

Reflections on Revolution



All the Important Issues. 2009. Mixed-media installation (video projection, acrylic ink and paint on wall, canvas, papyrus and white stoneware figurines). Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US. Dimensions variable.

AT FIRST THE EVENTS WERE INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM those of the past that had so often ignited resolve only to watch it fizzle into paltry protest and, in the end, merely confirm the futility of action. The usual protagonists, a handful of activists versed in sound and fury but accustomed to anticlimax, were quickly dispersed from Tahrir Square. But if proof were needed that Internet technology had changed the dynamics of social control and resistance, the events of 25 January, 2011 made the strongest of confirmations. YouTube, Facebook and Twitter became instruments of rebellion and, when coupled with recent newscasts of radical change in Tunisia, they would facilitate full-fledged revolution. The Mubarak regime, alarmed by a threat it had never envisioned, would suppress the Internet – but too late. The improbable had materialised and so rapidly that it astonished not only those who had longed for it as some vague possibility on a distant horizon but even those who had worked for it with the unflagging conviction that it lay tantalisingly within reach. All pessimism was swept away in a matter of days and a jubilant Egypt, awed by the outcome of its own actions, stood on the brink of a new era.

Article by Glen R Brown

Bassem Yousri was only one among hundreds of thousands of protestors who turned the wheels of the Egyptian Revolution but, as an artist, he was in an especially good position to contemplate and record the emotional aspects of the experience. Two years prior to the events of 25 January, he formalised his pessimism about Egypt's clouded future in a significant installation. Consequently, he later found himself in position to complete something of a before-and-after reflection on the psychology of revolution. Never presented as anything but a summation of personal sentiments, however, Yousri's 2009 *All the Important Issues* and its 2011 sequel in the installation *Homage to the Egyptian Revolution* bracket an individual's dramatic shift in disposition from cynicism to cautious elation. The fabric of history may provide the foundation for Yousri's pair of installations and the details of representation may be readily interpreted in terms of specific political events in 2011 but the dynamic between the works is, first and foremost, a contrast between two widely different frames of mind about a nation, a people and the future.

Yousri's discontent with aspects of the Egyptian



All the Important Issues.

sociopolitical system began during his undergraduate days at Helwan University in Cairo. In 2003 he completed his BFA in painting and embarked on a two-year stint as a graphic designer and colour specialist for a local fashion firm. In 2006, however, he made the decision to continue his studies as an art student and, moreover, to do so outside of Egypt. "I had a goal to go abroad and get my masters, to get a different kind of education," he recalls, "because I was really unhappy with the state of education in Egypt. It was getting too conservative for me. I wanted to get in touch with what was happening outside Egypt, to find a different atmosphere." The opportunity to realise those goals came with a Fulbright Commission Arts Grant in 2006, which brought Yousri to the US for an internship at Diane von Furstenberg's fashion house in New York and non-degree study in fashion design at Drexel University in Philadelphia. The Fulbright experience would prove to be a prelude to further study in Philadelphia when Yousri was accepted into the graduate program at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University.

Yousri's thesis exhibition at Tyler in 2009, *All The Important Issues*, constituted an outpouring of pent-up pessimism over a range of concerns about contemporary Egyptian politics. Its diversity of topics (from the rise of Muslim fundamentalism, the oppression of women and the government's control of the mass media to the empty rhetoric and futile resistance of Egypt's agitators against the Mubarak regime) was paralleled by Yousri's deliberate employment of diverse materials and techniques. "I was reflecting on a whole picture when I thought about the situation in Egypt," Yousri explains. "I tried to take a fuller view of what was happening. I felt that this needed to be reflected in my art, so I decided that one medium was not enough. I started to conceive of the entire room as a canvas. I decided that I would use the floor. I would use the walls. I would mix video with two-dimensional images and three-dimensional objects."

