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Zoltán Somhegyi*

The Past as a Springboard for Understanding the Present. Classical Motifs in Contemporary Art through Examples from the MENA Region and Asia

Abstract

The re-emergence of classical forms, motifs, and media in contemporary art is an exciting field of research. In this paper, through a series of case studies, I focus on carpets, calligraphy, and photography in the oeuvre of artists working in or originating from countries with a predominantly Muslim aesthetic heritage, to see how these novel pieces can contribute to our present understanding of aesthetics and thus a better understanding of our present.

Keywords

Past Forms in Contemporary Art, MENA Region and Asia, Carpet, Calligraphy, Photography

Introduction

"Nothing is harder to predict than the past"—this seemingly paradoxical affirmation comes from a paper by Cornelius Holtorf (2013, 434) which scrutinizes the aesthetic quality of "pastness" with questions of authenticity. In our present context of investigation, however, this statement may also be used to describe another curious feature of the past, i.e. that past forms, motifs, expressions, techniques, and media have complex modes of survival, revival, effect, and influence. In this sense, their unpredictability refers to the myriad possible ways of how they can re-emerge and be u s e d for

* Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary
Email: somhegyi.zoltan.gyorgy@kre.hu

the artistic purposes of contemporary creation; sometimes even abused for making ideologically or politically motivated pieces. Parallel to this, we can also observe that not only is the re-emergence of the past hard to predict, but so is the reception of it. In other words, artistic investigation of classical forms and motifs is often met with a lack of interest, doubts, harsh criticism, etc.—the palette is broad.

Based on this, we can say that working with previous art forms, classical motifs, canonized ways of expression, and traditional techniques is often regarded as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be truly inspiring for artists—both intellectually and aesthetically rewarding for the public—to create new pieces of art that somehow revisit and re-interpret earlier subjects, techniques, forms, or media. On the other hand, this can also become a source of criticizing their work, "accusing" them of merely relying on past achievements and/or previous artistic results as a sort of shortcut to immediate (economic) success in the global art market.

This dilemma and the difficulties arising from it seem perhaps even stronger in the oeuvre of artists who work with forms and elements that derive from or are connected to Islamic art and culture; or the artists who originate from and who often are still working in countries and regions dominated by Muslim cultural traditions; artists who investigate the possible roles art and its production may have, especially when encountered with creative processes and techniques that come from other cultural areas. Therefore, as we will soon see, in many cases in which artists survey traditional motifs, classical objects, previous art forms or media in and through their works, then—frequently and simultaneously—such cases also could be considered as a survey of the encounter of temporally and geographically different cultural entities.

In the following sections, I investigate some further aspects and instances of these exciting questions with a special focus on the possible modes as well as functions and the functioning of past forms which appear in the contemporary art production of the aforementioned cultural region, i.e. in countries with a predominantly Muslim heritage and the works of artists originally from these lands—where some of them still live, whereas others now reside in other places. Nevertheless, as we will see, this latter detail—that is, whether these artists still work in their home country or not, outside of their original cultural context—will not necessarily have a qualitative impact on the artists' ability to investigate the strength of their traditions through the re-emergence of earlier forms, motifs, and media in contemporary art production. In other words, remaining in one's original context is not an automatic guarantee for a "successful" result; in fact, even the contrary is

sometimes true: leaving one's original context and directly encountering another tradition (for example an artist from the Middle East living in Europe or the USA) can be beneficial in the process of capturing, comparing, and getting inspired by the essence of various cultural realities; hence, they gain a better understanding of their proper tradition. Thus, the physical location of the artist (i.e. located in Cairo or New York) or their belonging to, for example, the Egyptian or American art scene or community, does not necessarily lower their capacity of being an authentic voice in investigating what they consider as their heritage, especially in an ever more globalized world.

I would thus like to show—through and with the help of a few thrilling examples from the works of contemporary artists analyzed as case studies—what we can learn about the nature of the re-emergence of previous forms of traditional creation from these art pieces. In addition, I would like to show how they can help us better understand some of the many opportunities that may arise with the creative use and re-interpretation of the past, without naturally claiming that these considerations should be considered in terms of a blanket concept that could be automatically applied to any artist who is inspired by past forms in any way.

