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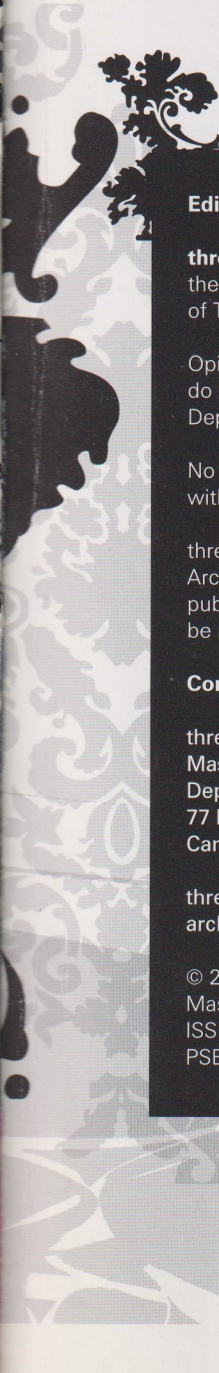
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Europe, Europe, Europe

Chant Avedissian with Sadia Shirazi

It is lunchtime and I am meeting Chant Avedissian again, after an awkward initial encounter. We first met in the childhood apartment he now shares with his sister- amid cigarette butts and vertically-hung scrolls- in downtown Cairo. After making coffee, we began a conversation in which all my attempts to talk about Avedissian's artwork were sidelined. We spoke, instead, about my work, interests and intentions; I was then shown around Avedissian's room and studio, a 3x4m room with a built-in loft. It was a tight, spare, woodlined space with standing room on the bottom floor near a computer and dais. Narrow steps led to the top floor where you could sit, stoop, or lie down but not stand. This is where Avedissian sleeps, works and stores his files, with a twin bed on one end, books piled beside it and within crawling distance a meter away, a work space under the room's only 'window', which - at 15cm² and with a fan fitted snugly into it - is more of a ventilation aperture. The attic-like space makes it easy to understand the scale of Avedissian's portrait works and the economy of his scrolls. It has been two days and we are meeting again for a formal interview at the restaurant Filfilah, a popular downtown establishment.

Sadia Shirazi: How did you find living and studying in Canada in the 70's? Weren't there many people emigrating there from Egypt at the time?

Chant Avedissian: I went to art school there, it was post-Woodstock in the 70's and I didn't even know what Woodstock was. [Laughter.] This is like going somewhere after a nuclear war and you don't know what happened in the war. I couldn't cope with post-Woodstock. The concept

of immigration to Canada I don't like but I discovered this there. Everyone was immigrating, my family was immigrating, my uncles were there, then my mother died, so I immigrated alone. All the communities live in restaurants there; I cannot connect my identity to a restaurant. I can't live in a cafeteria. We go to an Egyptian restaurant, we go to a Chinese restaurant, we go to a Greek restaurant: a restaurant is not a country. In New York people love other countries as long as it's in a restaurant. It's too early to go into this, but this is what happened in Canada. People had identity as long as it remained in a restaurant; this bourgeoisie who went to Canada in the 70's just to ameliorate their financial situation, this part of Canada I couldn't stand, not the other side. Not other things.

SS: After leaving Canada you moved back to Cairo then left again to study in Paris. What made you decide to return to Cairo after Paris?

CA: I came back to Cairo because to stay in Paris I had to become French. Because you can't survive France if you're not French. And I thought I can't be Egyptian-Armenian-French. It was too much. I was lost, between Egypt and Armenia- my name is Armenian but I am from Egypt- and then I was going to become French. That was just too much.

SS: Do you mean becoming French by taking citizenship?

