EL ZAEEM
الزعيم أحمد
AHMED
A deeply philosophical artist Al Zaeem Ahmed carried thousands of photographs, sketches and artifacts with him from Upper Egypt and the place of his birth when he displaced himself to Cairo. He felt the need to carry the moods, manners, tangible memories and feelings of his internal biosphere - his village.

This highly reflective Upper Egyptian had been exhibiting for years before he made the trek up the Nile. His reputation preceded him as not only an inimitable artist but also a modern-day philosopher. Decidedly influenced by the great artist Abdel Hadi El Gazzar (1925-1966) who had passed away even before his birth, Al Zaeem is forever seeking the meaning of life in both his art and existence. When you sit with him, he draws you into an existential conversation for as long as you please. He offers snippets of wisdom and poses questions that few think of. And – he seems to have the answers – certainly his own rejoinders.

Al Zaeem has become one of the most talked-about artists on the Egyptian scene today. His portraits exude life in all its fullness of pleasure and pain for he has lived both. The philosopher comes to life immediately, “A person is a mixture of the things he lives amongst, and it starts from the soul. I need to know where my soul stands, and what can help me discover it. Through this I can know where I am when it comes to creativity. Many artists don’t own their souls, and this makes them copy other peoples’ souls.” Al Zaeem has done a lot soul searching. Each canvas that sprouts from his soul and his brush tells a story – a uniquely Egyptian story – albeit without the characteristic archetypes.

This resilient Upper Egyptian man deceives our eyes. He is robust and strong and yet he is filled with sensitivity and calm. He speaks with serenity and an all-knowing mournful
air – that of an artist. Al Zaeem began exhibiting when he was but an undergraduate student of fine arts at Ganoub Al Wadi University in Luxor. Though much of the art coming out of Egypt’s rich colorful south is drenched in rainbow hues and ancient rituals, Al Zaeem’s palette is dissimilar. “In the village where I was raised, black and white were really clear to me everywhere. Even though there were so many colors surrounding me during the light of day, I strongly felt the fall of night and the color black would envelope me. After the setting sun, I would feel the darkness of night. People go to sleep early. There were no late nights parties. And, people wake up early, really early. They start their work at the crack of dawn and by noon they have finished when the people of Cairo are just beginning to wake up.” This stark juxtaposition of light and dark in life and in his soul is what inspires his clear gravitation towards monochromatic scenes. Much of his work is exclusively black ink on paper. His technique is mind-numbing, as he lays down what we can only imagine to be millions of biro pen strokes, tiny, persistent and meticulous. How many pens might he use for one canvas? “To be honest, I don’t count how many pens I go through, because when I’m working it’s as if I’m drunk. Can you ask a drunk person how much he’s had to drink?” he asks rhetorically.

Al Zaeem completed all his educational studies in Upper Egypt and followed his love for art when he entered the College of Fine Arts at South Valley University in Luxor. Living amongst the ancient dead and Pharaonic power that still permeates Luxor, he absorbed both the sweetness and the harshness of life, with all its contradictions. Paradox became his chief influence and his mentor. Contradiction leaks from every corner, every surface and image of his work.

Along with the thousands of pictures he carried to Cairo were Certificates of Excellence and Honors from his college. His unique talent was recognized even as a student. Al Zaeem was appointed to the Higher Institute of Arts as an instructor in the Department of Graphic Material Printing and Etching Metals. He taught drawing with dry materials, something he did for ten years. As we look at Al Zaeem’s young life, he is only 38 years old; we recognize that his artistic journey can be divided into five stages. Within each stage Al Zaeem’s distinctive philosophical character is singled out and representative of another turn, a new beginning, a new-fangled way of thinking that he has suddenly discovered and cannot be denied.

His first phase was that of printing and crafting in and on metals. He strangely insisted on studying this within the
The market  2 m x 2 m  oil on canvas
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Department of Graphic Design. This enabled him later to find an abnormal balance in his work which afforded him many awards, including the first prize in the Youth Salon of 2002.

His second phase was monochromatic and involved only shades of black and white, earning him the title of “King of White and Black.” Here he positioned and built the first pillars of his technical schooling. He crafted a philosophical perspective of reality translating his art into flat works that began to establish his first Surrealism installation. Surrealism became a surprised recipient with high symbolism, missing the sole hero and confirming his own meaning of life. By taking out the light from the darkness from a portrait he was able to create precise and perfect art that could not be imitated at all. With a dry pen on paper, Al Zaeem continued to produce in black and white for nearly twelve years.

