

Art as Resistance | Strike Magazine

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by Raul Alonzo

The uprising in Egypt has defied all preconceived notions that the power of popular protest had been marginalized and that the great revolutions of yesteryear were simply motifs of a historical narrative. Like wildfire, the 2011 Egyptian Revolution ignited following the ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia, in one of the defining flares of what has been called the Arab Spring.

As people took to the streets to demand an end to the rule of President Hosni Mubarak, who had maintained control of the country with the blessings of the U.S. government since 1981, the aspirations for liberation that materialized began to coalesce into a defining cultural expression. With the growth of street protest, came a growth in street art as graffiti artists emblazoned walls with images of social commentary, jarring depictions of those in power and memorials to those martyred during the uprisings.

A Culture of Resistance

In these months of post-revolutionary Egypt (or second-wave revolutionary Egypt in the words of many of its participants) a renaissance has grown amidst feelings of jubilation. Festivals celebrating the goals of the revolution, like El Fan Midan, draw crowds to witness innovators in visual art, music, poetry and prose. Anti-government sentiment runs strong through political literature and music – such as the artists of the Shaabi genre, a sort of Egyptian hip hop that emerged from the slums and took root as a favorite amongst the country's youth.



An Egyptian man waves a flag as military police run towards him, shooting

The outburst of such a cultural display can be interpreted as the effects of pent-up desires, conditioned by years of repression under the 31-year State of Emergency, finally being loosed. Much of this was first encapsulated in the graffiti that began appearing during the January 25th Uprising.

According to Waleed Rashed, writing for Smithsonian:

“Graffiti was a rare sight until two years ago, when artists began documenting the crimes of our regime. The artists – some acting on their own, others as part of an artistic collective – remind those who take political stands that nothing escapes the eyes and ears of our people.”

Some of the artists that define the growth of this new movement include Sad Panda, Ganzeer, El Zeff, Nazeer and Keizer – sharing commonalities with other street artists from around the world, such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey, with a distinct style embodied by the concerns of working class Egyptians.

As part of the uprising was facilitated by the utilization of social networking (that is, until the government shut off the Internet), artists have utilized the web to forward the ongoing revolution. Ganzeer founded the website cairostreetart.com where users can tag sightings of new work on a map of Cairo. Along with El Teneen, Ganzeer also established the blog magazine “The Rolling Bulb,” which combines the revolutionary art movement with street journalism. The WordPress blog [Suzeer in the City](http://Suzeer.com) gathers graffiti works from a

number of artists in one location.

Some examples of the captivating nature of the work can be found in such pieces as El Teneen's "Checkmate," in which all the pawns reside on one side of a red-and-white chessboard with the king toppled across from them. Keizer, who dedicates his time fully to producing street art, is known for incorporating aspects of pop culture and including English phrases reserved for the purpose of "[attacking] the upper echelons of society."

To come upon a large ant silhouette on any of the walls in Cairo is to encounter the work of Keizer. As he says of the ants on his website:

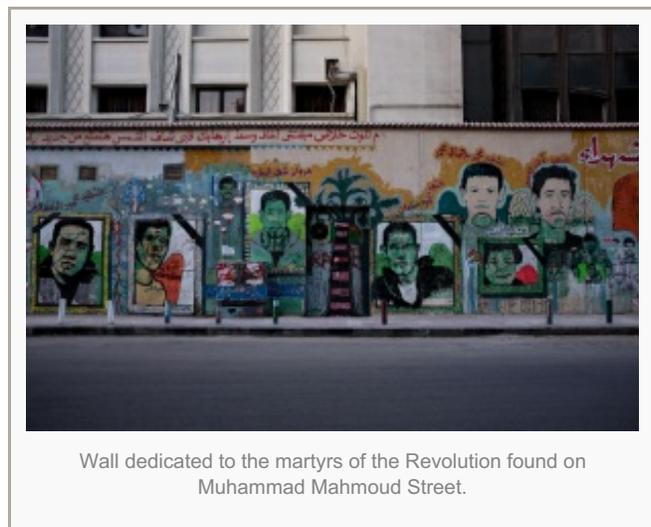
"The ant symbolizes the forgotten ones, the silenced, the nameless, those marginalized by capitalism. They are the working class, the common people, the colony that struggles and sacrifices blindly for the queen ant and her monarchy. Ants are devoted, dedicated workers. They cooperate, organize, delegate, and put themselves first in the line of danger and duty. Under-appreciated and ruled, they receive and expect no reward for their efforts, toil and struggle..."

But apart from the guerilla street art on the walls that bear witness to the ongoing revolutionary process, elaborate and complex murals also appear: glorifying in vivid coloring and divine symbolism the passing of martyrs and the immortalization of the battles seen on the streets of Egypt.

