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Egyptomania

NASSER RABBAT ON "TEA WITH NEFERTITI"



View of "Tea with Nefertiti: The Making of the Artwork by the Artist, the Museum and the Public," 2012, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar. Foreground: Vik Muniz, *Tupperware Sarcophagus Object (Relicario)*, 2010. Background, from left: Lee Miller, *Portrait of Space near Siwa, Egypt*, 1937; Lee Miller, *The Shadow of the Great Pyramid, Egypt*, ca. 1938. Photo: Haupt & Binder.

"NEVER DID THE LABOR OF MAN show me the human race in such a splendid point of view. In the ruins of Tentyra the Egyptians appeared to me giants," exclaimed Dominique-Vivant Denon when, in the winter of 1798, he encountered the temple now known as Dendera, located south of the small town by the same name in Upper Egypt, as part of Napoleon's French expedition to Egypt (1798–1801).^{*} Faced with the marvels of Egyptian art, he and the other savants attached to the mission had to question the Greco-Roman paradigm of their own history of art and to admit Egypt as the fountainhead of the tradition they called their own. Henceforth, Egypt became not only a subject of intense scientific scrutiny, exemplified by the monumental multivolume *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–28), produced by those same savants, but also a European fascination, at times even an obsession, whose history, myths, and material culture have been blatantly claimed and absorbed in various narratives that bypassed the country and its actual people.

The story of Egypt's appropriation by the Western gaze, the myriad artistic responses to this cultural colonization, and its impact on modern Egypt's self-image are the subjects of the teasingly titled exhibition "Tea with Nefertiti: The Making of the Artwork by the Artist, the Museum and the Public," on view at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, until March 31. The show is slated for a European tour, to begin with the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris next summer and perhaps an American sojourn later. Intelligent, beautiful, and judiciously critical, "Tea with Nefertiti," curated by the team of Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath of Art Reoriented, considers Egypt a case study but ultimately aims for a broader examination of the contentious ways in which the meaning of art is mediated through the multifarious agents and institutions engaged in its production, presentation, and evaluation.

The curators attempt to achieve this ambitious goal through an intriguing gambit: They present the works in the show from three concentric perspectives—the artist's, the museum's, and the public's—with each contained in its own section. The first emphasizes the individuality and creativity of the artist. The second examines the institutionalization of art, asking what this process entails in terms of the signification and valuation of artifacts. The third aims to track down the unpredictable transformations of art as it breaks out of its rarefied domains, infuses the public realm, and there risks appropriation to commercial, political, or ideological ends. The exhibition employs more than one hundred works of art, dating from 1800 BCE to the present, in combination with various other documents, ranging from official papers to newspaper clippings, to present Egypt's induction into art history in visually stunning and critically sharp vignettes. Shunning conventional organizational techniques—chronology, style, location, monograph—the curators create discursive loops in which artworks and documents from diverse provenances and times are assembled and arranged to frame questions about the complex relationship between art, knowledge, and politics, though this last element is delicately introduced and tactfully underplayed. Thus, the most iconic symbols of Egypt, the pyramids, are the subjects of two arrangements: one focusing on their formal and monumental qualities and located in the "artist" section,

the other touching on their pivotal role in the making of modern Egypt and displayed in the “public” section. In the former, works by Van Leo, Mamduh Muhamad Fathallah, and Lee Miller (all twentieth-century artists who lived in Cairo) explore the shape and overwhelming size of the pyramids as inspiration for photographic compositions, with Van Leo emphasizing the relationship of the pyramids to a human scale, Fathallah exploring their triangular profile, and Miller examining the exactness of their shadows. In these photographs, the pyramids’ historical significance is deftly subordinated, even intentionally suppressed, to highlight their sheer form. Conversely, in the public section the pyramids become the occasion for a panoramic and unabashedly nostalgic review of mid-twentieth-century Egyptian social mores, as gleaned from Egyptian movie clips featuring the pyramids in the film *Domestic Tourism II* (2008–2009) by Maha Maamoun. Taha Belal, another contemporary Egyptian artist, uses large colored-pencil and ink drawings of the pyramids to highlight the many ways in which they have been exploited by the consumer culture of our time. Finally, a color print by Georg Frey (1843) depicts a triumphal moment in 1842 when members of a German archaeological expedition planted the imperial flag of Prussia at the summit of the Cheops pyramid and sang a celebratory hymn to their king, in total disregard of their baffled Egyptian companions and of the fact that this was not their country. This simple image reminds us of the violent ways in which Egypt, both as a nation-state and as a repository of archaeological and artistic treasures, was entangled in the grand colonial project of the nineteenth century, its land resources and historical artifacts coveted by competing Western powers even when the country was still ostensibly an independent kingdom.

