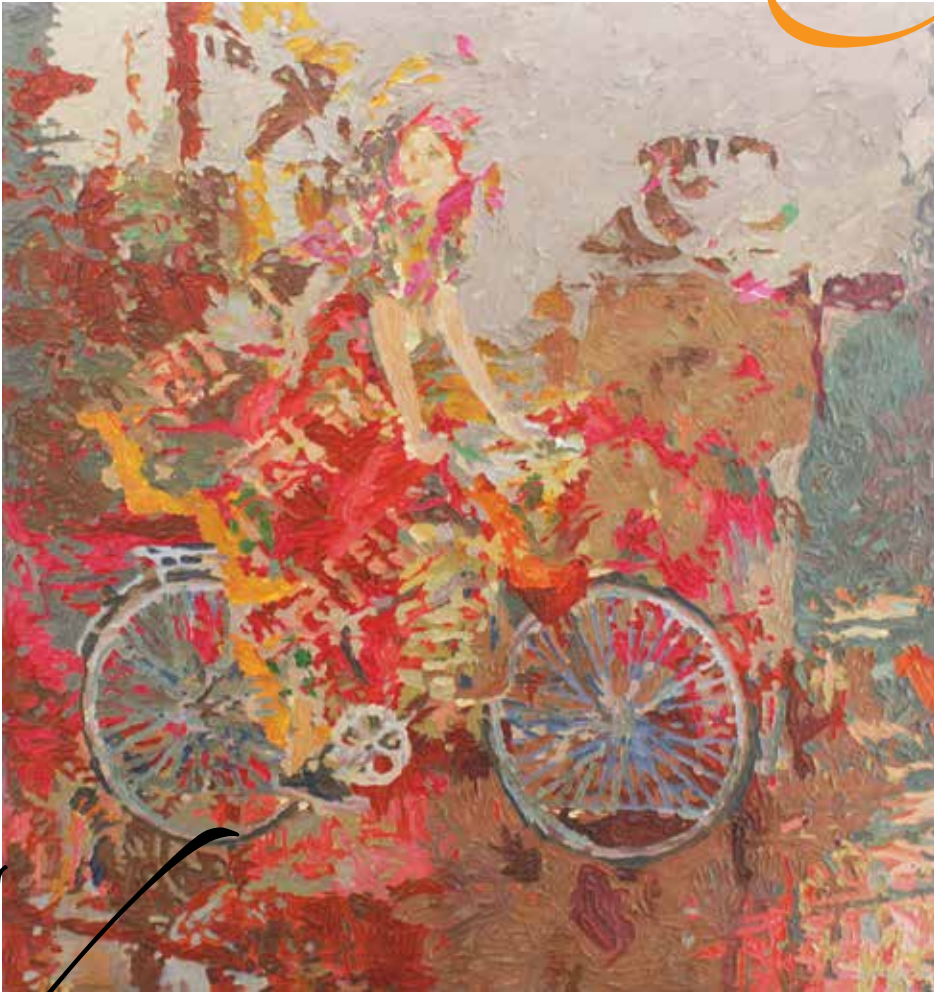


The Cycling

Artist Hossam Dirar has taken up cycling as a way of life—and he's leading by example.

By Ragia Lasheen



While living in Europe artist Hossam Dirar cycled everywhere. Everyone is on a bicycle, he says, from children aged 6 to women aged 90. "It's the easiest means of transportation, everything is close and all you need is a map." When Dirar moved back to Egypt, he sold his car and bought a bike. Today he cycles everywhere around Zamalek and is on a mission to show people through his art and by

setting an example that cycling is a simple solution to many of our problems. He tells Ragia Lasheen how:

You've just wrapped up a successful exhibition at Art Talks. Tell us about that.

Here cars are the only source of transportation, hence the traffic and that's what got me thinking when I returned from

Challenge

Europe that we need to ride bicycles. But how was I going to get my message across? The best way to express myself, I realized, was through my art. I began a series began about a year and a half ago, over which time I created some 13 works.

The idea of the works is that we try to escape reality and our problems with the simple means available to us. We've had enough of living in a world where things are not to our liking and we need to abandon these ideas, these traditions that we've caged ourselves into and embark on a new journey; a journey of ideas more than it is of destinations; a call to abandon outdated ideas and traditions that we grew up observing because they've been passed down through generations but in which we can no longer find ourselves.

Where does this journey of ideas lead?

We're living in a society where there is a significant age range, at the same time there is a difference in literacy and education levels. The 2011 revolution made a huge impact on the younger generations, those under 40, these are the people who championed the revolution's ideals, who were inspired by it and in whom the revolution is still alive. The older generation, who are older than 40, I don't believe the revolution did much to change them or that they even have the capability to change. It's difficult for them to abandon their ideas because they've been brought up to believe in them and have lived their entire lives conforming to them. The younger generation has certainly changed, but that's something we'll see later down the line.

It's true that over 70 percent of the population are under 35, but that's just a demographic. In terms of ability to change and in terms of authority, impact on decision-making or participation in the political scene, the education scene, any scene at all, their presence doesn't exceed 1%. They have no platform to express their ideas or talk about what they want to change and no mechanism to effect change. The problem is that the people who are different are always ostracized. People with different or progressive ideas are always shut out. In the coming period



I think we'll see that the new generations will not be able to adapt to the ideas of the older generation, and the latter will not allow them to be different. I think what they'll do is look for the youth whose ideas are closest to their own. They will adopt those youth to ensure their ideas live on and so that they take their place. This way the older generation can guarantee there won't be any change.

So there is no point setting off on the journey?