A point of coalescence for this new artistic movement was Muhammad Mahmoud street, where one of the most violent clashes between the security forces and protesters would occur.

The Battle of Muhammad Mahmoud

Leading directly into Tahrir Square, Muhammad Mahmoud street is like a conduit feeding lifeblood into the heart of revolution.



November of 2011 saw some of the most violent street clashes since the uprising earlier that January. Since then, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), an unelected body of 21 military officials headed by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, had taken power after Mubarak stepped down.

Beginning as a peaceful sit-in by the families of those killed or injured in the uprising, the Muhammad Mahmoud sit-ins expanded after security forces engaged in heavy-handed tactics, that eventually drew more and more protesters.

Dust filled the air, along with the loud cracks of the SCAF guns. Shouts were raised as fleeing protesters came upon the bleeding bodies of their comrades, holding them up and invoking the cries of God and liberty. Police sirens sounded off the walls of the nearby American University buildings as triumphant shouts were raised by protesters hurling bricks and debris at the security forces.

Protesters organized their own medical units, with injured comrades brought back from the battle line on the backs of motorcycle “cavalry.” A BBC story found that some had reported people coughing up blood and collapsing from the intense amount of tear gas being pumped into the air. Cairo, that day, was truly a war zone.

One of the more brutal tactics undertaken by the security forces was that of the eye snipers. On many of the wall murals found around Muhammad Mahmoud are the grim faces of men and women donning an eye patch or bandage. These are the faces of those who had their eyes blinded by the rubber bullets of security force snipers.

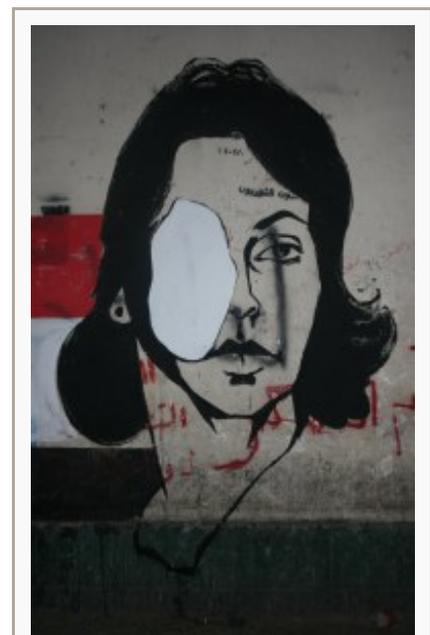
And to accompany them, are the faces of many of the over 40 people killed in the clashes with the security forces that day, as well as those from the beginning of the uprising. People from all walks of life: lifted up into the heavens through the imagery painted by their peers. They line the streets, their portraits in hues of green and blue – their faces fixed in peaceful, jovial, expressions. Immortalized how their loved ones and comrades remember them.

Muhammad Mahmoud, in the aftermath of these clashes, saw it’s walls adorned with many representations of this type of imagery – a sort of hall of collective recollection. All Egyptians remember the days of fiercest fighting, and many found at Muhammad Mahmoud today are eager to share their stories.

An Invocation on the Walls

Art as a form of remembrance, art as a form of resistance. Art as liberated expression. All such forms are found on the walls throughout revolutionary Egypt. And as the people move into the next phases of the process, the art serves as a reminder of just how far they have come. As Rashed noted:

“People singing revolutionary slogans come and go, but the graffiti remains and keeps our spirit alive.”



Street art depicting a victim of SCAF snipers that targeted the eyes of protesters.

The murals found on Muhammad Mahmoud serve not simply as a form of remembrance for the over 840 martyrs who died during the first wave of the revolution (which now stands closer to over 2000), but as a means to inspire the people to continue on with their protests. A popular chant echoed by those seeking justice for their comrades declares “we will get their rights, or we will die as they have.”

And, as such, the imagery of the artwork injects itself into the lives of thousands every day in Cairo. The murals lie right across the street from the Mogamma, the main administrative building in the capitol, and form a corner of Tahrir Square with their depictions painted along the wall surrounding the American University of Cairo campus. One of the main exits from the Sadat Metro Station opens up right next to the murals, themselves. Across the street from them are also many western fast food restaurants, including McDonalds and Pizza Hut, so they are plainly visible to American tourists as well. Thousands of people from all walks of life behold the art daily.

Several attempts have been undertaken to remove the graffiti and murals by the SCAF, but each time only proves futile as people, not simply those denoted artists like El Teneen and Keizer, but ordinary people continue to turn to street art to document their collective historical strides.

