

Book Review: The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation Building

Blog Admin

*Art and cultural production in Egypt during much of the last hundred years has operated against a backdrop of political crisis and confrontation. In this book **Patrick Kane** focuses on the turbulent changes of the 1920s to 1960s, when polemical discourse and artistic practice developed against the entrenched and co-opted conservatism of elite and state culture.*

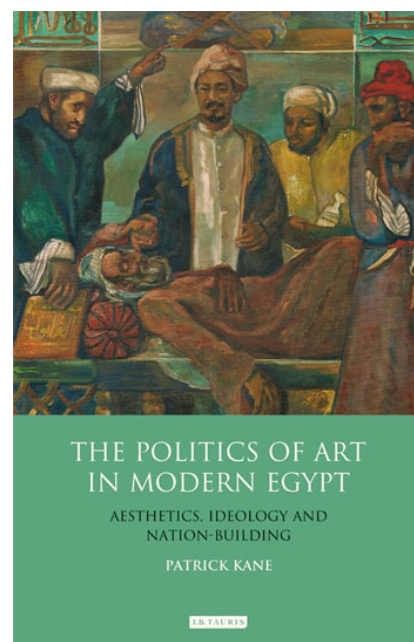
***Susheel Gokarakonda** finds that this book is essential reading for students of Egyptian art and literature, modern history, and revolutionary movements in the Arab world.*



The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation Building. Patrick Kane. I.B. Tauris. February 2013

Find this book:

In early July, just outside the gates of Cairo University, crowds of protesters began to occupy the site of Giza's second most famous sphinx. A monolithic peasant woman, hewn from pink granite some 14 metres tall, stands by the creature's shoulder lifting her veil, but her face is ignominiously pasted over with posters of Mohamed Morsi. The former President's name is graffitied numerous across the surface of the sculpture. Carved in 1928 for the Wafdist government during the country's latter years as a British Protectorate, the Nahdat Misr or "Renaissance of Egypt" retains its potency as a visual construction of elite and nationalist ideology, rooted in both the mythology of Egypt's ancient origins, and in the prosperous future optimistically envisioned through capitalist reforms, the mobilisation of a migrant labour force, and a revitalised cultural programme.

