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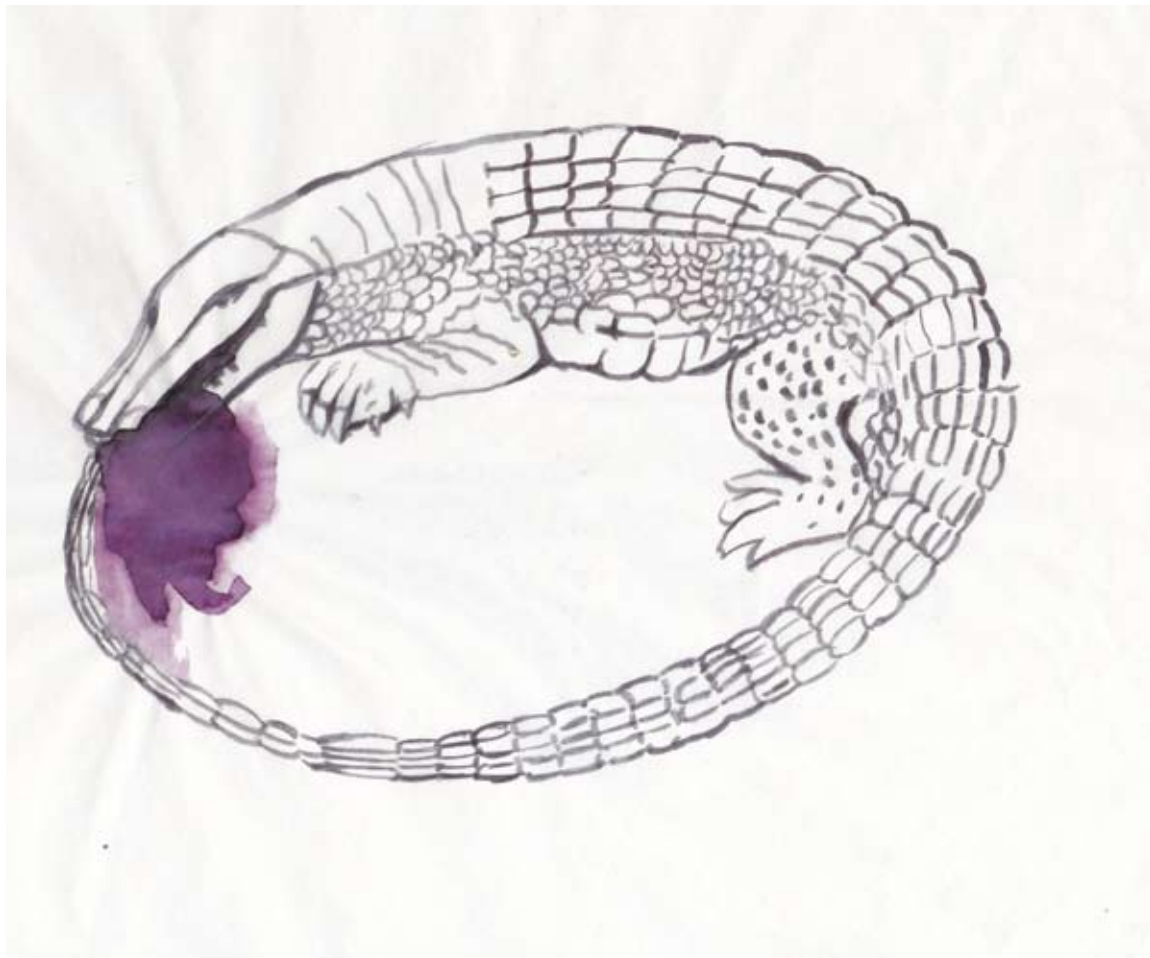
1974 – 2012



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he was known for challenging viewers with her multimedia body of work, which ranged from drawings, paintings and sculptures to videos, installations and performances. Amal Kenawy was one of Egypt's most recognised Contemporary artists, and not one who shied away from uneasy themes which characterised her work – on the contrary, she embraced them with a fearlessness for which she was renowned. Always seeking to push artistic confines within her native Egypt, she took on exacting topics head-on – topics such as transcendence, the body, violence, politics, the metaphysical and more. With a background in film, fashion design and painting, she produced a multi award-winning series of works with her brother and collaborator, Abdel Ghany. After battling advanced leukaemia, Amal Kenawy passed away on 19 August 2012. She was 38. *Canvas* pays homage to the late artist through tributes by five art world professionals who knew her and her body of work well.

“Amal discussed departing to a new world, her very own imaginary artificial purple forest.”