CA: Taking the identity, the blood cells. It's about blood cells, about assimilation; they call it intégration. We are all supposed to have this beautiful culture of France because they are the most sophisticated, have the most beautiful

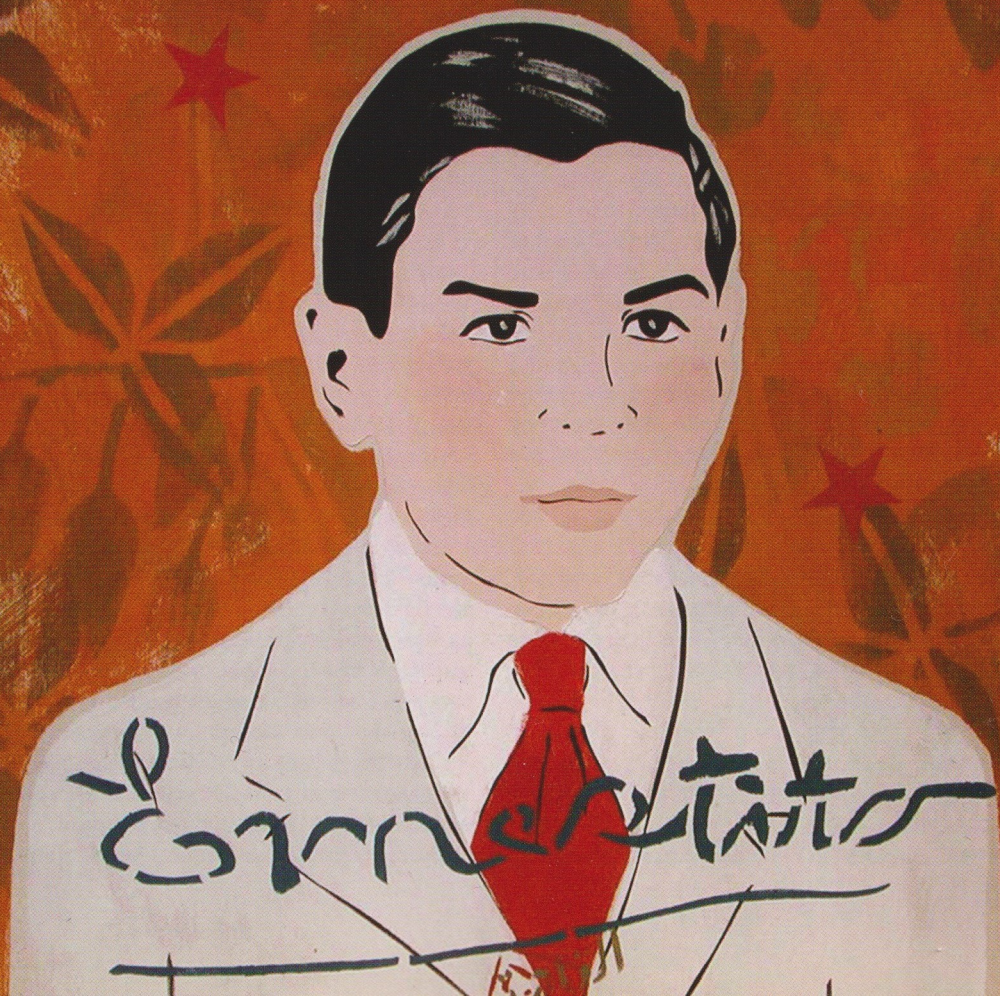
fashion, the most beautiful museums, the most beautiful city in the world- which is Paris- which is incredible, incredible. I mean it is beyond. And then they have these fantastic values of liberty, fraternity, and equality, which you cannot even discuss, I mean you go to jail if we discuss this; these are universal values. So Paris is universal. You just say the word Paris and you can sell it on a postcard; you can make a lot of money.

So the reason, yes, that I left. I thought I don't deserve Paris, so I left. I met people who told me, 'Change your name, you have now to behave like this, there are rules in France,' and I saw people living there who said they are Armenian, and I was very young and I was very shocked. I couldn't cope with the idea of becoming an Armenian living

in France; I can't cope with this idea, until today. I am born in Egypt and there is a reason- this might be very naïve- but there is a reason my destiny made it that I'm born in this country. Of course, if they kill me or if they put me out, I'll go out, but there must be a reason, so I wanted to come back to discover this reason. I even wonder today how come other people are born outside Paris. How come we are not all born in Paris? This is very important. I mean, it's very strange that there are other places in the world than Paris.