In the resulting installation, colossal drawings in



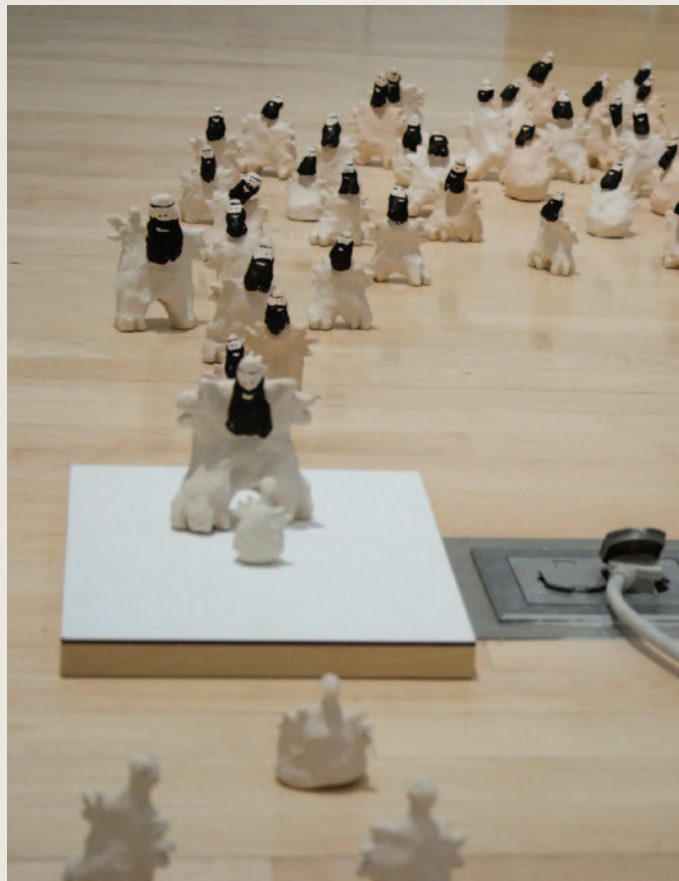
Above and facing page: *All the Important Issues.*

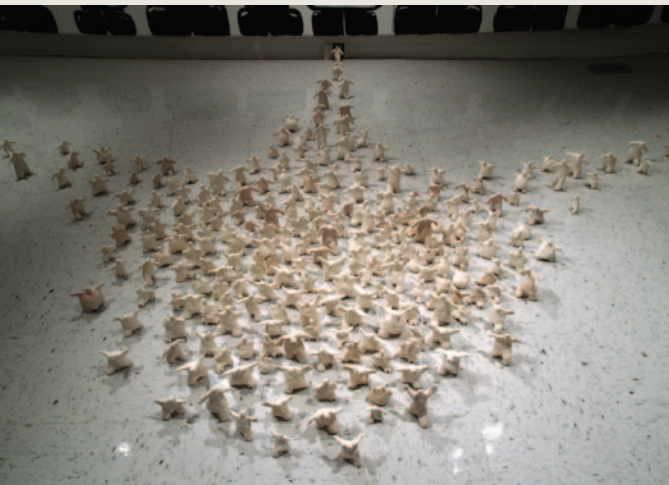
black ink extended over walls, canvases and sheets of papyrus (the archaic ground for Egyptian writing and a conscious reminder of the contrast between Egypt's cultural preeminence in the ancient world and the depressed nature of its arts under dictatorship in the modern era). Prominent on one wall, surrounded by an ink drawing of a television set on a console, was a video screen on which Yousri appeared in the character of Mr Moukhtar, a morose man with furrowed brow, sagging grimace and widely expressive eyes who muttered haltingly in Arabic, "It's a great debacle! It's a strange debacle!" before professing his views on excrement, attempting, with agonising contortions, to talk about love, babbling inanely about pouring tea from a teapot, expressing a debilitating weariness, rebounding from his fatigue to speak about happiness, then suicide and ending by blandly consuming a meal.