GONE TOO SOON

BY FATENN MOSTAFA

It is tragic that, in this day and age, we are unable to find a cure for leukaemia, which is what killed Amal Kenawy. Any comfort can be found in the fact that she leaves behind an indelible legacy: a groundbreaking portfolio of large-scale multimedia installations which tackle politics, love, pain, gender, societal issues and death.

The last time I saw her smile was a memorable and symbolic moment for us: it was in 2011 when the 30-year-old Mubarak regime ended. It reminded me of another of her smiles I had seen – one that was laced with her trademark courtesy and with just a hint of disdain. It was the 12th Cairo Biennial and Amal was radiant. There she stood, within her multimedia installation, behind an open kitchen, cooking a highly aromatic meal for guests as her epic *Silence of the Sheep* video played in front of her. In walked Farouk Hosny, Egypt's then Minister of Culture, followed by numerous government officials and journalists, and approached Amal. Hosny and Amal smiled, shook hands and she handed him a plate. He showed immense interest in comprehending her work and a short dialogue ensued. We watched intently, for Amal and Hosny ultimately represented a huge rift between two entities in Egypt: the state versus the Contemporary artist. That relationship was fed by animosity, a generation gap and a lack of understanding.

It was a moment tinged with irony: *Silence of the Sheep* showed footage of a street performance which Amal orches-

trated in 2009 in downtown Cairo's Champollion Street. The video is controversial in nature because it tackles the themes of gender, poverty and the consequences of dictatorship, but its making was all the more controversial: Amal 'the shepherd' led a group, consisting mainly of male artists and labourers, crawling on all fours on the street. It was a scene which offended some passers-by and eventually led to police intervention. Amal's older brother, collaborator and soul-mate Abdel Ghany was among the group that was arrested and jailed for a few hours. The police questioned Amal about "the nonsense and undignified humiliation" that she "imposed" on her fellow Egyptians and went so far as to suggest that she "was hired by foreigners" – an accusation which demonstrators of the 2011 Egyptian uprising were also charged with.

But against all odds, Amal's installation, including the controversial video, won the Biennial's Grand Prix. More symbolic perhaps is that the video performance was shot on a side street leading to the now-iconic Tahrir Square.

The task of burying Amal was Abdel Ghany's, as per Islamic Sharia law. "I didn't bury Amal," he sobbed. "I buried myself." In one of her most famous installations, *The Purple Artificial Forest* (2005), Amal discussed departing to a new world, her very own imaginary artificial purple forest.

I hope that she has found it.

Opening spread: Amal Kenawy. Image courtesy Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath.

Facing page: Untitled, part of the *You Will Be Killed* series. 2005–6. Ink on paper. 21 x 29.7 cm. Image courtesy Q Contemporary, Beirut.

Below left: Video still from *Silence of the Sheep*. 2009. Video of a public performance shot in Cairo. Image courtesy Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath.

Below right and detail: Untitled. 2009. Gold-plated copper and Swarovski crystals. Variable dimensions. Image courtesy Marie-Celine Somolo.





THE VICIOUS LIFE OF ADULTS

BY KHALED HAFEZ

Scene One: Cairo, 1995

I had just come from a three-year stay in Paris with the shattered ambitions of a young artist, defeated by an art world that I then thought pregnable and accessible. Cairo in 1995 was a city that I owned fully, or at least I thought so. I meet them around that time, a beautiful couple, literally and metaphorically beautiful, and very Egyptian. Amal Kenawy and Shadi El-Noshokaty – and here I have to mention both together – are inseparable, newly graduated, both proficient as young interdisciplinary trans-genre artists. Amal is a rebel: she moved from the Film Institute to the Cairo Fine Arts a couple of times because academic curricula in both institutions are insufficient to satisfy her creative thirst.



Scene Two: Daylight, Five Years Later

Amal is a star. For five years she had exhibited gigantic installations collaboratively with her brilliant sculptor brother Abdel Ghany – and here I have to mention both together – and she was already a UNESCO prize-winner, awarded to her at the Seventh Cairo Biennale. Her sensational, collaborative, colossal artwork installed at the century-old Groppi is part of NITAG, the controversial independent Cairo Art Festival. In 2001, our Amal becomes a mother for the first time and she continues to produce art like there is no tomorrow, and succeeds.



Scene Three: A night in a garden, Dakar, Senegal, 2004

Amal comes towards me and hugs me for slightly longer than normal. "My apologies for my tone this morning, I have personal problems and I did not want to snap at you," she says straightforwardly. I apologised too, as we, as two art professionals, had had an intense conversation in a tough and very rough art world. This time, years later, pregnable and accessible to all of us.



