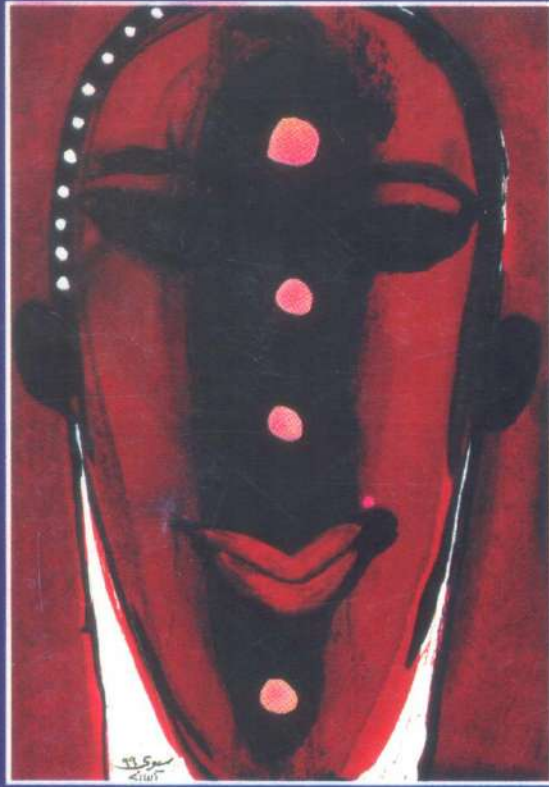
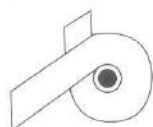




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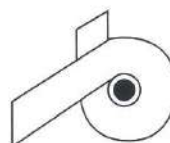


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"THE FACE ENUNCIATES"

The endless series of anonymous faces, conjoined on golden surfaces made an arcane space where the viewer was invited to pass through a passage, perceive the paintings as well as look at the mirrors placed to strategic angles. Evidently the archaic figuration, the illumination of gold paint and the illusion created by the mirrors evoked associations with pharaonic tombs; even for those who have never entered into one before. This was the installation of Adel ElSiwi entitled "The Face and Beyond" in the Modernities and Memories exhibition which was held in the 47th Venice Biennale. When he was invited to the same exhibition held in the majestic space of Dolmabahce Cultural Center in Istanbul he displayed six large paintings which were a selection from a series he finished in 1998. six golden panels each divided to vertical sections disclosed giant faces and small elegant figures placed in mainly central positions .

Siwi's paintings roused perplexion and interest in both exhibitions; because one could not put them into the place, one was used to put the art works emanating from Non-western countries. western critics have periodically declared the art of painting as dead. However this art is being born again unexpectedly with a new force . Not only the artists themselves founded a way to get out of the blind alley , put also the viewers perceived that there are other expansions of this medium. Siwi's paintings embodied this process. What made them interesting was that they were reflecting a distilled and refined expressionism, they had a spirited approach to minimalism and they were holding a congenial dialogue with the history of modern painting. Furthermore the local historical and traditional content was rendered with great discretion and humour. Siwi's paintings has a characteristically less expressive treatment . They incline toward a representation of the sublime in the post-modernist sense, rather than the passionate and elaborate. They go back to the most primary images in a quest to demonstrate his sensibility to an art in its tentative state. Moreover, the spontaneity of expressionism have a certain concerted quality .

The face became important in his Works by the beginning of the 90's . When Siwi's interest shifted to the appearance of the faces, he realized the ambiguity in the look of confidence. Was it the lack of confidence? He started to deconstruct the solid and the monumental, the proud and the archaic Which represented the closed ego into the flowing and trivial, the sarcastic and the satirical. He fulfilled this process by dealing with the concept of "self - portrait" .

Siwi uses figuration and abstraction in alignment or he combines two discourses i.e representational and abstract painting.. In his 1998 paintings large areas of nearly monochrome surfaces almost absorb the meticulously executed figures. In the face series . he avoids any likeness or similarity which might block the perception of the viewer. Here, the colored backgrounds are elevated to simultaneity . He works in the grey area between figuration and abstraction in order to lead the viewer to a conceptual field, representational painting is usually perceived as depicting reality; but the problem is that painting itself is face to face with intruders: cinema and television , These intruders simulate and re-produce reality. Although painting becomes a zone where reality loses, it gains another function: to breed metaphors beyond the conventionalized images of cinema and television and to visualize philosophical and critical thinking. These two functions are the most required ones in the art context of countries like Egypt and Turkey where , on and off, oppressive or decorative modernist codes of representation prevail .