Engendered by Yousri's impatience with self-styled prophets who called for change in Egyptian politics but seemed bereft of practical ideas as to how to bring that about, Mr Moukhtar is an embodiment of futility and pessimism. His empty pronouncements on banal issues did not, however, pass unheard. Central to Yousri's installation was a population of nearly 450 fired-clay figurines, a number of which sat on two orderly rows of benches, hands placed neatly on knees and heads tilted back, enthralled by Mr Moukhtar's ramblings. These

unglazed, roughly fashioned figures, directing their black-dot eyes toward the video screen, struck a note of pathos. Small and vulnerable, they seemed, like a herd of sheep, to manifest a communal need for guidance – and one that could scarcely be provided by the incoherent aphorisms and fevered brain of Mr Moukhtar. The figurines were obviously the recipients of Yousri's sympathy more than his scorn and, through them, he clearly expressed his own feelings of drifting in a sea of uncertainty with no dry land in sight. On the other hand, the fact that the figurines drew vague inspiration from Egyptian Pre-dynastic fertility figures and *ushabtis* from the New Kingdom, Late and Ptolemaic periods, suggested that for Yousri they embodied the spirit of a great people who may have temporarily succumbed to social decline but who might rise again to claim the legacy of their ancestors in progress, prosperity and cultural pride.

The primary obstacle to reintroducing these qualities to Egyptian life, Yousri implied, was a schism that had opened among the Egyptian people, particularly over issues of religious tradition and westernisation. With the loss of liberties and a rising despair came the desire for some kind of touchstone to give meaning and direction to life. "The lower middle class and the poor were moving at a fast pace toward religious fundamentalism," Yousri recalls. "The transformation became dramatic. It was clear when I was in college, for example. During my first year, few of the girls were veiled but, by the time I left school in my fifth year, many of them were wearing the head scarf while a few wore the *niqab*, the full cover in black. So

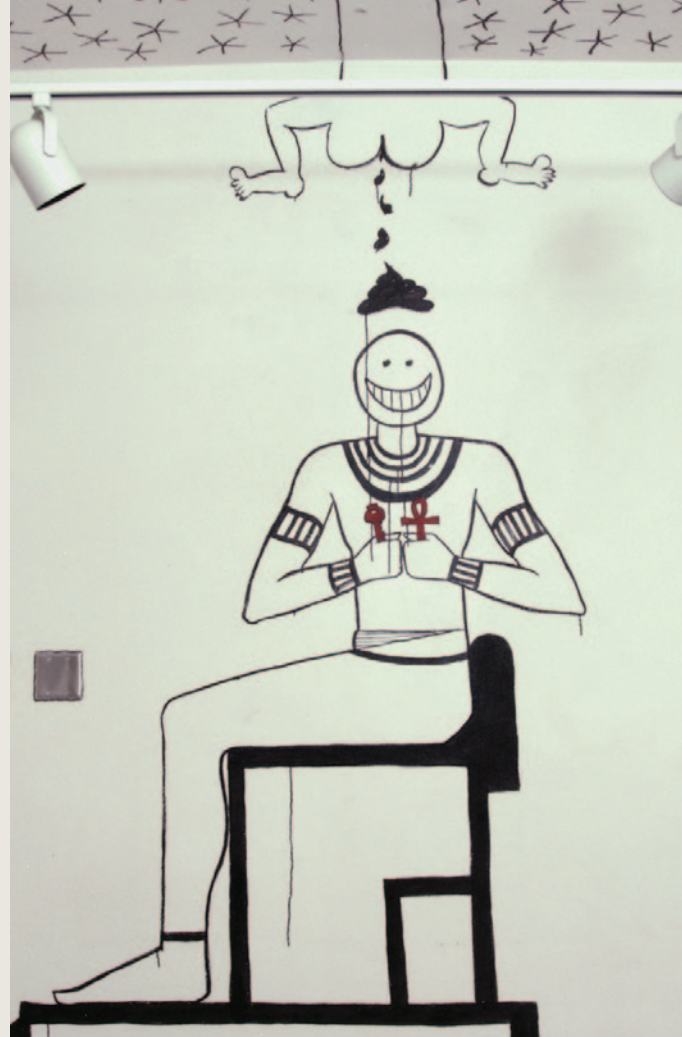




Homage to the Egyptian Revolution. 2011. Mixed-media installation (acrylic ink and paint on wall, white stoneware figurines). Yoshiro Ikeda Ceramics Gallery, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, US. Dimensions variable.

I saw the transformation with my own eyes. Then, on the other side, the wealthier parts of society were moving more towards western culture. They would mix Arabic with English and, to seem classier, they would throw in some French. It was a mixed kind of identity. They would wear western fashion and listen to western music. So there was a disconnect. I did not feel that there was a substance anymore to the Egyptian identity. It was reflected in the art, in the economy and in the way people looked."