The SCAF will try to jail these people, like when Ganzeer was arrested with two others setting up posters ahead of protests. “People forget that the streets belong to the people,” Ganzeer said in a Christian Science Monitor interview. “They think that they’re some kind of official government-controlled entity. I think it’s important to remind people that they’re not.”

In the days after Mubarak’s removal, the SCAF set up roadblocks on several streets leading into Tahrir, including Mohamed Mahmoud. Large concrete bricks towered over the streets, disrupting the daily traffic of the citizens.

Like the setting of a silent overnight snow, the following day many of the roadblocks were covered with the markings of graffiti artists. Some were brief memorials to the fallen (“R.I.P. Anas”) while others were more complex, such as the large yellow smiley painted across the length of the roadblock on Qasr al-Aini Street or the wall of the Sheikh Reihan Street roadblock, which was painted in a way to make it appear that the road continued on beyond it.

As it stands now, the task for many is to deepen the gains of the Revolution and further the break with the remnants of the old regime. In recent months this has continued to galvanize revolutionary youth movements, like with the Tamarrud – a campaign to gather signatures for a document expressing the Egyptian people’s lack of confidence in the presidency of Mohamed Morsi and a call for early presidential elections.

The urgency of such actions is to further the momentum of the people, on the paths created by the sacrifices of those martyrs found on the walls of Muhammad Mahmoud. Without the conscious action of the people, the effects of the counterrevolution will seek to head off such gains.



Mural depicting incarcerated protester, Sambo.



When the SCAF sought to repaint the walls of Muhammad Mahmoud in preparation for the celebrations of the January 25 uprising, a day later the walls were again adorned with graffiti, the mutilated faces of those who had lost their eyes, and the faces of those martyred. An inscription read *shaaria uyuun al-hurriyyah* the “street of the eyes of freedom.”

The message was clear, and asserted plainly: it is the people who will win the revolution.

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Raul Alonzo examines the impact of the Muralist Movement on the Mexican Revolution

New Horizons are Born from Paint and Fire: The year 1910 sounded the death knell for the old ruling order of Mexico, ushered along to it's end by the victorious cries of “tierra y libertad!,” that rang throughout the countryside. This was also the year that Gerardo Murillo, who would go on to be baptized “Dr. Atl,” the Nahuatl word for “water,” painted the first modern mural in Mexico, mere months before the first shots of the Revolution were fired.

Prior to the Revolution, the artistic output in Mexico was stagnated by the rule of the dictator Gen. Porfirio Diaz. The ruling classes embraced the art of the “Old Masters,” namely those of the imperialist and colonizing powers of Europe.

In essence, with the painting of that first mural, and the subsequent teachings and influence of Atl and others, artistic revolution would coincide with political revolution in Mexico. The question then was one that forwarded a bold task before the nation: how shall a new identity for a nation reborn take root?

Enter Jose Vasconcelos. A writer and philosopher, Vasconcelos was appointed to the position of Secretary of Education by the new president Alvaro Obregon Salido and was tasked with helping foment a flourishing of the arts in Mexico – one that embraced the indigenous past while celebrating the gains of the Revolution. As part of this task, Vasconcelos commissioned artists from around the country to erect murals in public spaces – not simply for the benefit of the affluent few, but for the enjoyment of the masses.



Anti Mubarak graffiti



Part of Diego Rivera's "History of Mexico"

These early artists continued down the path taken by Dr. Atl, as well as others like cartoonist Jose Guadalupe Posada, and would take the art world by storm, changing the artistic output in the region forever.

Los Tres Grandes: Few would argue with the notion that the three giants of the Muralist movement were Jose Celestino de Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera. The three would go on to paint magnificent murals across Mexico in the United States, with vivid scenes adorning the walls of the National Palace of Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes, and Dartmouth College.

Jose Clemente Orozco: Orozco was 27 when the Revolution began, unable to serve on the frontlines due to a childhood accident involving gunpowder that resulted in the loss of his left hand. Though he identified as a communist, Orozco's work was often balanced between his passionate idealism and pessimism with regard to humanity. According to the PBS "American Masters" episode on him, the carnage of the revolution left him desirous of something beyond the material creations made through socially-constructed ideologies. Concepts of race and nationality drew the ire of his brush strokes and he sought to outline the trajectory of the self-destruction of humanity.

"Like victims of amnesia we haven't found out who we are. We go on classifying as Indians, Creoles and mestizos, following blood lines only, as if we were discussing race horses, and the effect of the classification is to divide us into implacable artisan groups, the Hispanists and the Indigenists, who war to the death."

Utilizing the fresco technique practiced by many of his contemporaries, Orozco's murals include "The Epic of American Civilization" at Dartmouth College, the politically-charged murals that adorn the first, second, third and stairwell of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and the Hospicio Cabanas in Guadalajara – considered the Sistine Chapel of the Americas.

