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### Exceeding Realism: Utopian Modern Art on the Nile and Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar's Surrealistic Drawings

The question of *modernity* in the radical sense of the word, in its wish for the rejection of the past, creation of a clear distinction between nature and science, and focus on individual freedom, seems to be of major interest to the Egyptian intellectual milieu in the late 1930s and the 1940s. One of the important artists of the time and a founding member of the newly created Egyptian surrealist group Art et Liberté, Ramsis Younan, set up with transparent language the whole staging platform, so to speak, for the modern debate in the postcolonial Egyptian context. In a 1956 article, he argues:

It is often said that modern art became international as a result of colonialism, which culturally as well as militarily invades the colonized countries, thus destroying their traditions and their arts. However, we should realize that modern European art had been influenced by Eastern and African arts before any Eastern or African artist was influenced by European art. Therefore, cultural invasion is not the issue. It is rather cultural response. . . .

True Egyptian art will not exist unless our

past heritage is allowed to react with the international heritage. . . . we should not fear any innovation, no matter how extreme it may be, for those who fight innovation under the pretext of protecting our national identity reveal the weakness of their faith in its potential for growth.<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious that from a sociocultural point of view the term *modern* and its implications have formed, shaped, and even dictated the collective identity of the twentieth century. Therefore, it is critical to address questions relating to the birth of this term, its assessment, and the manipulative methods and mechanisms of its use, application, and adaptation. As far as Africa and Asia are concerned, the discourse of modernism within the postcolonial context seems to be unavoidable.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, its role in the Eastern and Western European bloc conflicts and in the North American post-World War II era is highly central. So who has the right to claim modernity? Is it an exclusively Western phenomenon, tightly woven into the formation of the intellectual history of Europe? Does it take other forms in former colonial/postcolonial contexts, and if so, under which parameters should it be examined? Is translation theory the only applicable device with which to discuss modernity in non-European spheres? How can we avoid Western binary thinking as related to the Other? Are terms such as *center* and *margin* useful for defining postcolonial phenomenology? Or—of course very cautiously and by clearly rejecting any insinuation or allusion to racist theories—should bioevolutionary theories, in which modernity is compared to a germ or a seed transplanted in a particular embryo or a placental rudiment, be employed?<sup>3</sup>

Interesting as these questions might be, this essay does not take the challenging macro perspective while discussing modernity in the postcolonial zone but rather the micro view. The focus here is a particular moment in the history of Egypt, in which a modern supplement (rather, injection) was slipped into the blood of the Egyptian national identity—specifically, several drawings and paintings by the modern Egyptian artist Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar. These works of art illustrate, I think, a particular zeitgeist in the Egyptian artistic milieu and mirror Al-Gazzar's individual and genuine artistic response to the utopian and almost mythical status given to surrealism in the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, his works will be dealt with as a reflection of the changing sociopolitical context in Egypt at the end of the 1940s and during the 1950s. Al-Gazzar writes: "Surrealism implies a serious contradiction between form and content. It

presents illogical ideas and dreams in logical forms and elements. The formation and drawing are precise and realistic and retain nothing of surrealism except the arrangement of its elements. There should be a solution to this contradiction. Either we should reinstate elements of realistic forms to their real and logical places in the painting or develop form in a way suited to absurd meanings.”<sup>4</sup> These pensive words were offered during the artist’s 1954–55 stay in Rome. The contradiction he discovers between the realistic approach of rendering nature, which he considers logical, and the illogical character of dreams and fantasies, which seem to find their visual translation solely in the *arrangement* of things in surrealistic pictures, is interesting, if not intriguing. His first idea that realistic painting is logical clearly shows his Western phenomenological understanding of representation, in which mimesis takes the main role in the visual translation of nature. Nonetheless, I would rather leave aside this specific thought and focus on Al-Gazzar’s particular observation about the contradiction in the surrealistic style between form and content, and his aim to find a proper visual solution to this contradiction, for developing a visual method well suited for depicting, as he calls it, “absurd meaning.”

Why does he use the word *absurd* in this context? Does surrealistic painting have absurd meaning? Is it meaningless? Al-Gazzar could clearly have used other words to define surrealism apart from transmitting absurd meaning. Moreover, in his varied writings on art, one is aware of his deep understanding of surrealism, which he defines as the domain of the artist’s free imagination and creativity and as the specific sphere in which individualism flourishes.<sup>5</sup> It is obvious, then, that there is a gap in Al-Gazzar’s logical explanation and the process of thinking on the contradiction between form and content in the surrealist style. Why does he, then, elide other values and potential meanings of surrealist painting and define it as, or even reduce it to, absurd meaning?

