

“Dance, when you're broken open. Dance, if you've torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you're perfectly free.”
Jalal ad-Din Muhammad ar-Rumi

"Dance leads us to the revelation of the soul, the clarity of the mind, and the transcendence of the scars of pain. Or it is the kiss of life that restores the pulse to those who have lost their lives and are exhausted.“ Jalal ad-Din Muhammad ar-Rumi*¹

(quote on right side extra page)

NEU

SARA TANTAWY - SHOOTING STAR

„I aimed to weave a visual and spiritual thread that connects us to our roots from the ancient Egyptian past that still pulses within our collective consciousness, to the identity of the contemporary Egyptian being.“

Sara Tantawy has since her diploma in 2017 so far conquered the Arab world, India and China, as well as parts of Europe and North America. In a fulminant series of exhibitions: from the East coast of Africa to Asia, from the Dakar Biennale, the oldest and most prestigious African biennale, where she represented Egypt in 2024, to solo exhibitions in the UAE and from the Days of Contemporary Art in Carthage (Journées d'Art Contemporain de Carthage (JACC)), to the Biennale in Beijing in 2019, and a major show in Washington we can draw her route of success around the globe.

For her painting „Silent weeping“ she received an acquisition award at the 2nd Dafen international Biennale in 2020 which is now part of the Dafen Art Museum’s collection in China.

Her paintings made a journey from the Sahara desert to the mountains of Tyrol, — from Dubai to Vienna, where she got featured by the art collector Faek Rasul.

The next destination is New York where the young artist sets up her new home.

Sarah places a strong emphasis on women's feelings and experiences, making women the central characters in her pieces. Her paintings are deeply personal and draw from her own experiences, allowing her to convey the profound emotions of loss, loneliness, and the absence of social support. However, Tantawy's paintings are always relating to her roots in one way or another.

¹ quoted in an article in Al-Ahram newspaper about Sara Tantawy’s first solo exhibition, "Silent Weeping," at Motion Art Gallery, Cairo 2021

The reference to the spiritual ancient Egyptian tradition in her work is the result of both her artistic research and her own practice as a dancer, that enables her to capture the spiritual quality of dance in her paintings.

What is the secret of her success?

Is it this blend of virtuoso mastery of her impasto painting technique that helps her achieve a realism that is almost drawing them into her flawless images awakening in viewers the desire to touch the skin of the women depicted— or is it Sara's personal emotional experience that touches the public ?

Perhaps it is the enigmatic, subtly interwoven, rich cultural-historical dimension of her paintings that accounts for the resounding success of this young artist from Cairo?

The accompanying text in this volume aims to explore these questions and to offer the art public a few thoughts on deciphering the messages hidden in the images.

DANCING WITH PAINTINGS

“Throughout history, dance has been utilized to honor, celebrate, and lament on every occasion. It has always been ritualistic and communal.”²

In Sara Tantawy’s paintings we find mostly young beautiful women, alone or in groups performing dance gestures in front of faint landscapes or almost vanishing of sand-stone-coloured backgrounds with quasi- hieroglyphic wall decoration. The playful patterns with camel figures and dancers create the impression of a contemporary, superficial “kitsch” background, reminiscent of the grandeur of ancient Egypt, which has degenerated into a mere tourist attraction.

Some paintings are round white panels on which the dancers sit, as if on a small island. The artist chose the circular shape to evoke the association of the horizon with the feeling of infinity. The horizon also played a significant role in ancient Egyptian culture and was represented as a sun disk between two lions, the "Aker." Similar to ancient Egyptian iconography, Tantawy also aims to convey a cosmological message by emphasizing that the female figure, which occupies the entire space in the circle, also represents the moon, sun and earth, and that the circular movement of her body also stands for the planetary movement around the sun.

„She occupies all of space.“ says Sara about her female portrait. There the painting transcends the persona of the woman and relates to the mother heavens, the goddess Nut who represents the whole heavenly sphere, like when we have a goddess as the creator, it’s her own very body that is the universe.

² Egyptian artist Sara Tantawy alters the art of dance in her debut UAE performance, NEWS article about her exhibition at Fann A Porter gallery in Dubai 2023, <https://magzoid.com/egyptian-artist-sara-tantawy-alters-the-art-of-dance-in-her-debut-uae-performance/>

„[...] the female represents what in Kantian terminology we call the forms of sensibility. The female represents time and space itself. She is time and space, and the mystery beyond her is beyond pairs of opposites, so it isn't neither male nor female. It neither is nor isn't but everything is within her, so that the gods are her children.³

Dance held a prominent place in Ancient Egyptian rituals, serving as both an expression of joy and a powerful form of worship. This lives on in Sufism with the Whirling Dervishes of the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Rumi.

