

Painting the Gaze: The Identity of Egyptian Portraiture from a Multicultural and Trans-Historical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to explore the inherent and spiritual aesthetics of the Egyptian visual culture through its manifestations in the contemporary Egyptian visual arts. In this context, the researcher connects the iconographies of the Coptic Portraiture with the aesthetics of the contemporary Egyptian portrait arts. Furthermore, the author aims to signify the trans-historical and the trans-aesthetic value of the Egyptian Identity in visual culture and visual arts. The present paper investigates the aesthetics of Egyptian portraiture through qualitative methodology, which negotiates the visual iconographies as well as the semiotics of visual culture. This qualitative combination manifests the psychoanalytic perspective of the gaze in the Egyptian portraiture within the contemporary practices that remake the Egyptian identity through visual culture. The Egyptian artists, throughout the histories of their visual culture, represented their cultural identities as well as collective social imaginations in visual arts through an assortment of iconographies. Furthermore, this research is empirical and purposeful for visual art professors who connect aesthetically into painting practices through creating art, researching and training art. This study is significant because it utilized art research as a medium to understand the cultural manifestations from trans-historic and trans-aesthetic perspectives. In this context, this study focused on the conceptualization of the Egyptian identity in Portrait Arts through the narratives and the practices from the historic to the contemporary significances.

Keywords: Contemporary Painting, Fayum Portraits, Multiculturalism, Social Reality, Visual Arts, Trans-Historic, Trans-Aesthetic, Iconography, Semiotics.

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1. Introduction and Research Background:

The Egyptian painting fashioned significant gaze iconographies through the temporalities of its portraiture. On which, this study examines the connections between the narratives/histories of Egyptian visual culture and contemporary portrait art. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore the spiritual aesthetics of such culture being the motivation for creating contemporary arts in Egypt. The visual history of Egypt is multinational and multicultural for assembling since the first centuries Greek, Roman, Coptic and native Egyptians into one diverse and significant identity. The significance of this study rests on the contemporary artworks that transformed this phenomenon from the archaeological museum frames to contemporary art practices. It highlighted the diversity of Egyptian visual culture and re-created local iconographies as themes in contemporary artworks. This study focused on the Egyptian identity in contemporary arts, and the impacts of understanding its iconographies on the mutual understanding among people in multicultural societies.

The art of Fayum portraiture has been a part of the Egyptian visual cultures that traveled across time from the early to the contemporary visual arts (Saad, 2017). In the same context, Egyptian Fayum artists had produced portraits to identify the coffins and their spaces and make them recognizable by others in life and afterlife. Nevertheless, the people of Egypt believed across different times that the soul of the dead would return from heavens and search for its body to unite. Therefore, marking the dead with a portrait would be the identification method through which the soul recognizes and meets the body. At this particular point, the gaze would be the contact point where the soul enters the body; accordingly, the eyes in the portrait were painted open expecting the soul (Hayward, Hayward and Swanson, 2014; Thompson, 1982). This belief developed the aesthetics of painting the gaze in oriental portraits, particularly in the Fayum Portraits, which significantly created a recognizable effect on contemporary art practices, the subject of this study.

The purpose of this study is to expose the influence of Fayum portraiture on the contemporary arts in Egypt. It presents to the international readers, from other cultures, one of the significant art practices from Egyptian Art, which is the art of Fayum (or the Coptic) portraiture. This iconic genre of portraiture conceived a significant artistic identity through the different cultural phases of the Egyptian culture. Since the ancient Egyptian civilizations, this art constructed a unique identity in the Roman period that flourished through the first three centuries AD (Borg, 2010).

This paper is significant because it connects different artistic phenomena in the Egyptian visual culture, from the Roman to the contemporary times. The iconographies of the gaze manifested a timeless phenomenon from Ancient Egypt, through Fayum Portraits to contemporary art practices. Egyptians believed that the gaze is a very significant component of their spiritual, physical and cultural identity. The open eyes are the windows of the soul and aesthetical connection from the outside world to the inner soul. Through the art of Egyptian portraiture, the gaze reflected layers of visual cultures and beliefs that constructed mainstream iconographies as well as individual symbolisms in the Egyptian visual cultural practice.