Al-Gazzar (1925–66) was born in Alexandria. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to the village of Burma in the center of the Nile Delta, later settling in a very populated and relatively poor quarter of Cairo near the Mosque of Sayyida Zeinab. This area, which today retains its premodern charm, was a place in which Al-Gazzar was constantly confronted with the lower and poor middle classes of Cairo. In fact this was and still is one of the liveliest areas of the city. Festivals and streets fairs, such as those of the Maulid (celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), are usually held in the space surrounding the Mosque of Sayyida Zeinab, and the bazaar

located just behind it is the vivid and active urban space of this quarter. It is likely that Al-Gazzar was confronted daily with the fatalistic approach to life held by the people of this quarter due to their superstitious beliefs, often mingled with Muslim devoutness. Here, in this quarter, he was granted a view into the “heart of darkness” of the Cairene folk. As Liliane Karnouk writes: “Here, every sort of popular magic is still being practiced: fortune-telling, purification rituals, collective exorcism. One can imagine, then, how the son of a conservative religious man and the heir to the previous generation of surrealist painters began to associate the intuitive aspect of art, the soul, with the essential element in the popular mystic arts: the hidden unknown.”<sup>6</sup>

Painted with gouache and india ink on paper, Al-Gazzar’s 1953 *Un djinn amoureux*, found today in the Museum of Fine Arts in Alexandria, is, despite its relatively small size (measuring only 53 by 28 centimeters), the *Guernica* of his oeuvre (see figure 1). The main figure in this painting is the *djinn amoureux*, depicted in the form of a lizard. It appears flying on the right-hand side of the painting, hovering above the main scene. In both hands, the jinn holds a crescent, from which emanate several threads that are fully stretched and affixed to other figures in the painting. This suggests that the jinn controls the entire scene and, like a spider, weaves a web to dominate the space. A scale is attached to his tail, with two white eggs on it. The main figure in the painting is a hybrid creature, possibly another shape into which the jinn has transformed. It has the body of an elongated quadruped with a female face, the forelegs of a bird of prey, the hind legs of a human being, and a long tail. Numerous hearts are depicted on its body, as if to suggest that there are many hearts located in its chest. At first glance it seems that Al-Gazzar is alluding to the enigmatic sphinx, especially when one compares the shape of the jinn’s hair to the Great Sphinx of Giza. At the same time, the image might also bring to mind the Buraq, the fantastic horse with a woman’s face, on which Muhammad made his night journey, Mi’raj, and ascended to heaven. This assumption is strengthened by the black Egyptian figure depicted lying on the jinn’s back, as if riding on it, and the Arabic words that appear in the jinn’s hair—*huwa*, *Allah*, *ahad* (he is God, the Only), namely, there is no God but Allah. The naked, dark female lying on top seems to be a personification of love and eros. Her tongue is bound by wire to the mouth of the lizard jinn. Her long black hair mingles with the tail of the snake crawling beneath. This snake appears to be attacking a small white quadruped. On the left, a woman sits

crossed-legged and raises her arms as if praying. An owl appears on her raised left hand. The whole composition suggests a mixture of rival forces, as if a struggle among eros, life, love, knowledge, and religious devotion takes place in Al-Gazzar's mind.

The fantastic inner world of Al-Gazzar's thoughts, emotions, fears, and wishes is depicted in *Un djinn amoureux*, both in image and in word. The written text on the far left reads, in part:

A jinn lover is lost in the seas  
 He washes his sins in the dust of life.  
 Ranting for no reason beneath him a well  
 His upper part is his libido  
 Planted in the valley of sleep. . . .  
 One after another  
 Greet him.  
 Peace be upon the House of Peace.<sup>7</sup>

The metaphorical text and its illogical syntax are reflected in the unusual mixture of and intricate relationships among the varied motifs. The surface on which these symbols are depicted recalls a rectangular Pharaonic panel of stone on which signs and symbols were inscribed, scratched, and scribbled.

