

MOATAZ NASR



EVER COLLIDING CIRCLES



Egyptian multimedia artist Moataz Nasr's kaleidoscopic practise draws on an eclectic array of traditional and contemporary forms in articulating the complexities of life in modern-day Cairo. By Nat Muller.



'Elshaab' (2012) Moataz Nasr. (All images courtesy LawrieShabibi)

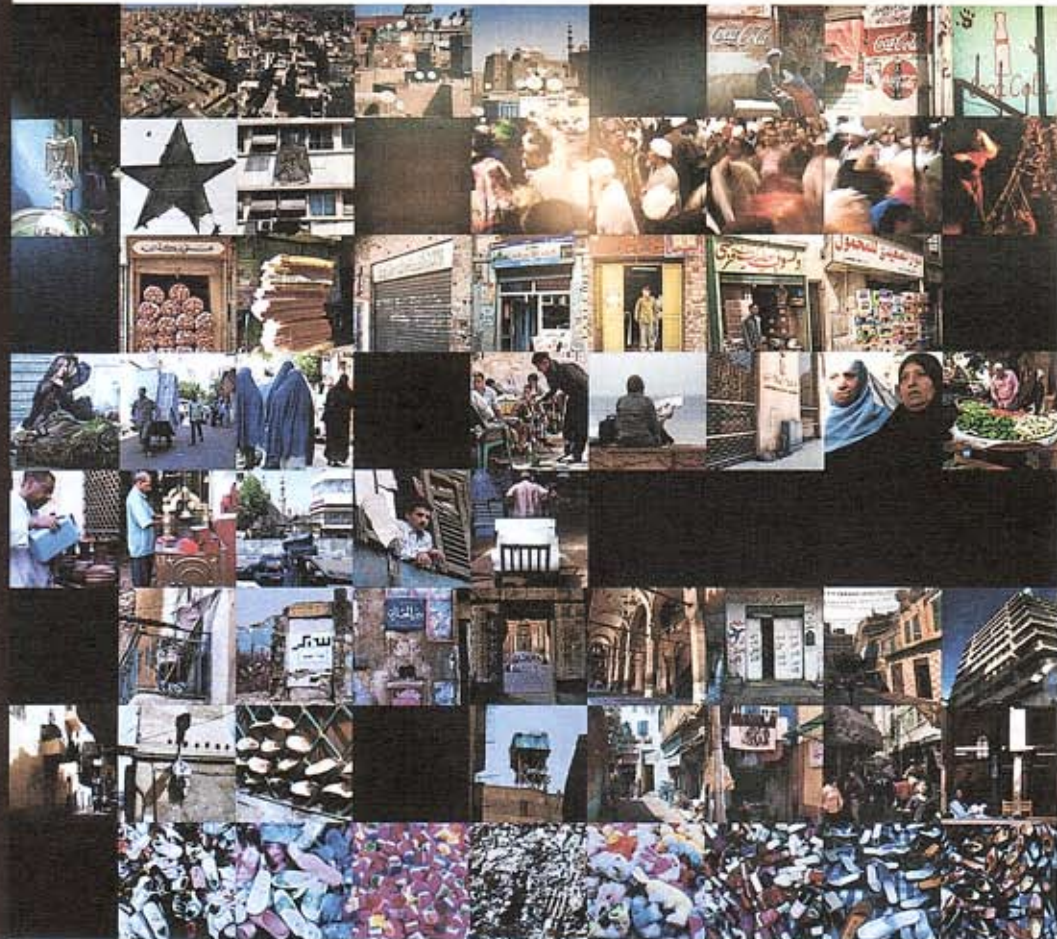
Moataz Nasr's work defies easy categorisation. His practice moves between past and present, violence and love, the spiritual and the worldly, the specific locus of

Egypt – and more particularly Cairo – and the universal. Somehow he manages to erode the conflicting forces that make up these seeming oppositions, and unite them in his art, as if they were a whole, always on the verge to clash or to melt seamlessly into each other. As such, Nasr always operates on the ontological fault lines of that what is, that what could have been, or that what could be. One could say that his work always carries a promise that can tilt either way, of being fulfilled or being unmade. This potential of a promise is not so much about making the right or wrong choices, or about taking an ethical position, rather it is about acknowledging the existence of different paths, and the realisation that sometimes between option and constraint lies a fine and murky line.