In fact, imperialism—with its concomitant strategies of control, acquisition, and cultural and artistic stratification—is one of the most potent themes to emerge from the exhibition’s interconnected perspectives. It pervades the presentation of most vignettes despite the clever tactics adopted by the curators to diffuse it across the layers of the exhibition and to harness it to other salient themes, such as artistic influence across cultures (both direct and indirect), the museum’s role in narrating art and history, and the identity of art as a contested and negotiated category. For example, the exhibition’s namesake, Nefertiti—or, more accurately, her celebrated bust currently occupying pride of place at the Neues Museum in Berlin—perfectly embodies, in its modern peregrinations, the imperial project of appropriation. Indeed, Nefertiti weaves together the narratives of the show as the subject of many of its artworks. These range from large-format photographs of the bust or its setting (as in Candida Höfer’s works) to a documentary of the fitting of the original bust onto a bronze cast of the missing body—a controversial exercise undertaken by the Hungarian duo Little Warsaw, which was blessed by the museum but bemoaned by the Egyptian authorities—to a work that revisits the adoption of her name and image for an Egyptian sewing machine in the progressive and hopeful 1960s, simply called *Nefertiti*, 2008, by Ahmed Kamel. But while the exhibition catalogue frankly tells the story of Nefertiti’s questionable acquisition by the German archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt in 1912, this information is noticeably absent from the artworks’ captions, a clearly intentional omission. Thus the curators shrewdly avoid facile ideologizing, preferring for the art to speak for itself.

And speak it does, in a voice that is profoundly political. Take, for instance, William Kentridge’s *Camets d’Égypte: Shards (Drawing Lesson 43)*, 2010, a video in which the artist appears to “listen” to fragments of Egyptian manuscripts, each emitting a different sound. Most are from familiar Western musical genres, but the haunting voice of Umm Kulthum, the queen of Egyptian music, rings out from one, persistently piercing the otherwise harmonious arrangement and forcibly inserting a prominent symbol of contemporary Egypt among these reminders of its appropriated and “Westernized” ancient heritage. Or take Mohamad-Said Baalbaki’s *Al-Buraq I*, 2007–2009, an installation mimicking a nineteenth-century natural-history museum, which purportedly shows the discovery of al-Buraq (the winged, human-faced horse mounted by the Prophet Muhammad during his Night Journey), complete with a full skeleton of the mythical animal, fragments of bones, sketches of excavation sites, and photos of scientists who ostensibly conducted the excavation or validated the discovery, alongside artworks from various cultures depicting a variety of Buraqs. Not only does this piece question the authority of museum installations in authenticating knowledge, but it could also be seen as a more cynical critique of the secular epistemology of our time, which imposes a scientific frame on all interpretations, no matter how far-fetched. Of course, the joke could be on religion itself, which has shown signs in the recent past of adopting pseudoscientific evidence to rationalize paranatural phenomena. This brilliant work is one of many assembled by the curators that manage to transcend the specificity of Egyptian history and culture to make salient comments on the construction and dissemination of knowledge in today’s globalized and commodified artistic culture.

Egypt’s constructed history, however, remains the main focus of this unsparingly critical exhibition, and this inquiry could not have come at a more apt time. When major museums (the Met, the Louvre, the V&A, and the nearby Museum of Islamic Art, Doha) seem to have settled on business as usual in exhibiting Islamic art as an insular tradition, “Tea with Nefertiti” comes crashing in, challenging and disturbing art-historical canons and questioning the entire institutional enterprise of deploying art as authoritative, and allegedly objective, knowledge. And when Egypt itself is still going through the turmoil of redefining its political future after decades of false promises and misguided ideologies, “Tea with Nefertiti” boldly complicates the narratives of identity currently debated on the streets of Egyptian cities, revealing their roots in the nation’s first encounters with the modern West, unveiling their layered evolution, and uncovering the multitude of agents that contributed to their construction. The fact that the exhibition itself adds a masterfully executed and museologically sophisticated layer to that rich history is only heightened by its debut in Doha, a city whose rulers are actively involved in the shaping of the still-forming, turbulent “Arab Spring.”

“Tea for Nefertiti” is on view at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar, through Mar. 31; travels to Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, Apr. 23–Sept. 8; Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, Spain, Oct. 30, 2013–Feb. 7, 2014; Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels, Mar.–June 2014.

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* Dominique-Vivant Denon, *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Égypte, pendant les campagnes du général Bonaparte*, 2 vols. (Paris: P. Didot l’aîné, 1802), vol. 1, p. 113.