My chosen cultural and geographical area of investigation is motivated not only by personal interest. I study this topic also because not much of this segment of contemporary art production has been analyzed in academic discourses of aesthetics so far. Such a lack of analyses also explains—in a chicken-and-egg-situation—why we have relatively less scholarly literature analyzing or quoting these inspiring works, compared to, for example, the classical artworks or the productions of Western artists from the same period. The artists of the selected region, including many of those quoted in this paper themselves, are well-known, also due to the popularity of their works in biennials, art fairs, museums, and private collections. Their works are often reproduced in art magazines, websites, art catalogs and books (including popularizing publications) which focus on recent art production and the art history of the region. Despite all of this, the theoretical analyses and academic aesthetic assessment of many of these projects are still relatively scarce in the scholarly context of contemporary aesthetics. This also explains why the Reader may find fewer references or quotes than "usual" in such texts, including some contexts to previous academic discussions of the works and considerations of other scholars. Thus, the present paper—without claiming to be in any way an absolute pioneer in this field, nevertheless—aims to solicit more discussions and scholarly publications in this area of research.

I propose the examination of three cases to show not only different examples and artists from various countries, but also to show different aspects, each of which I will trace in the works of select artists. These three cases are all relevant to the aforementioned questions, and the cultural area and framework mentioned earlier. Hence, I propose the case study of an object (carpet), an art form (calligraphy), and a medium (photography) in the works of six artists. We will see not only the various ways in which they can inspire contemporary creators but also how the new pieces can be applied to shed new light on the embedded potentials of classical forms. Some may find that the choice of these case studies (in textile art, calligraphy, and photography) to be very "trendy." Nevertheless, I chose them not because they are "hot topics," but because I found the questions raised by these cases to be among the most interesting, since they are representative figures of the region's contemporary art production. What's more, the chosen examples of artists and pieces contain another fascinating aspect that makes their investigation much more complex: they do not only re-visit classical objects, forms, or media, but they also show us the meeting of different artistic traditions and visual languages, which we can define as "Western" and "Eastern," although such a definition may seem to be an oversimplification.

The Carpet

Starting with the carpet, as it is known, it is one of the most essential products of applied arts in many societies in North Africa, the Near and Middle East, and Central Asia, and its use is not only limited to its everyday household functions. It is also used very often for hospitality and even more importantly in a religious context. For the latter two, it is sufficient to remember the importance of carpets in the majlis—the carefully designed space of homes where guests are received—and in mosque interiors. For the aforementioned cultural encounters between the "East" and "West" and their curious manifestations and consequences, we can also remember how "oriental" carpets were used in Europe when they started to arrive to satisfy an increasing demand due to their popularity. As we learn from Steven Parissien (2009, 27), Near Eastern carpets were used in the 17th and 18th centuries as symbols of wealth and status, and displayed more typically on tables and walls, rather than on floors. They were also elevated so as to maintain cleanliness. Taking into account differences in climate, such as wet weather and mud which could destroy the precious carpets, such a display would have been more typical for Europe than for the countries of origin.

Therefore, the polyvalent opportunities of use and appearance of the carpet include different approaches based on cultural context. In this way, it is thus not surprising that the carpet has special importance in the geographical areas from North Africa through the Near and Middle East to Central Asia in the everyday and religious practices, and at the same time, in other parts of the world. It is an object appreciated—even when taken out of its original, both literal and metaphorical context—for its timeless beauty, intricate patterns, and flawless craftsmanship. In other words, the carpet becomes an item of aesthetic curiosity and an iconic object. In certain ways, it represents or even metonymically symbolizes the aforementioned regions from where it originates.

