



Conversation Piece #1 - Haitham (Charles) Haddad

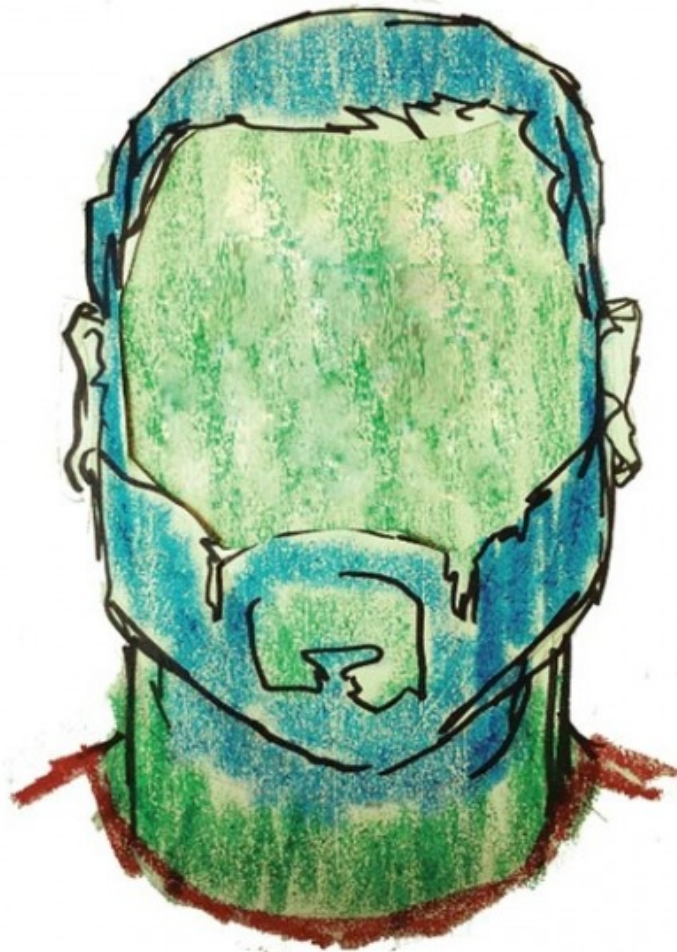
Michel Nassar in conversation with Haitham (Charles) Haddad on his work process and his take on gender, fashion, religion and technology.

Conversation / Michel Nassar January 14, 2016

Born in al-Bouqai'a village of the Galilee region in 1989, Haitham (Charles) Haddad received his BA in fashion design from Shenkar College in Ramat Gan, Israel. Combining graphic design with drawing, he focuses on contemporary art as affected by the history of the culture of fashion, and addresses gender politics by reshaping historical identities in present contexts. An up-and-coming artist, Haitham has recently participated in the exhibitions Notebook (2013), Manam (2014) - part of the second Qalandiya International biennale, and Tana Mahtiah (2014) - a joint exhibition with Anat Marat. His most recent exhibition, Amira/Ctrl + S, which premiered at the Khashabi Theater this past November, explores the relationship between memory, emotion, and digital illustrations. He currently lives in Haifa, where he runs Tsharliz, an online t-shirt shop for which he designs prints.

Our interview was conducted in his home on Masada Street in the Hadar neighborhood, where he both works and stores his art. Questions were revisited and answers clarified over the phone and on Facebook chats the subsequent week.

Haitham Charles Haddad. Lay/off



[1]Haitham Charles Haddad. Lay/off

MN: Eyes are prevalent in your work.

HCH: I don't know what's with the eyes. I just, I really like people's faces. Sometimes I draw only faces, or a combination of a few faces together. Maybe it's because in real life I look at faces a lot and ignore bodies. I don't look a lot at asses.

MN: Talk to me about portraits, and more about your fascination with faces. They've featured in many of your exhibitions, including your most recent Amira/ Ctrl +S. You've drawn faces without features, bulls' heads imposed on human bodies, mouths decaying in eyeless sockets, traced over pristine black-and-white family portraits with digital neon crayons. There's a sense of mutilation in your work, even in the playful masks with which you caricature traditional portraiture. Where does that come from?

