Together Alone

Sabry Mansour (b. 1943) belongs to the fourth generation artists engaged in processing an Egyptian cultural identity in visual language. After being trained in academic institutions following Western practices, he started his career by trying to reconcile his previous training with various modes of abstraction, derived from his cultural background. Abstraction in the art of ancient Egypt was both: aesthetic and functional; its transfigurations in Coptic and, later, in Arabesque developed the same concept, Islamic design being an abstraction of organic figures invested in decorative or architectural patterns. Mansour's world fuses elements from Egyptian myth, and rural landscape within an imaginative nocturnal environment. For him, identity is less a past than a becoming, which in the process grapples with existential and cosmic questions. This is configured in his constant search for visual relationships with self and the communal, the terrestrial and the celestial, the temporal present and the ever-abiding past. For the citizen to become part of a collective there need be a shared visual language capable of sustaining communication.

After fulfilling 'classical' requirements in his graduation project at the Faculty of Fine Arts *par excellence*, Mansour's early exhibitions - from 1963-73 – abandon all academic training as he starts to experiment with new spatial relations. At this period, his works are focused on the lone individual in space; they are characterized by a strict composition, and the absence of the third dimension. The withdrawn figures are viewed mostly from the back, set in a structural interrelationship with other elements such as a crescent or a bird. The structural austerity is counterpoised by a rich textural treatment that adds to the rigid compositions an inexplicable allure that testifies for his mastering of painting as a technology. His technical mastery inspirits him to appropriate academic training for his own cause: the interpretation of an Egyptian vision through a borrowed technology.

From 1973-79, a series of compositions representing conjoined male and female figures appear, again within firm architectural constructions. Their geometric regulatory is based on a keen observation of the human figure in terms of architectural symmetry. However, the male-female reunion is solemn and unrevealing. Two factors contribute to this effect: the absence of light and the representation of incomplete human figures, which deprives them from dynamic force. At times, the compositions convey repressed emotions through the textural, within strict formal correlations; the result is a paradoxical effect of transparency and symmetry. The male-female relationship remains frozen as long as self and other are inhibited. The first experiments disclose the artist's lifetime preoccupation with defining self and community in terms of spatial relations.

The 1980s mark a shift in Mansour's career: the reticent figures of his earlier period become more dynamic in their movements and expressions; there is also a switch from frontal postures in confined interiors to the rural landscape. The moonbeam, whether of an identified or unidentified origin, becomes the source of illumination. Its geometrical shades highlight emotional situations, or frame figures in dim interiors, evoking a mock perspective wherein rounded figures move in two dimensional space. The village is a construction of cave-like houses with small openings contouring recumbent lovers, or female figures performing the domestic in ritualistic gestures.

At this stage, the organic and inorganic are entwined through structural and textural elements: the palm tree and human hair; the moon and apparitions; human postures and the rural landscape. There is a reciprocal relationship between the static and dynamic, the terrestrial and celestial, all communicating through the pictorial elements. Thus expressivity is not confined to the human, which explains the absence of facial aspects. Anxiety, hope, love and despair are not only identified by eyes, lips, or hands, they may be engendered by a palm tree, a moon beam, or even through nuances of colour that are not varied but rich in tones. The dominant colours are blue and green in their full nuances, their shifts being functional and aesthetic. In the absence of contrast in shade and light, hot colours are introduced to emit a beam that accentuates or draws correspondences among separate elements in the composition.

Towards the end of the 1980s, a series of paintings representing the *Wailing Pyramid* become a dominant motif. The rural dwelling is replaced by a pyramid housing an interred mummy. While the rural landscape explores the visual relationship of the self/the figure in relation to a communal environment, the pyramid defines the contemporary landscape in relation to the past. The figures in the landscape are living a temporal present that links the past tradition, formally and metaphorically. Formally, the artist's technique applies an Egyptian aesthetic, in his use of symmetry and rhythm, as well as the standardization of the human anatomy in relation to other phenomenal aspects. Metaphorically, the past prevails in a rural landscape that is associated with roots: houses represent a primordial self. Palm trees, and birds become functional members conjoining the individual, existing in the temporal present with a collective self extending into time immemorial. However, the discrepancy between the ancient view of death as a threshold to rebirth, and the contemporary outlook to death as abandonment involves a process of mythologizing and demystifying.

At the beginnings of the1990s, the habitable space becomes a grave housing a shrine or a coffin. Death in life is not only conveyed through the grave-like house, but also the passive incommunicability of all elements in the landscape. The funeral atmosphere is evoked by the absence of light, except for a few subdued touches highlighting the mystery in the house of death. Unlike the palm tress in previous compositions, here they become bare of life, adding solemnity to the mortuary scene.

Towards the mid 1990s, the composition becomes infused with vigour, marking another turn. The landscape represents nature as an open space; flora and fauna incorporate nude figures in love scenes. Red flowers are introduced for the first time in controlled tones, devoid of sensuality; paradoxically, their presence stands for absence, for insatiable desire. Open nature has now substituted the rural house, for the artist has started on a *Journey* (1994) in free space. Nonetheless, his space is identified by the architectural symmetry patterning the seemingly wild landscape. Space acquires meaning only when the artist sets the boundaries without which everything is lost in void.