Over the course of two decades Nasr has through the means of video, photography, sculpture and installation developed a conceptual and visual vocabulary that is highly expressive, and draws on a myriad of inspirations, be they found in the streets of Cairo, Islamic calligraphy, popular culture, current political affairs or Sufism. However, references should not be read in too literal a way; in Nasr's work, points of departure are always cumulative, leading to a multiplicity of interpretive and experiential routes. For example, in his video 'At Death's Door' (2009) a pitta bread is filmed heating in the oven. It swells and comes to life and then deflates again. The accompanying soundtrack is one of heavy breathing, coughs and gasps, and ends in a final sigh with the bread losing all its air and returning to its level state again. The apparent simplicity of this video addresses so much more than first meets the eye. It magnifies the cycle of life and death on an individual level through the lone pitta bread, but transcends into the universal because bread is the most basic of staples, eaten across territorial boundaries and class divisions. It is no coincidence that Nasr plays up the Egyptian Arabic word for bread, 'aish' (life). However, read against the political backdrop of the 2008 Mahalla bread riots in Egypt – when food prices skyrocketed – the work takes on a highly political charge. In the swelling movement of the bread one can discern the political act of rising up and being subdued, and rising up again, the breath one takes before mustering courage to act. Though created two years before the uprisings of 25th of January in 2011 that saw the political stasis broken and Mubarak ousted, 'At Death's Door' suggests that something is impending. An oven is after all an incubator. It is only unclear at whose door death is knocking. This ambiguity of forces and of energies colliding is characteristic of Nasr's oeuvre, and directs his aesthetics. Words and their appearance, for example, become precarious signifiers of meaning and form. In calligraphic works such as 'El-Thaher wa El-baten' (The Manifest and the Un-manifest, 2010) or 'Light over Shadows' (2012) words like 'love', 'beauty', 'compassion' and the letter 'waw' are repeated cyclically in motifs. Form and meaning overlay each other and melt into each other: semantics become visual representation, and shape becomes cognitive and poetic meaning. →

Below and below
centre: 'Alshaab' (2012)





(Above) 'Cairo Walk' (2006)
 (Right) 'El Thaher wa El baten (The Manifest and the Un-manifest) - Love' (2010)



'THROUGHOUT, HIS ART SPEAKS A POETIC AND AN UNWAVERING BELIEF IN HUMANITY'S CAPACITY FOR CHANGE'

Even though Moataz Nasr's life and practice are firmly anchored in the social and urban fabric of Cairo, and his subject matter, source material, and visual markers are often local, he manages to create pieces that transcend place, and even time. There is a deeply transformative element in Nasr's work that articulates something seminal about humanity and the human condition. So when he shows us a video of a master musician sensuously cradling a tabla drum and playing it in 'The Tabla' (2003), he is making a powerful statement about the production of art and the construction of meaning. Indeed, before being played the tabla remains an inert object. Once the fingers of the musician start tapping a transformation occurs, and musician, instrument, rhythm and image melt into a holistic experience wherein they are more than the sum of their parts. In the 2006 sequel to this work, 'Tabla II (G8)', Nasr still projects the video, but has in addition filled up the exhibition space with dozens of different-size tablas. The drums are silent objects, as if they were a still or mesmerised audience for the enlarged projected image of the performing drum. As much as the relation between mediated image and object tells us about the power dynamics of artist to audience, one-to-many communication, or the positioning of a powerful individual vis-à-vis a group, we have to keep in mind that the drums in the room hold the potential to be played, and to erupt in sound too. When they do, they will probably sound louder and more forceful than the master drum. Here again there is a promise scripted into the work, a belief that the tables could turn, and that a collective voice or cacophony of voices might drown out the dominant voice, or conversely, that art has the power to create community and bring things together.

