

# Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

## “The Portrait is an Address”: Egyptian artist Hassan Khan at Beirut Art Center

Posted on 25/10/2016



Like



1



3

Tweet

1 Vote

**New survey exhibition explores how the Egyptian artist has examined the self as it embraces and resists social and political structures.**

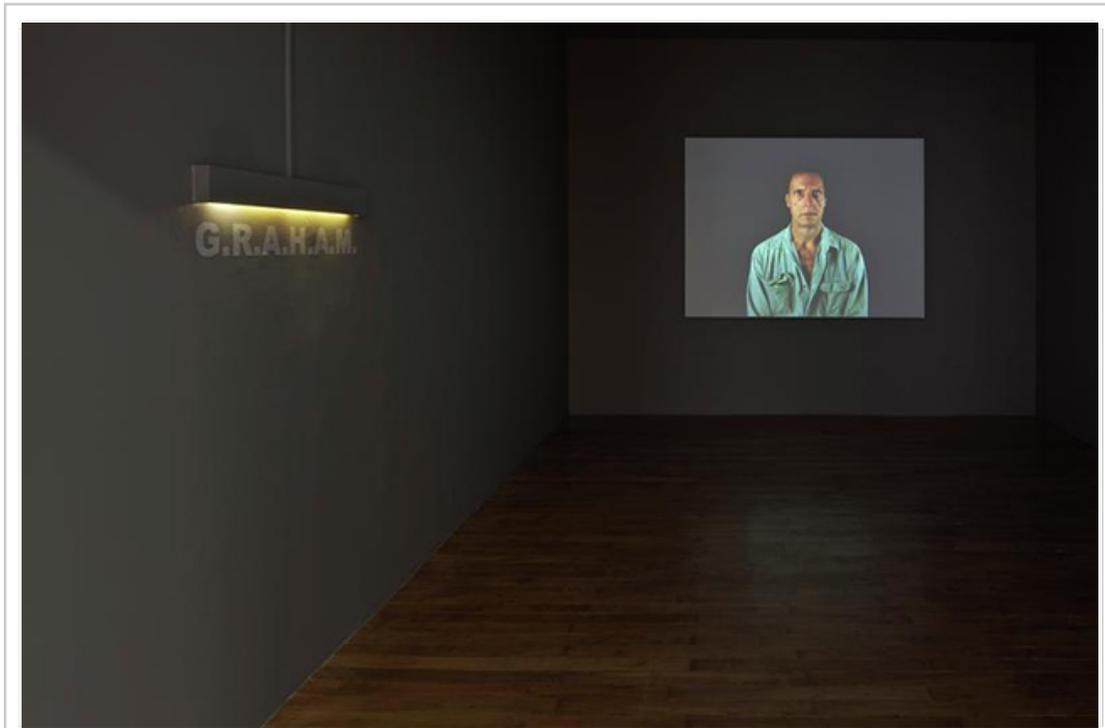
Artist and musician Hassan Khan’s first solo exhibition in Beirut, entitled “The Portrait is an Address” and held at the Beirut Art Center until 13 November 2016, focuses on a central aspect of his practice: the portrait.



Hassan Khan, “The Portrait is an Address” at the Beirut Art Centre, 2016. Installation shot.  
Image courtesy the Beirut Art Centre.

Cairo-born **Hassan Khan**’s work is transdisciplinary, appropriating a range of techniques and media – spanning writing, music, performance, moving image and installation – to explore how anecdotal, personal or private experiences are choreographed by urban architectures, national history and popular culture. In

addition, Khan has been a touring musician since the early 1990s and is involved with various bands and duos, as well as composing soundtracks for theatre and film.



Hassan Khan, 'G.R.A.H.A.M.', 2008, colour video transferred to DVD, silent, text on the wall, light fixture, 13m:54s. Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

With a practice as interdisciplinary and multi-faceted as Khan's, it has perhaps been difficult for curators to weave a common thread connecting the artist's diverse work in installation, music, performance and moving image from 1995 to the present. Hassan Khan has been the subject of various survey exhibitions, namely **Cairo Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival** in 2014, SALT in Istanbul in 2011 and **Gasworks** in London in 2006, but "**The Portrait is an Address**" at **Beirut Art Center** is the first to focus on the role of portraiture in his work.