In reference to the social dichotomisation, Yousri dispersed his earthenware figurines into two groups pattering their way lemming-like across the gallery floor. The first group, populated by lumpy creatures that seemed uncertain as to exactly what form to assume, waddled out of a sack suspended from the wall and made their way toward a low platform where one of their podgy fellows stood confronting the leader of the second group: a giant in contrast, whose long, dark-inked beard proclaimed his devotion to Muslim fundamentalism. Behind



this formidable figure, a stream of white-gowned, bearded brethren arrived, with a sombre column of their black-clad women following dutifully behind at a distance of several paces. The confrontation between the two groups was literally staged and the enveloping imagery of the installation reinforced the implication that the clash of ideologies was not merely a product of chance. "The split in Egyptian society," Yousri argues, "was partly due to politics played by the government to distract people and keep them distracted from their own rights." Against this divisive influence and the endless and purposeless chatter that it spawned, the possibility of a united Egyptian populace seemed hopelessly remote.

The pessimism endemic to *All The Important Issues* did not, of course, melt entirely from Yousri's mind with the disintegration of the Mubarak government, but the events of 25 January, 2011 clearly cast more than one warm ray of hope on his vision of the future. "The social problems have not gone away," he asserts, "and the country will be an unstable place for a while. But what happened . . . it is just amazing. We are writing on a new page in Egyptian history and there is a real possibility for a better Egypt." This possibility, perhaps even more than the reality of the revolution itself, suggested the theme for Yousri's second major artistic reflection on issues underlying



Homage to the Egyptian Revolution.

contemporary Egyptian identity, society and cultural life: *Homage to the Egyptian Revolution*. Installed in the Yoshiro Ikeda Ceramics Gallery at Kansas State University (US) in March, 2011, the work once again employed scores of Yousri's small fired-earthenware figurines but, this time, no ink marks distinguished them as representatives of opposing camps and the formation that they assumed, as they marched solemnly out of three tiny painted doorways and milled together, was emblematic of unity.

Painting imagery on the ceiling as well as the walls, Yousri transformed the Ikeda gallery temporarily into a tomb of ancient Egyptian cast: that is, a chamber redolent with aspirations to eternity. Overhead an elongated figure, suggestive of the sky goddess Nut traversing a starry firmament, disdainfully rained excrement down upon the head of an enthroned ruler who turned his false visage, a 'smiley' face bearing a frozen grin, toward the converging figurines. Hosni Mubarak, dubbed by his detractors the "last Egyptian pharaoh", notoriously maintained iron rule during the course of his presidency, partly through strategic displays of power involving the paramilitary riot police of the Central Security Forces. Although Yousri's imagery deployed these enforcers, replete with boots, shields and batons, in an encircling cordon on three of the gallery's walls, their tiny peeping eyes and whimsical proportions reflected the artist's assertion that the men of the security forces, recruited from the poorest class of Egyptian society, were as much the victims of oppression as those upon whom their violence was

exerted. Consequently, even their images seemed drawn into the swell of unity in Yousri's *Homage*. "What I felt going to Tahrir Square and being part of what happened was that the differences were dissolved," he stresses. "For the first time in Egypt, I felt that there was a healthy environment where difference did not matter."

It remains to be seen whether that unity will persist as the basis for a strong modern Egyptian state or degenerate – as in so many tragic historical examples of post-revolutionary uncertainty and unrest – into emotionally charged and even violent civil strife. Bassem Yousri's experiences have made him a realist and he is well aware that even democracy can be tyrannical. Nevertheless, as the copious allusions to the ancient world in his *Homage* suggest, he is a believer in his nation's potential to shine as a paragon of civilisation. "I refer to the greatness of ancient Egypt not to glorify it," he explains, "but to remind myself of the possibility of change. Of course, our problems are not going away just because a regime has been overthrown. There will be a lot of controversy, a lot of fear about who might try to seize power. But now there is a more optimistic tone. In the past, change was for the worse but, today, why couldn't it be for the better?"

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