EVOKING THE

MOTHERLAND

ADEL SIWI

could attend Cairo University, a dream which he himself had been deprived of. The family settled in the district of Manyal, a place which would be pivotal to Siwi's youth, full of hippies, friendships and memories of the rapid changes in Egypt.

In 1970 Siwi enrolled as a student of medicine in Cairo University. Student demonstrations were taking place during this time and Siwi quickly became enraptured by ideas of freedom and equality, going on to take part in the protests of 1972. It was a period which would gradually assist him in his decision to pursue a career in art. "The attraction to the political is the attraction to social justice. I was always very militant in my work. My paintings are a form of protest," he says. "But I chose to rebel through art, through beauty rather than through physically battling against repression." In 1979 the artist abandoned his work in Cairo as a doctor specialising in psychiatry and in 1980 left Egypt for Italy with Lina Margherita, who would later become his first wife.

Italy proved to be Siwi's real artistic training. In Milan, at the age of 28, he entered the studio of Italian artist Renzo Ferrari. A fundamental figure in Siwi's artistic growth, Ferrari invited the young Egyptian artist into a whole new world. He told Siwi that he had to read Leonardo da Vinci in order to understand Classicism and Paul Klee to comprehend Modernism. Siwi visited museums, met other artists and intellectuals and learned to dedicate himself fully to his work. He also participated in various exhibitions, including *Foreign Artists* in Italy at the Innocenti Palace in Florence in 1985. During this time, Siwi began putting out the plastic arts journal *Ain* and also translated into Arabic da Vinci's *Trattato della Pittura* (*circa* 1542) and Klee's *Das Bildnerische Denken (Volume I: Creative Thinking, 1956)*,

"Weakness creates art. Like life, a work of art can be full of many mistakes, but this is also what makes it beautiful."

two essential books for the study of art history. His 10 years in Italy provided him with rapid artistic growth.

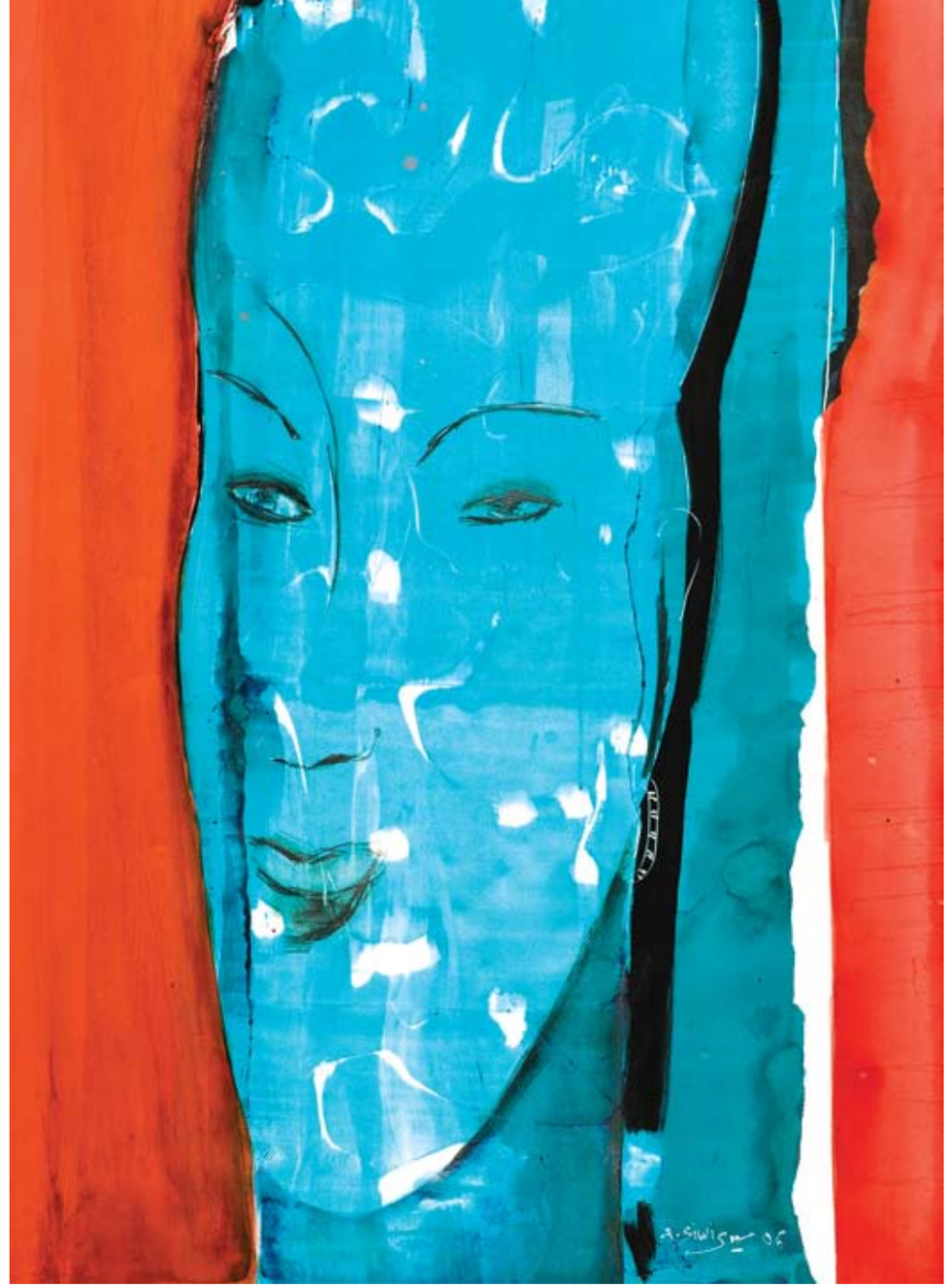
Longing to return to Egypt and paint in his homeland, Siwi left Milan in 1990 and moved back to Cairo. A little while after, he married Stefania Angarano, an Italian who was also influenced by the 1968 generation. He met her in Cairo where she was studying Arabic literature. She now writes art criticism and manages the Mashrabia Gallery. They have one daughter, Yara.

