

Kamel Lazaar Foundation – Kamel Lazaar

Tunis

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Kamel Lazaar has described the Kamel Lazaar Foundation, established in 2004, as 'a producer of knowledge'. A collector of Arab and Iranian art since 2001, Lazaar has plans to open a Foundation headquarters; in fact he commissioned Zaha Hadid to design a space but decided not to proceed because 'the environment was not ready for such a dramatic undertaking'. 'Zaha's practice,' he explains, 'came up with the plans and design for what would have been a landmark building in the historic city of Carthage, but, due to a number of reasons, this plan for the Foundation had to be revisited and reconsidered. ... An Ottoman palace in the oldest and most culturally vibrant part of the city, in the heart of the Medina of Tunis, was then luckily found.' This space will host exhibitions, seminars, workshops and an extensive library.

Lazaar's passion for art began to surface when he was very young, and he laments the fact that 'the quality of art and craft in my social environment as a child ... has been rapidly disappearing'. Growing up in Tunisia, he was heavily influenced by 'how our environment shaped the art being made and the social relations it produced. If you go to Mahdia, you see Italian and Ottoman influences, for example. I have attempted to revive aspects of those traditions there. I renovated an old house in Mahdia with the objective of bringing it back to its previous glory by using whatever little remained of craftsmanship. An association of artists was also created, bringing together some artists from Mahdia and the surroundings and some from as far as Europe. They come, live there and work. Every summer, they put together an exhibition and publish a catalogue. The association acquires some of their art - another perhaps more immediate way to support these artists and encourage cultural exchange. This as a small action, among many, that I hope will amount to something in the future.'

Lazaar says he has felt 'increasingly frustrated by the ambient mediocrity within the Arab cultural world and the lack of support that Arab art is getting within and beyond the region. This is doubly frustrating because I strongly believe that art is the soul of a nation, its people, and to see how this is being dealt with today is a source of disappointment. I would like the Foundation to address, in however small a way, some of these issues'. Today his main concern is the 'continued need for dialogue between the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region and the so-called Western world'. Like other patrons in the region, he regards cultural debate as 'often more accessible than political debate', which makes it possible to 'provide steps on the way towards mutual understanding and a respect for cultures and people' when politics stumbles or fails.

Lazaar is a self-made man. With an MBA in Finance from the Institut Supérieur de Gestion in Tunis, he is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Swicorp, a company he founded in 1987. His brother, Adel, is involved with the Foundation on a practical level, and his daughter, Lina Lazaar (who is a specialist in contemporary art at Sotheby's in London), is also deeply involved and has been developing the collection and the Foundation's remit over the past few years. Lina believes that Arabic art could play a more substantial role in global terms if collectors in the region focused more on supporting Arab artists. The Foundation's aims, in this respect, would be to bring more coverage of artists in the region and further support for the diversity of practices there.

'I have been blessed with a number of things that have influenced my thinking,' Lazaar avers. 'First of all, and although I come from a modest background ... there was always a strong sense of art in a community-based sense. I grew up in the small city of Mahdia, the capital of the Fatimid dynasty, the founders of Cairo. From a very early age, I lived in an environment where forms of artistic expression were very strong and pronounced. I am thinking here of the rich embroidery, silk knitting, naive painting and a whole rainbow of craftsmanship ... Small workshops where you could go and see men weaving silk alongside costume and jewellery makers. They would explain with passion what they were doing. I was young but nonetheless enchanted by this. It is with this sense of art as community-based practice that I started to consider the Foundation and what its responsibilities would be in terms of developing ideas and educating people about art from the Arab region.'

Though fully committed to its activities, Lazaar insists that the Foundation is not about him alone but rather 'a family passion'. He believes in the power of his cultural projects as what he calls 'small actions', each of which 'will hopefully add up to something culturally significant. ... I also see the Foundation as a producer of knowledge in which communities can be formed and can address one another. Today my dream project is to help build a village in the north of Tunis where the sense of art community will illuminate its life, just like mine was illuminated when I was growing up in Mahdia.' His Foundation, he hopes, 'will be a way of guiding all of these conversations and "small actions" into something bigger than the sum of their parts. This is effectively the challenge: generating understanding and dialogue between people who share an interest in culture, both Western and Middle Eastern.'