Egyptian portraiture reflected hybridized visual cultures (Hayward, Hayward and Swanson, 2014). Into which, the iconographies manifested a diverse social structure, concepts, and beliefs. The portraits connected the wandering souls with their bodies through the gaze. This belief produced an aesthetic value of the big opened eyes in the art of portraiture and associated the iconography of the

big eyes with the infinite eternity of heaven. One of the common beliefs among the different social classes was the life after death that integrated into the spiritual practices conducted in society during the mummification process, which was inherited from the ancient Egyptians and passed on to the coming Romans and Greeks who mixed with native Egyptians (Thompson, 1982).

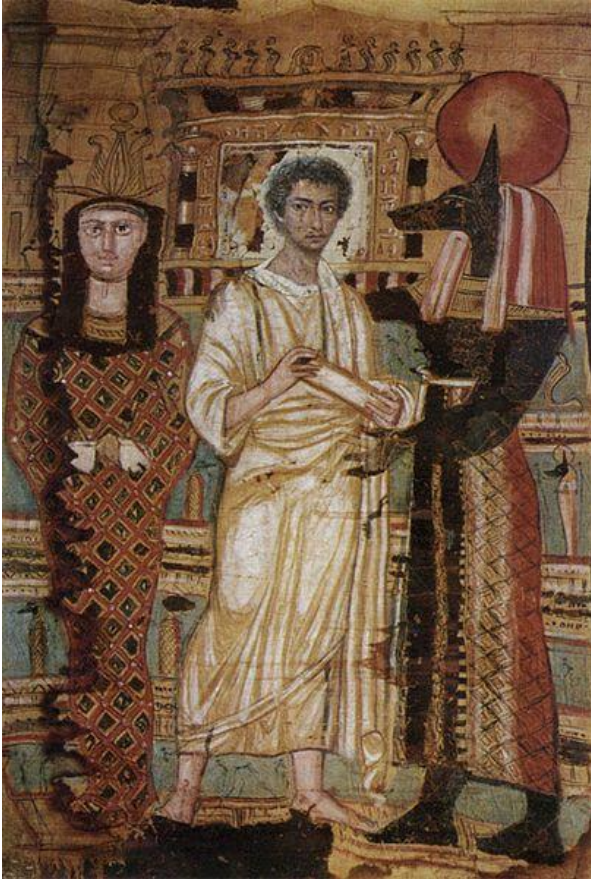


Figure (1): An old Egyptian portrait from the 3rd century AD depicting the dead as a Roman man embraced by Anubis, the idol of the dead in the ancient Egyptian beliefs, who appeared in the paintings of the dead until the end of the Roman era in Egypt (Hammad, 1973).

2. The Identity of Egyptian Portraiture and its Aesthetics:

The aesthetics of depicting the gaze constructed a folkloric image of the Egyptian identity from early to contemporary arts. On the other hand, the contemporary re-creations of this gaze represented wide-open eyes as a significant aesthetic value. Fayum portraits, in particular, received special attention because of its intellectual composition that combined the religious beliefs, aesthetic values as well as the purpose of making. This art formed a distinctive style and technique in Egyptian Portraiture and made a unique individual case in the History of Art (Thompson, 1982); therefore, it is significant to investigate the impacts of the hybrid Fayum culture on contemporary arts. The idea has not changed in the Egyptian spiritual conception, timeless in depicting the diversity of social classes, cultural identities, feminine and masculine fashions through the features of the person portrayed.

Re-inspiring historic iconographies in contemporary art practices is a familiar trend, where researchers located many cases through their critical and historical reviews. In this context, such a concept is termed *Artistic Influence*. At the same time, contemporary artists responded to the arts of the past through various individualities. They re-created the contents as well as forms in their artworks. The concept of artistic influence appeared in different old and new artworks (Bloom, 1973; Bryson, 1984), which recreated the poses, forms, fashions as well as concepts, symbolism, and iconologies.