HCH: I think it comes from my emo-ish teenage years. I grew up as the small kid, the not-very-attractive kid, who was smart and didn't have a social life. After a while I understood that this fit the image of a gothic-emo character, even if I didn't dress that way. I didn't have the black wardrobe or the gel. I'm not depressed, but I'm also not the happiest person alive. The drawings are another part of me that I don't show all of the time. There is something very scary about that. People always tell me that maybe I should go see a shrink.

MN: What?



HCH: Yes, really, my friends say that. They say, "Listen, these drawings are fucking creepy." They say, "Go see a shrink. The drawings are reflecting your inner self." I asked them, "Why? It's just a drawing." I don't see the scary things that they see. It's really funny because when I was a young kid I used to get scared by almost everything. Cats.... You know the movie *The Ring*? I couldn't sleep for a while because of that movie. The weird part is that after high school something happened, I don't know. I translated these emotions of fear into inspiration.

[Haitham Charles. Trip-tych \[2\]](#)



[3]Haitham Charles Haddad. Trip-tych
2014. Photo: Bilal Karaman

MN: Do you remember your first attempts at drawing?

HCH: I started by drawing naked chicks in high school on the notes of my piano music. Not very proportionate naked chicks either. My piano teacher saw the drawings and suggested I study fashion. This was in 10th or 11th grade. Now I hope to work some day in academia as a professor of the history of costume. I want to be the calm guy who teaches about clothes somewhere, not here.

MN: Why not here?



HCH: Ummm, because I've heard so many people tell me nobody here appreciates my work... Which might be true, I'm not sure yet. Haifa's whole group of pseudo-intellectuals and artists is not very supportive. There's a lot of envy. It's hard to succeed here in anything. Sana Jammaliyeh, my partner, and I have struggled even to give price quotes to people. We always get comments, like, "too expensive, too expensive, too expensive." It's frustrating. Anyway, fuck this place. I want to see the world.

MN: Haifa doesn't appear in your work, at least on the surface. Is it underneath?

HCH: No. I love it as a location, but... I don't know. I'm more interested in people than landscapes or buildings.

MN: The faces you draw melt into their physical surroundings.

HCH: I know it would sound really stupid, but it began from a lack of technique. I didn't know how to draw faces. I didn't go to art school. We were taught nude modeling once a week in fashion school, for one year. It was cool, and I learned a lot, but to tell you that now I can draw hyper-realistic faces would be untrue. When I sat down to draw, faces would always come out that had no beginning or end, and had no clear features, and, most of the time, until maybe two years ago, they had eye sockets but no eyeballs. Maybe the shrink will know why. People tell me I'm always drawing myself, but I say... No. They're just people. Most of them are bearded. I've had a beard for eight years now. In the exhibition Tana Mahtiah, Anat and I drew a hairy mermaid named Toota, which, by the way, means pussy in Hebrew.

[Haitham Charles Haddad and Anat Marat. Tana Mahtiah \[4\]](#)



[5]Haitham Charles Haddad and Anat Marat. Tana Mahtiah
2015. Photo: Tamuz Rachman

MN: Why is the mermaid hairy?

HCH: It's a part of the queer aesthetics Anat and I are in love with, the whole, I'm-a-girl-but-I'm-hairy thing, or the I'm-a-guy-with-lipstick thing. I especially like to depict these images with Arabic text, and to suggest these themes to people who aren't normally exposed to them. A mermaid doesn't need to be feminine. It can just be... Hairy.

MN: How did the Tana Mahtiah exhibition arise?

HCH: I wanted to make a fake god in a fake land, to make fun of the notion of a holy land. The way people come here from around the world and buy soil and air and... It's hilarious. We built a souvenir shop with postcards and posters and t-shirts of the god, to make it look like a souvenir shop in Jerusalem, and we installed it in a Tel Aviv bar. People were criticizing me for showing my work in a Jewish bar. This whole BDS thing drove me crazy. I still live by it. Try to live by it, I mean, because it's hard to live by it here. I received an email from one friend, and a semi-formal letter from another, and a phone call that told me I should consider where I exhibit things because where I exhibit things has consequences. My partner, Anat, is Jewish, and people would see the exhibition and say, "Here's a Jewish artist and an Arab artist sick of this land, creating a parallel universe they can inhabit." Fine, but we were not thinking about Jewish-Arab coexistence.

