

D-CAF presents two decades of Hassan Khan

D-CAF's visual arts programme this year spotlights prominent multidisciplinary Egyptian artist Hassan Khan who spoke with Ahram Online on his exhibition, which opens 30 March in downtown Cairo

Sara Elkamel, Friday 28 Mar 2014



Hassan Khan, DOM TAK TAK DOM TAK, 2005. (Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel)






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From 30 March to 26 April, four halls in a downtown Cairo alley will host artworks by contemporary Egyptian artist, musician, and writer Hassan Khan, which extend from the 1990s up to the present.

Khan's diverse oeuvre features performance and site-specific projects, sculptures, photographs, video, and writings. In his work, images are sometimes still, sometimes in motion, and at other times, absent. To produce artwork, Hassan Khan uses source material stemming from anything from dreams to daydreams and memories to observations, gliding down a gradient of surrealism. Negotiating the boundaries between public and exhibition space, this survey show pulls Cairo's audience through a window, into the mystical world of Khan.

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Represented by Galerie Chantal Crousel, the prolific artist has exhibited extensively, his 14-page biography testifying to the appearance of his wide-ranging projects in art spaces and festivals worldwide. The works that will traverse the downtown Cairo spaces during the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF) will act as a chronological, three-dimensional album, revisiting Hassan Khan's career.

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This survey show is Khan's first solo in Egypt since *17 and in AUC*, held at the Falaki Gallery in 2003 at the American University in Cairo's downtown Cairo campus. It succeeds another survey show that took place in 2012 at SALT in Istanbul, Turkey, which offered a valuable overview of Khan's work, shedding light on connections between projects that could be ten or 15 years apart.

Working with Beth Stryker (CLUSTER) as curator, what Khan presents in Cairo is a more focused "entry point" than the more dispersed and varied overview held at SALT, allowing audiences to examine the "crisscross of languages" that play out in his work but on a smaller scale.

"For me, that entry point is not total or complete, it is just one entrance," Khan tells Ahram Online, surrounded by incomplete pieces at site of the exhibition during the week leading up to the opening.



Hassan Khan, *The Knot*, 2012. (Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

The first hall is primarily comprised of works that deal with text and writing, such as *17 and in AUC* (2003) or *Mahmoud El Ansari* (2010), among others. "These are all works that deal with creating or breaking narratives," he explains.

"Although in this discussion I also wanted to include works that kind of break that linguistic interest, or complicate it," Khan says.

The artist reveals that the hall also hosts sculptures, photographs, and diagrams, so that the space would have diverse elements working in different ways. Moreover, more emotional images such as Khan's portrait of his mother are interspersed with more sardonic ones such as six pigs caught in a state of anxiety and fear (*stuffedpigfollies*, 2007). Other images stem from text-based stories such as a sculpture of a glass rope (*The Knot*, 2012).

"For me, these little punctuations to these textual works serve as a way to ensure that this entry point is not so dominant," Khan says.

In placing works of different scales and mediums in the same space, Khan creates spatial and sensory experiences that challenge viewers to make connections among the different works. The show is modelled in such a way that the first hall trains the audience to negotiate the gaps and bridges among these diverse

projects, on a more intimate scale, so it becomes like giving them an introductory lesson in the Hassan Khan language.



Hassan Khan, *Jewel*, 2010. (Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel)

The second, larger hall houses a more varied assortment of projects. *The Agreement* features five narrative texts written by the artist, printed on the wall and juxtaposed with 10 objects on a wooden shelf, while *Lust* is a photography series from 2008. The larger hall also features a sculptural installation entitled *Banque Bannister* (2010), and a video project from 1997 dubbed *Do You Want to Fight?*

The two other spaces are smaller, each hosting an individual installation rather than a mix of multiple narratives.

Khan's interest in the collective production of human civilisation was the drive behind the installation that now inhabits the third room at the Kodak passageway. In *DOM TAK TAK DOM TAK* (2005), Khan confronts his fascination with the forms collectively produced by culture.

"It's always a big question to me- how are these forms, the ones that escape pure and absolute functionality, how are they produced?" he says.

After breaking six songs down to their basic structures and working with musicians to reproduce them, "what you end up with is music that is...like a ghost of itself, or a shadow of the genre," says Khan. "It's also interesting for me because it retains that emotional communicability."

Despite carrying the echoes of *shaabi* popular music, the space where the music now lives is completely automated, "as if it is functioning on its own... in a produced architectural environment which is very cold." This juxtaposition is a characteristic of Khan's tongue-in-cheek irony, which also makes its way into his writing.

"But the material you're engaging with is not cold. It's music, and it's driven by the code of this culture or genre...and these two things together for me open up the possibility of touching... the cold heart of culture."

The final stop on the Hassan Khan trail is *Jewel* (2010), a film that the artist describes as a "historical painting," which basically presents a choreographed dance to a musical composition by Khan.

"It is based on a moment that I caught with the corner of my eye." Khan describes that as he was heading home one day, the car was turning a curb and there were two guys dancing around a speaker with a light-bulb flashing underneath.

"And by the time I went home I saw this whole piece from beginning to end. I imagined the piece completely. It was almost like an image that triggered a daydream and then I kind of produced this daydream into the piece," he says.

Khan worked closely with the two dancers in the piece to develop their individual performance languages. This sheds a small light on a side of Khan's work that has to do with working with actors.

"The film is almost trying to look at history as the production of personas rather than as things and facts that happened," he says. "You see a lot that you can't put your finger on but that describes the history of a place or people," he says.

"And so in the end you have this show that has different zoom ins and outs," explains Khan. "The space in the beginning is more delicate, here it has a more monumental aspect, with these two works it is more immersive, and in different ways, like you know *Jewel* is more abrasive and overwhelming, this is more interactive."

This exhibition not only manages to show the audience the varied works of Hassan Khan, but the varied ways in which he has created these works. Some projects are based on breaking down an existing form produced by culture (*DOM TAK TAK DOM TAK*, 2005), while in others he has turned a scene he glimpsed on the street to a daydream and ultimately into a video (*Jewel*, 2010). Other projects are based on observations (*The Agreement*, 2011), and the remainder exclusively on memory (*17 and in AUC*, 2003).

Khan's work seems to focus on the negotiation or capture of meaning rather than its creation. His projects seem to discuss places and people through probing; posing questions such as: What sounds do they make? What do they remember? What do they love?

Programme:

Exhibition opens 30 March and runs through 26 April.
Koday Passageway, 20 Adly Street, Downtown Cairo