How and why does a carpet become particularly interesting? It becomes interesting when artists from these very lands turn to this object. The long history of a carpet's craftsmanship is also noteworthy, not only in the context of a study of the tradition itself but also in the opportunities embodied by a carpet for the apprehension of the relevance of the tradition today. My first example in this regard is the Iranian artist Samira Alikhanzadeh. In her works, the carpet might appear as a mere background element or some sort of supporting medium at first; however, after a more careful observation, it emerges from its seemingly secondary role and becomes an integral part of the complex investigation pursued in and through her works. In a series titled "Persian Carpets," most of which were created in 2009–2010, we can see a traditional carpet embedded with a geometric pattern and a set of small and precisely placed fragments and shards of a mirror. But in front of it, there is another layer of plexiglass on which an old found family portrait photo is reproduced. Therefore, Alikhanzadeh's work is composed of three elements, two of which are already existing pieces of (applied) art: the traditional carpet and the family portrait, which in this case is printed on plexiglass. Nevertheless, these three elements will not only merge into one unique work of art, where the individual pieces lose their singularity like in a traditional collage. Despite being "melt" in one novel artwork, we may observe a curious countertendency: the elements mutually increase their distinct role, importance, and meaning. The art piece thus investigates various layers of memory, the act of remembrance, it also confronts these processes through various temporal layers represented by the singular compositional elements placed on different physical layers (Somhegyi 2014, 60-61). The "deepest"—i.e. background—layer is that of the carpet itself, which refers to and evokes the centuries-old cultural tradition of the region, even if they are not necessarily centuries-old carpets

themselves. The mid-20th century family photos naturally evoke the recent past. So, the evoked past confronts the third layer, contemporary reality, in several ways. First, this confrontation is manifested through the fact that the photos are not shown in their original materiality of the actual paper-print photographs, but reproduced in a typically contemporary material (plexiglass) and technology (the printing on it). Second, the confrontation of the present with the previous temporal layers is efficiently incentivized by the insertion of the mirror shreds that inescapably triggers an encounter with the (recent) past. At the same time, the encounter will necessarily be only partial—just like the understanding of the past—given the fragmented mirror that only reflects small mosaics of the visitor. Yet, the work has another aspect too, more social and political. As we learn from Linda Komaroff's catalog entry from an exhibition held in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the chosen photos from the mid-20th century depict the first generation of women who were free to be shown uncovered, i.e. without a hijab, in public spaces after the obligatory uncovering of women issued by Reza Shah Pahlavi (Komaroff 2015, 14). Thus, it is easily understandable why the placing of these images in the forefront—"forefront" in both senses of the word—may have particular relevance when a contemporary viewer looks at them and confronts various temporal realities.

For Samira Alikhanzadeh, the carpet served to provide a broader historic perspective, a "temporal" background evoking tradition in its contemporaneity. The traditional patterns appear on carpets created approximately during the same period as the photographs. It is relevant in our present contemporaneity to contextualize the main subject-matter of her artistic investigation. This will change in my second example in Faig Ahmed's series created mainly between the years 2007 and 2013. The elaboration and revisitation of the carpet in itself will determine the modes in which the artist confronts various artistic traditions, urging the observer to reflect on how they can mutually shed light on each other's qualities and pertinence. Although not made as a combination of physically different elements, these special carpets will stand for several traditions. The Azerbaijani artist took his region's wonderful rugs as a departure point, but he inserted significant distortions, modifications, and additions in the genuine patterns in his creations. This way, the appearance of the carpet radically changes. From a distant view, it may even seem that an original and classical carpet was somehow overpainted with another motif. But from a closer viewpoint, we discover that all the novel elements are truly embedded in the work, i.e. created in the same way as the rest of the piece. For instance, in one work