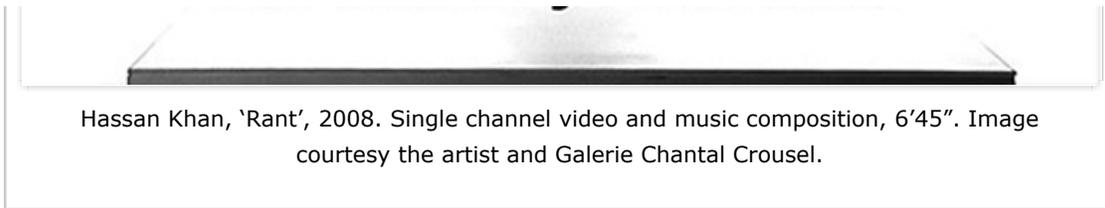


Hassan Khan live at Portikus, Frankfurt, 2015. Photo credit: Helena Schlichti. Courtesy of the artist.

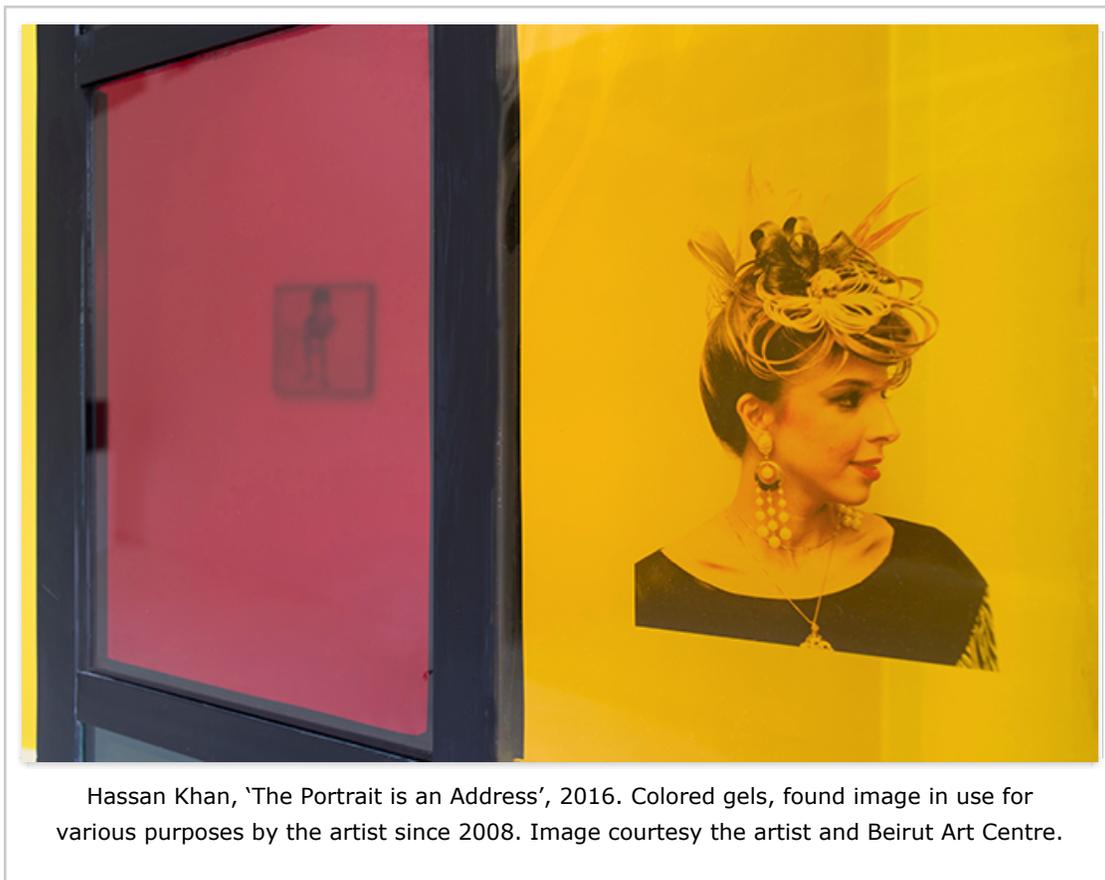
### **Hassan Khan, experimental ethnography and “the victim and the predator”**

In a 2009 **experimental text** and video work entitled *Rant*, the artist worked with actress Roba El Shamy for an intensive period of time in which they explored the actress’ relationship with her professional milieu. This stylised, actor-driven video work, accompanied by a piano composition by the artist, parodies, performs and critiques the paranoia and insecurity that pervades the emotional lives of anyone working in the entertainment industry. Far from an indexical portrait of the actress, the work is rather the product of a symbiotic and collaborative writing project in which both subject and object participate in the creation of a narrative, which appears to serve both artist and actress (and viewer) as a therapeutic parody of the stress of working in show business.