The qualitative methodology in this paper is a conceptual framework of iconography and semiotics, which creates a qualitative approach on which a visual analogy emerges between the contemporary and the old portraiture. This assembly will interpret the content of the artwork according to its cultural context, which significantly associated the identity of the Egyptian portraiture with the political, sociological and aesthetic contexts (D'Alleva, 2005). The conceptualization of iconography and semiotics will construct a manner of interpretation according to the Egyptian hybrid culture. This qualitative approach has become more interesting recently, for being used by art critics and scholars to analyze contemporary visual arts (Elkin, 2007). This qualitative methodology is fundamental for this study because it will give background to the content of the artwork according to its social background. Furthermore, it will establish a conceptual structure to the symbolic meanings or symbolic codes that are created by societies. At the same time, it gives a guideline to analyze social interactions and how the meanings change from one cultural situation to another. The methodology of this study aims to conceptualize the involvement of artistic aesthetics from the inherited visual culture with our contemporary understanding of today's art.

The framework of this qualitative methodology combined two complementary concepts, which are the *Context* and the *Practice*, the first concept (*the context*) is the psychoanalysis of the gaze, and the second concept (*the practice*) is remaking the image of the gaze in contemporary artworks (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 2014). The psychoanalysis of the gaze contains collective memories and cultural narratives of the afterlife beliefs of the Egyptian people. On the other hand, the complementary practice of remaking this gaze highlights the artistic influence as a context for art practice, where artists represent their point of view of their cultural heritage in contemporary media (D'Alleva, 2005).

The context of the gaze is constructed out of two cultural layers, the inherent culture, and the contemporary culture. In Egyptian society, the gaze was produced originally, when artists represented the portrait of the dead person with big clear eyes to look forward expecting the soul to unite with the dead body. This old artistic practice was based on the religious beliefs of the people at that time and represented those beliefs in individual creativity. This methodology aims to locate the artistic influence and its sources within the layers of the same culture, while contemporary artists respond to their heritage influences in diverse practices.

The practice of Fayum portraits was re-created into modern art observation (Borg, 2010) because scholars investigated this phenomenon as an artistic production that reflected the lifestyle of the Egyptian society. The Art of Portraiture represented the social classes of the different cultural groups coexisting together and depicted how people exchange fashions and beliefs (Borg, 2000, 2010). The coming Romans and Greeks affected the indigenous Egyptian community with their fashions and

hairstyles, while the Egyptians passed the tradition of mummification to them, which employed and utilized the practice of Fayum portraiture.

Researchers based their investigations on the differences and similarities of the artistic style, which appeared on the different examples of Fayum portraits, taking into consideration the fashion styles, hairstyles as well as the jewelry on the individuals portrayed. The analysis of forms, symbols, and iconographies created the framework for studying Fayum portraiture because of the lack of analogous archeological data (Borg, 2010). Since it was considered an artistic phenomenon, scholars approached aesthetic values and engaged in studying the visual properties associating with the technique and the artist's individual touch through investigating the painting styles. The critical, aesthetic and technical analysis of the iconographic qualities of the paintings illustrated the development of Fayum Art during the first three centuries in Egypt.

The aesthetic and stylistic examination of the artworks distinguished the Fayum painting in Art History. Although the number of Fayum artworks is relatively limited to 1000 portraits (Borg, 2010), the accuracy of the style and the method of representing the spiritual iconographies in portraiture created a unique identity that only existed in the city of Fayum in Egypt. The technique of Fayum painting ranged from a simplified naturalistic style to a more developed style with the higher representational finish. The artists from Fayum city used three techniques in their painting process, which are tempera, encaustic, and a mixed media technique that hybridized tempera with encaustic.