from the series we can observe a large homogenous yellow spot flooding down from the top as if it were a piece of action painting. In another one, graffiti is over-imposed on the central part of the carpet. Meanwhile in a third carpet, only the original colors of the pattern remain, the forms are completely melted and float together as if it was an abstract expressionist work. Sometimes the work reflects a contemporary computer manipulation of images and the effects of digital technology, like in a piece of which approximately half of it is pixelated, i.e. the classical motif is hardly graspable as it is reduced to large-size pixels that allow only a very vague tracing of the pattern. In some cases, Faig Ahmed created proper three-dimensional installations by cutting a carpet with classical motifs according to the main elements of its patterns, and then these disassembled parts of the original carpet were carefully arranged in various places of the space, hence the motifs float and fill the great volume of the room. From this we can see that the artist is interested in pairing distant artistic traditions and forms of expressions: e.g. action painting includes—and even emphasizes—the role of randomness that is completely alien to the meticulously planned setting of the motifs of traditional carpets. Graffiti, with its focus on leaving a mark or a personal sign—including less respected examples, even those deprived of particular artistic values, made just for the sake of tagging—is again placed in strong antagonism with the essence of oriental carpets since their anonymous creators often focus on technical perfection. Similarly, the idea of digital image-manipulation and virtual worlds is not something the creators of carpets would need to use in their very material craftsmanship. And lastly, the strong three-dimensionality of the disassembled carpet that thus fills the space is also in conflict with the emphasis of the two-dimensionality of the carpet—not only as an object but also through its motif; it traditionally does not even aim for the illusion of spatial depth. As mentioned above, Faig Ahmed chooses to confront radically different art forms within one unique piece. At the same time, we would miss the core of the works if we thought of them as mere visual jokes or as cheap reflections on "cultural clashes" between the "West" and "East" or as between the individualistic and self-expression-driven Western culture and the modest and honest collective production of the Eastern lands. Instead of reducing the strengths of the works by stripping them to these simplified approaches, we should interpret them as critical evaluations and critical analyses, where "critical" does not mean a disapproving and negative judgment, but rather a profound investigation of the essence of the different traditions by demonstrating exactly how much the specific artforms are bound to the cultural context from

which they stem. It is not a superficial anti-globalist lament, but a complex aesthetic project demonstrating and supporting the idea that foreign and/or exotic influences cannot be automatically and uncritically accustomed in other contexts.

Calligraphy

My next two examples in which calligraphy plays a crucial role are quite similar to what we have seen before, that is to the use and role of carpets in the creation of contemporary works, as well as in the ways a carpet appeared and what references it could establish. Hence, the pattern of my investigation will be parallel. Just like the carpets above, calligraphy is not only a well-known and fascinating art form but also one that is often primarily associated with the art production of countries with a predominantly Muslim heritage—although naturally, calligraphy plays a fundamental role in other cultures too, such as China and Japan. Analogously to carpets, its application is very broad, and we can find examples of its use in a religious context (holy inscriptions in mosque interiors) as well as in secular functions (e.g. the imperial tughra, i.e. an official calligraphic signature of the emperor) again. Its popularity can be illustrated, among others, by the fact that in the 19th century Historic Arabic letters or forms that resembled Arabic script were randomly added to decorative glassworks as elements of ornament, of which some of the best-known examples come from the workshops of Philippe-Joseph Brocard in Paris and of Lobmeyr in Vienna.

In many of the works by the globally renowned Shirin Neshat, a leading artist originally from Iran but living in the USA, calligraphic inscription is a fundamental element. In different series, the recurrent areas of her artistic investigation include convoluted issues in her country of origin and the Muslim world in general related to women, society, and religion as well as questions of personal and cultural identity, belonging, strength, and determination. In most cases, she also challenges the often superficial and prejudice-driven notions and partial understandings of the intricate realities of these countries and the people living in them. So, her works depict, question, criticize, and also call for change, although these are all equally directed towards her "Eastern" and "Western" audiences. Or, as we can read in Saeb Eigner's description of an earlier piece by the artist titled "Speechless": "Neshat is challenging the constraints imposed on women in her native Iran, while also playing on Western fears and preconceptions about Islam" (Eigner 2015, 178). In many cases, the departure point is a large-scale black and white

