

Black Art During [Counter] Revolution

The work of Black artists in Egypt is an overlooked yet important part of that country's ongoing struggle.

Edna Bonhomme — April 14, 2014



*“In the whole world you know
There are billions of boys and girls
Who are young, gifted, and Black”*

Written by Weldon Irvine and popularized by Nina Simone, “To be young, gifted, and black” was an anthem for African Americans seeking legitimacy in the arts. Although this song originally was an elegy for Nina Simone’s friend, Lorraine Hansberry — acclaimed author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, it was part of a broader conversation about the challenges that black virtuosos faced in the United States. As racial minorities who encountered multiple burdens of discrimination, challenging the dominant discourse about black subservience was part of a revolutionary framework.

Fifty years later, the lyrics of this song still echo in the hearts of revolutionaries who imagine “young, gifted, and black” people thriving in all corners of the world. Perched at the cusp of African, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean history, Cairo is a *mélange* of different ethnic and racial groups — indigenous and foreign. The revolution has been political in tone but cultural in practice. Albert Einstein once said, “The Revolution introduced me to art, and in turn, art introduced me to the Revolution!” While constitutional quarrels and electoral debates have sprung since the revolution, art has been front and center of the Arab Spring. It is in a revolutionary situation that people’s ideas can come to bear yet recent discussions by Egypt’s cabinet may restrict the topography of street art.

Contemporary Egyptian society is experiencing some setback but it is part of a long *durée* of art production from the Qaytbay period (1468-96) to the modern state-funded initiatives at the beginning of the twentieth century. Contemporary art education took more precedence when Prince Youssef Kamel Art School (now the School of Fine Arts) was founded in 1908. Artists such as Mahmoud Mokhtar attended this premier institution and prevailed in generating avant-garde North African/Middle Eastern art. Under Nasserism, Egyptian contemporary art transformed from a more European style to an “Arab” style. Yet this style would undergo transformation during the seventies. Some claim that Anwar Sadat’s regime was a period when Nasser’s pan-Arabic art subsided and moved closer to “Islamic” infused art. The standard narrative has a stake in how contemporary artists contextualize their work but the Cairene art scene is an imbroglio saturated with different nationalist styles.

Twenty-first century artists are part of a matrix of cultures that reach across the Mediterranean and the continent. Egyptian artist [Mohamed Taha Hussein](#) is best known for linking German and Egyptian art styles by incorporating calligraphic script with expressionist colors. In December of 2013, I attended a gallery opening at the [Nile Sunset Annex](#) that featured works that read “I love Bjork,” and “I went to Art School”. Egyptian artists were pointing to their connection with Western European and North American art and music. The crowd was mixed — Egyptian and non-Egyptians, mostly affluent but also students, journalists, and writers. The ability to stand in the midst of history and new art formations has been inspiring and it points to a revolutionary situation. Yet, one thing was missing from these scenes and the wall space — works that specifically addressed issues of race or the African continent writ large. Yet, my experience in the city illustrated that there were sub-Saharan Africans living and working in Cairo. Some of them were migrants but others were born and raised in Egypt. Surely there was an artist among them.

Amado al Fadni

I met Amado al Fadni, through a friend, in January 2014 at an art exhibit in Downtown Cairo. The building was somewhat dilapidated but it exhibited character and grace with its dark walls and French doors. This was a place where foreigners and Egyptians gathered. Yet, distilled in that mostly white European and Egyptian space were pieces that addressed issues consumption, nostalgia, and revolution. It was for these reasons that I was struck by Amado because he did not fit the mold of what one saw in the typical Egyptian art scene. He is an Egyptian born Sudanese national who stands within the discourse of Tahrir Square as a black non-Egyptian with multiple identities. As an artist living in Egypt, Amado [engages](#) with a wide range of medium including performance and video art.

Months later in Downtown Cairo, I interviewed Amado al Fadni in the mechanics alley of Downtown Cairo. We sat at a café on an unmarked street near the [Townhouse Gallery](#) and spoke about the intersections of art and race in pre and post-revolutionary Egypt. In the pre-revolutionary situation, he worked with Sudanese people to create phony passports that would designate newfound nationalities irrespective of race, ethnicity, or religion. The point of his piece was to use art to transcend the legal statures that emerged during the Sudanese partition.

Art has the power to work with broader political contexts and Amado explained the ways that the revolution allowed him to shift how he packaged his work to others. “The idea of not just taking or not just limiting the revolution in a room or in a gallery space. I wanted people to be involved,” Amado emphasized. Sub-Saharan artists are proud of their work and often serve as links between North and Sub-Saharan Africa; however, they are also marginalized and are driven to use alternative methods of survival to make a space in the Cairene art scene. Amado comments: “I do

not have Egyptian nationality so the chances for me to display my work or get into competitions are really narrow. For right now, I am working on re-reading history: African history and colonial history.” Amado finds that talking about discrimination is not a subject that people are interested in but he uses his own methods to bridge people across religious and ethnic lines.



Some of al Fadni's work. Mattress Factory museum, Pittsburgh

Art is linked to one's connection to the communities that one inhabits by but people can use multiple media to make sense of revolution. Amado, recalled how he tried to capture this issue by experimenting with video. Subsequently, he “tried to get out of Tahrir because the voice of Tahrir was the voice everyone was trying to hear”; propitiously, the people he came across in the outskirts of Cairo spoke about the revolution and how it impacted their lives. Because the interviews were participatory, Egyptians in these marginal communities were in dialogue with each other and a Sudanese artist.

Twentieth-century Egyptian art is speckled with diverse styles and black artist are part of that. It is not only a pan-Arab, nationalist movement that hovers on gallery walls but the work of black artists such as Amado stand within a revolutionary situation. What we learn from this is that art in Egypt can be political, revolutionary, and black. It can incorporate two-dimensional pieces or performance art. At the same time, talented black artists are part of the part of the cultural landscape of art world in North Africa and the Middle East



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