



Maher Dawoud: Found Mosaics and the Poetics of Pain

Author Marcelo de Melo, who is currently in Great Britain writing his thesis, defines below the new concept of found Mosaic. According to him, it is the artist, using his vision and by sheer effort of his imagination, who reveals that a mosaic structure can pre-exist within a given work. It is a mosaic invention in the archaeological sense because it involves finding something that was there all along without it being known. Here, he presents this concept, together with the work of Egyptian artist Maher Dawoud.

White Headache

2014

overall installation size is variable

Individual sizes:

Weak Mandibles,
6 x 3 cm, 8 x 6 cm
(p.98 et 99)

Headache Tablets,
10 x 4 cm, 6.5 x 8 cm,
9.5 x 4 cm, 5 x 8 cm
(p.99, left above)

plaster, resin, medicine
tablet, smalti and
millefiori

By Marcelo de Melo

My first contact with Maher Dawoud's conceptual mosaics was through the exhibition of the 1st Edition of the International Competition AIMC Student Prize in Ravenna (2015). In that occasion, I saw the works *Chocolate Bar* and

Sweet Corn, developed together with his students Maggy Maged and Christine Zarif as the result of a workshop dedicated to the idea of depression and cancer cells. The works consisted of a cast chocolate bar covered with medicine pills, a corn on



the cob also with pills, as well as a third work made of sugar cubes and resin. Apart from the unusual materials, I understood this third piece easily. However, the first two -*Chocolate Bar* and *Sweet Corn*- interesting in their own right, did not seem to have an obvious connection with mosaic art. They felt simply like assisted ready-mades, instead of mosaic works per se. After careful analysis, I understood the *mosaicity* of these sculptures. What struck me was the way in which the segmentation of the works in question proposed something new, something that I now call *found mosaic* i.e. found tessellation that exists in nature or in some industrial goods. The chocolate bar offered a ready-made *opus regulatum* that was appropriated by the artist. The maize offered them the same thing: a *found structure* that resembled mosaic work in their segmentation, spaces between units and placement. The appropriation of this fragmented regularity of the chocolate bar and the corn on the cob validated them as mosaic work, and consequently their inclusion in the exhibition. The medicine pills were also treated as tesserae and reinforced the narrative of the works in their relation to illnesses such as cancer and depression. These works were developed through a conceptual strategy of appropriation that is rarely seen in mosaic making.

White Headache (2014), an earlier work by Da-

woud, evidences his conceptual approach to mosaic making and his interest in the poetics of the object, a direct link with Marcel Duchamp's conceptualism. *White Headache* is an assemblage of plaster casts of human mandibles (8 units) combined with smalti, millefiori and pills. In addition to that, and a direct reference to pain, this assemblage includes four plaster casts of pill strips. Like the chocolate bar, the blisters of pills offered him a found tessellation. However, his treatment of the mandibles goes a step further. Dawoud adds smalti, millefiori and some medicine tablets to the mandibles in a playful manner, emphasising the regularity of the teeth as *found tesserae* and *andamento*. Even though his work deals with the idea of pain, the associative nature of his compositions contribute to contemporary mosaic making in an experimental and informed way. Dawoud's approach is not accidental. He has been an artist since a very young age and studied art on a doctoral level. His workshops serve as a platform to disseminate his conceptual approach to art in general and mosaic in particular, exemplified in the works developed with his students.

Dawoud's achievements are recognised internationally. In 2015, together with a group of artists, he had the opportunity of representing his country Egypt in the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale



Can You See?
Venice Biennale 2015,
Egyptian Pavilion
19 x 8 x 2,5 m
wood and grass





above left
Chocolate Bar
 2015, 15 x 8 cm, resin and pills



right
Sweet Corn
 2015, 24 x 8,5 cm
 resin and pills



below
Cancer Cells
 2015)
 20 x 20 cm
 sugar cubes, silicon, nails, resin and cement on wood

with an installation work titled *Can You See?* Dawoud describes this work as a conceptual contemporary mosaic installation, but the less informed viewer could find it hard to understand its connection with mosaic art. The work was created with wooden modular units filled with grass, arranged three-dimensionally around the Egyptian Pavilion spelling out the word PEACE spatially. This installation at the Biennale offered the viewer the possibility of interaction through an augmented reality app that revealed clearly the word peace, the main idea behind the work. Structurally, principles of mosaic making can be found in many layers of this installation: as an assemblage of modular units, as a digital -pixelated- environment, as well as a non-visual structure associated with Marshall McLuhan's concept of mosaic. Furthermore, considering a more specific aspect of the work, it is noticeable how the strands of grass offered the artists a ready-made mosaic structure like those of the maize. The grass on its own is a mosaic surface that echoes some of the works on inclination created by the Italian group CaCO₃.

The word PEACE is a mosaic of 5 letters built in a space of 19 meters wide, 8 meters deep and 2.5 meters high. Walking through this mosaic of letters, one cannot see the word PEACE without looking from high above. The visitor will walk through this mosaic of letters without really recognizing the whole scene of the word PEACE that he or she is moving through. Just like everyday life, one is so closely engaged in his particular problem that he or she does not see the "bigger picture". Similar to mosaic art in general, one can only see the beauty of the mosaic art when seen from afar (Maher Dawoud).

Maher Dawoud is a great example of how artists can experiment with mosaic making and conceptually engage with wider issues. He is one of few artists of his generation to migrate from the mosaic art circuit to the contemporary world of fine art. ■



Maher Dawoud
 Born in Cairo Egypt in 1983

BFA in Mural Painting (2005); MFA in Glass Compositions (2008); PhD in Mosaic Installation Art (2013), all from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Helwan University, Egypt.