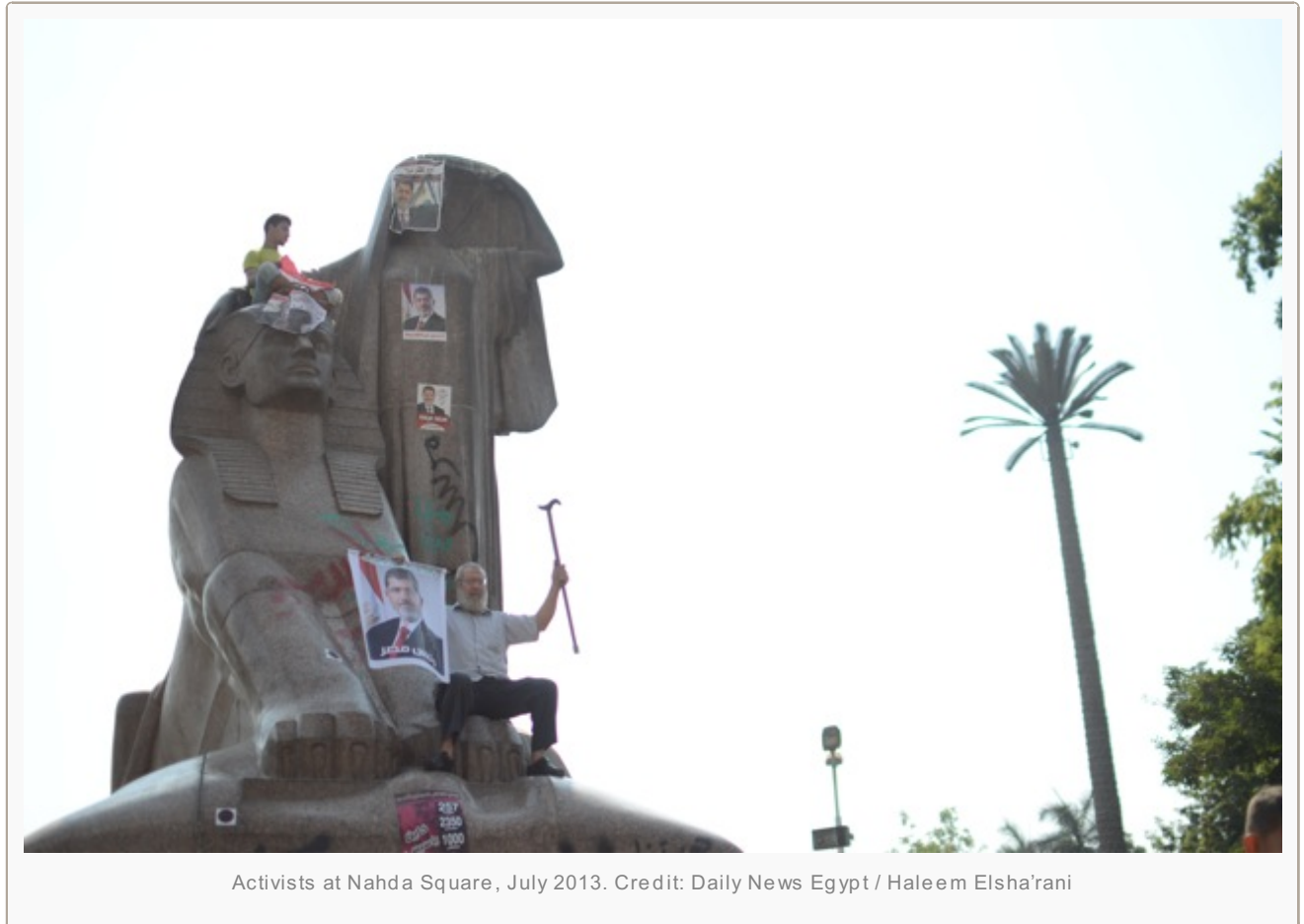


However in the days and weeks following General al-Sisi's dramatic coup d'état of July 3, the world has witnessed the deposition of Egypt's first democratically elected head of state and the most audacious seizure of power since the 1952 Revolution. Indeed the artwork's recent vandalism and brief reappropriation by pro-Morsi activists comes in the wake of "[Orwellian](#)" [military suppression](#), with conservative reports of dozens killed and continuing turmoil. Separated by some sixty years, it is with an astute eye on revolutionary movements both past and present that [Patrick Kane](#)'s timely monograph is published, tracking the nascence of a heterogeneous and uniquely Egyptian modern art movement across the first two thirds of the twentieth century. Its political imagery remains deeply emotive (as in the case of the Nahdat Misr), but has thus far received little critical attention from Anglo-American scholars overburdened, the author argues in chapter one, with the legacies of imperialism, Orientalism, and Neo-orientalism that serve to perpetuate a Ptolemaic and medieval view of Egyptian culture. Kane, himself a US-trained academic currently based in the UAE remains cognizant of these "limits of self-perception" (p. 3), but commendably attempts to at least somewhat decentre discursive analyses from these Eurocentric attitudes.



The temporal parameters are defined by the inauguration in 1908 of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, coinciding with the Nahda philosophy of cultural renaissance promulgated by the European-trained director of the academy Mohamed Nagi, among others, through to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the loss of Egyptian territory in the Sinai Peninsula. Crucially, however, Kane rejects the conventional linear model of avant-gardist progression. He posits instead a “social horizon of aesthetic experience” (p.11) in which the social, political and economic milieu of ordinary working Egyptians is foundational to the realisation of an alternative aesthetic discourse, spanning not only fine art and scholarly literature but also popular Sufi religious festivals, arts and crafts, and state-sponsored buildings and infrastructure. In other words, this is a social history of art punctuated by and responsive to global and domestic conflicts (including two major peasant uprisings at Buhut and Kamshish), the transformation of cultural spaces and the role of artists under the socialist presidency of Nasser, and ideologically contested government projects such as the construction of the Aswan Dam across the Nile in the 1960s.

The
anti-



Activists at Nahda Square, July 2013. Credit: Daily News Egypt / Haleem Elsha'rani

Nahda reaction spearheaded by the Egyptian Surrealists and the Contemporary Art Group of the 1930s–40s, and the ultimate failure of the renaissance paradigm, is similarly elided with an increased intellectualism in the arts, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in improving education and literacy among rural communities, and the growing threat of Italian-inspired fascist movements such as Misr al-Fatah (“Young Egypt”). Kane lays the groundwork (although lamentably, no more than this) for further analysis of cultural movements and their censorship under the Sadat and Mubarak regimes, and convincingly puts forward the case that the arts are “likely to remain a proving ground” for political and ideological expression in Egypt (p.178).

The formation of art institutions in Egypt after 1908, built upon the legacy of European salons, and the subsequent positioning of a high formalist mode of aesthetics takes on central importance in chapter two. Nagi's promotion of art as a "religion of the state" (p.21, from Nagi's *Une Politique des Beaux-Arts en Egypte*), serving both elite interests while also having a utilitarian role in educating rural communities, is contrasted sharply with the experiences of art teachers (hailing principally from the Muslim Brotherhood), disillusioned and radicalised after spending time in these communities during a series of crises in the late 1930s. Kane's somewhat belaboured account describes in detail the dissolution of parliament, the expropriation of crop surpluses, and falling wages. The growing tension between fervent nationalist sentiment on the one hand – Howard Carter's sensationalised discoveries at the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922 did nothing to quell this – and the state's failure to meet food and labour shortages on the other provided material for a new, increasingly urban and middle-class generation of artists and journalists led by Ramsis Yunan and Georges Henein. Their Surrealist philosophies and quotidian subjects of representation, underpinned by an ideological opposition to iqta ("feudalism"), are explored more fully in the third chapter.

However it is the discussion in chapter four concerning the mawlid ("festivals") that represents Kane's most compelling writing. Often dismissed as ancient folkloric tradition by Occidental scholars, it is here reconfigured as a complex aesthetic milieu with roots in Sufi mysticism and shared experience, and a dynamic arena of contestation between the state and the people. Their suppression by landowners fearful of public gatherings had both economic and cultural implications, stimulating a subversive counter-discourse centring on 'arusasugarine dolls and other craftworks as symbols of resistance.

This is a welcome addition to cross-cultural and postcolonial scholarship, shedding new light on important currents in Egypt's recent cultural history that continue to shape its political landscape. Kane's prose is lucid although repetitive in places, and some arguments may appear familiar to native scholars, who have long recognised the interrelationships between art and politics in the region. Nonetheless, it remains essential reading for students of Egyptian art and literature, modern history, and revolutionary movements in the Arab world.

Susheel Gokarakonda is an independent writer on art and politics. He completed his undergraduate studies at St Andrews and UC Berkeley, before obtaining a Masters degree in 2012 reading History of Art and Visual Culture at Oxford. You can find him on Twitter [@sgokarakonda](#). [Read more reviews by Susheel.](#)