Al-Gazzar's preparatory drawing on cardboard for this painting illuminates the interpretation of the final painting (see figure 2). In contrast to the painting, the central figure in the drawing is the jinn, depicted as a fantastic figure with a monster's face. Al-Gazzar alludes to the naked woman on the jinn's back in the accompanying text: "His upper part is his libido / planted in the valley of sleep." Furthermore, replacing the female figure with the lizard-jinn in the final painting sees the female depicted horizontally, raising both her arms as if adoring or aiming to reach the elaborate, closed city gate depicted at the center of this drawing. It is unclear why Al-Gazzar decided to replace the young female with the image of a lizard-jinn. However, by this change of motifs, the final painting becomes much more mysterious and even, to some extent, miraculous. At the same time, the catlike jinn was also changed from a suffering, ugly figure to an extremely feminine creature. Thus, the whole painting radiates temptation and mystery. Is this depicted city the House of Peace Al-Gazzar mentions in the accompanying text?<sup>8</sup> Art critic Aimé Azar accurately describes the tenor of this painting: "El-Gazzar is waging combat between the angel and the

beast, the unconscious and intelligence, traditions and myths. His non-representational approach has more realism than many realistic expressions.”<sup>9</sup> Torn between “traditions and myths,” Al-Gazzar, like many Egyptian artists of the time, was trapped between the burden of his land’s past history and the great expectations for its future.

In order to understand Al-Gazzar’s aesthetic language, it would be worthwhile to consider the artistic Cairene context, especially to trace his formative years as a young artist under the tutelage of Hussein Youssef Amin. It was Amin who discovered Al-Gazzar in 1938, at the age of thirteen, and encouraged him to keep on with his artistic education. In 1944, after a short period as a medical student, Al-Gazzar joined the faculty of fine arts. His main education as an artist probably happened after he joined Le Groupe de l’Art Contemporain in 1946, the year it was founded by Amin. Belonging to the first generation of artists in modern Egypt, Amin took part in the revolution against the British occupation in 1919. His search for nationhood and independence probably added to his great driving force to discover talented young artists in Egypt, helping them take their first steps toward forming an identity and style. Members of Art Contemporain used to gather regularly at his house to discuss artistic matters and other topics. Amin encouraged Al-Gazzar to develop his independent and particular expressive and surrealist style—then regarded as contemporary and modern—but concomitantly was much aware of the need to create an artistic language specific to Egypt. Amin was trapped between modern international art and art that was more traditional and national. This contradiction is evident in Amin’s statements in his manifesto in favor of surrealism as a modern mode of expression: “The major mistake which hinders people’s ability to understand contemporary art forms is unconsciously inherent in their attempt to accept this art through one of the old artistic ideals or combination of those ideals as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> Introducing the second exhibition of Art Contemporain in 1948, Amin states: “We can sense the substantial difference between contemporary art and traditional art, each of which now would appear as being out of synch with the age when it emerged. This art was the product of special social circumstances, reflecting man’s desire for sought-after modern development.”<sup>11</sup>

Al-Gazzar’s best work illustrating time in the context of Egypt’s struggle for national identity is his painting *The Past, the Present, and the Future*, completed in 1951 (see figure 3).<sup>12</sup> Here, Al-Gazzar uses symbols to define the three human conditions as relating to time. Al-Gazzar writes: “The past is clear in the background of the painting. . . . The present is the large

face seen in the painting; his expression is a combination of strength, resolve, absent-mindedness towards a hateful past and the contemplation of a happy tomorrow. . . . The future, meanwhile, is represented in the key put in front of the present. The key heralds the future with its secrets and hidden aspects."<sup>13</sup> It seems clear that Al-Gazzar's desire to liberate his soul and mind—even if this painting refers to the collective memory of Egyptians and not necessarily to Al-Gazzar as individual—is associated with the struggle for freedom from the burden of the past. If we are allowed to interpret this picture also as Al-Gazzar's wish to free his art from precedent artistic languages and his wish to use contemporary artistic modes of expression, it seems as if his intention echoes the words of his mentor, Amin.

The most powerful of Al-Gazzar's works are those made during the 1950s, which combine images and poetry. These drawings, all made with colored crayon and ink on paper, illustrate Al-Gazzar's interest in surrealist automatic writing, drawing, poetry, and use of imagery as a means of expressing the individual human condition, both conscious and subconscious.

