

PRESS RELEASE

Fathi Hassan  
*Hemsat [Whispers]*

Private view: Monday, 14 January, 2019, 6 – 9 PM

Lawrie Shabibi is pleased to present *Hemsat [Whispers]*, Fathi Hassan's debut solo in Dubai. Comprising an anthological selection of never-before exhibited pictorial and text-based works, the exhibition traces the line of the forty-year career of this Nubian Egyptian artist. The title, recalling the breeze of the desert, evokes an environment where everything moves and changes continuously.

Fathi Hassan focuses on the interaction between spoken and written language. Single letters, words or entire sentences are repeated to form captivating yet illegible 'texts' that draw from Arabic calligraphy, abstract and figurative designs and symbols, allowing for shifting meaning and multiple interpretations of the words and invented graphic signs. Hassan's dream-like stories explore issues of migration, memory, cultural belonging and loss. Born in Cairo to a Nubian family, Hassan has lived in Italy since 1984 and recently relocated to Scotland. His work reflects an identity in constant flux.

'My practice is like a rosary. The artwork is the last bead' says Hassan, referring to his various sources of inspiration: the landscapes of his homeland, the oral accounts of Nubian people, childhood memories, graffiti and street art, the Italian Renaissance, musings on current global politics and everyday life.

*Hemsat* brings together more than one hundred paintings and drawings, exploring the space between graphic symbolism and literal meaning. Diverse in style, their sizes span from postcard to large sheets. The selection is not exhaustive, instead focused as thematic groups that highlight certain aspects, while linking them all into a wider dialogue, a tale that seems to expand beyond the frame, which passes from work to work.

Hassan's calligraphy is inspired by Kufic scripts among others but is highly personal and not based on any one determinable script. Writing for him is something spiritual which flows like the voice of a loved one or the movement of water. The earliest works, small drawings dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, focus on phonemes as the unit to construct the language. Hassan either covers most of the surface with Arabic or Latin letters to create a one-word resonating poem, or instead scatters letters and phrases, leaving empty spaces on the paper, to focus on a specific keyword. Figurative elements and geometric shapes such as spirals or stylized eyes or ladders sometimes substitute the writing and resemble an archaic image-based language.

In the series *Faces*, a single word appears as a motto of the bright coloured crowds in the paintings. One particular group, *Ricordando Haring* (Remembering Haring) pays homage to the late artist Keith Haring, whom Hassan met in Naples in 1983, with Haring-like stick men superimposed onto calligraphy; another – a Surrealist influenced group whose production spans a decade- bears a triangle-headed character. The palm tree, another recurrent feature, is a symbol of longing for the ancient land of Nubia, where about 12 million palm trees were submerged following the construction of the Aswan Dam.

Included in the earlier works is the series *Ricordando Dad* (Remembering Dad), which Hassan refers to as pieces that reflect both his relationship with his father and that with his own sons. Universally, they represent the human instinct for life to continue beyond physical decline, metaphorically they represent immortality.

These early works are complemented by much larger paintings, created between 2011 and 2016. Throughout time, the single letter has slowly evolved into the overflowing, compact script seen in Hassan's recent work. These include *Head*, with its surface packed with sentences, a line traces the profile of a head but does not set a separation between inside and outside; *Kenuz* ('treasures'), a homage to his family and to the heritage; *Toshka*, the name of his ancestors' Nubian village, an imaginary bird's eye view of the town and its natural surroundings; and *Crossing*, which reflects on his nomadic existence: white round shapes break the flow of the text reproducing the trace of a lizard in the sand.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Cairo in 1957 to Nubian and Egyptian parents, since graduating in 1984, Hassan lived in Le Marche, Italy, and currently lives and works in Edinburgh, Scotland. In his drawings, paintings, sculptures and installations, Hassan experiments with the written and spoken word, exploring the theme of ancient languages erased by colonial domination. With invented, Kufic-inspired scripts, he plays with the symbols, textures and calligraphy of his Nubian heritage to explore the space between graphic symbolism and literal meaning in vibrant colours and collage.

Over the past 30 years he has participated in numerous solo and group shows in Italy, including the 1988 Venice Biennale, in Belgium, Denmark, Egypt, Great Britain and New York. Recent solo exhibitions include *Faces and Voices*, John Rylands Library, Manchester (2012) Fathi Hassan: Transformation, Skoto Gallery New York (2011); Fathi Hassan, Leighton House Museum (2010); *Tasaheel*, Centro d'Arte L'idioma, Ascoli Piceno (2010); "Kenuz", Domus Artis, Naples (2009) and a solo show at the Museo Nazionale Villa Pisani, Stra, Venice (2008). Group shows include: The Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy, London (2012); Rose Issa Projects at Abu Dhabi Art (2011); *Arabicity* at the Bluecoat Arts Centre, Liverpool, and Beirut Exhibition Center, Lebanon (2010); *Text Messages* at the October Gallery, London (2006); and an installation at The Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington DC (2002).

His work is part of several public and private collections, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; The British Museum, London; Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington DC; The Farjam Foundation, Dubai; Fondazione Fausto Radici, Bergamo, Italy; Flash Art Museum, Trevi, Italy; The Barjeel Collection, Sharjah, UAE; Symphonia S.G.R, Milan; Williams College Museum of Art, Massachusetts, USA; The Clark Museum, Atlanta, USA and The Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, Cairo.

## **ABOUT LAWRIE SHABIBI**

Lawrie Shabibi is a contemporary art gallery housed in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. The gallery supports the long-term development of the careers of young international contemporary artists with a focus on those from the Middle East and North Africa. The gallery also organizes art historical exhibitions working with an older generation of artists from the region. Liaising with curators, institutions, museums and collectors the gallery has successfully introduced international artists to the region whilst at the same time presented Middle Eastern artists to the international contemporary arts community. By holding a regular programme of exhibitions, screenings and talks, publishing

catalogues and participating in international art fairs, Lawrie Shabibi has in the space of seven years been a forerunner in the development of the contemporary art scene in Dubai.

For more information on Lawrie Shabibi please visit:

<http://www.lawrieshabibi.com>

## **PRESS INQUIRIES**

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