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Egyptian artist Sara Tantawy transforms the art of dance in first UAE show

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Egyptian artist Sara Tantawy's first exhibition in the UAE embodies a language that she discovered when she was dealing with trauma, which led her to experiment with dance and movement therapy a few years back.

This experience resulted in *Survivors*, a series of 12 realism paintings of women in dance poses that is now hanging at Fann A Porter gallery in Dubai until February 10. It is the artist's second body of work in her exploration of the ancient roots of communal belly dancing and movement as a vehicle to express grief, resilience and euphoria.

"I began researching this subject after I attended a dance and movement therapy course to deal with my own trauma and past experiences," says the artist, 29, who graduated in fine arts from Helwan University in Egypt in 2017. "I found that dance has been used for centuries as therapy and expression and I wanted to specifically look at its roots in Egyptian culture.

"Dance has always been ritualistic and communal, and has been used for every occasion throughout history — to honour, to celebrate and to mourn."

Tantawy learnt about the culture of belly dancing, which originated from travelling dancers in ancient Egypt. She wanted to understand the significance of shapes, colours, clothing, nature and moods on a dancer's movements and attempts to capture the spiritual quality of dance in her paintings.

"The paintings show dance as a medium to explore your feelings. You can show your pain, your happiness, your anger and your contentment without saying anything at all," she says.

For example, in the *Dancer At Silver Centre* series of three oil paintings, the artist chose circular canvases to depict eternity. Draped in a white dress and golden waistbelt that Tantawy handmade, the subject, the artist's friend, poses with open hair and arms swaying in the paintings.

"I chose the canvas depending on the movement of the body. The circle means no end or beginning. It represents the Moon, Sun and Earth and she occupies all of space. This circular movement of the body also represents the planetary motion around the sun."

In *Heirloom*, a wide square canvas, her subjects are draped in the same costume, expressing passion and desire. The artist blends hieroglyphs and Egyptian tombstone symbols in the background and adds a sculptural character to the women's skin using the impasto painting technique.

Another two stretched canvases depict dancers draped in a royal blue full-length dress, the motifs and brush technique repeated in these paintings.

"Colours hold a lot of meaning in dance. I researched about its symbolism in Egyptian culture and contemporary movements. White, for example, represents glory and peace, while blue is from the Nile River, which was an important water body in ancient Egypt."

Salvation, meanwhile, has two women posing on a boat, blades of tall grass rising in the background and water flowing underneath. The women in the painting are looking towards the sky in anticipation of fortune.

"The boat symbolises survival and the girls are hoping for a miracle. The grass acts like a shield to protect them while the waves below move them along," explains Tantawy.

Tantawy, who lives in Cairo, has previously presented at various group and large-scale exhibitions, including the Beijing International Art Biennale in 2019, the Luxor International Painting Symposium in 2020, the Dafen International Oil Painting Biennale, where she received an award in 2021, and the Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh last year.

It was at the Egypt International Art Fair, after Tantawy had hosted her first solo exhibition, *Silent Weeping*, that she caught the attention of Ghada Kunash, founder of Fann A Porter.

Kunash says they are always looking for young Egyptian artists such as Tantawy, who are driven by personal experiences and bring intention into their pieces, and so she reached out to her on Instagram to commission her first UAE exhibition.

“We loved what Sara was producing and contacted her to create this exhibition for our space. Her work is not just academic but you can see that a lot of research has gone into her paintings. The contrasts, the positions of her subjects on the canvas, the historical references with the motifs, everything has a purpose and a story,” says Kunash.

“We can tell that Sara has a keen eye and will go a long way in her career.”

Tantawy’s next body of work will steer away from dance but will continue to highlight Egyptian culture.

“I’ve started looking into Nubia, which is one of the oldest civilisations of the world and originated in Egypt. I want to know more about the Nubian culture and apply that in my work.”