My viewpoint isn't necessarily pessimistic. But I can read Egyptian reality on the ground and I've also read lots of history. The reality shows that life goes on in a certain way but that doesn't mean there is no optimism. And the struggle continues through revolutions that break this pattern. The hope is always there of course. The hope lives in all of us.

You've proposed cycling as a "simple" solution.

How is it possible that a city like Cairo only has one means of transport: cars? Where are the alternative solutions? We have the Nile, why don't we have river transport, buses like we had before that can carry a large number of passengers? We have no



real public transport. Why do we always choose cars when we have an easier way out: the bicycle? It's free and good for your health, does not cause any form of pollution, and its accidents are generally nonfatal. Everything about it is positive, so why not choose to cycle?

You've also made a choice, and that's to lead by example and cycle everywhere. How has that experience been?

There is a difference between cycling as a sport or hobby and cycling as a lifestyle, as a way of life. Personally, I go everywhere on my bike. I'm in a suit and tie and on my bike. I don't want a car. I sold my car five or six years ago. I am a Zamalek resident and if I'm moving around the Island I'm on my bike. Outside Zamalek that's really difficult, especially on bridges and narrow streets.

When I am on my bicycle the reaction I see on people's faces is that they are very happy to see me and I see they want to ride

bikes too. Very often they give me a thumbs-up as I ride by. But it's a matter of security; many youth I know, boys and girls, tell me they'd love to take up cycling but are afraid to take the risk. And they have every right to feel afraid. When President Sisi rode a bike it was different—he had scores of people around him to protect him and the streets had been cleared. It's good that he was on a bike, but that's not the way the streets are in real life.

In terms of logistics, what's needed to encourage people to ride?

All that's needed is a bike lane; one meter next to the pavement and separated from the street by a 10cm brick partition. It needs to be exclusively for bicycles, not motorbikes or anything else, just bicycles. To protect cyclists cameras need to be installed to monitor who enters the lane. I am positive that if there were this lane, more than 50 percent of Egypt's youth will start cycling.

The biggest obstacle is that there is no real punishment and reward system in Egypt. People everywhere are not civil by nature, but elsewhere in the world, it's the enforcement of laws that has made them civil. If people were sure that if they drove their car down the cycling lane their license would be revoked and car impounded, they would never drive down it.

But until we have real bike lanes and there is no law to protect you, you are not really safe. It's very dangerous. Even in Zamalek it's not so easy, but I've been riding bikes since I was very young and am very skilled. If it hadn't been for that I could have gotten into many accidents because of the way motorists act in Egypt, stopping in front of you and opening the door as if no one else exists.

If you really want people to cycle, give them the basic needs: a secure bike lane. And give them bikes. Egypt should be manufacturing bikes—if you wanted to buy one in Egypt, you won't find any locally produced ones, they're all from Malaysia, China and India. How is it that until now we have not been able to manufacture a bike? It's a problem. But can you take a minute to imagine with me what life would be like if we all had access to a lane and if we had a bike factory? Can you imagine the amount of petrol we would save, the pollution and the traffic we would avoid? Not to mention the people you would employ and you would be selling bikes and making a profit.

Once the basics are set, how do you get people on board?

You can raise awareness by being an example. If someone sees me as a role model it's more likely that they'll copy what I do. I'm on my bike in my suit—when people see me they say we want to ride a bike like that man. I don't have to hold conferences and give speeches on the street; not at all. When I first moved to Zamalek from Maadi, the only people riding bikes were delivery boys. Five years later, five years of me coming and going on my bike, I see a change, an increase in bikes in

Zamalek. The thing is to have faith in the cause, to lead by example. There's no point campaigning about cycling if you yourself drive a car. I can buy an expensive car but I've chosen to ride a bike—people can see that I am devoted and not a hypocrite. At the same time I express my cause as much as I can through my art and exhibits.

And through your art, how do you get your message across?

As an artist, I choose to spread my message in the simplest way possible. In a country where many are illiterate and most are challenged when it comes to understanding art, there is no point in using symbolism and abstracts. At the

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end of the day I paint to get a message across so it's important that they be able to understand what I'm trying to say. The way I paint shows reality as it is. Work is very visual. Most of the characters in my series are real people whose reactions are clear: a happy girl on a bike, the atmosphere around her happy and hopeful, as if the world around her is inspired by her happiness. There is a unity between the character and her surroundings. I use oil paints and knives, not brushes to smooth or take the edge off reality. Reality is not smooth and so my choppy, thick layers reflect that.

Women figure quite prominently in your work. What role do they play in your art?

To get people to pursue a new way of thinking you have to engage them first in the deeper issues, not the simpler ones.

Men on bikes—where's the issue there? But a woman on a bike is different. And it's not about the bike itself, it's about the circumstances surrounding being on a bike. A pretty, well-dressed girl riding a bike is an issue, because women here can't do that. If she's safe from accidents on the road, she's not safe from people's stares and wagging tongues. This is the real issue I'm talking about.

It's unfortunate that after making great strides in the 1940s and 1950s when it comes to women's rights, these past decades have thrown us back to the Middle Ages. The basic



rights of women—to go where they want, dress how they want and study what they want—are not there anymore. And it's society as a whole that propagates this. Abroad, a woman on a bike is perfectly natural. Not so here. Something I want to do is get a girl to ride a bike in an average neighborhood and film the reactions of people on the street. We need to see our reality. We need to see that we have many problems. If we are able to change the way people view a girl on a bike, then we've managed to strike at the very heart of our society.

For more about the artist, visit his website at www.hossamdirar.com