Scene Four: La Chesa restaurant, Cairo, 2010

Amal arrives almost an hour late, courtesy of Cairo traffic. We had exhibited together in four biennales and eight international shows, worked with the same Berlin gallery – a horrendous experience for which we agreed to take joint legal action.

We had our times of distance and times of closeness; we had suffered separations and new lives and we were both parents, 15 years after our first encounter. She confides her illness and her fight against it. We both cry for over an hour, laugh for over another hour and agree that life cannot vanquish any of us.

Scene Five: Palace of the Arts, 12 December 2010 at the Cairo Biennale

Amal is announced as the Grand Prix winner. I had participated, constructing by far my biggest project, a three-chamber tomb that took me a month to complete, during which time I had seen Amal almost every day. She also did her largest project by far then: the living room and kitchen (which also featured *Silence of the Sheep*). We had shared the same assistants and same technical problems; we never had a chance to talk during the process, but we exchange a few warm words when my wife Maha and I congratulate her for the prize at the opening. We agree to meet on a family level with Yassin, her son, sometime in the next few weeks. Six weeks later, the Egyptian Revolution erupts. Amal and I exchange phone calls, but we never meet again.

Finale 2012: A generic morning like any other, Amal leaves us

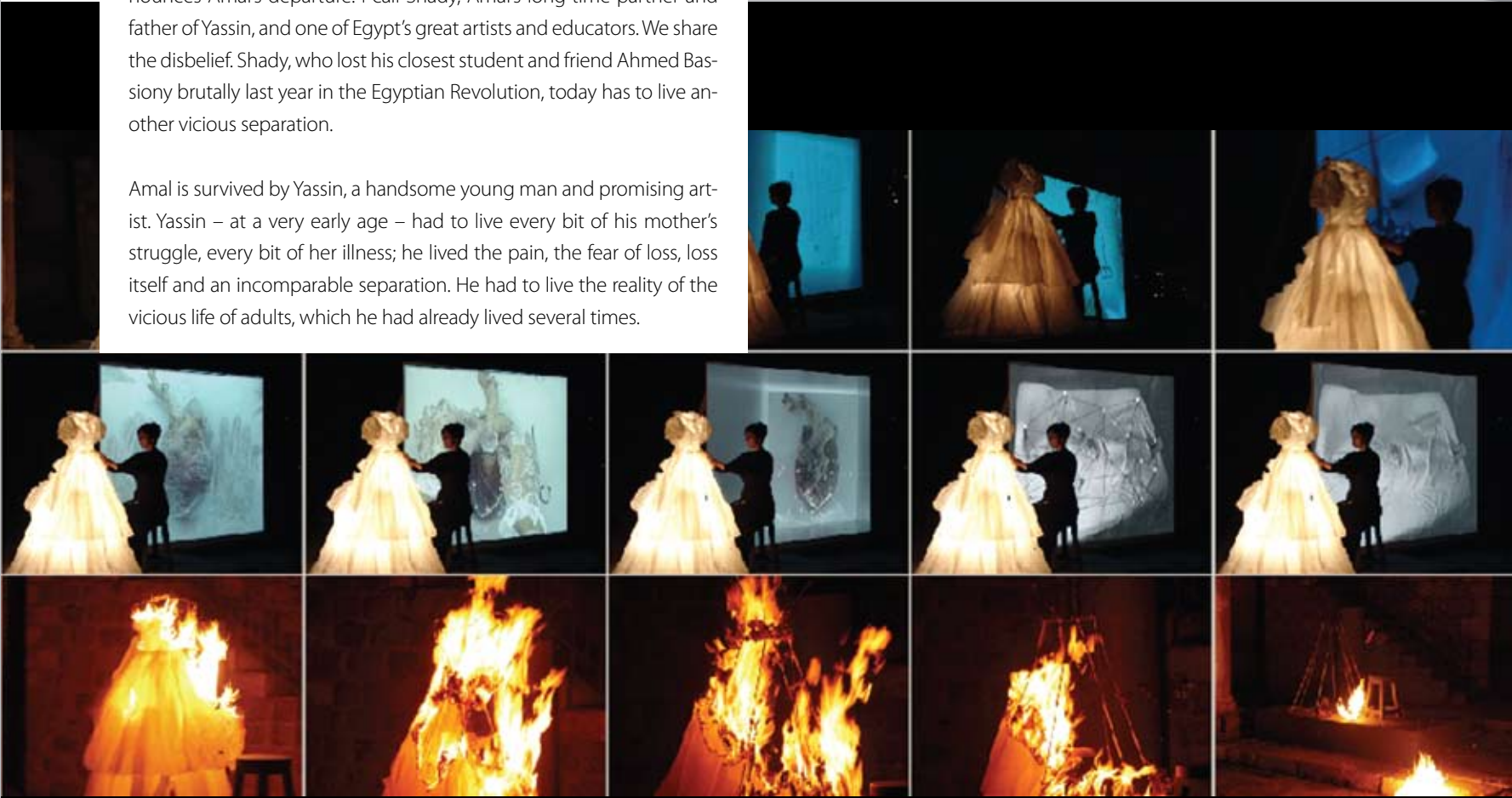
I get the phone call from Ahmed El-Shaer, a younger peer, filmmaker, video artist and mutual friend who worked with Amal and myself, always solving our emergency technical problems. Devastated, he announces Amal's departure. I call Shady, Amal's long-time partner and father of Yassin, and one of Egypt's great artists and educators. We share the disbelief. Shady, who lost his closest student and friend Ahmed Basiony brutally last year in the Egyptian Revolution, today has to live another vicious separation.