The color plays another significant role in Siwi's paintings; much related to these functions, There are two different golden colors; one is yellow golden which could mean wisdom and tradition and the other is gloomy golden which might be the color of pretension and betrayal. Here again, He refers to the origins he is tracing and to the daily presence of the simulation.

In the whole the paintings suggest that the artist is preoccupied with theoretical questions.

In the first place the installations were pointing out and cross-examining the consequences of "constructed image": The constructed image here, meant fulfilling the visual prerequisites of the consumer . in this case there are two different groups of consumers: local and international audiences. Both audiences are very likely prejudiced in their approach towards the artwork of a non-western artist. Their yearning for stereotyped oriental image was met by an apparently stimulating arrangement of images. The "Otherness" of the Faces, exotic animals and symbols executed with exquisite drawings indicate an affinity with orientalist iconography, but at the same time obstruct the viewer to justify his / her prejudices on the weakness of representation.

The local audience on the other hand, is still going through a process of appropriating the post-modernist conceptualization of paintings as well as the reconstruction of history through the art works. In countries like Egypt and Turkey, where imperialism and modernism have provoked constant remaking of history, there is a certain historical awareness of artists due to the ruptures, losses and absences in language, art, architecture and social life. Many artists in these countries have dealt with the subject of history by using the images, symbols and elements of ancient art in modernist paintings and sculptures as elements of traditional and national identity. They were judged as imitators either of Western art or Eastern tradition ; in both cases they were seeking national identity and traditional authenticity . Whatever they have been doing, it has been received by the audiences as part of the official culture or as an outcome of westernisation and internationalisation. The cultural politics of the nation states and world - wide official ideologies were always omnipresent within the art scenes. However, at the turn of the century, art is detaching itself from the state ideologies and navigating in the " blasphemous" zone of no man's land. Artists in Non-western countries use post-modernism as a spring board to transpose themselves to a different role: They have challenged the myth of "modern" in center and periphery and they have championed heterogeneity outside the Eurocentric discourse. This was the significant process in the 80's and came to crucial conclusions in the 90's Siwi's venture in developing his artistic identity was not only in his own effort to fuse and juxtapose differences such as pharaonic and Arab, African and Mediterranean, Islamic and Marxist, but also in the global awareness of the impossibility of centralization.

By playing on ambiguous grounds and stimulating the regressions and desires of these two audiences Siwi is challenging and enchanting the viewer Accordingly, Adel El siwi carried out, one of the important postulates of post-modern art. At the same Time, he is not allowing the viewer "to structure his / her thought and discourse around the concept of history" (1) . Here the concept of history is a solid one strongly relates to the unwelcome historical memory, the constructed image and radical ideologies within it .

Another aspect of the constructed image relates to the established iconography. As we approach the end of the second millenium we feel exhausted by the burden of symbols and motifs hand down to us by previous generations. We have a real problem with the images in the "collective conscious" as they also have played and still play some irritable ideological role within our cultures. Seen from this perspective we tend to think that the painting which has carried the iconography trans culturally or trans historically is better be dead .

Siwi is very well aware of this denunciation of painting, but he is also aware that in the artistic process when something may be lost something may be gained His attitude as a painter strongly corresponds to the ideas of Achile Bonito Oliva: "Paradoxically the death of art becomes a demonstration of art's immortality; it reveals the productive , cultural and economic forces that arrest their own autonomous power even while insisting on just how miracoulus their existence deprived of all function and that flies in the face of all prophecy,"(2)