photograph of a human figure emerging from an undefined and deep dark background, where uncovered body parts are densely overwritten with beautiful calligraphic writing. The written text can have different sources, including poetry or the personal reflections of the model. The portrait photo itself can feature only certain parts of the face, focus on the body through a close-up, or can show either the entire or only the upper half of the body—like in her series titled "The home of my eyes," first shown in the YARAT Contemporary Art Centre in Baku, Azerbaijan, in its inaugural exhibition in 2015. This very series in Baku had some particularities that make it especially noteworthy for our present investigation: the more than fifty people portrayed in the works represented the diversity of the population in her country, people aged from two to eighty-years-old and who come from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. However, instead of simply showing them one by one, next to each other as in a classical exhibition display, a large part of the series was arranged on an 11-meter high wall, thus becoming not merely a presentation of individual pieces but something that is considerable and enjoyable as one unique installation. Their coherence was evident not only through the way they were displayed but also through the recurrent pictorial and compositional solutions at the level of the singular works themselves. The portrayed figures all held their hands closed in front of them, though this gesture did not appear forced or as a disturbingly repetitive pose. Rather, it appeared more like a common connecting point between the otherwise very varied models. This focus on gesture and its emphasized visual role can also be explained by the classical influences on the artist. For instance, El Greco's iconic figures and their expressive posture is often quoted as a source of inspiration for the impressive portraits by Shirin Neshat and the process of composing their posture. Coming back to the calligraphic text, however, the artist interviewed her models and asked them what the concept "home" meant to them, as well as about their ideas on their cultural identity. Their answers were then written over the pictures. This also explains the observation that we can read in the artist statement by Shirin Neshat in the catalog of the exhibition: "[…] recently I have come to discover how my portrait tend to expand beyond simply conveying an individual's emotional state, and often function as visual narratives of a culture" (Nasser-Khadivi, Ismail 2015, 45). Therefore, akin to what we saw in our previous examples by Samira Alikhanzadeh, the works have various elements merged into one: the original portrait—this time created by an artist of her contemporaries—the calligraphic inscription, and the (even if indirect) classical sources of inspiration for the figures, their postures, and their

arrangement. Although they compose the elements, none of them is separable from the final work without harming its integrity. Calligraphy does then not simply complete but truly does complement the work—given the differences in the nature of visual and textual media. What is not expressible through the mere photograph can be further articulated through writing.

As anticipated above, the variety of the modes of influence and application of carpets in contemporary art has a similar range to that of calligraphy, i.e. the spectrum spans from being an essential and indispensable component, like in the cases of Samira Alikhanzadeh and Shirin Neshat, to becoming a unique element that stands in itself and that nevertheless confronts traditions and examines their modes of expressions, like in the works by Faig Ahmed. Likewise, my other example, Simeen Farhat, the Pakistani artist living in the USA and working predominantly with letters, has a similar approach, focusing on the pure art form in itself. She chooses poems and texts that inspire her from various languages, including English, German, Urdu, and Farsi, and then "translates" the text into a dynamically whirling set of letters cast in resin. The words become hard or impossible to read since the calligraphy is transformed by the "translation" into an independent sculpture of its own. The text thus expands into space. Through a change of form and media, we can also observe a shift of status: "the art of writing" (calligraphy) or beautiful writing (kallos + graphein) will become something different: a novel art created through the means of the classical "art of writing," i.e. in this change of dimensions a decorative visual form turns into a piece of fine arts. In other words, it becomes an artwork of inspiring ambiguity, because the formerly readable and decipherable motifs turn into an abstract ensemble that visualizes the strength of the beauty of writing; it also refers to the power of the content of the chosen text. The powerful and sometimes even almost "exploding" appearance of the artworks only reinforces our perception of them as pieces that aim to highlight the power of thought—recorded and mediated through the text—instead of merely focusing on the classical beauty or beautification of the letters and writing. This latter aspect, the visual dynamization of the text is crucial also when we learn that many of the original writings—the ones that are transformed into the sculptures—themselves often describe strong feelings, emotional turbulences, and issues related to the freedom of thought and speech. When in her artistic statement we read, "my modest attempt is to translate their (*i.e. of the original texts*) poetic dynamism into visual energy" (Farhat, no date), we can interpret this attempt as a re-visitation of the potentials of the classical forms of calligraphy. Extending the calligraphic inscriptions into space

and transforming them into novel artworks becomes at the same time an expansion and re-interpretation of the category and form of calligraphy itself.