Amal is survived by Yassin, a handsome young man and promising artist. Yassin – at a very early age – had to live every bit of his mother's struggle, every bit of her illness; he lived the pain, the fear of loss, loss itself and an incomparable separation. He had to live the reality of the vicious life of adults, which he had already lived several times.

Facing page, top to bottom: Two shots of *Non Stop Conversation*. 2007. Performance staged at the 2007 Sharjah Biennial. Image courtesy Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath; Above and below (detail) *The Journey*. 2004. Mixed media sculpture. 130 x 80 x 60 cm. Image courtesy Galerie El-Marsa, Tunis.

Below: Video stills from *The Room*. 2003. Video art and performance. Image courtesy Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath.

“Amal is a rebel.”



Below, left and right: Two video stills from *You Will Be Killed*. 2006. Video animation. Five minutes and 53 seconds. Image courtesy Q Contemporary, Beirut (left) and Galerie El-Marsa, Tunis (right).

Facing page, left and right: *The Silent Multitudes*. 2010. Multimedia installation consisting of a video and sculpture made of metal and propane gas cylinders for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Told/Untold/Retold*. Image courtesy Mathaf; *Silence of the Sheep* video of a public performance shot in Cairo exhibited at *Arab Express: The Latest Art From the Arab World* at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. Photography by Till Fellrath.

FULL OF GRACE

BY MOTAZ KABBANI

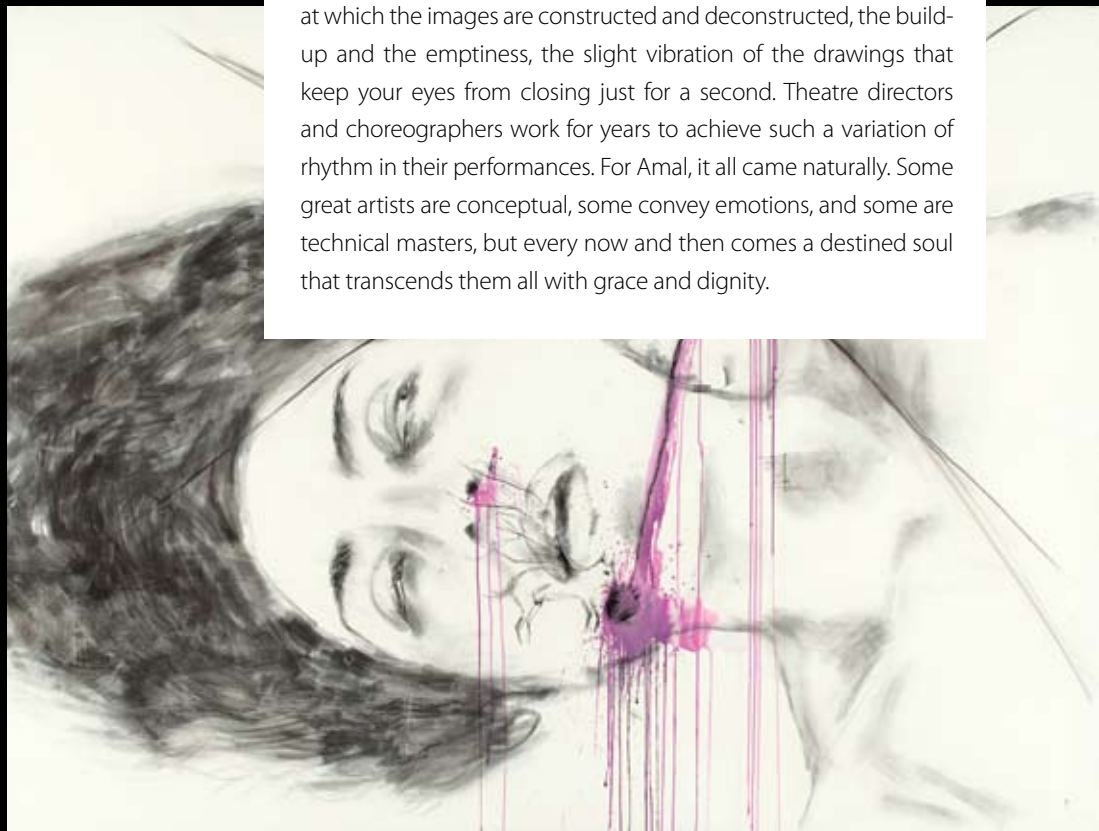
The first time Amal showed me *You Will Be Killed* was in my living-room while we were going over a selection of her work that could be presented at Q Contemporary. I was totally struck by it. The decision was instant and we both agreed that we would mount a full show detailing the making of *You Will Be Killed*. Time was unkind and the exhibition ended up being a post-mortem homage to a great artist. What Amal and her brother Abdel Ghany achieved by themselves would have required a full line-up of artists from different disciplines to pull together. The video is a fine example of mastery on many levels; the conceptual, the emotional, the humanistic, the theatrical, the visceral, the bold and the audacious. The outcome is a mixture of personal experiences that are pulled from the subconscious of humanity and projected to the viewer with no filters.