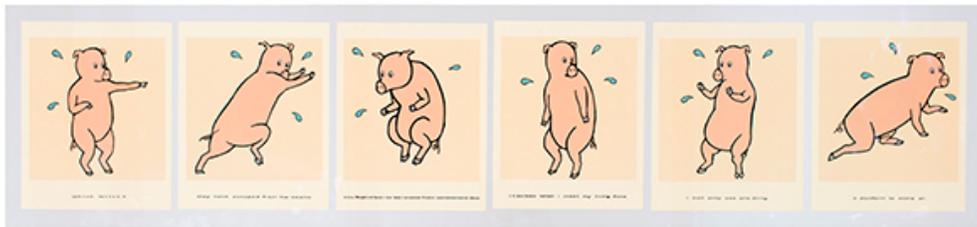
Hassan Khan's relationship to portraiture, as established by works such as *Rant*, is perhaps best characterised as an "experimental ethnographic" endeavour, in which the artist-ethnographer assumes and simultaneously reveals an active role in the construction of the work which is equal if not gives way to the active participation of his or her object of study. Hassan Khan's thus pivots on the construction of a public that is capable of deciphering the varying shifts in activity and passivity between writer, director and actor, as well as subject, object and camera.



It is distorting, disruptive or sometimes euphorically affirming these configurations that sustains works like *Rant*. Here, a section of the experimental text accompanying the video *Rant*, which recalls the founding situationist text *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) by Guy Debord, demonstrates how Khan weaves together the anecdotal (competition and stress experienced in a workplace) with a theoretical analysis of self and group, producer and participant, viewer and subject, "predator and prey":

*It is possible that we are all caught up in a vortex driving us towards a moment of silence in which the ego ends as our careers die. What can easily drive us insane is the continuous insistence by members of the group to sell something based upon a valency that ultimately devalues the self itself, both confirming and ignoring the truism: "We do not provide services—we are the service itself." That choreographed and slow collapse is predicated on a question that is also a statement.*

*The question/statement formalizes a schizophrenic sensibility—what is not to be represented, what one can only engage with. The visual code through which a generic speech pattern can be formalized will thus by necessity be stylized. The rules that determine this relationship ensure that our identification with the subject is not a sentimental one achieving catharsis, after which one can drag with relish on a post-coital cigarette. Here, we must be willing to pounce upon the weakness of the victim. Here, the victim is the predator.*



Hassan Khan, 'Stuffedpigfollies', 2007. 6 inkjet prints. Image courtesy the artist and Beirut Art Centre.

Other works displayed at the Beirut Art Centre also explore such power dynamics, for example, the text-based work *Mahmoud El Ansary* (2010), which narrates the predicaments of another semi-fictional character. At one point in the text, the character is similarly depicted as caught in an internal battle in which issues of status, success and class in Egyptian society are foregrounded:

*He never knew where he belonged in society thus he could only act either as an arrogant master or a lowly servant.*





“لم يمسك يمين قاطع بموقد التحيتى فى المجتمع  
ولذا فنان يتصرف إياكيد تكبير أو كنادم متواضع”

جلس محمود الأنصاري خلف مكتبه المصقول واللامع، خلف هذه القطعة من الأثاث، الضخمة والتمينة، المصنعة من رقائق خشب الصنوبر السويدي الذي يتميز بدرجة عالية من المرونة، والتي وضعت بعناية محسوبة للغاية في وسط غرفة وثيرة وفخمة محددة بمجموعة من الخطوط الهندسية، المسطحة بمادة الكروم البراقة والمتقاطعة بشكل حدائي ودقيق. فقد كان الأنصاري يعتز بصورته الشائعة كشاب عصري ولكنه كان يدرك جيداً إنها في النهاية مجرد صورة. أخذ نفس عميق وهو يتفقد الغرفة ويشعر بمتعة تحقيق هدف كان قد سعى وراءه طويلاً. ابتلع بهذا النفس تفاصيل مكانه المفضل، وهو مكتبه الخاص. إلى يمينه كان حائط من الزجاج العازل لصخب المدينة الكامنة خلف هذا الفاصل البسيط، فوقف خلف هذا الزجاج في غرفته المكيفة الهادئة يتأمل المشهد. ها هي قابعة أسفل نظراته كوحش متربص يصطلي بنيران غضبه المكبوت، فهمس لنفسه بهدوء قائلاً: «عاهرة».

حسن خان، محمود الأنصاري (٢٠١٠)، نص سردي، فونت جلال (١٣٠ كلمة)، العنوان، فونت ايران نستعليق (١٩ كلمة).

