



Adam Henein:

Inside the stone

Profile by Youssef Rakha

Some speak to God, or subscribe to grand political schemes. Others, in the shadow of the Pharaoh's rocks, make their own idols





"If he had a sense of identity it was probably with a stone", wrote the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert; "if he had a feeling of profound union it was exactly with a stone'. But stones, as the Aswan Sculpture Symposium revealed last week, can be very nice to talk to

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Adam Henein is an engaging interlocutor, but his quizzical blue eyes are always elsewhere. He responds immediately, playfully, more like a 30-year-old than a 70-year-old. Everything he says he relates to the person he is addressing, with unpredictable wit, often very light-hearted. But, despite the charm with which he arrests his companions, there is a sense that he talks to you with only a fraction of his concentration, that the deeply personal feelings he is about to communicate are but shadows of an inner reality hidden from everyone, perhaps even himself. There is, too, something fundamentally down-to-earth, an almost streetwise sense of what is appropriate, which, one suspects, has allowed him to pursue his interests without incurring a loss of his integrity. His bachelor-like attitude gives the impression of a life free of attachment. One may therefore find it surprising that he has been married for 36 years. (His wife, Afaf El-Dib, is a profoundly perceptive woman to whose support Henein owes much of his success, though illness has recently made it impossible for her to move without help.) Henein's most recent lionisation as the commissar of the Sculpture Symposium (since 1996) and the culture minister's friend, which some people have interpreted as a form of "bowing to authority"; his self-indulgent faith in what he does; the "wise" decisions that sometimes alienate his

friends: all these are both survival strategies and ways of cold-shouldering the daily and the banal, as if to save his energy wholly for the magnificent.

A life in stone, he explains, is over and above everyday existence -- individual and ritualistic, inexplicable, almost divine. Yet any apparent contradiction between Henein's early yearning for "something else, something other than home and school", and his fundamentally cautious,

pragmatic approach to the tribulations of a hard and risky life is eventually dissolved. "One has to survive," he admits, "but you don't want to make a fool of yourself just to make money." Since his first solo exhibition in 1956, which, as he sees it himself, "made an impression quickly because there were very few sculptors at the time who were not simply copying [Mahmoud] Mukhtar" (the celebrated pioneer of Egyptian sculpture), Henein has survived and made money; perhaps paradoxically, he has also become "the greatest and true heir of Mukhtar", in the words of artist Liliane Karnouk. Now he gazes at me while he adjusts his glasses, perfectly indifferent but no less honest for being so, lovable in the most unaffected sense. "What you have to do is look. When you look at a stone right, that's when you enter into its spirit. One day you'll find yourself inside it, and only then will you understand what it's all about."

Looking came early to Henein. His father was a silversmith and, though illiterate, "had a refined taste. When he saw something beautiful, he would sit and tell us about it. And since one started to see other things too, artistic pictures in tourist books, whatever came one's way, one's eyes opened to beauty." Elsewhere, Henein values beauty less than the "sense of equilibrium" that modern-day sculptors strive to assert in the face of "the madness, the utter imbalance suffered by the world today". But it is to what he calls nature (a concept that embraces beauty, equilibrium and an almost pagan apprehension of the sacred, invoked, for example, by Aswan's rugged landscape) that his loyalty is due. "What art is about cannot be expressed in words -- the motion of insects in the mud beneath a tree, the ripple of a stream, the silent fluttering of wings." Surprisingly, it was in museums, not in open air, that Henein's two decisive encounters with "nature" occurred. The first goes all the way back to 1938, when he was a student at Tawfiq Primary School in Faggala. At the time, he may not have known what a sculptor was, but an unplanned school-trip to the Egyptian Museum was to grant him a lifetime's vocation.