For Sarah Tantawy, as well as for the followers of the Mevlana, dance is not just a performance, but a profound spiritual practice involving a therapeutic experience, to which she dedicated a series of large-format oil paintings that can be seen in this volume.

In her paintings, Sarah succeeds in exploring the many dimensions of bodily knowledge that the traditional Egyptian dance form Raqs al-Sharqi, better known as belly dance, engenders. In doing so, she transfers the uniqueness of the dancing body into the medium of painting, freezing the ephemeral forms of body movement and eternizing them for permanent visual perception.

In Egypt in the Old Kingdom (c.2663–2195 BC) as well as in the Middle Kingdom (c.2066–1650 BC) professional female entertainers, dancers and musicians were known to have been highly organized into groups known as 'khener'. These women held honorable titles such as 'Overseer of the royal khener' and 'Overseer of royal dances'.⁴

We can easily imagine the beautiful young women in Sara Tantawy's large format paintings in these respectable positions.

In the temples both, women and later more and more men danced and sang in praise of the gods, while the cults of female deities, such as Isis and Hathor in particular, were dominated by priestesses and female devotees. A combination of music and ritual dance was also part of the actual funeral rite celebrating the dead.

Sometimes Tantawy's paintings seem to capture the emotions of mourning dancers.

Sara's beautiful portraits of women in elegant poses radiate this sacred light, as if surrounded by grief and suffering.

Especially the painting with seven dancers in white robes standing in a row entitled "Connected Flow" (2021) radiates mourning. Are the waterfall-like pleats of the veils by which the faces of the four women in the middle are covered symbolizing their flow of tears beneath ?

The mourning veil was commonly considered as accessory with which the bereaved could shield herself and conceal her grief.

The connectedness is depicted by entangled female hands. This gesture shows how the women support each other in their grief in order to experience healing in the group, as it happens in dance

³ Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* (1988), Ep. 5: Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth — 'Love and the Goddess' Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers discuss the mythology of love — from kāma to agape to courtly romance, <https://billmoyers.com/content/ep-5-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-love-and-the-goddess-audio/>

⁴ Patricia Spencer who explores and revives classical Egyptian dance in her 2005 newsletter for the Raqs Sharqi Society

as a therapeutic method. It seems as if the artist has also processed pictorially her own healing experiences through dance.

THE SYMBOLISM OF DRESSES, JEWELRY AND COLOURS

„My choice to portray women dressed in unified white garments is not merely an aesthetic decision, but a deliberate invocation of ancient Egyptian symbolism.“

In contrast to ancient Egyptian dancers, who usually performed nude and adorned only with jewelry, Tantawy's dancers in white linen dresses, more closely resemble the clean and proper Doris Day style of the 1950s. Others wear sporty, simple but elegant dresses, long-sleeved T-shirts, and flowing long skirts in the style of sophisticated dance groups, with gold coin belts at the hips, like those worn by Bedouins and belly dancers.

The artist also uses colors very consciously in her work by blending historical symbolic meaning with contemporary ones.

WHITE (Ancient Egyptian "hedj") was the color of purity, holiness, cleanliness, and simplicity. Sacred objects and even priestly sandals and tools were white for this reason. Sacred animals were also depicted in white. Clothing, often made only of undyed linen, was usually depicted as white.

Also the white draped costumes in Sara's paintings recall undyed linen and convey a sentiment of sacredness. They are a congenial allusion to the clothing worn by priests and priestesses during religious rituals honoring the god Osiris and can be interpreted as a sign of spiritual connection.

BLUE (Ancient Egyptian "irtyu") is the color of water and is associated with the Nile, the heavens, and the Milky Way, the celestial Nile.

The ancient Egyptians used the semiprecious stones azurite obtained from mines in Sinai and imported lapis lazuli from Afghanistan to produce ultramarine pigment.

The rarity of lapis and its true blue color mined from the earth contributed to its high value, making blue the color of the kings while it symbolized the rule of the gods.

Sara Tantawy uses this color on two stretched canvases depicting dancers in royal blue full-length dresses, previously shown in Vienna at the Salon Modena.

In the painting "The Guardians" or "Guardians of Nature," two girls in the same royal blue dresses are seen, tied together with their long braids, writhing as they try to free themselves.

They stand in the desert, from which sparsely long blades of grass sprout, and are surrounded by three seated rams. The sun god Ra, the highest patriarchal deity proven to have succeeded the matriarchal predynastic period of the great goddesses since King Re-neb in the 2nd Dynasty (c. 2830 BCE), could also take the form of a ram. Thus, the image expresses the bond between women and their shared pain over the powerlessness they are still experiencing in patriarchal societies today.