Though Nasr is very much a politically engaged artist, as projects like 'Ice Cream Map' (2008) and 'Propaganda' (2008-2010) show, it would be reductive to interpret his work through a political lens only. Throughout, his art speaks a poetic and an unwavering belief in humanity's capacity for change. The latter is expressed with great generosity, even if the odds seem against it, and if situations cannot be fully grasped. His photo series 'Cairo Walk' (2006) is testimony to that. For a decade Nasr would walk the streets of Cairo, photographing whatever and whomever he would meet on his path. Shown in a grid of 72 images, 'Cairo Walk' is simultaneously a life-size jigsaw puzzle that can never be fully solved, as well as Nasr's own subjective cartography of the city he lives in. Chaotic Cairo, a city bursting at its seams, with its crazy traffic and crumbling infrastructure is not an easy place to navigate, or to get to know. It is also very much a fragmented city, of different communities, and social classes. Nasr hints at the social and geographical divisions in his display of the images; we never get the full picture; we never fully understand the logic of the city or of its visual representation, for that matter. However it seems that it is fine not to fully understand and comprehend our surroundings, and to leave openings for unexpected encounters. As a collector of his own urban moments, the artist depicts the city and its inhabitants with love and appreciation, albeit that this love is often conflicted. This uneasy relation comes to the fore in his most recent piece 'El Shaab' (The People), which consists of twenty five ceramic figurines representing the religious, gender, class, ethnic, and generational diversity of Egypt's population. 'El Shaab' alludes to the popular cry heard across the Arab world, from Tunisia to Egypt, from Yemen to Damascus: 'El Shaab yurid isqaat el nizam' (the people demand the fall of the regime). Indeed, a closer look will reveal that some of the figurines are wounded, have their eyes patched and their heads bandaged. A separate scene shows the much televised incident of the female protestor savagely beaten by the Egyptian military, her abaya ripped open, showing her blue bra. Those in the know will recognise a figurine representing the artist, who with a defiant look oversees the scene. As an artist Nasr is not bystander. Rather he is a witness, a chronicler and an actor.





(Far left, bottom) 'Light Over Shadows' (2012) (Left) 'Merge And Emerge' (2011) (Above) 'Oxymoron I' (2011)

'AS WITH ALL OF MOATAZ NASR'S WORK, POSSIBILITIES ARE TO BE FOUND PRIMARILY OUTSIDE AND BEYOND OUR FIELD OF IMMEDIATE VISION'

Within the restive political context of the Middle East, Nasr knows all too well that situations are unstable, and can flip in a very short period of time. Since 2008 he has embarked on a series of projects involving matchsticks as his source material. Whether the matches are arranged in the map of Iraq in 'Under Fire' (2008) and subsequently lit to indicate the vulnerability and tragedy of a territory laid in ashes, or whether arranged in colourful abstract Islamic patterns used by Cairene tentmakers in 'Khayameya' (2008-2010), the possibility of fire and destruction is ever present. His matchstick series of calligraphic lions and tigers 'Oxymoron' (2011) embody the fragile tension between the subject of these works – staunch lions and tigers, traditionally the ornamental guardians of buildings – and their very medium. Within this tension, or oxymoron, lies the inability of the lions and tigers to protect themselves from destruction, let alone safeguarding whatever or whomever they are deemed to protect. Another oxymoron can be found in the usage of material, and the question of material value:

the material itself resists to be imprisoned within its form. Perhaps the most elegant incarnation of this is to be found in the three-channel video installation 'Merge and Emerge' (2011). Here three Sufi dancers, clad respectively in green, red and blue robes, whirl separately in their field. At times they come together in one field, never touching each other, but always insinuating that collision is possible. Their movements are fluid, expertly controlled and balanced. Whether intentional or not, Nasr has dressed the dancers in blue, green, and red, also known as the RGB colour model. When mixed together these colours can produce a vast array of other colours. As with all of Moataz Nasr's work, possibilities are to be found primarily outside and beyond our field of immediate vision. **MBA**

'COLLISION' BY MOATAZ NASR IS SHOWING AT LAWRIE SHABIBI UNTIL JANUARY 10TH WWW.LAWRIESHABIBI.COM