

Dominique Sighanda's "The Return to the Day" bridges ancient Egypt and modern art

Reham El-Adawi , Tuesday 19 Nov 2024

The Swiss-Italian artist's solo exhibition The Return to the Day, hosted by the Embassy of Switzerland and the Italian Cultural Institute, offers a fresh perspective on Egypt through the lens of the artist's unique approach to sketching, drawings and travel notebooks.



Sighanda at her exhibition

The Embassy of Switzerland in Egypt, in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute in Cairo, hosted the solo exhibition “The Return to the Day” by the Swiss-Italian artist Dominique Sighanda, as part of the Italian Language Week in the World and the celebration of the 90th anniversary of the Friendship Treaty between Switzerland and Egypt. The exhibition was on view at the Italian Cultural Institute in Zamalek until 10 November, and has now moved to the Don Bosco Salesian Institute in Rod Al Farag, Cairo, where it will remain on display until 30 November.

Sighanda is a painter, musician, and carnettiste (mobile illustrator who keeps a travel diary). The exhibition offers a unique perspective on Egypt, as seen through the eyes of Sighanda, inspired by her journeys between the Giza plateau, the necropolis of Saqqara, and visits to two museums in Cairo and Turin. It showcases Sighanda’s drawings, notebooks, and plates, reflecting her philosophy of using the carnet de voyage, an ancient practice she revitalises through her art. Sighanda seeks to engage directly with Egyptian culture, both ancient and contemporary, by visiting the original sites of the Pharaohs’ tombs on several occasions.

The title refers to a translation of ancient Egyptian funerary texts The Book of the Dead, a collection of writings that, along with other papyrus fragments like the Merer Diary shown at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, are considered precursors to the modern carnet de voyage. The carnet de voyage tradition originated in the 18th-century as a way to capture the culture and customs of a place through drawing. With the rise of photography in the 19th-century, this practice gradually faded. Today, Sighanda revives this ancient “modus operandi” to delve into the essence of a culture and narrate its story through her crafted notes. As the exhibition’s subtitle suggests, Sighanda’s drawings and travel notebooks bring visual substance to the subjects she captures in her diaries. Created freehand and during brief sittings, these artworks reflect the complexity and richness of ancient Egypt.

True to her spirit of experimentation, Sighanda merges sound and colour in search of pure vibration and authentic forms. Much like her

music, her travel notebooks follow a harmonic logic, alternating between signs and drawings. Through her depictions of landscapes, urban life, and archaeological artifacts, she also engages in self-portraiture. By composing pages and plates, she unveils her inner self, authentically expressing her emotions and experiences. The black India ink marks and watercolours she uses to create her art range from light and delicate to denser and more detailed brushstrokes, evoking the intricate features of statues, amulets, pyramids, and ritual artifacts used in mummification and embalming. Funerary trousseaus and decorative motifs are carefully observed and rendered with a thoughtful, participatory approach that is both intellectually and graphically faithful and curious. These drawings, described as “almost like snapshots of traversed landscapes”, are further enriched by the emotional depth that the travelling artist brings to her expressive practice, blending it with her studio work, where the motifs, still full of life, serve as primal emotional sources.

For several years, Sighanda taught painting and drawing techniques at the Michelang Academy of Fine Arts in Agrigento, Italy. She also attended the CEPA (Cercle Européen pour la Propagation des Arts) in Luxembourg. She graduated in engraving techniques from the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, Italy. Since 2018, Sighanda has been a cultural mediator in Switzerland at the Lugano Museum of Contemporary Art (LAC) and the MASI Museum of Art of Italian Switzerland. In 2019, in Villemur-sur-Tarn in Occitania, France, she created a travelogue 50 meters long and 1.5 meters wide, now the largest in the world. In 2021, she was invited by the International Network of Michelin Cities to participate in the 21st Rendez-Vous du Carnet de Voyage in Clermont-Ferrand, France. Sighanda currently lives and works between Italy and Switzerland.