk by them?” she tells me, suddenly taking brisk steps back and forth in the meter or so in front of the work. The figures twirl slightly in the wind she’s created, no longer limp. While the shrouded women in the vitrine are so tightly gripped by the fabric and poised on thin, unmoving wooden sticks, these floating women seem more at ease with their captivity.

This second work is placed beside a 30-second video that captures a row of bodies, from the waist down, marching in unison. They take step after step, yet do not advance a single inch. The figures, which move to an excerpt of Antonio Vivaldi’s “Filiae maestae Jerusalem”, appear to be in

some kind of pharaonic-era dress, but are otherwise unidentified. (This calls to mind another strong piece in the show; a painting of a procession of naked bodies against a pink background, their faces dramatically replaced by black umbrellas.) The video runs on loop, like an audiovisual rosary. Lutfi says this is her favorite piece.

“It soothes me,” she says, her eyes moistening again. She explains how it draws on the Sufi practice of zikr.

When Lutfi is not in tears during our conversation, she is on the verge of them, her face betraying a mix of exhaustion, pain, and disenchantment. It is a common expression among many of us who, in this

post-revolutionary era, feel a sense of insurmountable defeat, and a haunting fear.

When I ask her if she was scared of making work that's overtly political, she shrugs. "I just wasn't interested. There's a great nonchalance," she says.

"But [this show] is an expression of grief," she says, looking around at the work. "What else is all this?" She waves her arms sweepingly, almost defeatedly.

I am not sure what all this is, but to me, it is more than just mourning. The masterful way she captures the fear and turmoil she experiences puts fear to shame, and asserts a refreshing perseverance in the face of difficulty. If only we could all mourn so productively.

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When Dreams Call for Silence runs until February 28 at the Margo Veillon Gallery, Tahrir Cultural Center, American University in Cairo

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