Most of the paintings were painted separately on wooden boards, and installed afterward on the top of the coffin above the facial side of the dead person. Yet, there are some portraits painted directly on the wooden coffins. On the other hand, there are a few artworks where the artist used canvas instead of wooden boards for portrait painting, which usually considered as a shroud covering the body of the dead. The thickness of the board is not more than two centimeters above the face. This practice illustrates the function of the portrait as an identification method that enables the soul to identify its body when it returns from heaven.

The Fayum artist occasionally primed the wooden surface for painting, but mostly they painted directly on the wood with their Tempera or Encaustic paints. The painting process may take a few days from under-painting to finishing the artwork and can be considered a hard-working task if the artist was commissioned to paint several portraits. The full-figure portraits represented all the details of the deceased person on the entire coffin, except for the spot covering the face where it is dedicated to the wooden panel to be painted and installed on top of the facial side of the coffin.

The paints are fixed and distributed on the board in a representational manner that responds to reality. In this technique, the artist begins by outlining the portrait accurately with monochromatic Burnt Sienna color using one brush, then applying the rest of the colors when the under painting dries, taking into consideration the drying times of the colors and how to keep the consistency throughout the painting process. Encaustic paints, on the other hand, used wax and oils and took long times to dry, and had a more shining and glossy finish, while tempera seemed to have matt and chalky appearance.



Figure (2): Old Portrait on the wooden coffin surface (left) and old portrait on canvas shroud (right).

3. Re-Creating Fayum Gaze Through the Contemporary Artworks:

Investigating the concepts of representing the belief in life after death is still present until now in many examples of contemporary Egyptian artists, while they developed new methods of expression through this phenomenon in mixed media art instead of decorating the ancient coffins. This idea identifies its individuality into the subject and comprehensiveness of the entire aesthetic identity of the artwork. In this context, it is necessary to distinguish between the impact of Egyptian spiritual beliefs and the impact of social realities on the artwork aesthetics, to illustrate the intrinsic beliefs motivating people to represent the gaze as an identifying iconography in trans-historic and trans-aesthetic manners. The contemporary artists recreated this gaze to symbolize the aesthesis of spiritual reunion between the soul and the body.



Figure (3): On the left, a detail of an old Fayum portrait made of tempera. On the right, a detail of contemporary portrait made by M. AbuElnaga with mixed media technique.

The hybrid cultures produced the concept of mummification toward ensuring the survival of the spirit in timeless eternity. Egyptians in Fayum believed that the soul returns after death and the deceased person would have an endless life when the soul enters the body through the wide-open eyes represented on the portrait. This indicates that the concept of the spirit is based on the principle of reincarnation, which represents the idea of the immortality of the spirit (Thompson, 1982). The philosophy of reincarnation in the ancient Egyptian spiritual perception existed in different parts of the ancient civilizations of the Middle East (Hayward, Hayward and Swanson, 2014). This conception significantly created a spiritual impact on the contemporary cultures of today.



Figure (4): Fayum portrait of a woman (detail), tempera.

Eyes sparkle with life in Fayum's paintings, even though they are dead, where the power of expression is a unique identity in portraiture. The purpose is a metaphor for the artist, who used portraits, to express the spiritual idea that symbolizes the belonging of the soul to its body after death. The artist focused on the method of representing the eyes, which demonstrates a mixture of aesthetics and spiritual beliefs. The expansion of the eyes and their gaze and openness are the source of the spiritual connection, the point of contact and the return of the soul to the body.



Figure (5): A modern painting portraying the Baptism of Christ by Marguerite Nakhla (1908-1977). The Coptic Egyptian artists made this painting with tempera on wooden surface depicting an old scene with old technique on the modern time of the year 1974, the fashions and the hairstyles are identical elements in this painting.

The impact of spiritual belief in these artworks is significant through the individuality of recreating the classical culture into a contemporary or modern artwork, while novelty refers to the unity of the common theme in all artworks. In this conception, the reality of the artwork represents a spiritual philosophy.