Photography

Compared to the previous two cases—carpet and calligraphy—the patterns of investigation as well as the use and re-emergence of my third example, that of photography, will be now a bit different, partly because this technique and the artistic medium does not stem from the wider region's tradition. Photography can be therefore definitely considered an external influence. It can be defined as a Western invention, but not only since it was physically invented in Western Europe, but also because it is in a way a sort of culmination of the strive for a reality that motivated Western artists since the late Middle Ages in great part. Despite this however photography arrived relatively quickly and early in North Africa, in the Near East, and the Middle East, mainly through the early documentary photographers, both semi-amateur travelers-discoverers and professional artists-photographers who, for example, produced series of landscapes, cityscapes, and renderings of classical ruins and monuments of particular art and architecture of historical value for the interested commissioners and "Western" public in general. Naturally, soon after the first "visiting" photographers, some started to stay longer and open studios in the larger cities; locally born and trained photographers followed their example too. Among the first commissions, besides the aforementioned documentary landscapes and cityscapes, one of the often recurring tasks were taking portraits, of which the most popular and up until today perhaps the most fascinating ones are the hand-painted photographs and the series of staged portraits, i.e. that shows the model in richly elaborated settings, in front of a painted background and with additional elements.

It is thus not surprising that contemporary photographers in or originally from the region often refer to the history of the medium in their works, and not only in general but also in particular to the regional and local history and studio practices of it. We can compare two forms of this case in my last two examples. The first example is Youssef Nabil, who was born in Egypt but lives in the USA. He started to show his hand-painted photographs in the late 1990s. They have soon secured international fame for him as well as popularity among specialized collectors and those generally interested in art too. Curiously in his case, the reference to and engagement with the past is mani-

fested not only in the choice of topics or at the level of revisiting previous topics and motifs, but the past is also pursued through the revoking of a not-much-in-use-anymore technique: the coloring of photographs by hand. The classical technique was often used not only on regular photographs but also for the creation of movie posters made from film stills, especially during the peak of Egyptian cinema in the 1950s—a period and a cinematic world that fascinates the artist, which we can read about on his profile in the Barjeel Art Foundation's website, for example (Barjeel Art Foundation, no date). The somehow timeless and idealized appearance of celebrities of that era provides an ideal opportunity to investigate our present period, and not simply in comparing today's celebrities to earlier ones but also in the ways we celebrate and commemorate fame today. From this point of view a curious example is the portrait of Omar Sharif from 2006, the renowned Egyptian actor who connects eras and cinematic worlds throughout his career. However, as mentioned above, what inspires the observer of Youssef Nabil's works is not only his choice of subjects—that naturally reveals much of his interest and preferences—but also the additional and subtle references to the history of art in general and of the medium in particular, of which one of the most intriguing examples is his work titled "My Frida" (1996). The photo is a re-staging of the well-known self-portrait by the Mexican artist, except the model is the artist Ghada Amer. Through the complex relation and the aesthetic link established between the three artists (Nabil, Kahlo, and Amer) Nabil manages to pay homage to not only the two women but also to the often forgotten or anonymous photographers of the classical technique who nevertheless immortalized thousands of individuals (in early family photographs from the first decades of the medium) and also the stars of cinema. It is just an extra twist and both an intellectually and aesthetically inspiring feature that the works oscillate between the media and techniques, or as the artist said in a 2012 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist: "[…] I decided to hand color my black-and-white photographs using the same old photography technique, which would still keep this old cinematic feeling that I liked in the black and white. I also wanted my work to be seen as paintings" (Obrist 2014). He expressed this duality regarding the media in another statement: "It is not the photography, but the paintings that attract me. I paint with my photographs" (Amirsadeghi *et al*. 2009, 228). This oscillation then adds further layers for the interpretation of the pieces.

