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## Carving spirits

The departure of Sobhi Girguis, one of Egypt's leading sculptors, raised the question of how great figures pass away without a respectful farewell, writes **Rania Khallaf**



Sobhy Girguis, one of a handful of brilliant masters of contemporary sculpture, passed away on 19 January. The political chaos overwhelming the country left the event almost unrecorded. Born on 20 December 1929 to a family of musicians in the Cairo neighbourhood of Al-Qulaly, Girguis had a glorious career of which most Egyptians, alas, remain ignorant. Girguis graduated from the sculpture department of the Fine Arts College in Cairo in 1958, and six years later he received a scholarship to study at the Fine Arts Academy of Florence, Italy. And, ironically, he made the Egyptian citizen the core of his work. In Girguis's work the figure of

the Egyptian, shaped and reshaped in different characteristic situations, represents rare moments in peoples' lives; moments of confusion, joy, inspiration, and playfulness. Using a range of materials from iron and brass to bronze, such moments come to life. Girguis was known as a narcissist who identified with his own sculptures; he was quoted as saying, "I am infatuated with my own sculptures and, although my experiment seems to be a hard one, it has its special flavour." Nor was he without context: Girguis belongs in a generation of sculptors that includes such greats as Gamal El-Seguini and Adam Henien; like theirs, his work has influenced and enriched the art scene in Egypt. In turn Henry Moore, the Italian sculptor Marino Marini and the French artist Ossip Zadkine helped forge his unique style, investing it with seriousness and a human focus. Though widely known as The Sculptor, Girguis received few honours in his lifetime. In 2008, he was granted the State Appreciation Award in the Arts. The paintings in his last, 2007 exhibition at the Mahmoud Khalil Museum revealed a rare sensitivity to people, a sort of constant rebirth giving rise to an intimate dialogue with the viewer. It was the appropriately low-key culmination of a life dedicated to art, in which Girguis also taught sculpture at the Fine Arts College. The course of that life shifted considerably, besides. For fifteen consecutive years, Girguis only worked in bronze. He called it the conciliation between form and vacuum: a kind of mixture between human beings and machines. Here as elsewhere his figures have perplexed faces; with childlike expressions they are involved in some catastrophe or dilemma. Girguis exhibited rarely, but always to significant effect. He held his first solo exhibition at the Akhenaton Hall in Qasr Al Nil in 1971, where he also exhibited in 1981 and 1994. He exhibited in Shonet Al Fann (the Art Retreat), then in the framework of the artists residence programme in Agami, Alexandria in 1985. Other venues include Doroob Gallery in 1996, the Cairo Atelier in 2002, and the Mahmoud Khalil Museum in 2004 and 2007. He participated in many international exhibitions and biennales including the Venice Biennale in 1976 and the National Art Biennale (Sun Path) in Ecuador in 2006. \*\*\* Faten Mostafa is the founder of ArtTalks, an exclusive educational, advisory and artist-promotion initiative in Egypt; and she is among Girguis's greatest fans. On a quick visit to the ArtTalks premises in Zamalek, the sight of Girguis's sculptures and paintings revived my spirits at a time when I was deeply depressed by the news of clashes and political turmoil. In one corner of the elegantly designed office, three paintings took pride of place. Their warm colours, shades of brown and red mainly, communicate an intimate sense of sympathy. One of these paintings is The Thinker, a 122 cm by 102 cm oil on canvas, showing a single figure with a triangular head and a rectangular body. Painted in faint brown, the figure looks as if he has finally arrived at an idea over which he has been mulling for the longest time -- a solution to the misery of the world perhaps? -- yet his tiny eyes and the faint smile on his face tell the viewer not to take life itself seriously. The viewer cannot help but

sympathise with such unique characters, especially in the light of the confusion and devastation that has followed the revolution. In many of Girguis's works, there is a sole figure commanding the whole space, as if to give the character portrayed a chance to talk to the viewer. And it works. The titles are suitably poetic: Two Dancers, Kiss, Fortune-tellers, Playfulness, Way Out, Surveillance, Escape... Each tells a story of its own, inviting the viewer to rethink the world around and inside them. Some (like Consultation, Family and Traditions) have three or more characters, and they stand out in the collection; yet on closer inspection the figures turn out to be replicas of the same sole character, speaking the same language. Mostafa told her own story with Girguis: "I was introduced to Girguis's works ten years ago by a mutual friend. I thought, how come I never knew about this great artist before? And I could not wait to visit his atelier in Al-Daher, one of Egypt's highly populated areas. After that we became close friends, and I used to visit him frequently and so had the opportunity to purchase some of his most precious works. Girguis dedicated his life to his art and to teaching -- shying away from publicity exposure. His body of work evolves around the human condition: the struggle and the acceptance; the emotions; the questions of life." Asked why art lovers and critics know very little about Girguis, Mustafa says he was "a shy person, who had always rejected being interviewed by the media. He was an icon, an isolated intellect, a true artist, who was too sincere to his art to waste time on social gatherings or public relations. He never stopped working until the last two days of his life, when he was a deadly cold." Girguis left Egypt a legacy too valuable to waste; and the need to document his works and tell the story of his life in a proper catalogue is great; perhaps there should also be a museum to show it. After extended negotiations, ArtTalks is now the sole agent authorized by his family for these tasks. And so, a year from now, on the first anniversary of his death, both ArtTalks and the Ministry of Culture will have taken a step towards making the work of this artist available to his subject, the ordinary Egyptian.

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