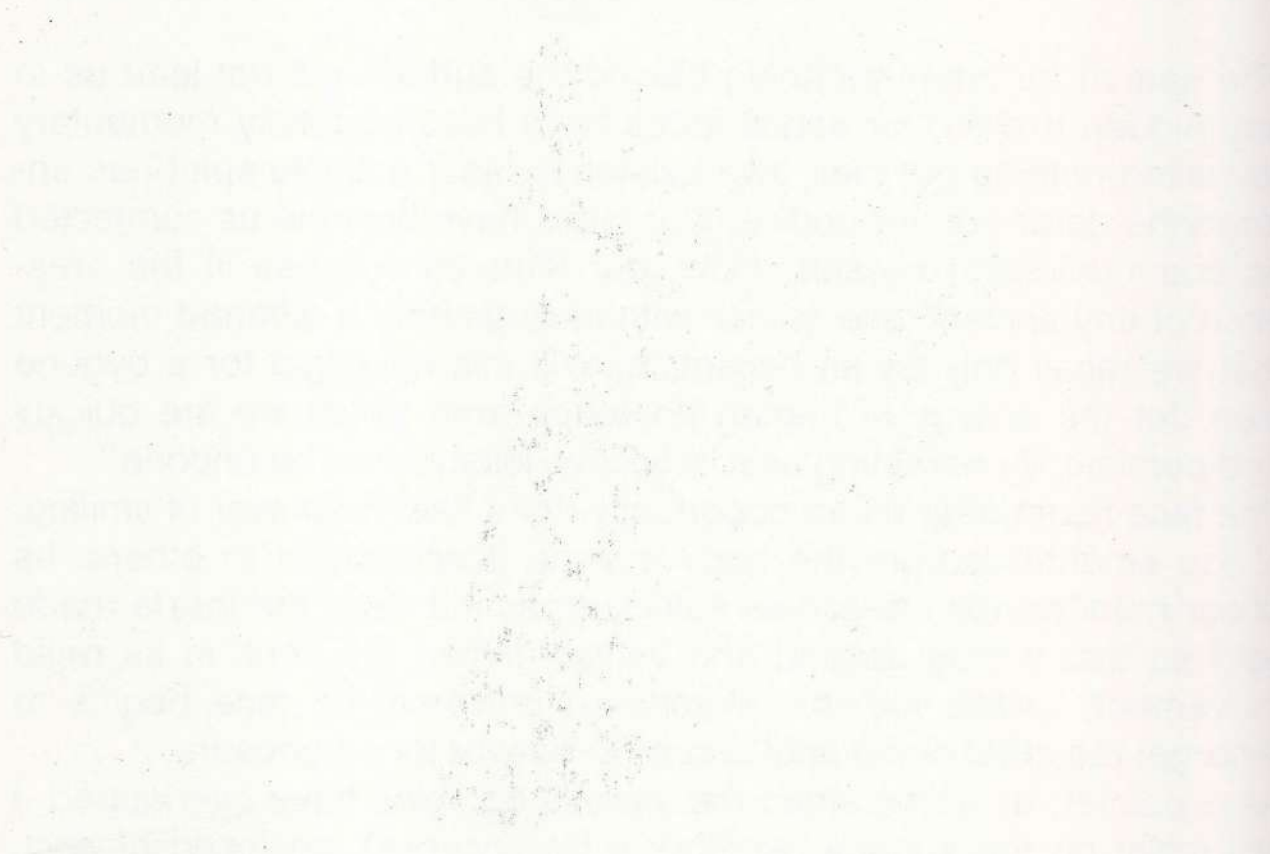
Adel El Siwi's paintings should be evaluated as a paragon in the transition from a century long paving the way from a national, sanctioned and enclosed Non western territory to a "terra incognito", production with its regenerative and accessible faces .

Beral Madra
Feb. 1999

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1- Thomas MC. Eville, The tomb of the Zombie, Art Criticism, Vol:11.1.

2- Achile Bonito Oliva, "Keeping Death Alive", Flashart, Vol. xxv, 162,s.99.



A Multicultural Face

Adel El Siwi's recent paintings can even be interpreted in the light of physiognomy, although the results regarding the relationship between body and soul are more accidental than deliberate. For years now this artist has been working on faces in a way quite distant from portrait painting.

In fact, a face is simply a field of action, the object of his investigations, which are at once morphological-spatial (especially) and, in some ways, psychological. His research on a formal plane is not an end in itself, even though it is inevitable and intense. In fact, it fuses with an "external" cultural commitment with the ethical basis of his paintings. Between these forms and ethical-social assumptions he establishes synergy, homophony and analogical development.

