

Ahmed Morsi and the “Alexandria School”

Popularly, this term is loosely used to describe artists from the portal city, starting with the Pioneers or Masters (such as Mahmoud Saaid) through the WWII generation and up until the 1952 Revolution (ending with Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar and Ahmed Morsi and their peers). As you can see this is not really one “group” or “movement” but rather encompasses multiple periods, influences and styles. However, if we were to pay heed to this non-absolute definition of the “Alexandria School”, then only Ahmed Morsi’s earlier work (1950s mostly) would be within that classification.

Alexandria in the late ‘40s was a replacement for Paris, which was suffering the ravages of war; so French and other European galleries moved many of their exhibitions to this multi-ethnic, culturally diverse portal city. Morsi saw Picasso exhibited in Alexandria before seeing exhibitions for established local artists from Cairo. The Artist studied with the son of Italian Master, Antonio Becci, whose former students included Seif Wanly. He would meet Seif Wanly later in his studio which he shared with his brother Adham and Morsi’s secondary school English teacher, himself as well an artist. It was Wanly who introduced Morsi to the great Alexandrian sculptor Mahmoud Moussa and can be credited for a friendship that ended only with the passing of Moussa. It was Moussa, then Director of the Alexandria Atelier, who assigned a room in that coveted space, which was to be Ahmed Morsi’s third artist’s studio. At the inauguration of the Museum of Fine Arts in Alexandria, Morsi was introduced to Abdel Hadi El Gazzar, both of whom had works on exhibit for the historical grand opening. It was this meeting that prompted a new collaboration between Morsi and Gazzar, which would result in multiple group showings in Alexandria for both their work as well as Hamed Nada, Mahmoud Moussa, Fuad Kamel, Ibrahim Massouda and Hassan el Telmissany among others. This collaborative spirit is also evidenced by the unpublished project between Ahmed Morsi and Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar, which was comprised of Morsi’s poetry (including “She died under the moonlight”) juxtaposed with Gazzar’s illustrations. The intended exhibition and book unfortunately never materialized due to Gazzar’s untimely passing; though both poems and illustrations survive and can be seen in the Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar monograph.

Professor Hala Halim of NYU cited in her presentation at the “Egyptian Surrealists in Global Perspective” interational conference held at AUC in Cairo that this term – “The Alexandria School” was indeed coined by Egypt’s renowned novelist and critic, Edwar el Kharrat (1926-2015), defining it to include one group of artists, a generation coming of age in the 1940s in Alexandria, each masterfully representing his medium: Alfred Farag as Playwright, Mahmoud Morsi as Actor, Mounir Ramzi as writer, Ahmed Morsi as both Painter and Poet.... This was the generation that lived

“surreally”, to quote al Kharrat: “Surrealism is a living practice.” It is a cohesive group of Alexandrian talents, perhaps not organized as a group with published manifestos and membership in International art organizations, but rather a collection of free thinkers with a desire to defy the acquired beliefs of both space and time and a shared passion for life – and they all moved together, recognized each other and collaborated with one another – most importantly, remained life-long friends (Edwar el Kharrat and Morsi had a friendship now that spanned over 70 years, friendships with Mahmoud Morsi and Alfred Farag were also life-long ending equally and only with their passing) - without the need for official papers and bonds.

Therefore, in the context of El Kharrat’s use of the “Alexandria School”, as it is his term after all, and with its essence deeply rooted in Surrealism, Ahmed Morsi’s entire portfolio of both Paintings and Prints (etchings on zinc plates, linocut, woodcut, etc.) would be included in that classification. Moving further into the ‘50s, one can see that Morsi’s work starts to gradually, quietly free itself of the confines of its indigenous roots - perhaps as an organic desire to disassociate from the colonial and orientalist ideas of art and local artists in particular. Though his city remains a faithful muse, an unrequited love lost in a tragic diaspora, the manifestation of longing, passion, isolation and metaphysical existence transcends locality and moves at a faster rhythm through the decades at last resting comfortably and always silently in a universal sensibility, more gentle, finer and simpler and more efficient in content yet encompassing all.

Morsi continues to live his days “surreally” as those who know him would attest. And unlike most artists, who exhaust their creative message, plateau and often experience an obvious decline in artistic quality and production, Ahmed Morsi demonstrates that his creative wallet remains abundant, with still new forms of expressing the surrealist’s “new sensibility” (another critical term coined by El Kharrat). To quote Picasso: “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up”; by Picasso’s definition of artists, Ahmed Morsi remains a “child”, a living testament to the relativity of time and perhaps even space with 65 years of uninterrupted creation.

It is most invaluable to attempt to look at art through the lens of its creator and this is strongly a personal endeavor. These words will hopefully offer a richer viewing and understanding of the lifelong passion of Ahmed Morsi and his work, albeit still limited to the language of the visual arts. Because, as Samir Gharib, renowned Egyptian art critic, recently said in an article on Morsi in highly acclaimed cultural magazine “Al Khayyal”: “Ahmed Morsi paints his poetry and writes his paintings.”