

Curatorial Introduction

On ACTS of WAR : Hamad Khalaf

Exhibition in 24HR Contemporary Art Space , Darwin, Northern Territory.

Australia

By Rifky Effendy

“In each historical period, there are people who are muted, and those who are not. They are those who fight (Goenawan Mohamad 1998).

Hamad Khalaf’s exhibition, “Acts of War” connects War and Mythology. In the stories of ancient Greece , such as Homer’s Iliad, soldiers, kings and ordinary mortals are shown killing and deceiving one another. They are also shown engaging in plots with or against the gods. As if war were at the very heart of the human experience. The exhibition “Acts of War” similarly touches on the issue of war. Part of it is erotic in a poetical way, but the underlying message is mainly political. The exhibition consists of military object on which are painted scenes from Greek mythology. The presentation is made in such as way as to look like a display of archeological items in a Museum.

The items on which the mythological scenes are painted include gas masks, army boots, helmets, decanters, chemical attack gloves etc. All are painted in black and red, to suit their metaphorical function and look as real earthenware objects from Ancient Greece. For example the story of Harpies & Phineus appears as winged monsters “Tormenting Phineus” (2006) painted on a gas mask. Ornamentation, by floral and geometric motifs, is added to emulate the style of ancient Greek vases. Another famous story illustrated in a similar manner is that of “Hercules” (2006) fighting the serpent headed Hydra & visiting the garden of the Hesperides. The scenes are painted on a pair of protective gloves. The 9 snakes which make up the Hydra’s head are wrapped around the fingers of the left glove. Similarly, the branches of the golden apple trees are also wrapped around the fingers of the right glove. On an Iraki army boot entitled “Jason and the Dragon” (2006), the artist combines figures and ornamentation in order to create a 3 dimensional object, which is painted like an ancient Greek vase and yet has the shape of a worn-out army boot. What characterizes all those works is an artistic appropriation of mythology – the purpose of which will be discussed below.

Among the most famous mythological characters thus appropriated, one recognizes the figures of Patrocles, Achilles, Theseus, the Minotaur and Nike, who all appear as metaphors for one aspect or the other of the contemporary political reality of the Middle-East. For example, the work “Jason and the Golden Fleece” (2006) refers to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of oil-rich Kuwait in 1990.

Khalaf uses and reinterprets mythology as a means to openly challenge the “culture of war”. He lays bare myths, so as to have us raise questions. Isn’t mythology, as explained by Roland Barthes (Myth Today: 1957), a system of communication, a discourse? Isn’t it a meta-language that uses “stolen” elements of language to render natural something that

previously wasn't, in other words to distort interpretation. Everything can become myth, and the best weapon to counter a myth is to create an artificial myth: "Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth?"

Like the original myth, appropriation, says Robert Nelson, is a distortion. It can mutate and adopt new signs. Appropriation is like a joke; it has to be related to a context. By essence unstable, it creates ever new signs with every new historical context. An example of the phenomenon is given by the Minotaur myth, that of a strange and marginalized creature which is constructed as "the other" and therefore imprisoned, powerless, in a labyrinth. He becomes to Khalaf a symbol for all modern forms of discrimination. Broadening his interpretation, Khalaf also raises questions, via ancient Greece, about the present state of modern Western culture. He raises in particular the question of the factual validity of its paradigm of rationality and democracy developed around the notion of Man.

Archeology is often used as a tool of national claims whenever a nation looks for pretexts to occupy, dominate and eventually expel or even eradicate another nation. Archeological items then become the loci in which myth and reality interfere with one another. In his project named "Narcissus Sporadicus" (a spoof newspaper published in Hades), Khalaf uses archeological items for the purpose of such a re-reading of history. He also clearly explains, with well-designed captions for each item, the concepts that underlay his work, thus inducing the reader to react. Commenting on this appropriation, Nelson, referring to Edward Said, says that "there are those who act and those who act upon, and for those whose memories and cultural identities are manipulated by aesthetic, academic or political appropriations, the consequences can be disquieting or painful." Appropriation authorizes the use of artistic items from past and present and exposes their true meaning.

Khalaf's work is a discourse on war, involving both elements of history and of the artist's personal life as well as places of origin - Kuwait and the Middle-East. When the first Gulf War came to an end in 1991, Khalaf, who was then in Paris, returned to his country. He found employment with a company contracted to clear the landmines scattered all over the battlefields and abandoned by the Irakis after their defeat. He used this position to constitute a collection of more over 600 war items. Some of which are now in his parents' house in Kuwait. Others he later took to Bali, where his studio is now located. In the exhibition, some of the items used are duplicates, like the iron helmets of the German WWII soldiers.

At first, he simply considered the items in his possession as elements of a memorabilia. Only later did he find them a new function: being a medium to question events that had happened and so disturbed his life. He had loved Greek mythology since childhood. So he came up with the idea to combine Greek mythology with a statement against war. War is ever present in the history of human civilization. Pro and contra, it also engenders an extraordinary artistic energy, such as seen for example in the works of masters such as Goya, Picasso, Kollwitz, and in the numerous masterpieces of literature and philosophy that are dealing with it. War has colored Man's culture throughout the whole range of history.

When bombs shook Bali in 2002, Khalaf managed to go to “Ground Zero”, the location of the former Sari Club, where he picked up scattered shards of ceramics left over from the explosion. He then gave those shards a new meaning; they became elements of a “Rubble Puzzle” associated with the Trojan War in the Iliad – opposing Greeks and Trojans. Those shards are presented in a glass top table. Here Khalaf shows that the series of terrorist events that have happened in Indonesia since the 9/11 World Trade Center attack, are part of a bigger narrative that eventually victimizes the weak. Khalaf’s artifacts become a narrative of scattered elements, and in the end his narrative appears like a puzzle – such as is the multi-complexity of the related chain of events set in motion by 9/11. In history indeed, events are never isolated. They are always related to other, parallel or previous, events.

In his book “Clash of Civilization”, Samuel Huntington says the Cold War will be followed by global conflicts between civilizations and religions. Especially between Western and Moslem civilization. This theory is now used by the United States and its Allies (post 9/11) as a pretext to political pressure, and sometimes attack with military force, Middle-East and/or Islamic countries such as Afghanistan and Irak. As well as to confront terrorism in the whole world, including in Indonesia . This reaction of the United States impacts on both local and global decision making processes. It also breeds religious and racial discrimination.

Khalaf’s works invites the observer to pay more attention and react to today’s global politics. He himself questions it through archeology. We are shown how the history of human civilization is full of conflicts – related to economics, power, religion, colonialism, as well as to cultural, racial, gender and other differences. Those global conflicts are sometimes rooted in old values, sometimes in new ones – or under a new guise. It seems that the Western humanitarian paradigm about human equality has still a long way to go (before it can be implemented). It even seems that injustice is growing. Ironically the humanistic paradigm advocated by the West seems to generate its opposite, ever new conflicts. (End)