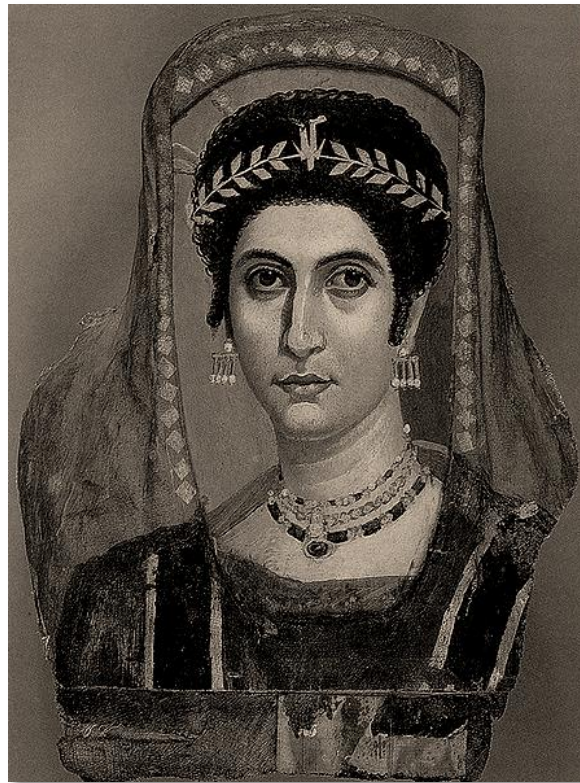


Figure (6): Fayum portrait, tempera.

The artwork contains visual grace and spiritual contemplation into the eyes of the painted figure with subtle deliberation and a sense of life. The ambiguity of death overwhelmed people's imagination, where the prevailing belief of the other life diverges through timeless iconographies and all its visual manifestations. Therefore, the power of the gaze is expecting the soul to meet the body of the dead through the open eyes painted on the coffin that suggest the secrets of life after death. In addition, this is the secret of spiritual communication between the artwork and the other world. Therefore, all the eyes in the artworks remained open in their natural joy and not closed although the people are dead.



Figure (7): On the left, a contemporary portrait by Abdelaal Hassan. In the middle, a detail of an old Fayuom portrait. And on the right, a contemporary portrait by Mohammed Abuelnaja.

The connection between the physical and the spiritual realms is a classical concept in Fayum beliefs. The eye contact is the only point of communication between the body and the soul, where the eyes were portrayed clearly open towards the viewers, to make them aware of the connection. Most of the paintings depict similar poses and have a good sense of representation. This sense of reality is a technical and integral condition in the mummy painting style, which originates from the traditional beliefs rooted in the concept of immortality after death. The painting integrates spiritual representation with aesthetics coining a realistic style to identify the true person's image in reality, with the same real features, to enable the soul to recognize its original body after death.

The manifestations of belief in contemporary art appear in different visual artworks, where artists reconstruct the classic relation between art and belief. It is significant to investigate the different cultural identities that express and represent arts and beliefs in harmony. They intentionally critique the global violence that is breaking down the human culture into parts and engage deeply with their own cultural, social and political issues. Artists' engagement is a daily practice that is highly exposed to the electronic social reality, which is the phenomenological character of the current global culture.

The dual representations of belief in contemporary and Fayum cultures articulated spiritual values into art criticism in a multicultural context and created a constructive dialogue between cultures based on the philosophy of understanding others. In contemporary art, there are various examples of symbolic representations of spiritualities and spiritual themes, such as religion, religious figures, and idols (Grovier, 2015); they express the human state of affairs as well as multicultural aesthetics. The thematic representations of people's beliefs are a cultural phenomenon that has a deep cultural identity, and at the same time interacts actively with the global culture. Belief in art illustrated major characteristics in civilizations through human history that are the diverse ethnic backgrounds of society, global exposure, and cultural knowledge in contemporary contexts.