SS: When you went to study in Paris did you also feel you were going to the center of the art world?

CA: Yes, because I grew up until the age of 18 with Paris



as the center of culture: in the house, in school, in my surroundings, in the French cultural institute in Cairo, in Egyptian cinema. I mean if you see Egyptian movies, everyone goes to Europe- the doctor is coming from Europe; they go to Europe to bring the machines. I mean the guy thinks his wife is having an affair with another man, he takes the child and he goes to Europe. This is in a famous Egyptian film. The wife goes to the villa of her husband and his mother says, the guy is not here and your son is not here and tomorrow morning they are going to Europe- this is a very big event- the guy goes to Europe. He doesn't go to Sudan, he doesn't go to Afghanistan, he goes to Europe. So we grew up thinking Europe is the center. You walk in the street and the birds sing that, 'Europe, Europe, Europe'. Where you were born and raised, was it like that, 'Europe, Europe, Europe'?

SS: No, not really.

CA: Yes, in Paris I saw it on my skin, the police would stop me and check my ID, this was twenty five years ago, and tell me, 'You're lucky you're in France because in your country you can't survive.' And once in school I said something critical and my colleagues, students, told me, 'Then go back to your country.' All this adds up, all this made it clear that Paris is too good for me; I am not good enough for Paris, so I left. Paris is beautiful, this is passé, it's out of fashion now. They live in two periods, the French, in the Revolution and '68. There are beautiful streets in Bukhara I wouldn't exchange for the whole of Paris because it has history and contemporaneity and the people are today and you are in 2007, and there is still something magical there. The French think they have taste, well I also have taste, we all have taste, and my taste says that Paris is old, it's old-fashioned, it's not hip. Bukhara is hip.

You don't go to a movie with someone if he says I like Paris, once a person says I love Paris, finished, it's out, you cannot trust him, because that is bad taste. And people have bad taste, in general, sorry. If they say 'I like Kabul,' then you say, aah, there is something there... I studied in Paris just to be accepted by society.

SS: Did it work?

CA: It still works. Whenever you are in good society, in the sense of thieves, crooks, liars- I don't know how else to put it- and you speak a little bit of French, your level

goes up. In pretentious society, it goes up, but it doesn't work everywhere, because the majority of people I now know, they know that France is the passé. Anyways we've said enough about Paris, but I wish them well and I wish the Armenians in France well and the Egyptians in France well, I wish everybody well, and let them enjoy liberté, égalité, fraternité.

SS: The other day at your flat, you were telling me the story about how you came to do your first stencil...

CA: But I never did a stencil. A lady wanted an image of a singer and I did it in stencil, because I didn't want to do one drawing. I wanted to have a file, like an architect, and from that file I could make a copy. I thought doing something once was not good. I wanted to have something, a drawing that was like a photocopy, where I would have given the photocopy, not the original, and kept the original with a number. I love the idea of not doing something once.

A big part of the stencils was also inventing an identity. I didn't want to change my country to fit my name or change my name to fit my country. It took five years in Armenia for me to feel comfortable keeping my name and my country, I went in 2000. Anyways, I thought doing a painting by hand was overrated. You can't do a painting by hand, you can't draw anymore. I don't.

SS: Why?

CA: Because when you see craftsmen, when you see how people copy, and how people have patterns in printing or for textiles or the forms in calligraphy, you see that people use something as a base pattern, and from that, they copy. I made a rapprochement with silkscreen because of this idea, because I discovered that people have filed forms that they use. I went to Aleppo, have you been to Aleppo? There are these magnificent textile printers, with huge ateliers and this guy is printing with one repeated circle and he does four meters of printing and they hang it on huge bars, in this huge place - it's beyond. I went mad. It's magic. Because the guy is there doing the most beautiful textile and he's not an artist, he doesn't say "I'm an artist," he's not in the Modern Art Museum.