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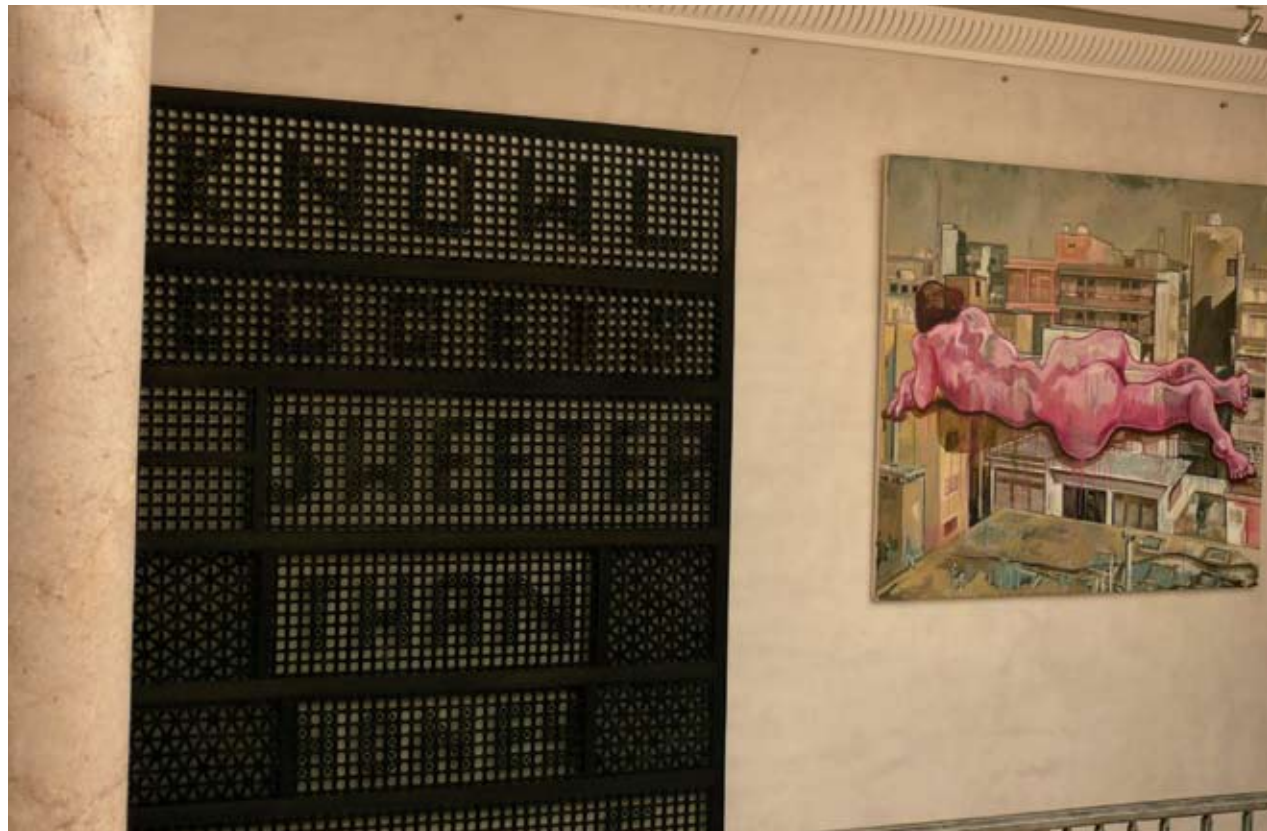
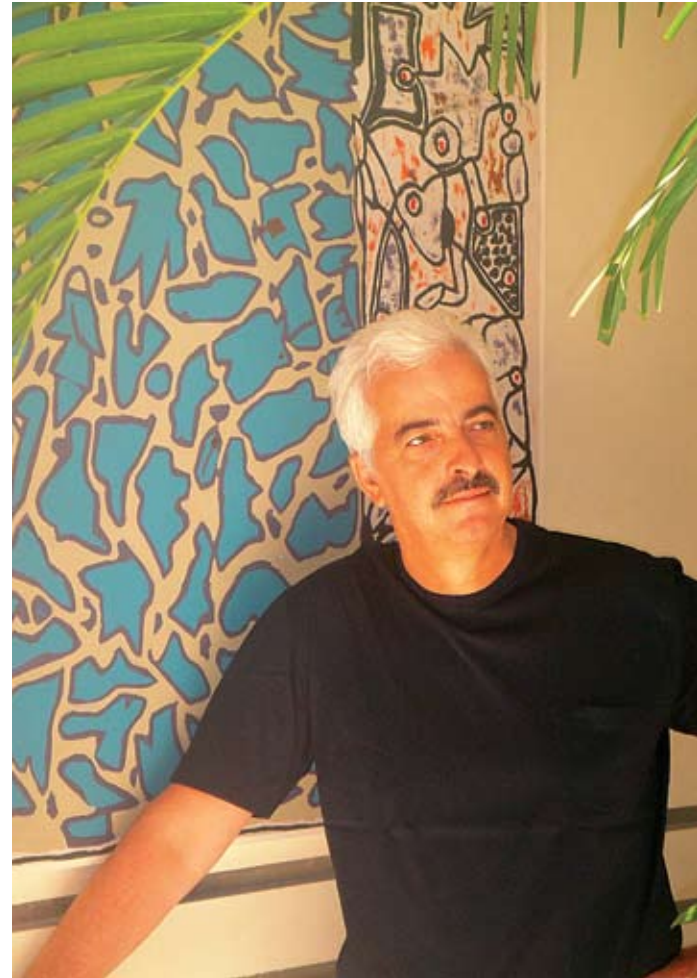
(above)
Abdelaziz Gorgi
Le Couple Tunisien, 2000

(top right)
Kamel Lazaar in front of
Abderrazak Sahli's *Untitled*,
2005

(right)
(left work)
Susan Hefuna
*Knowledge is Sweeter
than Honey*, 2005

(right work)
Marwan Sahmarani
Les Voyeurs, 2004

All images courtesy of
Kamel Lazaar Foundation



(above)
Works currently on view
in Lazaar's home in Tunis,
including:
Néjib Belkhodja, *Medina*,
2004

Hedi Turki, *Untitled*, 2003

Chafic Abboud,
L'Anniversaire, 2000

Youssef Nabil, *Ahmed in
djellabah*, New York, 2004

Hassan Hajjaj, *Odalisque*,
2000-2007

(left)
A sample of traditional
wedding costumes from
the city of Mahdia

All images courtesy of
Kamel Lazaar Foundation

