

Weamm El-Masry's Women

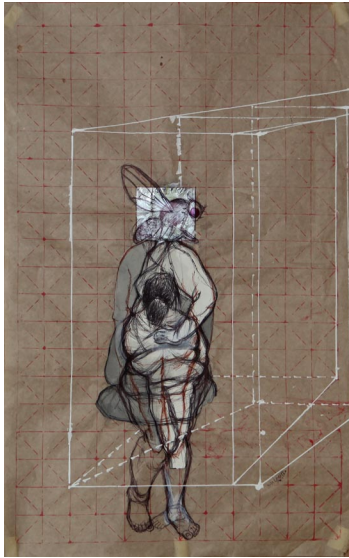
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“To follow without halt, one aim,” pen, Chinese ink and acrylic on hard paper, 2013.

For artist Weamm El-Masry (b. 1976), her subject is women and the physical and emotional challenges of being a woman in Egypt. She traces the pain of the female condition from a myriad of diverse vantage points: from her own personal experiences that inform many of her autobiographical works, such as the 2013 “Golden Fly” series, and from observations further afield, including her works created after five days teaching art to female inmates in a maximum security jail in Colombia. “I can very much understand a woman’s feelings, but I don’t understand a man’s... because of that I only draw women,” says El-Masry. “All my work is inspired from my own experiences...my sadness and my joys. My work expresses my life.”

El-Masry is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice, since graduating from the Faculty of Applied Arts at Helwan University in 1998, has included video art, photography, animation and installation as well as drawing and painting. She is inspired by artists like Lucian Freud, Egon Schiele and Francis Bacon, drawn to them for the strong emotions conveyed in their work. “I am a mix between being very tough and very emotional. I have those extremes. So these artists express my same personality,” she says.



“Unchain My Soul,” pen and collage on Chinese paper, 2012.

In her solo exhibit, “The Golden Fly,” (2013) that showed at ArtTalks Gallery in Cairo in June, the artist explored the theme of “women as victims” in a range of works in pen, Chinese ink, acrylic and glass colors that portray the “high degree of tension, anger and struggle that women go through”. In ancient Egypt, the golden fly was a medal of honor awarded to soldiers for bravery in battle. Only one single Egyptian woman, Queen Ah-Hotep, was ever awarded this medal. For El-Masry, women are the victims of many circumstances in their everyday lives: they struggle with their weight and with the multiple roles and responsibilities imposed on them by a conservative society. It is from this daily battle that the exhibition emerged. “The Golden Fly” is therefore a metaphor for the recognition El-Masry feels all women deserve, but are usually denied, for facing this daily fight with courage.

Her own battle with weight is a theme that the artist returns to repeatedly in the “Golden Fly.” El-Masry draws on her experience of gaining 20 kilos after giving birth to her first child. The large fleshy nudes she creates offer her a form of “art therapy” – a means of coming to terms with her feelings around her body: “I feel like when I bring out the anger of overweight women on paper, gradually I begin to feel acceptance of my situation.”

In the work “Solace” (2013) a full-bodied, nude woman is represented with her arms wrapped around herself in a gesture of comfort and protection. The drawing conveys El-Masry’s idea that women do not need to turn to others for satisfaction but can give satisfaction to themselves. The figure of the woman is rendered in black pen and Chinese ink on beige graph paper, the sensuous curves of her body playing off of the straight lines of the grid on which she is drawn. Corrector fluid has been used to whiten the woman’s hands to emphasize her embrace of her own body. In creating this work, the artist has evoked the state of self-acceptance she hopes to embody one day.

In “The Golden Fly” series, El-Masry also pays homage to “women of the world” in portraits of Egyptian singer Om Kalthoum, Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, and others. For El-Masry, these are iconic figures that overcame the challenges that inform so much of her work. They provide a brighter, more positive element of hope that contrasts with the darker themes of women as

victims that dominate this series. “I began to realize that in spite of the struggles, there are women who crafted an image and became an example to be proud of,” she says. For El-Masry, all women deserve the golden fly, whether they are victims of their circumstances, or women who have defied the odds and achieved an iconic status.

The state of female anguish, combined with a passion that longs to break free of constraints, is a theme that El-Masry depicts well – and often from the vantage point of her own personal experience. She herself expresses a state of being torn between her own ambitions and duties as a wife, mother, and artist, feelings that are reflected in works such as “Unchain My Soul” (2012), which shows a nude woman standing in a simple geometric box. The artist likens this box to a psychological prison, in which a woman puts restrictions on herself, or society restricts her with its customs and traditions.



“Let me be me,” pen and Chinese ink on paper, 2012.

Indeed, the artist was afforded the rare opportunity of exploring this theme outside of the Egyptian context in 2012, when she traveled to a maximum security prison in Colombia to teach art to women inmates for an artist’s residency, the UNESCO-Aschberg Bursaries for Artists. Initially afraid to interact with the women who were serving time for murder, drug dealing and terrorism, the artist found that after five days spent with the prisoners, she was deeply moved by them.

Several of the ink drawings El-Masry created of the prisoners are multi-layered, with circular patterns overlapping the women, a reflection that everything in Colombia – buildings, shacks, pharmacies – is behind iron grilles because of the high crime rate. “So for me, everything was seen with those patterns of iron. And for the prisoners, they were all in the same uniform and had to follow a strict routine, so they also became patterns,” says El-Masry.

Far from home, El-Masry connected with the female condition in an unexpected context, finding a deep level of rapport and understanding with the women inmates in the parallel world of the prison. The artist was surprised by the inmates’ reactions that she did not expect, noting that by the time she was leaving, the prisoners were tearful. “How full of emotions they were... It moved something in me that said: ‘It’s 100 percent wrong to judge by appearances. It’s 100 percent wrong to have taboos. The core of someone is completely different.’”

In her ink drawing, “Diamond” (2012), the prisoners’ featureless faces are overlaid with a

diamond necklace made of glitter. “I wanted to overlap a diamond necklace on the women because they are truly diamonds inside... I felt they were also victims. One killed a man because he was sexually harassing her mother. Another one needed money. Every one of them, there was something that forced her to do this, a moment of anger when she lost her mind and it made her [commit a crime] in spite of herself.”

“People say men are victims too, but I don’t know what they feel,” says El Masry. “If I had gone to a men’s prison I would not be as emotionally connected as I was with the women.”



“It’s all about love,” pen and glitter on paper, 2012.

She describes her work as “visual diaries,” in which she records everything that comes to her without fear. In this way, her work becomes a means of preserving her emotions and thoughts in the moment. “Whatever I am drawing, I don’t erase anything. All of it is present on paper... all the thoughts, even mistakes. I’ve reached a point where I am not shy of my mistakes. I want them to be there and for people to accept that they are there on paper.” The artist notes an ink portrait she made called “Irma” (2012), of one of the most dangerous Colombian prisoners. At

first she drew Irma's face, but then decided to turn the paper upside-down and draw Irma's body around her upside-down face. "It ended up as if Irma is hugging herself, as if her face is her heart," says El-Masry.

"I don't care if I've got a million approaches, a million ways of drawing [in a work]. I am recording everything that comes to my mind just like a writer does in his diaries." She never plans her work; she simply puts pen to paper and sees what happens. "I like the idea of an adventure, that I don't know what will come out."