In between Paris and Cairo I stopped doing any handwork, any painting. And I never wanted to do painting, but I discovered that people put photos of people on the wall- football players, movie stars- and I thought to do



The Village Girl

the stencils, but I didn't know what was going to happen, that it was going to go on for so long. I did two or three stencils at the beginning and that was it. And then it went on and on and on and it became like drugs; you can't stop. Then I stopped, I said enough is enough.

SS: The imagery of many of your stencils is taken from Egypt in the 1950's, during Nasser's era. How did you pick the subject matter for your work?

CA: In the beginning it was my childhood memories, and then little by little I was shocked by what I discovered in newspapers, I mean the *mise en scène* that was there. *Mise en scène* means how a photo is directed; how an image is not true. Neither the people stand like that nor look like that; everything was fake. The images said things about liberty and happiness and sports, but the photos were composed, for propaganda, so it was very amazing to do this work- like "The Arab Girl with a Gun."

And then there were portraits of people that were important. I did a portrait of Umm Kulthum because I thought she was a freedom fighter for bringing money for the army in 1964. I also did one of Afghani, who was expelled from Cairo by the British and died in Istanbul. The choices are half-conscious, half-subconscious. Sometimes you pick a drawing because it's obviously aggressive- it was meant to lie- so you do it. I did it to emphasize the lie. Just so you understand the lie, by doing a stencil of it, or a photo of it, or exhibiting it, whatever. But the stencil, it's a façade, a fake façade, because it looks like a painting and it talks about something quite horrible, something quite dramatic. A few of the stencils are like that, a few are

dramatic, but it doesn't show because it has color and it looks like a painting.

SS: You like that fact that your work is a stencil pretending to be a painting.

CA: Yes, yes, yes, of course it looks like a painting, but if you do it on a textile, if you do the stencil on the wall, on the street, it's a different context, it becomes a different context. If you put it together on a bigger panel, it's a different context. If you put it separately, unassembled on the wall, it's a different context, if you put the photo with it... What you saw in the book is all stencils, there is not one line, which is not a stencil- the letters, everything is stencils. That is why I'm doing my next exhibition to show that nothing is hand drawn, because I was amazed in Beirut people asked me how I do them. I thought it was very obvious how it's done, but apparently not, because people thought I drew them, by hand.

SS: I think especially in the larger pieces it seems more obvious it's a stencil than in the small ones. For example, when you showed me the portrait of Afghani, you told me that because of the paper size you had needed two transparencies to make that one stenciled image. Do you think someone looking at that image of Afghani can see that you used two stencil pieces?

CA: No, maybe not. But this was done because the photo was like that.

SS: You wanted to stay true to the image...



Umm Kulthum

CA: All the time.

SS: Instead of say, leaving a small gap, for example, emphasizing how the piece was made.

CA: Yes, that could help but the images are all from photos ---except mangos. I drew a mango. I had to draw a mango because I didn't have a mango. [Laughter.] Yeah, I'm not joking, it's true- so I imagined a mango. I could've gotten it from the internet at the time, but I didn't have it, so I drew a mango, but all the other portraits and things are from photos and as the photos are.

SS: What did you think about your stencils ending up like paintings hanging on walls?

CA: It was not supposed to be like that. It ended up like a painting but what saved the situation is the scrolls that were supposed to remind you of the textile. The scrolls were done initially for a birthday party; you put it on the walls and afterwards take it off. You don't live with the

scrolls. Like people here when they have a wedding, they have this textile, which is printed now, but used to be textile, you put it up and then you take it off. This moving of the object is very important, like Chinese scrolls, or moveable screens. The Arab Bedouin culture, it's magic because the whole thing ends up in a box. Your house can become a box. This is top architecture. So this concept of movement, it's very important to show, because we are dying in our tombs, which are these unmovable houses we live in. We can't move the walls, but imagine you're in a house and you can move the walls, it's beyond... So, where are the real questions?

SS: These are the real questions.

