

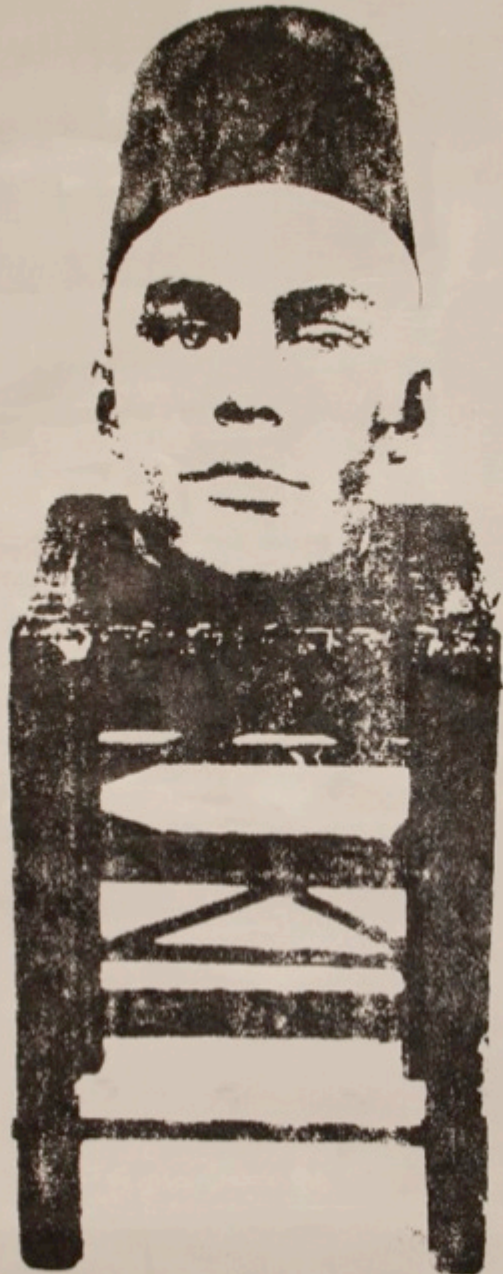


RAOUF  
RIFAI



CARNAVAL OF DARWICHES





***Chair Darwiche***, acrylic on canvas and serigraph, 150 x 112 cm, 2012. The Darwiche's Chair, borrowed from one a shoe shine boy might sit on, is the Darwiche's body, satirically commenting on society's frequent inability to see the human being behind the function he fulfils. In ***Mutant Darwiche*** (back cover), the Darwiche works to get closer to his spirituality, spinning like the whirling Dervishes in the "Mevlevi Sema Ceremony" of Turkey declared by UNESCO in 2005 to be among the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. He therefore transcends his poor status through hard work, and is recompensed through spiritual fulfilment.

Front Cover:  
**Paradise of Darwiches**  
Acrylic on canvas  
190 x 330 cm  
2012

Opposite:  
**Jeha Darwiche**  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2011



# Carnaval of Darwiches

An exhibition by RAOUF RIFAI

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**I**N THE EARLY PHASE of his career (1982-1984), Raouf Rifai's work was preoccupied with the environment, nature and light. From 1985, tradition, especially folklore and folk characters, emerged as a recurring theme in his work. In 1995, he spent 3 years exploring, through his art, the history of his country, Lebanon, before coming back to an environmental theme from 1999 to 2007. Rifai introduced the Darwiche as the point of departure for his art in 2008.

Rifai's work is influenced by several artistic styles including Impressionism and Expressionism. Throughout Rifai's body of work, 3 themes are intertwined: pollution (physical and spiritual), social relationships and the relationship between the material and the spiritual.

The backdrop to his art is the continuing instability and violence in the Middle East, a constant and faithful companion throughout the artist's life.

## Rifai's Darwiche

Rifai's Darwiche is a folk character representing the simple and simple-minded common man ("darwiche," when used in Arabic to describe a person, means simple and simple-minded). Rifai's common man also encompasses the dervish, or Sufi mystic, thus imbuing a spiritual and physical duality to the character.

Rifai's dedication to the Darwiche resembles that of Paul Klee and his angels. Like Klee's angels, Rifai's Darwiches are many and varied. They share some common characteristics, foremost the fact that they are all rooted in human existence: They have weaknesses and flaws, a myriad of expressions, attitudes and emotions; they are secular and spiritual; they are handsome and ugly; they are stupid yet at the same time wiser than everyone around them; they are full of worries or playful; they cry yet derive humor from everyday tasks; In short, we recognize ourselves in them, they are us.



