

# *Subversive Patterns – Ambivalent Lines*

## Contemporary Egyptian Art within an Intercultural Discourse

Judith Bihl, a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities Cologne

Structural patterns such as geometrical, floral or calligraphical forms along with repetitive symbolic icons constantly appear in contemporary Egyptian art concepts.

These ornamental structures arose from a traditional artistic heritage loaded with different significances and symbolism. My PhD project aims at decoding their meanings, but also at analyzing how these patterns are artistically transformed and reflected within a contemporary global context.

The analytical approach allows an intensive examination of the subversive potential of these concepts. I favour a broad definition of the ornament concept, which stresses the strategies of critical thinking that appear through the use of ornamental structures.

### ***Patterns and Lines as critical Forms***

The presented patterns are questioned and reflected critically with regard to their meanings in a contemporary cultural discourse.

Therefore, they mean more than just an iterative review of the past art heritage. They rather allow statements referring to current events such as the so called 'Arab Spring'. Ornamental concepts provide thus a political potential.



Khaled Hafez, *Book of Flight*, 2010. Mixed media on canvas, 600x250x5cm.

Neglecting the role played by local modern artists in the social and political transformations from the beginning of the 20th century also creates a lack of understanding when referring to contemporary Egyptian art concepts.

The strategical use of patterns, repetition and lines by artists such as Marwa Adel, Khaled Hafez and Sameh Ismail claims to rethink concepts of dichotomy paired with hegemony and ideology. In a semiotic and contextual analysis, my aim is to show how these artistic patterns can be described as a form of subversion and reflection.

However, the use of ornamental patterns in contemporary artistic concepts is not a purely Egyptian phenomenon. At the global level, one can observe a certain revival of the ornament in many contemporary cultural discourses.

The ornament thus offers an ideal comparative framework for the methodical analysis of intercultural artistic and cultural concepts. It gives the opportunity for a dialogue across cultural borders and has a high research potential for a history of visual culture from a global perspective.



Marwa Adel, *The Journey No 14*, 2012. Photography and computer graphic design fixed on wood, 75x85cm.

The transregional focusing on contemporary art of post-revolutionary Egypt leads to new challenges for research studies in order to develop appropriate methodological approaches.

Two problematic issues emerge within this context: There is an insufficient tendency to evaluate artistic practices either to their affinities to 'Western' concepts and therefore to relegate them as derivative or to measure these contemporary artworks as merely current reflections of political and social struggles, without taking into account their respective historical context.



Sameh Ismail, *untitled*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 130x150cm.  
(Translation of the depicted Arabic writing: *The Constitution first*)