Hassan Khan, 'Mahmoud El Ansari', 2010. Narrative text by the artist in vinyl lettering on the wall. Image courtesy the artist.



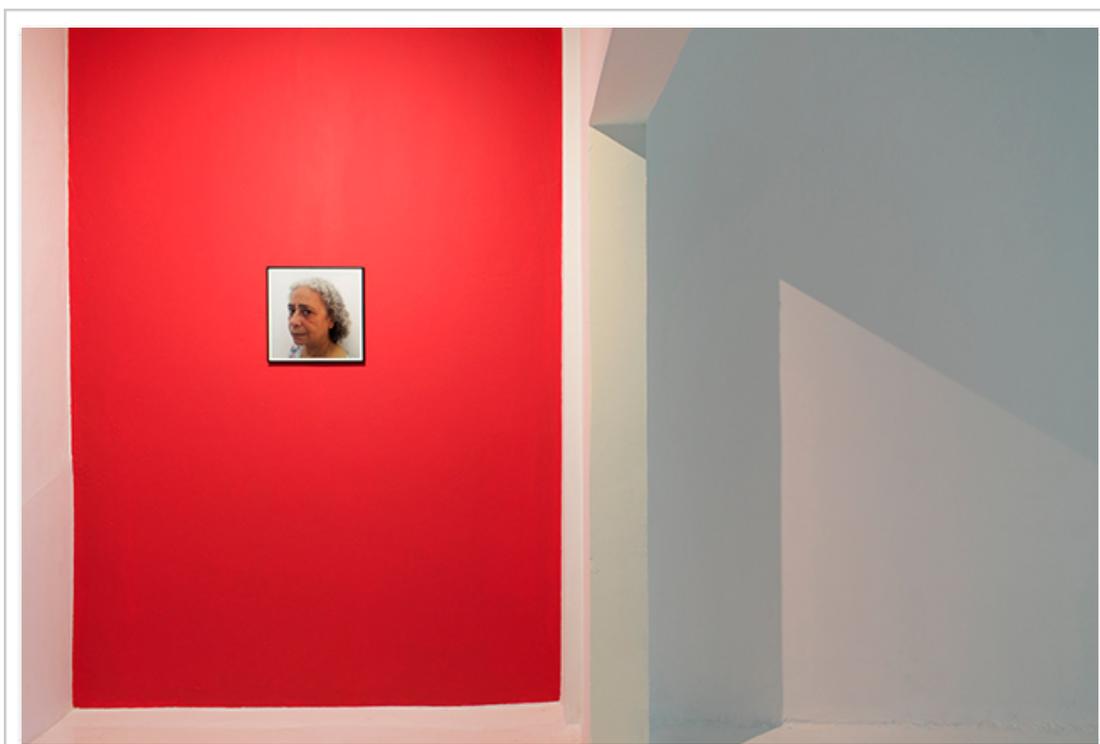


Hassan Khan, '100 Portraits', 2001. Still from video, 1 min. 21 sec.  
Image courtesy the artist.

### The portrait and the urban environment | The portrait and the alphabet

*100 portraits* (2001) explores the relationship between urban environment and portrait, individual and architecture. It stems from a project, originally entitled *Reading the Surface: 100 faces, 6 locations, 25 questions* (2001), shown at Cairo's Al Nitaq festival in 2001. *Reading the Surface* was a series of simultaneously projected videos, showing portraits imposed on gray buildings and aerial shots of the city of Cairo.

The project was conceived as a system for charting the flow of power that runs through the streets of Cairo daily, and is expressed at particular nodes such as architectural spaces: Khan chose six locations (the mall, football stadium, a mosque, a currency exchange, a Mercedes showroom, and the exhibition space itself) and researched how these spaces produce a particular subject through strategies of participation and differentiation. In each location, Khan interviewed a subject beginning with a seemingly straightforward question, such as "What is a football stadium?", progressing to questions that require the subject to reveal more personal or emotional information about themselves: "Why are you here? What is the difference between a person standing in the mall and the person standing in the street?"



Hassan Khan, 'My Mother', 2013. Framed color photograph on painted wall. Image courtesy the artist and Beirut Art Centre.

