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The Art of Urban Introspection

KINSEY KATCHKA

Throughout the world's urban centres, one finds dynamic creative communities where artists create work informed by the visual landscape around them. For many, this means capturing the density of stimuli and challenges of city life in a manner that resonates with the built environment and frenetic energy that constitute urban landscapes, and with the "visual overload of everyday life."¹ In Cairo, a city characterized by overpopulation, economic hardship, and widespread disparity, Islam is visibly and audibly manifested through its mosques, dress, and calls to prayer, and as such contributes to the city's multi-sensorial cacophony.

If Islam contributes to the dense sensory landscape of Cairene life in many respects, the more personal, contemplative aspects of Sufi practice permeate a more private sphere. Sufism, "the Science of the Heart," is widely considered "the inner dimension of Islam."² Sufi practice with its distinctly meditative, reflective dimension has, through the centuries, taken form in the pursuit of knowledge and its expression in poetry, text and script, and mystical numerology. Themes of duality, complementarity, tolerance, meditation, and repetition³—whether of images, words, or movement, as in mantras and movements of the *dhikr* ceremonies—recurring in Sufi thought and practice often take visual form in the work of artists whose work is influenced by Sufism whether intended or not. Regardless, historically Sufism has had a strong aesthetic component in which the moral dimensions of humanity, morality, and mutual obligation are inscribed.

A synthesis of these two paradoxical realms—the ultra-saturated urban cityscape and the introspective nature of Sufi spirituality—takes clear form in the artwork of Hazem El Mestikawy and Huda Lutfi.

Hazem El Mestikawy

Hazem El Mestikawy lives and works between Cairo and Vienna. The artist's sculptural installations are distinctly architectural forms, carefully and artfully constructed. In many of El Mestikawy's sculptures, each component is designed to fit into another, with no gaps between and no space for approximation. Throughout his body of work, positive and negative space carry equal weight and are mutually constitutive. El Mestikawy uses raw material from the urban environment, thus designing each installation to be practical as well as environmentally sound: the individual components can be packed for easy storage and economy of design, and most of the materials are recycled and recyclable. The artist builds flexibility into the design, and each work can be configured in any number of ways, so that each is characterized by both precision and flexibility. Made of cardboard understructure overlaid with small pieces of torn paper, this technique reinforces and strengthens the work's physical structure. He frequently uses recycled paper from everyday urban life such as newspaper and other discards. When torn apart, any text loses its literal meaning and legibility. Using text this way, El Mestikawy points out, the density of script determines the tonal range of the surface.⁴

Hazem El Mestikawy, 9A Letters

This article discusses the work of two Egyptian artists who are inspired by the urban environment as well as by Sufism. Their art reflects two aspects of Cairene life: the frenetic activity and density of communication that characterize cosmopolitan centres, and the more contemplative aspects of Sufism. The author argues that Sufi philosophies and practice mediate between the personal nature of spirituality and the realities of urban life in the present day.

His recent sculptural work clearly resonates with Sufi philosophy, most markedly that of mystical numerology and attention to text and script, even though not necessarily intended by the artist. In *9A Letters*, a series of nine sculptures exploring the first letter of nine regionally relevant alphabets (Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, Demotic, Coptic, Old Roman, Old Athens, Kufic, Neskha, and Modern), the artist investigates the multiple facets of script and three-dimensional form along with

this mystically significant number. He cites such intensive attention to a single form—in this case, the letter "A"—as an "expression of singular devotion." The notion of scripted knowledge and text takes on new meaning when abstracted and subsumed by the ensemble of nine sculptural components. It becomes infused into the mystical configuration of the whole, and the artist's conceptual framework overrides the letters' function as text. Indeed, the three-dimensional form of each individual letter derives from an architectural style concurrent with the use and/or introduction of that alphabet into the Egyptian region, and these deliberate architectural references evoke the changing built environment of this urban setting evolving over millennia. Literal text is subsumed by the artist's conceptual framework. Scripted knowledge, then, is submitted to El Mestikawy's meticulous creative process, thoughtfully synthesized and reinserted into his deeply personal meditation that moves beyond conventional language, definitions, and architectural convention.

Because of the streamlined form and monochromatic surface of the work, each piece looks deceptively simple: though the geometric forms may seem straightforward at a glance, their careful juxtaposition and precise interrelationship belies a precise and profoundly complex process. This treatment of positive and negative space—presence and absence—within each installation suggests the complementarity of masculine and feminine; of the human and divine, all inherent in Sufi philosophy. In *9A Letters*, the history of knowledge and passage of time are deeply embedded, as represented by the varied alphabets; some current, others relegated to relative obscurity, as are the correlate architectural manifestations.