"As soon as I stepped in, I went crazy. When I saw those things I forgot all about my class and the history lesson. I lost my way but didn't care, because one thing kept leading to another. Of course as a child you don't know if this

is reality or imagination. I knew those people were dead, but here they were, as concrete as anything, and I could touch them. Suddenly I had this weird feeling that I was discovering another world, away from the textbooks, physics and chemistry classes and breakfast with the family. A world where you could live and be very happy. Afterwards we had an arts and crafts lesson and I stole a piece of clay and took it home. And I sat down to make a sculpture I had seen in the museum. I showed it to my father and he was so pleased with it he took it to his shop in the Goldsmiths' Market and displayed it alongside his own work. Later there were examinations, church, financial problems, but it was for this other world that I lived from then on. In a few days, totally unknowingly, I saw, was stimulated, did my work, displayed it and even attracted an audience -- already, the cycle was complete."

It was not until Henein graduated from Cairo's Academy of Fine Arts that he was able to work continuously for five years, though it would take him another two decades to start working seriously in stone, "a noble medium" which he had longed for but had little chance of using. His university years gave him a taste of the intrigues at which he is now so adept, too, but his capacity for innocence, his communion with nature, was one thing he would never give up. There is much about his character that his memories of that time reveal: His reckless independence ("It's strange, but I don't remember having any mentors: none of my teachers really made an impression on me"). The value he places on himself as an artist: "It was I who influenced my colleagues; they may have been good sometimes, but none of them kept going" -- an unfair assessment of his generation's achievement, many would say. His obstinacy and mistrust of others: "I wasn't liked too well because I was clever and wanted to do my own thing". Museum visits remained inspiring, however, "especially that early experience of the Egyptian Museum, because it gave you a standard of judgement -- a set of laws. From then on, everything you saw you compared. And you could tell right from wrong because you possessed those standards."

From 1953, the year of his graduation with honours, to 1965, long stays in Luxor, Germany and Nubia were to "rectify the purely academic knowledge

one had acquired at the academy". In Luxor, Henein remembers, "you saw the girls and their faces, the goats, the acacias", and learned how to translate them from reality to art, while joining Egypt's leading artists and intellectuals on an expedition to track down monuments in Nubia during the building of the High Dam made it possible for him to see "a place which the advent of civilisation had not yet touched". In architecture, clothing, everyday objects, Nubia presented him with "Egypt as it had always been, in its purest form". Europe was equally beneficial, however, since, besides extending his knowledge of Egyptian, Greek and classical European art, Henein's German period brought him into contact with the latest trends. "I didn't stop at Ancient Egyptian art" -- a passion he would harbour throughout his life. "It was necessary to acquire your own vocabulary of forms and structures, faithful to your sense of place. This point is crucial, because only then do you reach something both real and original, the previously undiscovered feelings that lie dormant beyond the things you see, rather than just imitate what others have already accomplished. Germany prevented me from stumbling over Egyptian art, so to speak. Because through being there, I could balance the old with the new, and find my way of doing things."

The second decisive encounter, too, occurred during his stay in Munich, where an exhibition of ancient Latin American art forced him to reassess all that he had known. In the Aswan Symposium, Henein explains, sculptors suddenly find themselves inside "human civilisation's very first studio". With the work of nature and a number of unfinished ancient sculptures around them, "they sense their own limitations, understand how tiny they really are compared to nature, and this either spurs them on or depresses them, but in all cases it triggers a major change of direction." The same thing happened to him then. "The Mexican stuff was a crisis -- it made me think, What am I doing here? And the big names I had admired in European art -- Henry Moore, Rodin, Saint-Gaudens -- seemed far less significant. I got depressed and stopped working for almost a year, stopped going to the college, and just went back to that exhibition every day." The sculptor he had been studying under "was not the best, but I chose him because he was working on Egyptian art, and suggested new approaches to it". But when he

held his exhibition, his own distinctive affinity with Egyptian art prompted the artist Gabriele Münter, Wassily Kandinsky's wife, to tell Henein that Europe had nothing to offer him, and that he had better return to his genuine sources. "It was a potent sentence," he recalls. By the late 1960s, when he first thought of going to Paris, where he would live until the early 1990s, Henein had already made *Dynastic Bird*, and, earlier, *Fisherman and Donkey*. Already he was well on his way to realising the ideal of a sculptor as great as Mukhtar, who was also as scathingly original.