Using her body as the canvas on which the storyline unfolds, Amal talks about violence that extends beyond the effects of war and destruction by creating an out-of-place hu-

“Every now and then comes a destined soul that transcends them all with grace and dignity.”

man that is trying to lift her head up to fit in and constantly being covered by ripples of blood, construction sites, death and a fake ephemeral theatrical world.

One thing that is hidden between the strength of the images and the riveting emotional charge conveyed is rhythm. The rhythm at which the images are constructed and deconstructed, the build-up and the emptiness, the slight vibration of the drawings that keep your eyes from closing just for a second. Theatre directors and choreographers work for years to achieve such a variation of rhythm in their performances. For Amal, it all came naturally. Some great artists are conceptual, some convey emotions, and some are technical masters, but every now and then comes a destined soul that transcends them all with grace and dignity.





AN ODE TO THE RESTLESS

BY SAM BARDAOUIL AND TILL FELLRATH

"The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite." – Charles Baudelaire

The model of the *flâneur* could well be the best way of understanding Amal's intensity and her love-hate relationship with Cairo. Those who knew her will remember her restlessness; to be more precise, her insistence on never being still. This could have come from the desire to mirror her city, to challenge it, change it, merge with its every particle and become part of its essence. Amal was, as Susan Sontag wrote, the ultimate "solitary walker reconnoitring, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes." Her *Silent Multitudes* (exhibited at Mathaf's *Told/Untold/Retold*) is wholly rooted in the uncompromising practice of the *flâneur*. She depicts an 'explosive' social predicament, a struggle for upward social mobility, a vicious cycle of migration up and down the social ladder of privilege versus destitution, all contained within the form of the popular propane gas cylinders that can be found in many Egyptian households. Ironically, she did all this months before anyone was even thinking about what came to be called the Arab Spring. As always, Amal could see well beyond her time. Her words

ring with the ability of inhabiting unconventional forms for the sake of artistic expression: "A silent driver dragging behind him silent crowds. That's how I came to see the donkey, and this is how I saw these gas cylinders." Her video, *The Silence of the Sheep*, shot entirely on the labyrinthine streets of Cairo, grapples with the topic of inner-city migrations and with the existential condition of the city's ephemeral dwellers. Amal made time stop and, with the absence of its forward-thrusting trajectory, time's presence is felt even more strongly.

A few months before she passed away, we were having lunch in Cairo and planning another collaboration. At one point we wondered if the work would be ready in time. With that particular smile full of confidence that only those who knew her would recognise, she turned and said: "When the time comes, I will be ready." A pause followed. We all recognised the biting subtext in her words. A tear rolled down. It is beyond devastating that time has stopped for Amal, but her presence will always be felt as strongly as when she was still here. We miss her restlessness. 🇸🇦