The first of this group is *The Hymn of the Beetles*, made in 1953 (see figure 4). A magical and enigmatic atmosphere imbues this drawing. The main figure on the left is a man with bird's feet and an extended monstrous upper body with six arms. His sharp and powerful profile and huge eye emphasize his supernatural character; it is as if he were working omens on the beholder. Like the mythological figure of Orpheus, he plays a musical instrument (the flute) and tames the monstrous, almost grotesque, creature that crawls at his feet. A creeping insect, most probably also tamed by the captivating song of the flute, appears on the instrument itself. The whole picture is a surrealist vision of a dream. There is the sense of intimacy, as if we are entering the private, unconscious sphere of Al-Gazzar's thoughts and fantasies, evoking for a moment Francisco Goya's *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (*caprichos*, no. 43). Humankind's irrationality, prejudices, and obscure forces seem to control Al-Gazzar's inner world. Fear and the wish to tame irrational elements are mixed in this drawing. The poem, written by Al-Gazzar in both red and black ink and integrated into the drawing, accentuates the enigma of this work and contributes to its illegibility:

Behind the black walls, they are there.  
 The stench spreads  
 The shapes of their Throats lie rusty inside ears.  
 Do you hear their hymns?

Wailing and wailing . . .  
 At the dawn of the feast  
 The sun disc is garlanded with my crowns.  
 Bracelets of love I offer as a present to my loved ones.  
 My star is faithful  
 I carry it on my shoulders  
 With it I travel into the unknown and  
 My flute calls on people  
 Everyone sings  
 The hymn of the beetles with the green flies of air.<sup>14</sup>

Al-Gazzar painted *The Damned Son of a Bitch* around 1953, and the work includes another of the artist's poems (see figure 5). The central and main motif of this drawing is a fantastic tree emerging out of a woman's face with an owl on the tree's trunk and branches, which appear as if they were made of long black hair. On the left side of the tree, a woman sits, or rather mourns, and her long hair mingles with the tree's hairy branches. Several other figures appear in the rural landscape. On the right is a bizarre scene, to which the enigmatic title of this drawing most likely refers. In the scene, a heavy woman, sitting on a man who is lying on his stomach, seems to punish the man, beating him with both hands. A hanging water bucket, four ravens, and a fleeing figure appear in the background. Like *The Hymn of the Beetles*, this drawing evokes both confusion and curiosity. The subject matter remains inexplicable. Different narratives are collected and displayed here, but the rationale behind them is unclear. Impressions of grief and sorrow are brought to mind. Bad luck and tragic circumstances are mingled and presented in a dramatic but nevertheless slightly humorous manner. The accompanying poem reads, in part:

The damned son of a bitch  
 The son of the red slaves  
 A lowly scoundrel  
 A rascal typical of his time  
 Self-centered . . .  
 Like an ominous crow  
 It spreads the news everywhere  
 The one with a sincere palm  
 Has made me promise him  
 We will end the times of injustice.<sup>15</sup>





Figure 1. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, *Un djinn amoureux*, 1953. Gouache and india ink on paper, 53 by 28 centimeters. From the Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Alexandria



Figure 2. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, *Un djinn amoureux* preparatory drawing, 1953. India ink on colored cardboard, 34.5 by 22.7 centimeters



Figure 3. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, *The Past, the Present, and the Future*, 1951. Oil on cardboard, 62 by 95 centimeters





Figure 4. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar,  
*The Hymn of the Beetles*, 1953.  
Colored crayon on paper, 48 by 62  
centimeters. From the collection of  
Gazebia Seri



Figure 5. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar,  
*The Damned Son of a Bitch*,  
circa 1953. Ink on paper, 36 by  
48 centimeters. From a private  
collection



Figure 6. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, *Dances of a Slain Person*, 1954. Colored crayon on paper, 34 by 22 centimeters



Figure 7. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, *Now What Is This Silence?* 1954. Colored crayon on paper, 34 by 21.5 centimeters

*Dances of a Slain Person*, created by Al-Gazzar in 1954, consists of a double page drawn with crayon (see figure 6). The organization of words and images suggests that this drawing is part of the illustrated anthology of the Alexandrian poet Ahmed Mursi. Mursi's poem is titled *Death under the Moonlight*. The poem, which appears on both pages, reads:

Dances of a slain person on the brink of disappearance  
 Wailing from his grave rattle under the pillars of the sky,  
 The ribs of a neighing toll run by hands of the wind  
 As though they were ghosts moving in the dark. . . .  
 Why does the evening have the features of annihilation?  
 Why?  
 Why?  
 In the deserted spot there is my ruined tower.<sup>16</sup>

*Why* is repeated in this poem, imposing its question on the entire scene. For a moment it seems as if the word is screamed by the robust figure sitting on the ground, with feet bound. The figure is naked with only a band of disc pendants hanging around its chest. It raises its head and is depicted with an open mouth as if complaining or lamenting. Another melancholic figure, most probably a female, appears on the left side of the double page. She sits in the shadow of a ruined building. A huge bell hangs over her head, and an eagle screams above her. At her feet lie several skulls. The figure holds a lute under her arm. In the distance under what seems to be the moonlight, as the elongated shadows suggest, we see several other figures. The ambience of "dead under the moonlight" is transmitted through Al-Gazzar's visual images and symbols.

