

# A H M E D M O R S I



مجمع الفنون  
الإدارة العامة لمراكز الفنون



وزارة الثقافة  
قطاع الفنون التشكيلية

## *The beach of time of Ahmed Morsi*

1. We are all strangers. Even to ourselves. Especially to ourselves. Although sometimes we like to think that we have discovered the substance of our wishes, with what wicker our dreams are woven. We fabricate great or intimate explanations that, when accurate, may be useful to a generation; poems that, when they hunt in the night, are a luminous net, hovering like a suspension bridge between the edges of perception and reality.

2. We have spent but four years sitting face to face, two metal desks sewn together by their weight, solid school tables from the fifties, from the time the United Nations was founded. It is a daily ritual: greetings that we exchange like accountants of a shipping company with mysterious freightage. We were both born by the sea: he in Alexandria, I in Vigo. Of the Alexandria of his childhood and adolescence, mythicized in that quartet by Lawrence Durrell that I devoured in my formative years, no trace is left. But when he walks through the streets of old Manhattan, especially the Bowery, mentally composing his poems or drawing in the beach of his old head the sketches of what will later become paintings, he says it is as if he strolled through the port streets of his native Alexandria. We share the same space, and some intimate passions.

3. "Isms" are the needles in butterflies' spikes. They only confirm that they have ceased to beat their wings. We use "isms" as labels to escape this place. But not to wonder into the nooks and crannies of a life and a memory. Surrealism. Symbolism. Expressionism. If perhaps the Egyptian spirit exists, it can be read in the paintings of Ahmed Morsi. In any case, there is a metamorphosis at hand. He said it once: images that trap his imagination from old newspapers, magazines, walls, shadows, cutouts, fences, branches. Landscapes towards the unknown. The true life, the true reality, the true soul. Approximations, because truth is like the thin layer of foam that waves leave in their departure. A beauty that speaks for itself, and becomes extinguished. The worlds of commerce and painting get matched at all times, and they do so even with the fury of a metal mantis in this Manhattan that we love and share for

coinciding, diverging reasons made of images and tenuous voices, that lay themselves down like a language of imagination and desire. Ahmed does not betray his secret or his art to achieve recognition. He could not, without taking off a mask that is in reality his own face. To paint because there is no other path, because he has to do it. Expression of an internal world that he knows out of force of visiting it with brush strokes that make a distinct shadow.

4. Although he has been living in New York for decades, he has never fully abandoned his past life. That is, his native city. If Alexandria exists it breathes in his memory. But he does not paint what once was; he paints a spirit, an atmosphere extinguished in the geopolitical and moral seas of nowadays, a century that breaks its knuckles against us. Mural paintings, purity, silence. Horse heads, stone heads, asexual bodies, absence of time, eternal time, time that returns like the sea against the beach of time of Ahmed Morsi. Poetry finds a clear, and mysterious road towards the crystallization of painting, and vice-versa: paintings find their way towards the mind of the painter through the poetry with which he contemplates the world and his dubious shadow upon it. Painting is a figuration of the soul, while poetry moves into the field of resonance of the human voice, which is the one that translates thought, or at least attempts to do it: because reason is made of quicksand. That is why in Ahmed's paintings we read images of words that recall a forming thought that cannot and will not be told but in this way, without words, with a terrifyingly familiar silence. As if he had linked through a secret interior passage the secret chamber of the pharaoh's servants with the tombs of Juan Rulfo's ancestors and his "Pedro Páramo." Had I not known Ahmed Morsi to be a poet, I could have succumbed to the relatively easy temptation of saying that he paints poems, but that would be lapsing into a degradation of both registers that are here related to one another like the left- and right-side beaches of the brain: without words, with its body turned into a sort of delta and a sort of hinge where the voices full of images and emotions lay down next to the images locked in the paintings, who themselves unleash emotions hard for us to translate into sentences. They appeal to a territory, that although populated by reminiscences which we can direct to and locate in Egypt, in Alexandria, under the sand, in the hieroglyphics, in hieratism, in the silent profile of the figures who sow, or knit, or paint, or write, at the same time they are retelling the beginning of sight, of their way of seeing when heat makes the horizon reverberate and the clarity of things remains half-said.