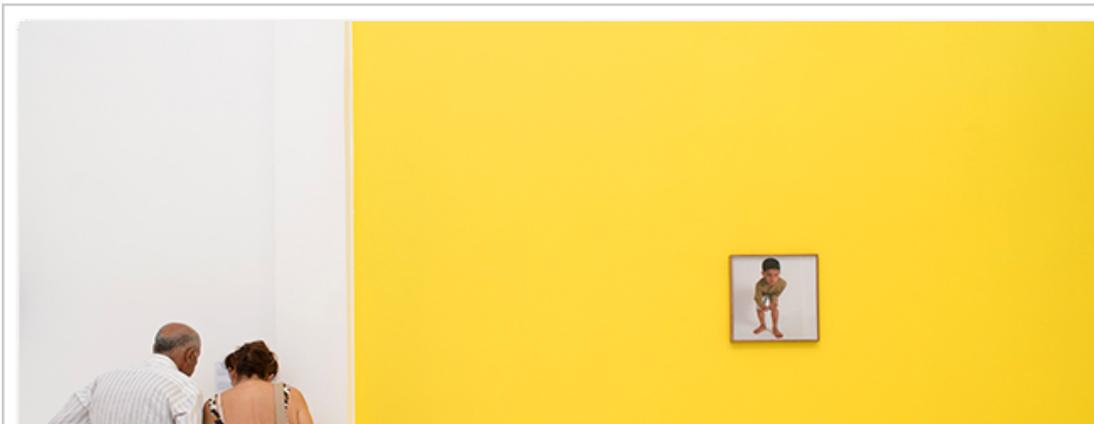
The work demands a relation to the character that is analytical and questioning rather than sympathetic, as they and the viewer both negotiate the relationship between the subject and their urban setting or context. In an **interview**, Khan explains the impact that such a project had in Cairo:

*In Nitaq in 2001, I did a video installation called "Reading the Surface: 100 Portraits, 6 Locations and 25 Questions." And that I think at the time — it was also rough, I*

*didn't have much experience then — was the biggest video show that had ever been done in Cairo, and it had some kind of impact for its content but also its ambition and scale. It was many rooms and it was something that at the time wasn't very common. And I think these were the last things that people really saw. Maybe I'm wrong, but I imagine there's a segment that imagines this*



Hassan Khan, 'Alphabet Book', 2006. Limited edition Artist book, 26 pages 40 x 40 cm.  
Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.





Hassan Khan, 'Untitled (Alphabet Book C)', 2006. Framed color photograph on painted wall.  
Image courtesy the artist and Beirut Art Centre.

### Hassan Khan and self-knowledge

A similar logic, whereby portraits are paired with another series of objects or settings, is applied in Khan's work *The Alphabet Book* (2006), in which Khan wrote texts inspired by his dreams. He then made images that accompanied the texts and finally intuitively matched each image to a letter of the alphabet, creating a linguistic code that sheds little or no light on the nature of its sources. As the viewer is led through a labyrinth of illustrations and symbols, the dream and the work of art become increasingly confused as accurate signposts of the artist's psyche. The work seems to communicate a cynicism with regards to the possibility of "self-knowledge". As the exhibition press release states:

*The exhibition aims to explore the primal relation between how we conceive of a self and its reproduction (not merely representation), or its construction through formal methods. It proposes the portrait (as genre, approach, and form) as being at all times an absolutely strategic and essential tool of establishing property (as it was first on medals for instance) and/or exhibiting power.*

Rebecca Close

1357

Related topics: **Conceptual Art, Critique of Consumerism, Documentary, Egyptian artist, Museum shows, Photography, Video**

Related posts:

- **Lebanese-French architect Hala Wardé to design BeMA: Beirut Museum of Art** – October 2016 – Beirut's newest museum, BeMA: Beirut Museum of Art is set to open in 2020
- **Preview: 5 highlights from the 7th Beirut Art Fair** – September 2016 – prior to the opening of the Beirut Art Fair, Art Radar selects a few highlights not to be missed
- **Rashid Rana and Glenn Lowry on the inaugural Lahore Biennale 2017** – video – May 2016 – Rashid Rana, newly appointed Artistic Director of the inaugural Lahore Biennale, speaks to Glenn Lowry at MoMA in New York
- **5 Egyptian artists to know** – February 2015 – *Art Radar* brings you 5 Egyptian artists working with innovative practices
- **7 notable installations at the Sharjah Biennial 2015 including Hassan Khan** – May 2015 – *Art Radar* highlights 7 notable installations at the twelfth edition of the Sharjah Biennial

Subscribe to *Art Radar* **for more news on contemporary art exhibitions in Beirut**

Posted in **Conceptual, Consumerism, Documentary, Egyptian, Feature, Museum shows, Museums, Photography, Video**  
Tagged **Beirut Art Center, Cairo Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Gasworks, Hassan Khan, Rebecca Close, SALT**

permalink [<http://artradarjournal.com/2016/10/25/egyptian-artist-hassan-khan-at-beirut-art-center/>]