CA: Aaah, but it's all about the stencils, but that's okay.

SS: Well, I have some more, so....

CA: The problem with the French, maybe to put it there, is that they are a minority. They have the same problem as the minorities. They are a relatively big country, but

the poor things they are the 14th spoken language in the world and they think they are the first. They know they are the first, they believe they are the first, but once in a while someone reminds them they are the 14th, because there is Chinese, Spanish, Arabic.

It takes a lot of work to change what you've been taught, as a child I had been culturally abused. If I could, I would sue these people: my uncle, my environment, books. Some people are sexually abused and they get money as compensation, I think some people are culturally abused and should get money, too. We need to come up with an Art Abuse Table, concerning the French, an International Tribunal should form to handle this. "African is underdeveloped," "Paris is beautiful," such phrases fall under abuse. If parents tell their children that Paris is at the center of art- that is abuse. It is killing all horizons for the child. And to tell a child French wine is the best, that is also child wine abuse, but after 17 years of age, it's consensual and cannot be prosecuted. I think, in child art abuse cases, the child should be compensated from 1,000 to 10,000 dollars.

"American in Paris," this pornographic film should be stopped. "Gigi" should be X rated- adult viewing only. When I became conscious of this it was too late. I couldn't sue anyone; a court will tell me "You were consensual." I'm too kind to sue the abusers, though. Parents should be careful what artistic judgment they give to their children.

SS: I see you working for Hassan Fathy as a way of reversing the artistic judgment given to you. When and why did you start working for him?

CA: I started working in 1981, because there was an architect called Abdallah Kouatly, who was hired by the Aga Khan to file his drawings for two years. I knew him before and it happened that he asked me to help him, so I worked for two years as a paid assistant. When this project finished Hassan Fathy asked me to do his papers, manuscripts, and notes. During these two years I came to know the man, the architect, and I thought it was quite a secure, protective environment, that house, so I continued with Hassan Fathy for 8 more years, just to be next to this man.

It was a process of learning being there. I knew that I had to clean what I had learned for thirty years, because while I was with him I did textiles, I did traditional clothes, and I did photography. I wasn't paid when I worked for

him, so I had to bring in money. I had to invent a form of visuals, so I did textile. When you see an Arab house in museums, it's not the real thing, in actuality it is full of color but in textile form. There is a culture of moving textile, the color moves, it's not stationary like a wall on a painting, things move. Fathy gave me independence outside the gallery system. I never gave an exhibit of my stencils in a gallery in Cairo, thanks to Hassan Fathy. You can still be a painter without showing in a gallery, by selling work through word of mouth.

My art master, though, was the adobe brick. Putting three bricks together to make a wall, to make a pattern, it's magic. You put two together and in the middle one more and you stack them together to build a wall. Or you tilt one brick vertically, at an angle, or overlap one brick with another. It all starts there and you end up with a girl holding a Kalashnikov. I was very impressed by architecture for years and Fathy was the best architect for me because he was building space. The limitation of space is magic. What influenced me was his research and his systematic insistence that every line you do has to come from the given geography of the land. He connected architecture to history- it was in this way that I followed him. It was a huge challenge for me to produce a print on a wall that was repetitive. It was not about uniqueness; I was obsessed by the fact that anyone could do it.

I could do geometric work with only a straight line because I didn't have artisans- it was the closest to brick, to me building a wall. As an Armenian in Egypt I would think, should I do a nude oil or brick? I chose brick, so they don't say that the French brought croissants and this Armenian is bringing roses. I was very sensitive about my name in Egypt when I returned from France, so I had to do something that would make me Egyptian, which today I don't need anymore. The best way to become Egyptian was to change my name and I wouldn't do that, and to become French I had to change my work; I love my work too much to do that. The brick was my life. I was dying to do something to compete with the brick. The canary can never be the eagle... maybe I became a parrot.

You know, I'll go to prison if you publish everything here. Just publish the funniest things.

SS: Yes, of course, only the funniest bits.

CA: If it's funny, you can keep anything.





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