



AHMED FARID

A PORTRAIT OF LUXURY

Ahmed Farid defies the theory that you can't have it all. He's president and CEO of Madar Home Signatures, Co-founder of Baraka Group, the man who brought Bulgari to Egypt and more recently he has added painter to his illustrious career. Working in the luxury business for over thirty years, get to know the man behind Egypt's biggest brands...

By: Hind El Ramly

With a passion for culture, sociology, and history, Farid graduated near the top of his class with a degree in sociology in the Seventies. After college, he dived into the business world and in the process laid the foundations of many of the brands we have come to know and love

today. His initial business endeavor was working in the furniture retail sector in Italy. Along with his business partners, he founded Baraka Optics, Madar (which boasts designer interior brands including Minotti, Fendi Casa and Kenzo Home), opened the first luxury mono-brand boutique in Egypt (Bulgari) as well as launching other successful brands including C&CO and iSi.

To Farid luxury mostly constitutes a feeling. He casually alternates between his Bulgari watch and his colourful 30-euro watch. When I meet Farid, the man who wears many hats with ease sits with a larger-than-life painting behind him. You would mistake it for a veteran abstract-expressionist artist, but in fact it is one of his creations. Donning what anyone would perceive as the latest cool offering of

Italian optical glasses, Farid looks every bit the part of an artist. To my surprise, his glasses turn out to be Snowflake-a brand designed by Farid himself.

Already a business veteran, his latest endeavor in becoming a painter may be illogical. In fact no one was as surprised by Farid's artistic success more than him. But upon closer look, one can see how this businessman turned artist. Despite starting to paint fairly recently-in 2006 to be exact, Farid always had an interest in the arts. After all, his endless business travels exposed him to one of the most artistic places on earth: Italy. After he took up painting he started exhibiting his work through the respected Al Masar Gallery in Cairo. Participating in group exhibits, Farid's work was being exhibited alongside contemporary heavyweight artists such as Adel El Siwi.

Farid's mother used to paint, he recalls. "I have her paintings but I never saw her paint, as she painted before she was even married". In a way, his life has come full circle. Dreaming of becoming an architect when he was young, he ultimately became a painter. When asked if he is planning a solo exhibition, Farid is quick to dismiss it. He doesn't think that he is capable of having one because he believes he can't produce the needed amount of artwork to fill all those white gallery walls. But like he did so many times before, Farid might surprise himself yet again...

How did you get into painting?

I always admired art, especially throughout my travels. One day I was at Diwan Bookstore and my eye caught a book about painting. I bought it as well as some paper, two knives, and oil paint. Having no previous skills in painting whatsoever I just took the plunge and painted. I kept learning techniques and constantly trying to develop myself. I once left some of my paintings lying around the house and to my surprise I later found that my wife framed and displayed them.

What drives you to paint and how do you feel about exhibiting your work?

Believe it or not but painting helped my business life. Instead of stressing over work, painting allows me to take a break from the stressful business world. I don't like routine and I get restless easily. That's why whenever I was successful in business; I was always keen to start on a new project. Painting is a never ending process, which I never get bored of. There is always something new to paint. I'm still surprised and humbled by my success and that people collect my artwork. It's great to exhibit your work. Before that I actually never believed that people would like my paintings. But people whom I don't know started to buy them, so I thought they must really like my work then!

Baraka Optics is one of your earliest as well as most successful business ventures. How did it come about?

Starting up Baraka was by coincidence and the glasses market was a huge challenge when I ventured into it. I noticed that there was a gap in the luxury market in Egypt, especially when it came to eyewear. So I partnered with Mohamed Fathy Ragab my longtime friend and business partner and together we started the luxury eyewear industry in Egypt. Later we introduced yet another concept to the Egyptian market with C&CO. It was the



first optical store targeted towards the youth that offered them a selection of luxury eyewear with funky design for a very competitive price. Through C&CO we also introduced some of our own brands, which are designed in Egypt and made in Italy.

What were the problems that faced you following the 25th of January Revolution and how did you overcome them?

Despite suffering some losses as a result of the economic downturn after the revolution, I still support it. About four of the optics stores were burnt or looted. In City Centre Kattameya the employees of the store went down on their own without any instructions and took all the merchandise in order to protect it. That's because our employees care about their work as much as the owners do. I learned early in my career that there are no bad employees; only bad bosses.

Because we also have great relations with all our suppliers abroad (whether for Bulgari or Fendi Casa), many of them were very understanding when the revolution happened. They allowed us to lower some of the prices to be more competitive and attract customers. The fact that I have known many of them for a long time gave me the credibility and networks that allowed them to trust me. This happened at a time while most businesses elsewhere in Egypt faced even harsher policies and guarantees from their suppliers as a result of the revolution.

What's next for Madar Home Signatures?

Madar is doing really well at the moment and I'm very optimistic about the future. We have some new talented designers who are bringing a fresh outlook to Madar. We also have a new strategy. More and more Egyptians are demanding value for money. We are now targeting an educated and intellectual elite more than ever who seek this value for money. In addition, we have a fully-functioning Egyptian factory, using the finest Egyptian fabrics and craftsmanship as well.