By the third stage, Al Zaeem had discovered his colorful exuberant palette. Strangely he himself does not quite remember how or when this palette began. By depicting flat faces he side-stepped surrealism with symbols confirming and insisting on consolidating his vision of reality. We soon understood that Al Zaeem sees double-crude and painfully.

“The cloudy stage” was dominated by the color white. He drew a smooth succession of white and black pieces in an attempt to create a boot. Art aficionados agree that loony visual space depends on surrealist symbols that are difficult to detect - as detected in the painting “The Man and the Cigarette.” Herein we see flies fly draconian operations of the reality divided against them selves. We see that characters are similar in configuration and feature no hair. We see men and women engaged with each other, fruit, pomegranates and androgynous characters intermingled in daily life with animals always afoot, a flight and affright.

This stage continued for two years until Al Zaeem introduced a full color palette. Herein lies the full authentic surrealist Al Zaeem. He claims that all the senses of the world he has created in color. His technique for including the whole experience and feeling is summed up in reasonably severe symbols of surrealism such as martyrs, boats, birds, bare-footed-peasants, turkeys, decorations, shawled goats, parasols, eyes, seeds and ballet dancers. This phase lasted almost two years and included groups of subjects, including a mysterious one that carried the great philosophical subjects of controversy and suspicion in the eye of the recipient.
During the fifth stage Al Zaeem utilizes one single color that is initiated by the artist. “Dancer Blue” and “Albesbas” are appendages of a more philosophical symbol wherein one color is characterized by severe, cruelty and shows the artist Al Zaeem with the tools and installation of a surrealism school. This phase has deemed him as one of Egypt’s most important artists in the Arab world.

Having travelled far and wide with his art, El Zaeem Ahmed’s work has been acquired by world-wise collectors from Holland, France, Germany, England, Spain, Japan, USA and Qatar. He has gained a coveted permanent spot in Egypt’s own Ministry of Culture and the Museum of Modern Art. However, as you could probably have guessed by now, accolades don't really matter to him. “When I finish a piece, I feel like I want it to go away. It's like a mother who’s always with her son. She wants him to go away for a while and then come back,” he says about his artistic process. “I consider my eye a camera and memories can bring you back to your childhood and then skip ahead to when you're 80. Some paintings just happen; a painting could take a day and be amazing. But it could also feel like 20 years in the making. In the end, I’m a human. A human has a soul, a mind, a heart and emotions can fight each other.”

Al Zaeem is a free-spirited thinker. Instead of colors and lines that flow like his thoughts, he is a master of technique, shading shadows and light fluidly together. His portraits might have a caricature-like quality, but they undeniably exude both human emotion and action. Whether it's an elderly man feeding the birds or a beautiful Nubian woman indulging in a slice of watermelon, he manages to capture the essence of Egyptian life without being overt or in-your-face. His characters don't take walks on the Nile nor do they ride donkeys, nor any of the stereotypical pranks. Yet somehow his subjects are intrinsically Egyptian. “I am proud that I’m an Egyptian because we have always had humanity. Nowadays they write all these books about psychology and philosophy… but the pharaohs have always known about it and used it to bring them happiness and plenty.”

Al Zaeem is man with few, if any, mental or artistic limits. He is ever-adapting, vibrant and has a forward-thinking approach more than most; “When it comes to art I like to be adventurous,” he concludes. I don't want someone to say something like ‘you are a painter, don't be a photographer. Who are you to tell me that? It's all about thinking about what's going to happen in the future. I want to try more new ideas. I like craziness.” It is this spirit of self-determination,
introspection and escapade that fuels this young Upper Egyptian artist. His art is certainly rumbling and resonating within the country, because Egyptians revere what he does.
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Above: Raouf Zaidan, at home, with his 99 years old mother, Gwendolyn Hutchings (known as Jean) Zaidan, a determined woman who came from Britain to Egypt in 1934, at the age of 18. She says of Egypt, “It was love at first sight.”

Left: Photograph of George J. Zaidan, Raouf’s father, who was a chemical manufacturer.