5. When I look into Ahmed's paintings I become silent, and not because I cannot

enter them, but because they speak to me with figures that I recognize, illustrations of a dream I have had and that now, while I contemplate that illuminated train that comes from the sea towards a beach full of naked and silent figures who observe me, I feel it concerns me, that it is coming for me. Because I too have been awaiting it for a long time.

6. When I read Ahmed's poems I begin to travel. I am not going to say the he was waiting for me in New York because I did not know that I would be coming here to spend some of the crucial years of my life, nor that he would be waiting at the other side of a steel table at the United Nations, while the delegates' voices speak to an auditorium of mirrors in the great rooms of the General Assembly and the Security Council. But the truth is that almost from the first moment, and through a third language that we share, but which is not our own, which is not the one we speak in our dreams and the one we speak when we try to describe the way the first beach was, the metallic locks of the old shops that sold chandlery and rigging, dates and corn, fish flour and herring, coffee, couscous, codfish, spices, reels, feathers, ink and reams of paper, brushes and linseed oil, copper wire, wax, matches, chickpeas, books and newspapers, soap, cork, cane, esparto, oil lamps, pins and nails, paints, knives and paintbrushes and aqua fortis and potatoes, almonds and candy, pasta, glue, dictionaries and shoes. We do not need many words to understand one other.

7. When I try to translate what I feel and what I see I jump into an imaginary streetcar that leaves from my childhood at the port of Vigo and arrives onto the cobblestone streets of Alexandria. I can smell once again the aroma of rotten fish and preserves, burlap, fuel and oil paint that I loved so much as a child, and I walk at sundown through the shipyards and warehouses and workers' restaurants and the closed grocery shops.

8. We are all alone, even if we pretend. Ahmed and I. Although those who observe our lives, who share our existence and some of our passions, may think it is not so. Words help us touch the light over a beach beaten by the wind, which now, in Ahmed's paintings, seems to have collapsed, allowing us to hear a beating in Morse code, a beating that has to do with Alexandria, and which I nonetheless listen to as if I were its accomplice. Because through the windows that Ahmed has made in his chest I see what I dream, I see a beach of time with clocks with no hands, still hands, horses, sexless beings that observe me and allow themselves to be observed, heads of horses, figures with big blue feet like wedges, dark blues that come more from memory and desire than from reality. Two embrace and

we do not know if that embrace is like in dreams, pure like air, but that in opening the shutters up to the light they hurt us. Because we realize that we are embracing the truth, but that does not save us from time nor from death, as reassuring as it is. The embrace goes and so does the warmth of the flesh beating by our side, but the same cold beach remains.

9. This is not an attempt at interpretation. It is perhaps an invitation to look into these faces that are masks, that appear blank, that observe with such silence. They are horrific, but nonetheless do not make me afraid. He does not like to talk about his paintings, which do not precisely speak for themselves, but make use of words. That is why one does not want to succumb to the temptation, which is, on the other hand, irrelevant, of insinuating that they want to say whatsoever they want to say, because their form is not to say, but to let us see through another sphere that is not made up of words. Because it has already been said that Ahmed writes poems, and he writes them completely in the notebook in his head (a beach of time) while he walks through the Bowery, which is a New York passage that leads to Alexandria (at least for him it does) and for me too ever since he allowed me to share that path between his house near the United Nations and the New York that survives every effort to turn it into something else, sawdust of history, rust of dreams.

10. His world seems airtight, impenetrable, protected by a lattice of silence and loneliness. It is there, however, in all its intensity, in its lack of emphasis, in its frankness. He does not highlight, does not scream, does not point. He half-opens a door that leads to the beach of time and invites everyone who wants to enter it, those who dare reading, leaving behind the noise, the voices and the echoes of those who are fabricating the world with blows of an ax and they forget that we are going to die, that in the face of all that vibrant future there are men like Ahmed Morsi who know how to pronounce silent syllables, stakes sunk in the sand, horses that observe us, eyes that are our own, heads that we rock in our arms so that everything does not become extinguished when we close our eyes and the sea comes to beat with its gray ink upon this strange place called existence.

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