The Fayum society contained diverse social classes, which integrated fashions, languages as well as beliefs. The process of mummification is a clear example of multicultural effects caused by Egyptian society on the other Greek and Roman societies in Fayum city during the first three to four centuries. The practice of mummification associated beliefs in the afterlife within the cultural practices, to create a kind of social ritual that requires special attributions from jewelry makers and portrait artists (Thompson, 1982). Indeed such funeral practices associated different crafts in one ritual practice, making a significant model of multimedia art a long time ago. Investigating Fayum portraits indicates the multicultural status of the community at that time because of the different fashions that appeared in Fayum portraits, which match with various facial looks resembling different skin colors and hairstyles. Women's paintings are full of accessories and cosmetics. This donates the social and religious traditions that established the focus of this analysis. The portraits illustrate beautiful appearance as if the woman is going on the wedding to the immortal day wearing accessories, hairstyles, necklaces, earrings, and eyeliner. This focuses on the formal features of the image, reflecting the real representation of the real appearance of the woman in the most beautiful image. This hybrid example of art and spiritual practices in Fayum portraiture created a significant phenomenon in the art (Hanafy, 2017), which affected contemporary art practices.

It is believed that jewelry accompanies the deceased to the afterlife world. Accessories such as necklaces and ear earrings match each other in design and shape; they were mostly made of precious stones such as amber and turquoise. All these aspects reflect the individual social position of the person in public life. Jewelry and accessories reflect the social status in public life which is a traditional practice at the time; and part of the belief in the after death.

Accessories appear in the pictorial composition of the portrait to connect the physical world with the spiritual afterlife, therefore, all the belongings of the dead person that reflect social identity are portrayed on the painting surface. The process of portraiture is conducted with great spiritual depth, and with absolute clarity (Thompson, 1982). According to this perception, the representation of jewelry in portraiture is one of the significant characteristics that accompany the concept of the afterlife and complementary requirement in the world of the dead.

Death afflicts the body but does not harm the soul; the soul is not subjected to the physical end of the body. If the body ends to live, the soul then resorts to its afterlife. The artist presents intellectual and spiritual awareness in the painting of portraiture to connect the dead with the eternity, where the appearance of the deceased shall be optimistic in the portrait. Therefore, artists depict women with high femininity by portraying them with jewelry and accessories. In addition, they pay more attention to stimulate the aesthetic characteristics of the physical good appearance, such as the fair skin as well as the calm gaze. These features are all certain features of the person's psychological comfort and optimism for the second world after death.

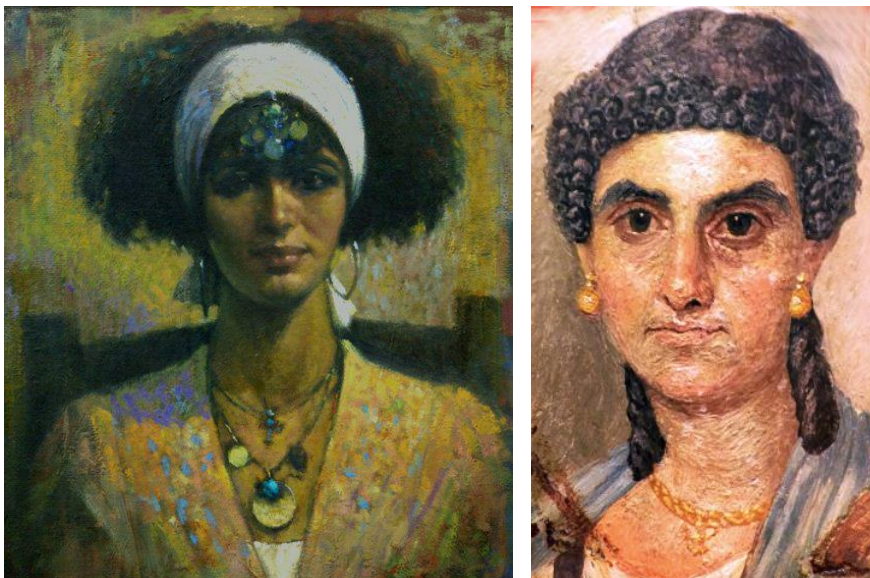


Figure (8): On the left, contemporary portrait by Abdelaal Hassan. On the right, a detail of Fayoum portrait.