By the end of 1990s, Mansour starts taking part in outdoor projects. The execution of mosaic panels in public sites raises for him a new problematic in painting, that drives him to reconsider former divisions between 'public' and 'private, 'art' or 'craft'. He apprehends that articraft in his cultural heritage makes no division between the economy of the 'studio' and the economy of wider life. His new practice in public projects has moved him off a monocular optics focusing on a limited space, opening up new possibilities for spatial dimensions fit to represent proximity and distance, the single figure and the group, at a time. His new technique, in the third millennium, reflects a conflicting relationship between individual and community in present day

Egypt, within a cultural environment claiming communal values, while each individual is confined within his/her own domain. The total scene conveyed is that of social members simultaneously together and alone.

Such a dual perspective cannot be interpreted in a three dimensional surface with a fixed gaze. Instead of perspective lines traveling into depth, Mansour's compositions are constructed in perpendicular planes that configure the sense of distance and proximity, the total view and the close up. Proximal space is constructed by gesture, with all the compositional units corresponding to the bodily movement, rather than linear contours. Although physical movements are finely calculated, perspective is totally eliminated; all units are placed at an equal distance along equally divided planes, the scene never receding in space. The artist avoids redundancy in the regular repetition of gestures by registering texture to dissolve boundaries dividing organic and inorganic, as encountered in real life. Through textural variation the eye can also determine variation effected by weight and weightlessness.

The subject matter of the paintings is not meant to dramatise a unique event. In *Earth and Sky* (150 X 250 cm.) the simplified symmetrical units disrupt metanarratives of grandeur to focus on the mundane, as unfolding the essence of life while resonating with supramundane existence. Throughout its history, Egyptian art was both sacred and profane, the physical unraveling the metaphysical. In Mansour's art the symmetry between mundane and supramundane is configured by their equal placement in space. Similarly, the parity of the sexes is represented by their even placement in a shared spatial order. The terrestrial and celestial all celebrate the joys and pains of life and love, dance and ritual, hope and regret, motherhood and fatherhood, flora and fauna. Sky, land and water, which mark intervals among the different units, are interpreted in terms of texture, as well. However, if tactile space is meant to evoke the feeling of nearness through touch, in Mansour's paintings the forms are defamiliarized creating distance.

This becomes more perceptible in compositions centred on the face, building a closer space. In *Man, Woman and Crescent* (150 X 60 cm.) a man's face is totally embedded in a woman's, both engulfed by a torrent of hair. The woman's hand circles the man's body and is gently poised on his back. There is contrast between the hair's rough tactile sensation evoking a sense of mystery and dread, and the enfolding hand interpreted as a white silhouette. The hand, as a blank white space emits a beam of light in the eerie atmosphere evoked by the darkened hair, and the contrast in texture attributes to it an ethereal touch. The painting is a variation on the major concept 'together alone', with the contouring crescent arching the male-female head forming a celestial cupola.

Mansour experiments with a new technique in *Bikar's Eulogy* and *Spectres* (150 X 60 cm.) where the figures acquire elongated spectral forms. The space in both abandons any notions of gravity, the spectral figures equally floating in the lower darkened plane and the higher plane slightly lit, but still blurred. The darkened space is shot through by a string of raking light building profiled shapes, without totally forming a rupture between upper and lower planes. The dividing line is intercepted by the lower figures reaching out to their fellow men and women in the upper plane. The figures in the lower plane are positioned sideways or from the backside signifying departure, while the upper figures take a welcoming frontal position. The upper and lower planes are not diametrically opposed, we are facing a universe where the exceptional and the unexceptional merge, male and female are entwined, a compositional construction avoiding hierarchies. The scenes do not simulate religious narratives rather they convey the ceremonious in the mundane.

The interchangeability of the exceptional and the unexceptional domains applying a new painting technology is not simply to put on the face of novelty. It springs from a pressing need to reach equipoise in the present period of transition, where conflicts on the individual and social levels are aggravating. Mansour's technique is not only fit for the construction of a reality withdrawn from the actual. He has applied his new technique in portrait paintings where the portrait relates to real life by representing characteristic features of the model, while defamiliarising the familiar at some point, to associate it with what is beyond the real. Thus, the portrait represents the referential and that which transcends it.

The *Portrait of the Artist* depicts familiar features, only the eyes are defamiliarised by their opacity. Although their light is extinguished the eyes do not lack vivacity; the sensation conveyed is that of a person who has been satiated by the known and is resignedly awaiting the unknown. Conversely, *Sadim* the portrait of a young girl retains translucent eyes open with anguished anticipation. Put next to each other, the two portraits represent two modes of viewing that do not stand for polarities but varying visions of different generations. Such a visual technique initiates a different mode of looking at portraits, whereby they cease to be mere reproductions of reality, and instead, help the viewer locate the portrayed face within an unidentified realm oscillating between real and unreal. As such, the portrait is never complete, a completion that would have set it in isolation. Instead, it will always solicit its viewer for more participation, by relating the real face to the visualized portrait, which problematises the relation between self and other, life and art. At this stage one would desist from setting sharp divisions between private and public. In periods of transition, it is only through the ability to transpose oneself in different worlds, that one becomes able to align art with craft, outside and inside, public and private.

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