MN: Whom would you pin down as your earliest artistic influences?

HCH: Alphonse Mucha, a graphic designer from the art-nouveau period. Slavic. From Prague, if I'm not mistaken. Yes, Prague. I went to an exhibition of his sketches there. Him and Klimt. I love them a



lot. They're genius, the way they... People hate it now, the kitsch, and pink colors, and khaliji posts. (M.I.A., the singer, has a video clip, "XXXO," a take off of khaliji posts... Roses with glitter, and tigers and unicorns, like, flying). I like these visuals because they are in-your-face. It started in school, when we studied Latin America and its art. It was there that I began to love Christianity.

MN: Christian imagery permeates your work.

HCH: It's really funny... I grew up like any other Christian kid, surrounded by a cross here, a golden necklace with a decapitated Jesus-head there. Somehow I fell in love with the iconography of Christianity. I can't even tell you why. We're not a religious family, and I have a fucking Jesus in my room. It's very kitschy, this combination of ornaments and signs and symbols— this idea that everything has a meaning. How the way the saints hold their hands tells part of a story.

[Heitham Charles. In the Name of OMG \[6\]](#)



[7]Haitham Charles Haddad. In the Name of OMG 2014



MN: What about your own art? Does everything have a meaning?

HCH: No! No! Fuck it! Khalas. People always think I'm sophisticated but I'm a stupid child.

MN: You write in the introduction to Amira/Ctrl+ S that digital technology preserves memory, but your exhibition regurgitates old photos, and, in repeatedly altering them, seems to offer up their memories as new experiences to be consumed and re-remembered. How did your treatment of the photos change the way you related to them and the memories they contained?

HCH: Scanning the photos ensured that they wouldn't be lost, as they could be on paper. When I realized this, suddenly the idea of paper became vague. Why should paper be important to art or memory, when we are aware of pollution and the destruction of the Amazon and whatever? Suddenly you begin to understand that maybe we need new media in order to exhibit these old memories. This was why I scanned the photos, and presented them on screens. The tracing also began as an act of preserving the memories, but, like you said, it ended up creating new ones. At first my grandmother, the theme of the exhibition, asked, "What did you do to your grandfather?" But at the opening she said that it was the best tribute a grandson could give his grandmother.

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[9]Haitham Charles Haddad. Faragh فراغ, Installation
2014. Photo: rabea Salfiti. Qalandiya Internation program. Haifa

MN: Why did you choose to trace over your grandfather's face but not your grandmother's? What was it about your grandfather's death that made tracing over his face more permissible?

HCH: I chose to trace my grandfather because his absence makes me afraid of losing him. Even when I did trace over a few of my grandmother's portraits, I didn't have memories associated with them. You can give your input when there's an absence. You have this control, this power, and you can decide what to remember and how to remember it and, with illustrator software, if you want to make a nose bigger you can. It became obsessive. I was in control of the pixels. I smudged the faces of my grandmother and grandfather until they had almost disappeared.

MN: Speaking of digital media, I noticed you maintain a Tumblr account. How does the Internet influence your art?

HCH: The new wave of artists are on Tumblr. It gives everyone a stage to express themselves. Not only Tumblr, but also Twitter. An open platform to say whatever you want, even if it's pornographic or insulting to others. It's the Internet. It seems like it's not real but it is. It's real life. It's the soul. I mean, today... You're alive even if you're dead, when you have a Facebook page. People still post on the wall of the biggest producer here in Palestine, and he's been dead for a long time. All of these stupid movies from the '90s are coming true.

MN: To which artistic traditions do you see yourself contributing? Do you see yourself as a Palestinian artist?



HCH: No. I don't like to be labeled, because when you label me you're making me responsible for every word I might say, and you'll make me feel I need to be more cautious with my work, and what I do, and how I show, or what I exhibit and where. In fact, I don't want to be labeled as a Palestinian artist or, for that matter, as an artist at all. I don't know what an artist is. Is it to study art at some fancy academy, and to smoke a certain cigarette, and wear a certain hat? It's hard to be called an artist, or even a fashion designer. If someone says, "Oh, you're the fashion designer," I'll say, "No, I'm the sewing guy. If you need someone to sew your pants—come, *ahla os ahla*."

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- [1] http://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/5_800%20%281%29_0.jpg
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