4. The Context of Belief and Multiculturalism:

For some time, the audience viewed Asian, African and Middle Eastern arts from anthropological perspectives, as a historical material while ignoring the contemporary trends practiced by the artists coming from those regions. Contemporary artists believe that each civilization is significant on its own

(Joo, Keehn & Ham-Roberts, 2011). Furthermore, each society has own aesthetics where different artists represent different sets of aesthetics. Each culture has a diverse assembly of creativities, which made art critics investigate the authentic artworks that reproduce the temporality of social status.

While approaching multicultural dialogue, the artists construct space and context to convey different messages by using social and cultural themes, where the artworks become significant in the global art context. The context is the environment of the artist, from which the artist is taking elements to create the artwork. One of those elements might be the use of religious symbols for example, which is linked to the thematic representations of belief. Viewers at this point would engage with their beliefs and arts, after cultural orientation between art and social values. Contemporary artists expressed religious beliefs as a part of their cultural identity because one of the significant features of our contemporary civilization is the diverse faiths of people.

Belief and contemporary art may engage now, experiencing new ideas, artworks, spaces, and cultures. Artists practice their high individuality in front of a global audience and represent their beliefs. International biennales expose multicultural arts, which represent spiritual issues reflecting the growing global interest in social plurality and diversity, creating a broad-minded audience that interacts with new cultures with understanding and tolerance. Furthermore, the global mainstream media today represent people's beliefs as one of the main global issues that cause cultural clashes, some of those media focus on representing conflicts to attract audience. However, artists focus on representing the welfare of culture because it can make a multicultural future for a society where plurality and diversity are significant values.

On institutional level, the contextualization between arts and beliefs present various examples. Art institutions represent the narratives of local communities into global art to diversify the cultural capitalism in our post-modern era. They offer new stories than the ones represented in the mass media to dislocate themselves outside the media circle and expose people to unseen images. Those people became unconscious consumers of mass media productions that use death, religion, sensual contents to create fake reality and attract more viewers. Representing the theme of belief on a global scale and multicultural art venues is a significant contribution of contemporary art because such activity offers an indirect critique of the media contents.

As a conclusion, this paper presented one intellectual case of the influence of beliefs on art. Moreover, illustrated the thematic representation of belief as a characteristic feature in contemporary art where the artists expose art to a multicultural audience. This audience is well educated to accept differences among society and understand it because the multicultural practices in society gave more value to the art. This conceptual approach in research would enhance the significance of the plural structure of cultural identities into one community. Artists' vision lead to new incites of cultural understanding, where concepts became diverse and individual in local and global levels, this would give more grounds to new experiences and new ideas about contemporary arts to the audience, through a smooth dialogue between the international artist and the local viewer.

Politics, economies, and beliefs provided new concepts for researchers to restructure the global culture of understanding, to replace the conventional categories of the western and eastern, developed

and undeveloped, poor and rich, as well as religious and secular. This culture of understanding would reflect on contemporary arts. In the global political context, the world is divided into regions, and the regions are divided into countries or local areas. However, the cultural context unites all these cultural parts into one entity like the soul and body reunion in Egyptian portraiture art.

The consideration and understanding of local culture and people's ethnic and cultural identities will create sustainable development. Cultural knowledge as part of the people's beliefs makes the balance between the global values and local values; also, it affects the context of the artistic process for artists who live in such communities (Nanjo, 2006). Enhancing the local cultural values would affect the politics of the global free market, leading to a productive society rather than a consumer society. Beliefs, culture, and social identities will be the greatest international dilemma the world would face today (Nanjo, 2006). While cultural reflections in art on global scales would create a balance between global and local culture towards a peaceful future.

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