



IN PEACE AND WITH COMPASSION

Photographs: George Fakhry
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In one of the most creative and unique shows of solidarity with Egypt yet, artist Reda Abdel Rahman, in collaboration with Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, organized the exhibition *In Peace and with Compassion*. The exhibition was marked the fifth edition of the interfaith CARAVAN Festival for Visual Arts, an initiative founded by Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, a U.S Episcopal priest and a champion of the arts. CARAVAN is an art platform that, since its inaugural show in Egypt in 2009, has developed artistic initiatives with the aim of fostering an exchange “between East and West,” encouraging both artists and audience to “journey together through the Arts.”

The protagonists of this year’s project were a group of forty-five life-size fiberglass donkeys, sculpted by Reda Abdel Rahman. The donkeys were distributed among artists of all backgrounds, each offered as a canvas onto which the artist could manifest their vision of Egypt. Following an exhibition at the Anglican Church of St John the Baptist in Cairo, the donkeys were scattered across various venues in Cairo where they generated a lot of attraction both for their aesthetic pleasure they evoke and the universal message they carry. But the donkeys’ journey doesn’t end there; twenty-five were brought back together and selected to travel to London, where they were displayed marching through St. Paul’s Cathedral between August and September.

The idea for the project came about in light of a growing trend to showcase painted fiberglass animals in public areas, such as Camel Caravan and CowParade. In this case donkeys were thoughtfully chosen for their value across time, and their representation in both Koranic and Biblical texts as symbols of humility and peace. While today the image of the donkey has met with a more negative connotation





– ‘donkey’ is commonly used a derogatory term in several languages, including Arabic - the pivotal role of the donkey in Egyptian society, dating back to ancient Egypt, cannot be overstated.

The results of the exhibition were delightfully rich and diverse, evidencing the variety of participants, which included a mix of established and emerging contemporary artists.

Reda Abdel Rahman’s submission, a darkly satirical commentary on Egypt’s socio-political situation, presented a donkey, who Reda likens to the, “Egyptian citizen who is always crushed and poor,” whose form has been taken over by the dual forces of the military and Egypt’s former Islamist president. The work included an interactive element in which audience members were invited to write on a miniature figurine of a mummy and place it in a basket on the donkey’s back; a powerful metaphor for the destructive forces that carried away the lives of so many on their path to power. His work recalls artist Lara Baladi’s 2008 artwork *Donkey Symphony*, in which she also drew an association between the symbolism of the donkey and the strife of Egypt’s frustrated populace.

The event could not have come together without the combined effort of Western and Egyptian artists, both Muslim and Christian, which is a testament to Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler and Reda Abdel Rahman’s achievements. Their belief in beauty as a powerful social force and the universal and regenerative power of art to a culture brought forth marvelous results and, given their success, I expect we will have a lot more to look forward to in the future. Ω