RED (ancient Egyptian "deshr") was primarily the color of chaos and disorder and the color of the desert (ancient Egyptian "deshret," the red land), as the opposite of the fertile black land ("kemet," was also the ancient name for Egypt).

Accordingly Tawny lets two women in red dresses dance in the desert.

Red symbolized natural energy while blue represented supernatural energy.

Red and white were conceived as complementary color pairs; as in the double crown of the god Horus and the pharaohs.

THE BOAT SYMBOLISM

"The boat symbolizes survival and the girls are hoping for a miracle. The grass acts like a shield to protect them while the waves below move them along,"⁶

The painting entitled "Salvation" brings us to the great cultural significance of the boat. Two women sitting on a boat are looking in opposite directions, as if one were basking in the morning sun and the other in the evening sun.

What misfortune have they just survived?

In ancient Egypt, boats held the status of protectors of the Cosmic Order of the world.⁶

— Perhaps this time too, they protected the depicted women ?

The boat was the most important technological achievement of human history until the advent of aviation. It was an important means of transportation on the Nile and also had representative and symbolic significance. Since the introduction of the Re cult in the 5th Dynasty, Egyptians believed that the sun god sailed across the sky in a solar barque during the day (anticipating its adaptation for the concept of aviation) and crossed the waters of the underworld at night. As the pharaoh was a representation of the sun god on earth, the kings would use a similar boat upon his death to travel through the underworld on their journey to the afterlife.

The barque embodied the superiority of men over nature and was a sign of power, of wealth and of domination. While some societies have found in the horse a powerful image of authority, which elevates the rider, the ancient Egyptians used the boat, often decorated in a distinctive way, to achieve the same effect, sometimes turning it into a shrine.

⁵ Afshan Ahmed, Egyptian artist Sara Tawny transforms the art of dance in first UAE show in The Frontier Post, <https://thefrontierpost.com/egyptian-artist-sara-tawny-transforms-the-art-of-dance-in-first-uae-show/>

⁶ Dorian Vanhulle, Boat Symbolism in Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt: An Ethno-Archaeological Approach, Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections, 2018.

In this sense also Sara Tantawy uses the boat as a stage for her female portraits in order to elevate them and let them appear more sublime.

THE STRINGS & SHADOWS

In one of her earlier series of works from 2019 arabesques emerge as shadows on crouching naked bodies, appearing as shadows of transcendence.

For the ancient Egyptians, space was not conceived as empty but consisting of complex, higher-dimensional geometrical structures, symbolically encoded in the Isis & Osiris myth⁷.

The spiral shapes on Sara's painted bodies remind us of the logarithmic spiral on the crown of Horus, symbolizing the Uraeus serpent which stands for the fiery dynamics of light and the wave-particle duality of the smallest fundamental entities of the universe, — wavelike properties like a snake in motion.⁸

When Sara portrays people playing cat's cradle, forming complicated string figures with their hands on other paintings, she also alludes (subconsciously ?) to those complex structures of the space that subscends everything.

In her painting "Haystack," the complex structures become chaotic and take on a sad form of reality as carefully painted straw on a floor on which a beautiful woman curls up from cold or loneliness.

In another painting, we encounter the same young woman with a somewhat lost, yet inviting gaze in a long, slightly transparent, off-the-shoulder dress. She crouches on the ground in a faintly sketched landscape on a rocky shore. Is she waiting to be released by her beholder?

ARABIC IDENTITY & ERASURE

"In my work, the woman is not just a visual subject, but a symbolic vessel—a bridge between a sacred past and a present in search of meaning." (Sara Tantawy)

Sarah is currently embarking on a new artistic exploration journey, taking us with her new series of paintings to her exploration of Arab identity and the peril of its erasure. That is why the artist portrays women sitting meaningfully on a broken globe.

Therein, we see women who are no longer quite so young and no longer quite so beautiful, wrapped from head to toe in ample white cloaks. This is the traditional clothing of married women in Nubia and Sudan, which has largely been abandoned by younger generations in the wake of urbanization.

Let's stay curious to see where Sarah Tantawy's artistic journey will take us in the future.

⁷ as recently deciphered by the author: Quantum Information Traced back to Ancient Egyptian Mysteries, Technoetic Arts, 11:3, Bristol: Intellect, 2013, 319–334.

⁸ RCZQ, The Isis & Osiris myth as origami Instruction for Plato's 5th element (forthcoming)

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Vienna, May 2025