

Los Angeles Times

ARTS & CULTURE

Artists in Egypt work in a tense atmosphere

The Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis give artists cause for concern. Their work reflects the country's uneasy mood and conflicts.



1/9

By Jeffrey Fleishman, Los Angeles Times

February 9, 2013 6:00 a.m.

CAIRO — The Muslim women in Marwa Adel's photographs are shadows, repressed by custom, religion, marriage and regret. While nude, the figures are obscured by sepia scrim, scrawled upon with stifling words — as if their true selves may never be known.

Like their creator, a single mother edging at the bounds of artistic freedom in a patriarchal society, the images are at once vulnerable and defiant. A man from the Muslim Brotherhood, the nation's dominant political force, which is infusing Islam into a once-secular government, scolded her at a recent exhibition.

"He had a long beard and he stood up and told me, 'How could you do something like this? You are a Muslim.' He said women should be veiled and covered. His kind wants us to cover our minds, our issues. I told him, 'Don't worry about me. I know my God very well.'"

PHOTOS: Arts & culture by The Times

She touches a computer screen. A woman, face in hands, surrounded by cages, seeps to life. She touches the screen again. And again.

A woman ripping through a sack, another laced in thorns and vines, and one of her most autobiographical, a bare-shouldered woman with sensual lips; her face — hidden by a mask of wild, static hair — a mystery. Adel's art is provocative, imbued with symbolism and monochromatic, challenging a nation that has struggled with its identity since the overthrow two years ago of Hosni Mubarak.

"The ultraconservatives say I'm an atheist," she said, adding with a piercing dig at the opposite sex, "but if you argue with a man, you argue with God."

The political rise of the Brotherhood and more extremist Salafis scares Egyptian artists, writers, satirists and journalists. Brotherhood leaders engulfed by political unrest and economic turmoil have not, at least at this point, shifted significant attention toward galleries and museums.

The ArtTalks gallery in Cairo's Zamalek neighborhood is prone to works that touch upon the revolution: Wailing mothers holding the hearts of fallen sons; an imam and a priest, sitting side by side with pensive expressions; a family portrait as if painted from the 1940s — before a stricter Islam was imported from the Persian Gulf — with unveiled women and men in western suits. One of the most striking paintings is a half-male, half-female nude, kneeling, the face covered by a veil, the body part of a cross. The image crystallizes the crises of religion, civil rights and identity radiating through the Middle East.

But artists do see a disturbing foreshadowing in Egypt's new constitution, which contains passages, including pointed references to blasphemy and morals, that they fear could be exploited by Islamists to impose restrictive sharia law.

Prosecutors recently investigated a popular TV comedian on allegations of defaming Islamist President Mohamed Morsi. The state-run newspaper Al-Ahram covered the breasts of a woman when it reproduced a painting depicting poverty by Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar, one of Egypt's most renowned artists. About the same time, Salafis covered nude Greek statues in parks and along the corniche in the coastal city of Alexandria.

Art and personal freedoms are increasingly contentious terrain in an unfinished revolution marked by a panoply of religious voices that range from mainstream Islamists promising tolerance to hard-line clerics, their designs unbound after 30 years of autocratic rule, conjuring medieval-sounding righteousness.

"I was once asked: If I came to power, would I let Christian women remain unveiled?" Hisham Ashry, an Islamist preacher known for his puritanical rhetoric, told an Egyptian television station. "And I said: If they want to get raped on the streets, then they can."

Such comments are regarded as outlandish by many Egyptians. But they have become as prevalent as graffiti, the raw narrative art of the revolution, which has transformed

Cairo's walls and buildings with slogans and images that yearn for more secular ideals that have yet to come.

Fatenn Mostafa, founder of ArtTalks, which represents artists and sponsors educational seminars, said Egypt's emerging political Islam has dispirited many artists while inspiring others. She compared the present atmosphere to that of the early 20th century, when artists and writers protested British rule through their work.

"You're seeing that same anger and passion directed at the Muslim Brotherhood today," said Mostafa. "A lot of artists are painting nudes. I think this is a rebellion against the Brotherhood. There is also a type of self-censorship going on as some artists are trying to stay under the Brotherhood's radar."

A vexing game

Ahmed El Shaer keeps a studio in the dusty light of old Cairo. A painter and video artist, he dwells on the revolution in his work and the persistent debate over Islam's role in society. Trips in recent years to Europe have altered his thinking on religion and, like many artists, he keeps God private but is concerned that the aggression by Salafis in Tunisia, who have physically attacked artists and burned galleries, will spread to Egypt.

"I believe in God. But this is a discussion I have with myself," said El Shaer, the sounds of school boys and vegetable carts rattling outside his window. "I am rethinking how to deal with life and society through religion or without it. How will I deal with Islam?"

"The new constitution says you have freedom to create but not against society's traditions. What are these traditions? They are not defined. That's why artists hate the Muslim Brotherhood, they don't make things clear. Brotherhood members grow up with one idea: 'We are right.'"

The recent video game he created speaks to the country's many dangers. The game is a battle between man and camel. It conjures the infamous attack in February 2011 when riders on camels attacked anti-Mubarak protesters in Tahrir Square. The weapons of the men (protesters) in the game are Twitter birds; the camels' weapon is a sword.

"This is Egypt today," he said. "When we defeated Mubarak, another camel appeared in the form of military rulers. Then came the Brotherhood and Morsi. The more camels you kill, the more come. And the more men you kill, the more Twitter birds come. Nobody wins in my game."

Art and identity

Across the city, Adel pointed to the shards of wedding dress and charred divorce papers that surround a woman — again not fully revealed — in one of her photo montages. The dress and the papers are her own, depicting how constricted she felt not so many years ago as a young bride.

"I'm saying love and hate are in this marriage," she said. "My husband, only hours after

we were married, wanted to choose my honeymoon clothes. He wanted to control what I wore. I was so surprised. This is not who he was before."

She paused and said: "Men want to put us in old picture frames."

Like many of her analogies, it was double-edged, as if she might offer it the young women around her to ease society's relentless pressure to shape themselves through tradition.

Adel, 29, and her husband eventually split up and she won custody of their young son. She taught applied art at Helwan University and in 2008 won a grand prize in a photography contest. She bought a new camera and focused on women. Her art took hold as the nation grew restive, leading to the uprising that toppled Mubarak.

She fears the Brotherhood and the Salafis for their air of piety and their lack of tolerance to words and images not conforming to their interpretations of the Koran.

"It makes me very depressed. Sometimes I cannot work," she said. "We are divided in Egypt. The gap grows bigger every day ... I feel so sad and strange in my country."

She reached up and fixed her head scarf, brown, neatly pinned, fitting her like a silken second skin. Her models show their hair, but she does not; this, she said, is her private contradiction. She began wearing hijabs as a girl, and now her identity — as much as her rage against customs that repress women — is as complicated and unresolved as her country.

"It became part of me. I feel naked without it," she said. "People expect that as an artist I should be unveiled, more 'presentable.' But if I take off my hijab because people want me to, that's another form of oppression. I would not be normal. I would be confused."

She glanced at her computer screen, small in her hand, full of women she has created with memories, anger and doubts.

"I'm not ready to take it off," she said. "I want my models to do what I cannot. They are mirrors to me."

jeffrey.fleishman@latimes.com

Special correspondent Reem Abdellatif contributed to this report