Another drawing in red crayon on paper, *Now What Is This Silence?* represents a flooded world in which figures, memories, symbols, and signs swim in the streams of the river of unconsciousness (see figure 7). The text here is also by Mursi, and it appears as if it were floating over the painting, as a phantom carrying words into the illustrated double page:

Now what is this silence?  
 Why has my bell died?  
 Is this a funeral or apparitions of departure? . . .  
 I spray flowers of childhood with floods  
 Are my dreams nothing?  
 Should I be patient like an empty bubble inside a human aquarium?  
 The black foam keeps fate at bay

My buds, what wrong have they done to wither and perish? . . .  
 It will melt away against my free will if the wind blows in the dark  
 It will melt away against my free will as I crumble like debris.<sup>17</sup>

The works described here clearly demonstrate Al-Gazzar's specific visual language, consisting of symbols, personifications, and literary references. Aware of the contradiction between form and content in surrealist painting, the artist constantly tries to free himself from the tyranny of figurative art by transforming his motifs into symbols. He is obsessed with and longs for the freedom of the human mind, exposing its fears, concerns, desires, vanishing memories, and the banalities of life. His ideas were likely nurtured by the concepts expressed in the late 1930s by Cairo's surrealist group *Art et Liberté*. This group was founded on January 19, 1939, by George Henein, a well-educated, highly influential figure in Cairo's art scene.

Henein had already made a name for himself in Europe. He was involved with European, mainly French, surrealist artists and Italian futurist artists, especially Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. The establishment of a surrealist movement in Cairo came at the behest of André Breton and Diego Rivera, who asked Henein in 1938 to join an international action in order to repress the Nazis' hostile attitudes toward modern art. On December 22, 1938, a tract was presented, probably written by Henein. The tract, *Vivre l'art dégénéré*, written in Arabic and French, was distributed in the streets of Cairo and sent abroad.<sup>18</sup> It was a clear anti-Fascist manifesto, addressing directly Adolf Hitler's totalitarian regime and its aggression against "degenerate" art, while also representing *Art et Liberté*'s wish to give the freedom of act and mind to artistic creation: "We believe that any attempt to confine modern art, as certain people wish, to being an instrument at the service of a religion, a race or a nation is utterly absurd or is no more than a bad joke. As for us these reactionary myths can only be regarded as imprisoning the thought. As a generalized exchange system of thoughts and emotions which are shared by the whole humanity, art cannot but reject those artificial restrictions."<sup>19</sup> The manifesto concludes: "We stand for this degenerate art. It is in it that reside all the chances of the future. Let us work for its victory over the middle ages which is rising in the very heart of the Occident."<sup>20</sup>

The manifesto was subsequently published in *Al-fan al-hurr* (*The Free Art*).<sup>21</sup> In such times, when Fascism was spreading in Europe, the East was also engaged in keeping alive the modern art movement and its ideals of freedom of expression. In fact, this tract was in accord with and clearly



alludes to the *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*, which was made public on July 25, 1938, in Mexico, the home of exile for modern European artists and intellectuals. This text was the founding transcript of the *Fédération Internationale de l'Art Révolutionnaire Independent*.<sup>22</sup> The main figures in *Art et Liberté* were Henein, Fouad Kamel, and Younan, and the group adopted a surrealist language, as Younan explains: "The credit is likewise due to this Surrealist Movement as the first serious attempt to create a new myth in which reality and supernatural, manifestation and the intrinsic, wisdom and madness, apogee and perigee, life and death meet and become a source of light and inspiration. . . . Therefore we see him [the artist] now intentionally exploding these forms, hoping to stumble across the primary essence of Being and its hidden features under the debris."<sup>23</sup>

By searching the cognitive realm of the artist's imagination, the idea of freedom appears as secured. Surrealism, therefore, could be considered the answer to the need for a specific mode of art associated with freedom and the wish to break any constraints that imprison the soul, or—using another metaphor—the spirit of the nation. This idea fits well with Breton's *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme*, written in 1924, which defines surrealism as a pure psychic automatism expressing the process of thought, freed from any control by reason, and independent of any aesthetic or moral constraints.