History, meanwhile, was marching inexorably ahead. Henein's first exhibition had coincided with the Suez War. His marriage to El-Dib (in 1963) was soon followed by the 1967 defeat, and the predominant sense of disillusionment with the 1952 Revolution. "I am not political," he insists. "Of course the question of art's relevance to society has preoccupied me. I may be wrong, but I'm more inclined to say that art is an individual thing, personal rituals which are influenced by society only coincidentally, by virtue of the artist's presence in it -- his upbringing and what he sees. But I never felt that my work was targetting any particular cause." In the wake of the war and under the Sadat regime, however, there was no room for this kind of human endeavour: all would be lost if he did not move out. "We built our house in Harraniya, but didn't stay in it in the end. The wailing that was going on in Egypt would've killed us, like the many people it did kill. Escape seemed the only option, because it was the only way you could learn something, see something, protect yourself in some way. Not that I didn't want to come back. It's just that I never had that thing people talk about, homesickness, nostalgia, whatever. Because so long as you're working, you're not living away from home."

Two more resolutions would shape their life together -- and forge Henein's extraordinary future. First, he was determined to live off his art alone, and El-Dib respected and upheld his decision. Second, the newly-wedded couple were never going to have any children.

In 1971, a cultural exchange exhibit took Henein and his wife to Paris, where, among 50 Egyptian artists, the two of them were supposed to remain

for two months but hoped to stay on for two years; all they had were "LE30 and the key to a friend's flat". In fact, for the next seven years, they did not even visit home. Henein sold a statue to Mustafa Safwan, a famous Paris-residing psychoanalyst who befriended him, and thus secured their financial situation for the first five months. "Then things started coming slowly." To be able to work peacefully in stone, he devised his own style of painting, and gradually gathered a large following of amateur collectors. "You had to be a little cunning to survive, but you wanted to do something worth your while, too." He used pigment on papyrus, worked a lot and sold cheap. His paperworks, now among the most expensive worldwide, were his way of getting around the forbiddingly competitive Parisian art scene. "Gradually I was invited to exhibit in Morocco, Kuwait... European galleries took notice of me eventually, friendships evolved. Until my name became known, and a book and video were made." It was at this time, too, that he met Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni, then a cultural attaché in Paris, and forged links with the public figures who would make his return to Egypt, which he had been visiting every year since 1978, all the more rewarding. "I don't know how I came back. I'll tell you one thing, though: I didn't come back all at once." There was, of course, the Giza Sphinx restoration project, in which he was asked to participate in 1989. But there was also the dream he shared with Hosni: to establish a sculpture symposium in Aswan, where artists from all over the world could work in granite.

For the past four years, Henein has been dividing his time between Harraniya and Aswan, though he continues to travel extensively. "I don't understand this idea of residences. I reside in the world, anywhere. I don't believe in borders," he declaims. A recent heart operation has deprived him of his cigarettes but left him all the more energetic, his monastic serenity intact. Hearty meals and the occasional beer keep him entertained, but his mysterious gaze remains perpetually unsatisfied, yearning for more of life. And the competence with which he heads the symposium, in his own view his most impressive career move, testifies to his abiding pragmatism.

His territory, of course, extends far beyond the Basma Hotel, where the symposium is held annually. In Cairo's downtown galleries and Paris's

museums, at the granite quarries on the banks of the Nile, on a plane or in the governor's Jeep Cherokee, next to an ageing chauffeur, he is perfectly at home, open to what others say, alert. If there is one place in which Henein is in his element, however, that must be the open-air museum, a raised platform resembling some long-abandoned pagan temple in the heart of Aswan, where the work of nature and the studios of the ancients stand side by side with what the four years of the symposium have yielded. Enthusiastically, Henein describes it as his "latest breakthrough". Now he braces himself against the wind, stares intently at a statue, points to a distant rock formation. "Come to think of it," he says half-jokingly, "there is more to idolatry than meets the eye." Then he picks up a piece of stone and hands it to me. "You think you can get inside it?" he asks. I am still not sure what he means, but I know that, from now on, stones will never be the same again.

Photo: Randa Shaath

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1999/426/profile.htm>