"My work is not for the intellectuals"—claims the London-based Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj, in whose works we can see a different direction of engaging with the (recent) past of the medium of photography. Hajjaj

wanted to refer to the fact that through his fascinating, visually mesmerizing and brightly colorful, works he aims at reaching out to everyone, and not only to those specialized in contemporary art—a modest affirmation, which we can also interpret as an anti-art-establishment proclamation, one that we can listen to in a recent video interview with the artist (Hajjaj, 2020). When observing his works, we can understand how and why it is easy to get entangled by the pieces and why many can relate to them, on different levels: the artist blends various cultural and artistic influences, motifs, and elements in a visually captivating image that takes its inspiration from traditional Islamic artistic heritage as well as Western forms and movements of art, especially that of Pop Art and popular culture. However, exactly because of the multiple references and the multiple ways of re-using these references (even if in some cases indirectly), his works are a curious subject also for "intellectuals"—despite his opinion above—who are eager to trace these influences. The portraits show his friends, colleagues, musicians, and artists dressed in harsh-colored dresses or—as we can read in a recent text on the website of the Yossi Milo Gallery that represents him—"in outfits with colors, patterns and shapes that evoke the vibrancy of Moroccan souks with contemporary detailing more common to east London's hipsters or south London's fashionable crowd" (Yossi Milo Gallery, 2020). When we add to this that the photographs are often shown in a special frame designed by the artist that is filled with products including canned food, we can easily understand that he aims to revive and also critically examine a series of legacies: (1) his home country's vibrant colors, (2) the repetitive patterns, abstract forms and stylized organic motifs of Islamic art and design, the different periods of Western art history including (3) Orientalism and (4) Pop Art, and also—and here we have a similar tendency of paying tribute to the craftsmanship as we saw in the case of Youssef Nabil—(5) the tradition of staged studio photography that was, and in certain cities still is, very common and popular, even if less and less practiced because of the spread of digital technology. All this is pursued however in a form that is "accessible" for a possibly very broad audience, given the multiple levels, i.e. on one level, we could enjoy only the sheer visuality of the images, on others we could focus on the satirical signs pointing at the ambiguities of globalization, while again other levels engage with the implicit complexities of references embedded in the works. One can thus decide which registers to apply and identify with, to interpret and enjoy the works. The pieces undeniably and actively use various forms and manifestations of traditions and thus contextualize their relevance and examine their actuality.

Concluding Remarks

Earlier I used the metaphor of a "double-edged sword" with regards to the fact that the re-visitation and elaboration of previous topics, motifs, media, and techniques may be problematic for some observers. It can be not only a source of inspiration but also a source of criticism. The artists need to prove and demonstrate their original contribution to the visual heritage that they are elaborating and re-interpreting. At the same time, however, after having seen the above examples, we can perhaps convert the metaphor and add further meaning to it by claiming that artists are sometimes even required to use a double-edged sword as they are "fighting" in two directions. On the one hand, they often need to persuade critics that their choice is "legitimate," i.e. by showing that their pieces are not simply about a superficial reference to past motifs, elements, objects, forms of expressions, or media just for financial gain, achieved by exploiting the previous merit and/or the "exotic" lure of certain forms and appearances. On the other hand—and this is especially interesting if we think it over—in their works, artists demonstrate exactly the contemporary relevance of traditional forms through the aesthetic confrontation of temporally and culturally different elements. This is what explains, as we could also see above, that artists—inspired by earlier motifs and media and by investigating their possible ways of re-emergence; critical in great part as a result of these investigations—are often critical of the current state of culture, society, and politics, as well as with art and its infrastructure, and not necessarily only of their home land or in their country of origin, but on a global scale.

In this way the constant interest in and re-interpretation of the past will become an investigation of our own time too, or as Jale Erzen claimed: "The past, which is an unstable, unfixed, nonlinear accumulation of mnemonic traces is the foundation on which we build our identities; it is the clay with which we mold ourselves according to how we inhabit time and space. Our present is also a point in constant back and forth movement" (Erzen 2017, 199). Therefore, as anticipated at the beginning of this paper, the aesthetic re-visitation of the past and classical forms may lead to many inspiring questions regarding the nature of this inspiration and the re-emergence that artists examine through their works. At the same time, we saw through the analyses of different examples that these artistic investigations are very often not limited to the mere analyses of the past forms themselves but become intellectually and aesthetically thrilling attempts to

grasp their relevance in the present. Therefore, when focusing on our current state in the creation of novel works—that are, at least in part, inspired by the past as a springboard—such pieces of art will contribute to our present understanding and to the better understanding of our present.

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