GIVING LIFE TO THE UNKNOWN

"Weakness creates art," he explains to me with a laugh. "Like life, a work of art can be full of many mistakes, but this is also what makes it beautiful." Siwi uses the Italian phrase *all'improvviso* meaning 'unexpectedly' or 'all of a sudden' to describe how he works. He often doesn't know the subject matter of an artwork before he commences. "At times we must expect the bad surprises. Life has many. Sometimes life is not fair and we must learn constantly to let go," he explains. "I like loss. I try to work each day by accepting the experiences as they come." This creative process of spontaneity has allowed him to create work which exudes a personal intimacy and yet reaches a collective whole. *Lightly Monumental*, a commissioned work for the 2009 Egyptian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in collaboration with Egyptian artist Ahmed Askalany, is one example. The work refers to what Siwi calls a "monumental paradox – a monument made from the small gestures of everyday Egyptians," he explains. "I wanted to expose the everyday monuments from which

Facing page: *Miss Africa*. 2009. Mixed media on canvas. 200 x 347 cm.

Below: (Detail) *Farid-Asmahan*. 2010. Oil on canvas. 140 x 170 cm.



"I love Charlie Chaplin. He rebels from the inside. He does not approach things from the outside like an outlaw, but wears a suit and hat."

Egyptians extract their joy. They have created a monumental world out of the simple gestures of everyday language. The spirit of Egypt is from everyday people." The work features paintings by Siwi portraying large vertical figures imbued with symbolic anecdotes suggesting possible narratives. They were displayed alongside Askalany's sculptures of human figures and animals made from the weaving of natural coloured palm leaves. As in Siwi's other works, the figures in the collaboration recall the elongated forms of the Egyptian Pharaohs, merging the country's present with its ever-resounding past.

Siwi is currently working on a series in homage to the great Egyptian belly dancers. The women are vibrantly and sensually portrayed, dancing confidently without exhibiting shame of their bodies. The artist also recently took part in the group show *From Facebook to Nassbook* (5 July–8 September 2011), part of the *Shubbak Festival of Contemporary Arab Art in London* (page 64). The exhibit refers to the recent peo-

Facing page: (Detail) Untitled. 2006. Mixed media on paper. 70 x 100 cm.

Left: (Detail) Untitled. 2009. Mixed media on paper. 80 x 110 cm.

All images courtesy Artspace Gallery, Dubai.

ple's revolution in Egypt, which was largely communicated amongst the masses through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

LAYERS OF TEXTURE

The use of rich colour and texture allows Siwi to freely express his *oeuvre*. He is technically proficient and yet is against materials which impose themselves upon the canvas. It was in Italy that he discovered oils, but he didn't like the way they exerted a life of their own. He thus returned to his "non-material" phase in which he used oxides, dyes and inks which dissolved into the texture and formed his base, whether it was on paper, canvas or wood. Siwi drowns the surface of his paintings with materials until hidden shapes and forms appear. The materials he uses on his canvases do not add layers; rather, they seemingly resurrect dormant images within his work. He loves to work through various coatings of colour and watch how they transform themselves into new tones and forms. The many gradations of texture provide Siwi with tools for his technique of improvisation.

"I love Charlie Chaplin," he suddenly says, smiling. "He rebels from the inside. He does not approach things from the outside like an outlaw, but wears a suit and hat. He is fully involved in what he does. This is why he attempts to break the symbols of success." In a way, Siwi's *Faces* are like Chaplin: they stand outside history and yet they are still inside, radiating sensitive warmth and hope for the people of modern-day Egypt. We talk of artists who have influenced him. Siwi cites Egyptian greats, Mahmoud Said (*Canvas* 7.1) and Abdel Hadi Al-Ghazzar. Said's classical landscapes radiate the warmth of the Egyptian land while Al-Ghazzar's enchanted figures inspire the creation of otherworldly and magical depictions. Siwi refers to Said's work as being "aristocratic" while Al-Ghazzar's is "popular."

Through Siwi's enchanted faces and mystical Egyptian landscapes, the amalgamation of Egypt's past with the modern present is evident, yet his work also holds an exuberant sense of determination. Siwi paints Egypt and, as he does, he captures the modest and simple gestures of a people with a monumental spirit.

For more information visit
www.artspace-dubai.com