

ARTFORUM

BEIRUT

Hassan Khan BEIRUT ART CENTER

Of the many organizing principles through which to present the work of Hassan Khan—moving chronologically from early to recent work, for example, or arranging disparate mediums into thematic clusters related to recurring ideas of power or dreams—portraiture would appear the least obvious. Since the late 1990s, the Egyptian artist has made a slew of videos, photographs, installations, animations, sculptures, and performances that deliberately resist—even defy—categorization. He is a musician who pays close attention to the vicissitudes of *shaabi*, literally “of the people,” a genre of gritty urban dance music that is forever reinventing itself in working-class Cairo. He is also a keen observer of the political and intellectual dramas of urban life, noting the choreography of police brutality, the cruel details of socioeconomic class, and the tiny acts of aggression that zigzag among friends and other social groupings. In his twenties, Khan ran theater workshops for the influential playwright Ahmed al-Attar, edited a magazine called *Alive*, and penned a winning manifesto known as “The Violent Editor.” He recently published his first novel, *Twelve Clues*, bending multiple genre conventions (police procedural, nouveau noir, thriller) into a singular conceptual exercise. Khan considers *Read Fanon You Fucking Bastards*, a digital/graphic collage of images, text boxes, and diagrammatic signs whose first iteration appeared in 2003, a work in perennial progress, always ready to be mobilized and reconfigured whenever a curatorial or editorial process veers into what he considers neocolonial terrain.

presented thirteen works in three distinct spaces. The first was a darkened room bounded by a wall of soft white curtains—very uncharacteristic for an artist who otherwise tends toward hard edges, right angles, and total control. Inside were three video screens cutting diagonally across the space: *G.R.A.H.A.M.*, 2008; *GBRL*, 2010; and *Studies for Structuralist Film No. 2*, 2013. Running the full length of a long wall was *Insecure*, 2002, a series of vinyl text instructions such as LIST TEN STRATEGIES YOU USE TO SEDUCE OTHERS; WONDER WHAT THE CLOSEST PERSON TO YOU REALLY WANTS FROM YOU; WONDER WHAT YOU REALLY WANT FROM THE CLOSEST PERSON TO YOU. In another corner, *Technicolor Mubarak*, from 2001, showed a flickering portrait of the former Egyptian president sitting next to a photo of himself, the whole scene awash in colored lights. In the next room, a portrait of the artist's mother, which Khan took with his mobile phone, hung high in a corner on a wall painted red. *Rant*, from 2008, a memorable black-and-white video of an actress agonizing in an empty room, split the second space in half. The third jutted up against the Beirut Art Center's glass facade, which Khan had dolled up in a grid of colored gels, along with a found photograph of a young, over-accessorized woman, whom the artist described on an exhibition tour as fashionable but also sad and tragic. Close by was a framed photograph—extracted from a larger work, *The Alphabet Book*, 2006—placed on a bright yellow wall, showing a little boy, fists up in a boxer's stance; Khan described it as “a self-portrait through the actions of a child actor.”

Mixing old and new work and shuffling through both well-known and totally forgotten projects, the exhibition made an impressively surgical cut into the artist's oeuvre, not only proving Khan's abiding interest in portraiture—rendered as wry text, a slowed-down video of a friend refusing to speak, found footage of a dictator, or a group of ink-jet prints of cartoons depicting an anxious pig (*Stuffedpigfollies*, 2007)—but turning the genre on its head. Works such as *G.R.A.H.A.M.* and *GBRL* are studies in how personas are constructed, how people brand and project and communicate and convey themselves to others, how friendships are formed around or through the tension between intense self-assertion and dramatic self-doubt. Contrary to convention, the portrait here was always doubled, often haunted, and never alone.

—Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Hassan Khan, *The Portrait is an Address*, 2016, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Walid Rashid.

Yet for his first solo exhibition in Beirut, Khan took the notion of the portrait and effectively turned it inside out, or more accurately, enlarged it from a static image to an active sentence, thereby articulating something new about his practice. “The Portrait Is an Address”