One of the more talented artists of *Art et Liberté* was Kamel, who influenced Al-Gazzar's paintings the most.<sup>24</sup> His poetical drawings appear as if painted "in the free stream of thoughts and the flowing of forms and contours"—to use one of the titles of his drawings—and strongly bring to mind the drawings of Al-Gazzar. It is probably the freedom of associative thinking and its translation into a particular visual program that links and binds images and symbols. Kamel explains his inner vision and visual streams of thought:

One day my depths awoke (sister tree, brother rock). The law of being in everything was overwhelming at once, and I sensed a peculiar symmetry which binds and humbles every creature in a delicate and miraculous order. I began to remain un-disturbed when I didn't see the curve of a water-buffaloe's back as though it were the moving extension of a huge piece of mountain, or when I didn't distinguish much between a horse's mane and a woman's hair, or between a chair and a human body.<sup>25</sup>

These fermenting cosmopolitan ideas of Egypt's modernist circle had largely died out by the end of the 1940s. It is generally understood that the

surrealist movement on the Nile and its aspiration for internationalism challenged the growth of nationalism in Egypt and was also divorced from the still-maintained academicism in the art schools of Cairo. It is likely that the surrealist group and its derivatives alienated Egyptian public opinion and as a result lost political and financial support. Al-Gazzar appears, then, as one of the major figures in the Egyptian artistic landscape who was able to keep the spirit of the surrealist movement continuing into the next decade. Yet, why does Al-Gazzar use the word *absurd* to define the character of surrealist painting in his writing in the mid-1950s?

It seems that the political change in Egypt in the 1950s, particularly the officers' revolt in 1952, brought about a totally different environment to art and society in Egypt. Pan-Arabism and national patriotism were revived, especially as a result of the establishment of a Jewish state in the midst of the Levant. Egypt, caught by the rising tension between the two superpowers of the post-World War II era, had to redefine its national identity.

It is interesting to see how the surrealist style of Al-Gazzar's 1960s paintings also changed. His works could no longer be defined as relating to the international style of surrealist art and automatic painting, both of which aimed at mental and spiritual freedom. Rather, Al-Gazzar's art is constrained by his wish to marry national style with the traditional. The freedom of human *individual* spirit and imagination visualized through Al-Gazzar's automatic writing and scribbling motifs of mental visions and landscapes are transformed into imaginary and bizarre patterns and symbols relating to the *collective* Egyptian psyche and its national identity, organized within narrative space. Al-Gazzar seems, then, to develop a genuine method of visualizing the Egyptian spirit by looking into its inner mind and soul. Finally, despite his subtle criticism of Egyptian society, he turns out to be, at least in his last "surrealist" works, a painter in service to the nation. Al-Gazzar seems to search for a genuine Egyptian identity in his early surrealist works. Instead of simply drawing on the themes of the visual Egyptian past, he concentrates on the national collective psyche and creates for it novel symbols and icons, illustrating its new "human condition." It is interesting to see how the politics and history of the region dictated the path that the surrealist style of Al-Gazzar took or, one may even say, was reformed and reconstructed by them. In fact, following the development of Al-Gazzar as an artist, from the 1940s until the mid-1960s, provides an interesting example of the reception of modernism on the Nile and the transformation it underwent from its first direct link to individualism



and the free spirit of the artist to its later association with nationalism and the collective identity of the people. The international, if not global, artistic ideas of Henein and Art et Liberté in the early 1940s seemed to die out at the end of the decade, leaving space for a new surrealist style that was torn between the search for an artistic, authentic, and individual expression and the making of Arabic national identity—an absurd combination of tasks.