David Alfaro Siqueiros: While Orozco may have been sidelined during the Revolution, Siqueiros seemingly breathed nothing but zealotry for the ultimate victory of the toiling masses. At the age of 15, he led a six-month student strike at San Carlos Academy against administration's teaching practices – and won. He worked to unseat the military dictator Victoriano Huerta in 1913, attaining the rank of captain and starting the Congress of Soldier Artists in the process. He helped launch "El Machete," the official newspaper of the Mexican Communist Party, and departed to Spain to fight against the fascists during the Spanish Civil War. He would eventually become secretary general of the Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors and Engravers Union – of which Orozco and Rivera were also members.

His ardent militancy, however, would see him side with the Stalinists during the Stalin-Trotsky split that would divide communists internationally. In 1940 he led an unsuccessful assassination attempt on the exiled Bolshevik revolutionary.

Despite his tolerance of Stalinist authoritarianism, his work was adamantly focused on human struggle and the overcoming of oppression by the proletariat – featuring masterful images of masses of people and stoned with passionate optimism for the future. His masterpiece is often regarded to be the Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros in Mexico City, designed in the 1960s and housing the world's largest mural works and one of Siqueiros's last before his death: "La Marcha de la Humanidad." Visitors to the mural can crowd onto a rotating stage that can hold up to 1000 as a light show and narration about the work seeks to arouse the sort of triumphant passion Siqueiros intended for all humanity.

Diego Rivera: Next to Frida Kahlo, Rivera is probably one of the most well-known of the Mexican artists. His body of work, which spans across the hemisphere, provides a good reason as to why. Evoked in his

art is a strong attachment to Mexico's indigenous past, such as the mural depicting the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan in the National Palace. Also is a strong jolt of social and political influence, fomented by Rivera's Marxist leanings, such as with his murals "In the Arsenal," which depicts Frida Khalo and photographer Tina Modotti distributing arms to campesinos beneath a banner evoking Emiliano Zapata's slogan "Tierra y Libertad."

One of his most notorious murals is "Man at the Crossroads" (full name: Man at the Crossroads Looking with Uncertainty but with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a Course Leading to a New and Better Future). The mural depicts a worker at the controls of a machine in the center of the machine with two visions of the future on either side of him. One depicts what Rivera saw as the debauchery of the wealthy elites, the suppression of the working class under the clubs of the police, and the utter despondence of war. The other depicts a May Day parade, of a united human race in which oppression, hunger and war were eliminated.

The work was commissioned by the United States' top "patrons of the arts" at the time – the Rockefellers, Nelson Rockefeller in particular, to be painted on the main lobby of the RCA building in what would eventually be Rockefeller Center in New York. It wouldn't be the scenes of disorder in capitalist society that would move the young billionaire to pull the plug on the project, but Rivera's decision to include Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin as one of the labor leaders.

In one of the most flagrant acts of censorship in the history of muralism, Rockefeller had the torn down after Rivera refused to alter the image. As Rivera recounted in a radio interview:

"Let us take as an example an American millionaire who buys the Sistine Chapel, which contains the work of Michelangelo... Would that millionaire have the right to destroy the Sistine Chapel?... In human creation there is something that belongs to humanity at large... No individual has the right to destroy it."



"La Marcha de la Humanidad en la Tierra y hacia el Cosmos," otherwise known simply as "La Marcha De La Humanidad" by Siqueiros

Prior to the destruction, in a scene reminiscent of Rivera's images, crowds came to chant their support of the artist, only to be disbursed by the billy clubs of mounted police.

A Culture of Resistance: The Mexican mural movement would boast many other names throughout the twentieth century, and beyond. The Work Projects Administration art projects saw the painting of murals throughout the Southwest, including those painted by Antonio Garcia for the Corpus Christi Cathedral and academy.

The movement would also go on to inspire those in the Chicano Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, with Latino's throughout the Southwest rediscovering their cultural heritage through art projects involving formally trained and self-taught artists, community volunteers and teenagers. Lasting examples can be found throughout Texas, including in El Paso, Austin, San Antonio and Houston.

The reverberations of the Revolution have not been lost on the youth, as exemplified by the ardent student activism against the return of the PRI party in Mexico – the party that abandoned the aims of the Revolution to embrace neoliberalism and oligarchy.

As a new generation seeks to take the reigns of their collective destinies, to look at their revolutionary heritage esconced in the murals of the past can serve as cultural inspiration needed in charting the future.

“Revolution, Renaissance and the Mexican Muralists” is the first installment of the Art as Resistance series. It was originally published in Issue One of Strike Magazine.

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