Huda Lutfi

Unlike El Mestikawy, in whose work Sufism is a subtle influence that is more a matter of interpretation than intention, for Huda Lutfi Sufism is a deliberate point of departure. Having already established a long, distinguished, and ongoing career as a cultural historian whose scholarship focuses on medieval Islam and Sufism, Lutfi turned to visual arts in 1992, and her research interests in culture, history, and identity inform her creative work. Viewing the world as "a series of signs to be deciphered and interpreted," she makes paintings, collages, and installations that focus on themes of memory, gender, spirituality, and mediation. Lutfi considers the creative process as "an attempt at seeing, of seeing oneself, the effort to understand oneself."⁵ Commenting on her renovation work on her second home in Fayyum, she notes that the intention is "to take you to a special place of feeling and knowing, to some special consciousness, some sense of connection with the uni-



NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM OF ART © HAZEM EL MESTIKAWY, 2005

Huda Lutfi, *Labyrinth of Masha Dolls* (detail)



COURTESY OF THE THIRD LINE, DUBAI © HUDA LUTFI, 2006

In these, as well as *Labyrinth*, Lutfi drew on the meditative atmosphere of the nightly Sufi gatherings which Cairenes attend “as if to get away from the noise and colours of Cairo.” *The Secret of Repetition* and *Circle of Remembrance* refer to an aspect of Cairo that few people see, the Sufi aspect. Lutfi’s intention was to find a way to visually convey “an intangible state of being, of silence or mediation, the moving away from noise and forms to quietness.” To do so, she assembled numerous wooden shoe moulds that she found in large numbers at a downtown shoe factory. For *The Secret of Repetition*, each was cleaned, scraped, painted in silver, and inscribed with the old Sufi adage, “I am the companion of the one who remembers me.” Assembled en masse, they give the sense of repetition to reinforce the meaning. Lutfi explains that she “use[s] one sentence over and over again so it becomes like a mantra. That ties to Sufism too, the idea of repetition of one or two or three words, so it quiets you down ... That’s the purpose of the mantra, to make the mind empty and quiet” so one can achieve greater insight.

Urban introspection

In their creative work, Hazem El Mestikawy and Huda Lutfi each evoke a reflective, peaceful domain that stands in stark contrast to the frenetic activity and density of communication that characterize Cairo’s public spaces (as well as those of other major cosmopolitan centres), even as the artists’ materials and forms create an indelible connection to that space – for El Mestikawy, in his deliberate inspiration by the built environment; for Lutfi, the city as an endless resource of materials and recycled imagery. Sufi philosophies and practice inform their work, and mediate between the deeply personal nature of spirituality and the realities of urban life in the present day.

Huda Lutfi,
The Secret of Repetition



COURTESY OF THE THIRD LINE, DUBAI © HUDA LUTFI, 2003

verse, some enlightenment or extra awareness,” and this applies to her artwork more broadly. This sense of special space and knowing emerges in her artwork, and resonates with El Mestikawy’s more overtly architectural sculptures.

Also like El Mestikawy, an element of recycling inheres in Lutfi’s work, perhaps most explicitly in her “Found in Cairo” and related “Alayis (Dolls)” series. For two years she embarked upon “a sort of archaeological venture,” carefully collecting objects from the city’s varied repositories such as flea markets, junk shops, and antique stores. Lutfi manipulated and assembled those objects in such a way as to induce reflection on common day-to-day experiences. Both series deliberately contest rigid notions of identity by including images or photos of faces which are not strictly defined as “Egyptian” but which have been found in the city’s old book stalls and second-hand shops.

In *Labyrinth of Masha Dolls*, Lutfi assembles tongs found at a vendor of *sheeshah* (water pipes) and related accessories. Normally, one sees plain tongs with no figurative shape or even surface decoration. Here, the functional implement takes on a voluptuous female form, while the chains that attach the tongs to the pipe, in this context, suggest the constraints women face in society, both in Egypt and elsewhere. The voluptuous metal tongs – over 100 of them here – are configured atop a delicate labyrinthine structure and are illuminated by a single light in an otherwise dark room. Rather than placing the installation on a stabilizing platform or table, she constructed a fragile wooden frame that is tenuously assembled, “so if you touch it one place, the whole thing moves and is affected” echoing the degree to which people and society are interconnected, as well as suggesting the fragile infrastructure of life in Cairo. Lutfi draws on the image of a labyrinth because she “wanted something with strong meaning to bring these together. A labyrinth is a fragile structure; a labyrinth is life”; appropriate, Lutfi notes, given that “life seems always to be fragile at [this] moment in Egypt and in the world,” politically, economically, and existentially. This is very much attached to the Sufi tradition, which teaches one “not to become too attached to things that can be lost so easily ... and therefore if you’re not so attached, then you are better able to deal with such situations of loss”; here, the chains constitute a metaphor for attachment.

Also like El Mestikawy, the notion of repetition as meditation is very apparent in Lutfi’s “Found in Cairo” and “Alayis (Dolls)” series, particularly in *The Secret of Repetition* and *Circle of Remembrance*.

Notes

1. Nick Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 8.
2. Ian Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (London: Curzon Press, 1992), 246.
3. Unless otherwise noted, the citations and quotations here by the artists are from personal communications between 2006 and 2008, during conversations in Cairo or in ensuing correspondence and telephone calls.
4. Linnea S. Dietrich, “Huda Lutfi: A Contemporary Artist in Egypt,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (2000): 12–15.
5. Ibid.

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