## Notes

- 1 Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art: 1910–2003* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 35.
- 2 For a discussion of modernity in the Muslim world, see mainly Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226–47; Hasan Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World* (Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1995); and Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso Books, 1996). As far as art is concerned, see mainly Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*; Wijdan Ali, “The Status of Islamic Art in the Twentieth Century,” *Muqarnas* 9 (1992): 186–88; Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité arabe: L’évolution des arts plastiques en Egypt, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996); Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: Florida University Press, 1997); and Doris Behrens-Abouseif and Stephen Vernoit, *Islamic Art in the 19th Century: Tradition, Innovation, and Eclecticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); see also Jessica Winegar, *Creative reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
- 3 For an excellent and critical approach to modernity within the colonial and postcolonial discourse, see Saurabh Dube, “Introduction: Enchantments of Modernity,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002): 729–55. See also Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “A History of the Concept Modern,” in *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, trans. Glen Burns (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 108; Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity,” *boundary 2* 20 (1993): 65–76; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 4 Sobhy Sharouny, *Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar* (Cairo: Elias Modern, 2007), 18.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 47.
- 7 The English translation is given in Sharouny, *Al-Gazzar*, 74.
- 8 It is tempting to compare this painting of Al-Gazzar’s with a small (54.5-by-73.5-centimeter) oil painting by Max Ernst, *Le triomphe de l’amour/fausse allégorie* (*The Triumph of Love/False Allegory*), from 1937. Apart from the similar titles of both paintings, the resemblance between the compositions is striking. A large monsterlike figure appears in the foreground. Similar to the jinn lover of the preparatory drawing, Ernst’s monster fills the lower zone of the canvas. An angel with a broken wing appears at the painting’s center, hovering above the lower scene. This angel might be compared to the “flying” figure in Al-Gazzar’s work. The small, naked woman who raises her arms toward the angel recalls in some way Al-Gazzar’s female figure, who also raises her arms as if praying or asking for forgiveness. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find out if Al-Gazzar was aware of

- this painting of Ernst's. Thus the link suggested here remains speculative. See Melanie Franke and Dieter Scholz, ed., *Surreale Welten: Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg (Surreal Worlds: Collection Scharf-Gerstenberg)* (Berlin: State Museums of Berlin, National Gallery, Nicolai Publications, 2008), 179.
- 9 Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 45. This is cited from Aimé Azar, *La peinture moderne en Égypte* (Cairo: Les éditions nouvelles, 1961), 116.
  - 10 Hussein Youssef Amin quoted in Sharouny, *Al-Gazzar*, 13.
  - 11 Ibid.
  - 12 It is tempting to compare the male figure in this painting, whose hands and fleshy fingers dominate the foreground, with the famous 1952 Robert Doisneau photograph of Picasso at his breakfast table, *Le pains de Picasso*.
  - 13 Al-Gazzar quoted in Sharouny, *Al-Gazzar*, 17.
  - 14 The English translation is from Sharouny, *Al-Gazzar*, 76.
  - 15 Ibid., 77.
  - 16 Ibid., 75.
  - 17 The English translation is from Sharouny, *al-Gazzar*, 78.
  - 18 Azar, *La Peinture Moderne en Égypte*, 53.
  - 19 For this translation, see Abdel Kader El-Janabi, "The Nile of Surrealism," *Faradis*, 2007, <http://faradis.wordpress.com/2007/02/28/surrealist-activities-in-egypt/> (accessed October 5, 2008).
  - 20 Ibid.
  - 21 George Henein, "Long Live Low Art!" ("Yahyah al-fan al-munkhaṭ"), *Al-fan al-hurr (The Free Art)*, December 9, 1938.
  - 22 See Robin Adèle Greeley, "For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky, and Cárdenas's Mexico," in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 204–24.
  - 23 Ramsis Younan quoted in Samir Gharieb, *Surrealism in Egypt and Plastic Arts* (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1986), 37. For further discussion of Ramsis Younan and the surrealist group in Cairo, see Svein Engelstad, "Historical Themes in Modern Egyptian Art" (paper presented at the Fifth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, Lund, October 25–28, 2001), available at [www.smi.uib.no/pal/Engelstad.pdf](http://www.smi.uib.no/pal/Engelstad.pdf) (accessed February 1, 2010). See also Andrea Flores, "The Myth of the False: Ramses Younan's Post-structuralism avant la lettre," *Arab Studies Journal* 8.2/9.1 (Fall 2000/Spring 2001): 97–110.
  - 24 Fouad Kamel was born in Beni Suef in April 28, 1919. He was a student of Yusuf al-Affi's. In 1947, he joined the Wing of Sands society and showed his *Automatic Works* in several exhibitions organized by the society. He was one of the youngest members of Art et Liberté; he showed his work in that society's first exhibition in 1940.
  - 25 Gharieb, *Surrealism in Egypt*, 40–42.