My intention in saying this is to underscore the fact that between the ideological and compositional dimensions of his work there is no subjection or instrumentalization of one with respect to the other. Paradoxically, despite the fact that El Siwi has been a psychiatrist, his ethical outlook is more of a socio-cultural than psychological character. If anything, they take on a rather metaphorical cast, as in the case of the artist's interest in mythology, a mythology to reinvent - as El Siwi quite rightly points out - but one that in any case is quite far from any subjectivistic symbology. Every work reveals a commitment to multiculturalism, to intersecting experience, to complex situations, to a socio-existential condition beyond the monolithic and monothematic tradition, even if it is the great Egyptian cultural tradition. And this, despite the fact that El Siwi loves reconnecting with the past. It is all the problem of a critical relationship with things, an attitude which probably stems from a survival (one of the few) of his previous scientific commitment. However, it is still a mobile viewpoint, the fruit of some of the artist's wanderings beyond the national borders, beginning with the long period of his visit to Italy in the eighties. Speaking of his use of gold, the artist states, "I use it to neutralize space and open it completely, but at the same time it is like a blindfold to stop any communication with egyptian tradition". This is an example of El Siwi's tendency to kill two birds with one stone, to keep a hold on both the ideological and the aesthetic-artistic fields contextually and synergistically.

His mobility of thought and expressivity is moreover tinged with irony, a close cousin of self-criticism. It seems to me that this is a rather important point in trying to understand El Siwi's work. The critical contact that the author has with the past and with contemporary expressive needs is complicated by its ironic element and it brings about a playful and free psychological and expressive dimension fairly near the ephemeral. His paintings and installations, which are usually quite large, do not really look big or monumental, because internally they are undermined by a basically unstable spatial and narrative rhythm

and they give the impression of a temporary condition waiting for things to settle down which, you feel, is something that will never happen. But what does take over is a sort of narrative anxiety. And why not? Adel El Siwi has now begun to concern himself with his own anxiety and no longer with that of his patients, doing so in the manner most congenial to his spirit - that is, by expressing and declaring himself in a sober and solid concert of subjectivity and intellectuality. And by communicating. Transitively. Also because our artist has for some time now overtaken the period of gestural informality, a symptom of a need to give total space, albeit transitorily, to subjectivity. And in this way the problem of identity, a crucial point in any multicultural position, has shifted from the individual sphere to the social. As a consequence, the variously investigated and expressed single face gradually gives way to a plurality of faces, which in some cases have multiplied inexorably and in great quantities, especially in a few installations, such as "the Face and Beyond" of 1996-97, which measures 17X3 m. On each of the great numbers of small-size mirrors leaning against the wall next to each other, El Siwi's water colours and charcoal unravel the traces of elongated faces which, because of the "horror vacui" effect lose their identity, if they ever had one, and invite the viewer to study a sign of a metacultural kind in a setting of considerable value, the latter being due to the arrangement of the installation on three right-angled walls. It should be pointed out that installations like "The Face and Beyond" cross cultural boundaries without becoming aseptic. They share formal emotions dear to the USA or to Europe (particularly to Germany and Italy), and yet they evoke the idea of the earth, of a particular earth which you feel could be identified if examined in greater depth. They ooze with a geographically circumscribed humour which will be revealed to you on smelling it, touching it, and tasting it synaesthetically. You feel the material, the handwork, the vibrations of a "work in progress". And these feelings can even send you back to Africa and the Mediterranean

But before doing this, you go through the contemporary art of vari-

ous latitudes with the feeling of losing your identity but with the certainty that you have not lost the foundations of your identity - that is to say, the very odour of your body. The same thing can be felt when you stand before another demanding work of El Siwi's: six paintings, each 250X150 cm. hung next to each other so as to offer an intense narrative with moments of pause and rest. They go under the common name of "Every king has his little tale". And this is El Siwi's big "lay" tale.

Fused in it are contemporary and ancient mythology, emblematic narratives, and phenomenological notes of "visual remains" (to quote Andr  Breton), abstract signs which are apparently free but actually orchestrated with the narrative events and with the intention of communicating in the most objective way possible, without however abandoning the anarchic laws of art. These paintings, owing to their compositional layout and their abstract-narrative air, bring Anselm Kiefer to mind. And Adel El Siwi, beyond all the sterile disquisitions on modernism and postmodernism (although some of the latter has rubbed off on him with his multicultural faces), can be seen to be an artist of a time of complexity.

Carmelo Strano

February 99

Milan - Italy

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