

by Dave Hickey

I like to distinguish between successful art and serious art. Successful art asserts its position and kinship in the practice of art generally. Serious art ever so slightly alters the conditions of that practice; serious art, then, takes chances by raising questions about its relative success. Think of it this way: successful art demonstrates its familiarity with the discourse and is usually composed of that discourse itself slightly “customized”—like streamlined low-riders. Serious art is a brand new vehicle. It requires a rethinking of art’s conditions on the part of the beholder. So success is about talent. Seriousness is about revolution. Success is about positioning. Seriousness is about moving the discourse along. In my long experience with Sherin Guirguis’ work, it has always been successful—clearly and meticulously art of our time. Her new work is serious art. It is simultaneously more irrational, more completely invented, more passionate and more meticulous.

In Guirguis’ case, I suspect, this transformation represents the triumph of taste over culture, the assertion of an identity that is specifically her own in all of its meta-cultural complexity. Consider Guirguis’ geographical narrative. At the age of fourteen, Guirguis and her family moved from Cairo to Southern California, and like most young artists I have known who have undergone this kind of massive, cultural phase shift—moving from the Middle East, or the Indian subcontinent or East Asia—Guirguis immediately set out to become a Southern California American in all things, and since being an American is pretty much defined

by not being anything else, she effectively shut down her childhood. She was beguiled by Los Angeles’ brand of sleek minimalism, its eccentric culture of design and décor. Most of her early art, in fact, presents itself today as a kind of application for acceptance into the culture of Southern California. At the time, it just looked like good California art.



*Untitled (study)*, Ink, watercolor and silver leaf on paper, 19 x 24 in (48 x 61 cm), 2011.

I didn’t begin to sense the dissonance between what Guirguis was and what she was doing until I attended her wedding in a little Coptic Christian Church in Eagle Rock in Los Angeles. The whole profusion of Middle Eastern religion and design—the antique geometry of the church’s décor, the elaborate costuming of the priests, the singing and chanting of the liturgy, the swinging of the censer, and signing of books—opened my eyes a little. I had a little epiphany. At that time my favorite work of Guirguis’ was a long metope of Eames chairs in outline, cut out in plywood and painted black, floating off the wall

in a long overlapping frieze. Until that moment in the church I had regarded the piece as elegant and witty. Sitting there, I could see the self-evident analogy between this Guirguis piece and the elegant textual mosaics in Coptic and Arabic that are part of the basic visual culture of the Middle East. Amazing, I thought.

From this piece forward, I suspect, Guirguis has been working toward restoring the visual components of her first fourteen years without abandoning her American inheritance. The manner of her new work is not Egyptian, Guirguis says, nor American. The works allude to the tradition of American abstract painting and collage, to Middle Eastern mosaics and carpets, even to vertical mapped elevations, since each section of each work is carefully layered, creating an atmosphere of controlled chaos and gaiety, and lest the works actually appear to be geology seen from above, the stratum of stacked gold leaf, paint and cutouts is elevated above the surface of the work, as her Eames chairs were, so the colors on the underside of the stratum glow around the edges. As a consequence, one senses in these pieces the imprint of the whole artist and a single vision that is at once successful, serious and unafraid of its own ebullience—a little victory, then, since serious artists never get to have big ones.

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