*Abu Zeid El Hilaly Darwiche, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, 2011*

Opposite:  
**Memories of Abu el Abed**  
Acrylic on canvas  
190 x 300 cm  
2011







Opposite:

**Popular Icons 1**

Acrylic on canvas

180 x 230 cm

2012

***Popular Icons 1** is a humorous, witty and grandiose portrayal of Middle Eastern symbols and contradictions including religion, the sabot shoe (a symbol for Syria), economic mismanagement (the black lamp), a Golf player highlighting the blindness of some in society to their environment, a Darwiche dressed like a Sheikh but carrying the picture of a Pope. The symbolism and contradictions are apparent and the political undertones clear, yet wit and humour prevail to convey a powerful picture of Middle Eastern society.*



***Egyptian Darwiche***, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, 2011







## Folkloric Characters and Symbolism

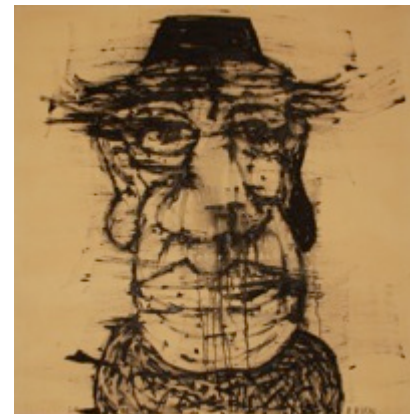
Rifai's Darwiches are almost always accompanied by a rich array of explicit and implicit Middle Eastern symbols. Often, the Darwiche is represented as a folkloric character such as Juha (better known outside the Arab world as Nasreddin), Abu Zayd al-Hilali (an 11<sup>th</sup> century Arab leader featured often in Arab folklore), Abu El Abed (a Lebanese fictional character who is the centrepiece of jokes in Lebanon) and others from the rich history of the Middle East. A central aspect of Rifai's aesthetics is his lifelong concern with the possibilities of parody and wit; our awareness of this factor opens to us the political dimensions of Rifai's art.



**Gay Darwiche**  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2011



**Young Bride**  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2011



**Abu Antar Darwiche**  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 150 cm  
2011





### **Darwiche in Celebration**

Acrylic on canvas

130 x 160 cm

2012

***Darwiche in Celebration.** With a strong stylistic wink to the Egyptian style prevalent in the Middle East for several thousands of years (and based not on how we see a particular scene but on what we know belongs there), the artist depicts the Darwiche is in love, having a drink and raising it to his love. She however is veiled and unaware. Both are struggling with the wall in Middle Eastern society which separates what one sees from what is occurring in reality.*

The Darwiche is the Middle East's Mickey Mouse, Superman, Archie Bunker, Asterix. He is a cultural icon standing steadfast against the Mickey Mouse invasion. Inspired by Nasreddin, Rifai's Darwiche wants to be popular across the Middle East and his stories almost invariably take the form of humorous anecdotes. The Darwiche stories can be understood at many levels including as a joke, as a morality tale and as a political statement – and usually deal with timeless concepts, purveying folk wisdom that triumph over all trials and tribulations.

Rifai's paintings are always witty and at first glance some can also be viewed as Childish, another feature he shares with Paul Klee.

Rifai's Sana Gallery exhibition is consistent in its use of media (almost always acrylic on canvas). He is a natural portrait artist and through long experimentation developed an individual style of combining color and tonality. His portraits, each with distinct personalities and emotions, exhibit confident brush strokes using a variety of color palettes though earth colors, black and red tend to dominate. With a strong stylistic wink to the Egyptian style prevalent in the Middle East for several thousands of years (and based not on how we see a particular scene but on what we know belongs there), his paintings have an unmistakable Oriental personality though he excels in piling up Middle Eastern symbols which are so well travelled that some of his art could be mistaken for being South East Asian or South Asian.

### ***Blind Darwiche***

*The Darwiche lives in his own world and refuses to look at what's outside, thus avoiding the pollution of his brain and body. At the same time, Blind Darwiche stands for backwardness and as is frequently the case in Rifai's art, Blind Darwiche can be viewed as inward looking (spiritual) or outward looking (physical) just like the Oriental culture the artist represents.*



***Blind Darwiche***, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm





# Carnaval of Darwiches

An exhibition by RAOUF RIFAI

14 March-28 April 2013

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Born in Lebanon in 1954, Raouf Rifai lives and works in Beirut. He holds a Ph.D in Urban Planning from the Sorbonne- Paris I, and teaches art at the Lebanese University.

Rifai has taken part in numerous Collective shows throughout Europe; the United States the Middle East and Japan.

He has also had more than fifteen solo exhibitions since 1984.

In 2010, he was awarded the first prize of the Sursock Museum's Salon d'automne in Beirut. His art work has been sold at Christie's.



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*Back cover: Mutant Darwiche, acrylic on canvas and serigraph, 150 x 150 cm, 2012*