

Tea with Nefertiti in Paris

Sara Elkamel, Thursday 22 Aug 2013

Currently on show at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, an exhibition showcasing over 100 works of art from and about Egypt redefines concepts of time and place



Before moving to its new home in Paris at the Institut du Monde Arabe (The Arab World Institute), Tea with Nefertiti: The Making of the Artwork by the Artist, the Museum and the Public was inaugurated at Mathaf: Qatar's Arab Museum of Modern Art, in November 2012. Curated by the Lebanese-German double act Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, this exhibition seeks to strike a visual debate on the mechanisms by which artworks have been used to build images and perceptions of cultural otherness.

Split into three chambers, the exhibition examines the procession of the artistic practice, examining how artwork travels, beginning "through the eyes of the artist, within the museum or exhibition context, and lastly with the public sphere and mass media," according to the Tea with Nefertiti monograph.

Named after the beautiful Queen Nefertiti (1370 BC-1330 BC), the wife of Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten, this project tackles a set of domains. It can be considered a critique of museology, a reflection on how staging the artwork participates in the construction of historical narratives, and an examination of how visual displays and curatorial practices are employed as tools to frame cultural otherness.

More than 100 works of art by 26 modern and contemporary artists from Egypt and across the globe are re-contextualised and juxtaposed with Pharaonic, Islamic and Coptic archival material, and the effect is a meandering matrix through which the diverse Egyptian visual culture can be experienced.

Assorted and varied, artists make their way into this visual tale narrated by Nefertiti at the Institut du Monde Arabe. Works from as far back as 1800 BC are daringly juxtaposed with some by the father of Egyptian sculpture, Mahmoud Mukhtar, along with pieces by contemporary Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, surrealist painter Ramses Younan, and contemporary Egyptian artists including Bassem Yousri, Maha Maamoun, Iman Issa and Alaa Younis, while others still showcase the work of world-renowned 20th century European painters and sculptors, such as Paul Klee, Amedeo Modigliani and Alberto Giacometti.

The bust of Queen Nefertiti, an artwork sculpted by Thutmose in 1350 BC, excavated by German archeologist

Ludwig Borchardt in 1912 and showcased in various museums in Germany since 1913, has become an icon through which the identity of an entire civilization is experienced. Nefertiti, the artwork, the cultural icon, the fragment of history, is the point from which this exhibition departs.

You are greeted at the door by contemporary Egyptian visual artist Yousef Nabil's portrait of Nefertiti. Through his lens, she almost resembles a heavily made-up beautiful young woman you would see today, if you overlook the chapped earlobes and the missing iris. Rendered in his personalised technique of hand-colouring silver gelatin photographs to remove the marks of reality and mimic the texture of golden-age Egyptian films, Nefertiti leaps through time and entices you to join her for a cup of tea. In decontextualising the limestone and stucco bust that is typically seen showcased among other historical artefacts, Nabil invites onlookers to experience the woman behind the history, effectively setting the scene for visitors to indulge in a casual cup of tea with the queen.

In this conversation with Nefertiti, you should not expect chronology. The exhibition toys around with time and geography; a sculpture by the pioneer of modern Egyptian sculpture Mahmoud Mukhtar depicting a defiant looking fellah (peasant) dubbed *The Native* (1910) standing on four ragged steps, a Coptic motif symbolising power, is exhibited with a limestone Coptic funerary stele dating back to the 8th century, a sandstone statue from 1250 BC, and a painting by renowned Franco-Egyptian artist Georges Sabbagh from 1919, among many others.

Such juxtapositions defy conventional museum designs, putting forward a new way of consuming art history that transcends the concepts of time and place. A multi-focal web of artists is therefore presented to capture the contemporary moment, highlighting a geo-temporal flexibility and an ongoing process of cultural transformation and negotiation.

Also exhibited are cubist and surrealist works by artists such as Georges Henein and Ramses Younan, co-founder of the 1940s Art and Liberty Group, a movement that emerged as a platform for cultural and political reform. A number of text panels from a 2010 project dubbed "Prestige of Terror", by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, a South African-born, London-based artist duo that focused on the Art and Liberty Group, lunges forward into the 21st century. The text staring back at you has compelling contemporary relevance -- "Bread and Freedom," one paper reads, echoing the chants that erupted during the January 25 Revolution.

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Other gripping works by international artists also appear across the exhibit. For instance, photos of the occupation-era Sakakini Palace in Cairo (where the blockbuster *Yacoubian Building* movie was shot) by Russian artist Xenia Nikloskaya, from her series "Dust" shot between 2006 and 2012, are poignant reminders of the unsympathetic effect of time and neglect on the city's historical buildings.

The pièce de résistance is possibly the mixed media installation by contemporary Egyptian artist Bassem Yousri titled *It's Not as Easy as It May Have Seemed to Be*, depicting miniature figurines gone rogue in a makeshift museum. The unruly ivory-colored figures spread out across the walls and floor to create a sense of motion and engage with the works on display; they pull paintings out of frames, climb the walls to reach artwork. It is a refreshing take on a process that is otherwise so orderly. The installation has an undeniable energy, despite the lack of color.

Yousri's installation leads visitors onto the next sections of the exhibition, which tackle how works of art are modified by the act of museuming or through a discourse with the public. In a sense, the curators assess how a mise-en-scène is created for artwork in a way that generates meanings and functions not originally intended by the artist, while assessing the literary and aesthetic language of "expositioning" as a vehicle for presenting a different culture and how the audience ultimately consumes and interacts with the art.

Moreover, artworks could function as cultural cartographies, providing insight into the culture in which they were created. A mixed-media installation by Alaa Younis, commissioned by PhotoCairo4 in 2008, revolves around Nefertiti, not the queen this time, but rather a sewing machine produced immediately after the 1952 military coup that overthrew the monarchy in Egypt. The pistachio-colored machine, named after an icon of the glorious Pharaonic past, was part of a grandiose modernisation scheme ultimately proved unsuccessful. The sewing machine, and its smooth recognisable body, has been imprinted in the collective memory of the nation. In a way, it is an icon for a more nationalistic time.

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Because of the sheer diversity of the artwork exhibited, the stroll around the exhibition has its poignant moments, its nostalgic moments, as well as some downright amusing others. You stumble upon a life-size mummy reclining in none other than a plastic Tupperware container with a sky blue lid. In this sculpture by Vik Muniz, entitled Tupperware Sarcophagus, the artist explores how ancient history is essentially packaged today.

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While many artists, exhibition halls (local and global) and audiences have been caught up in experiencing the revolutionary art that has emerged in the Arab region during its "spring," this project was pursued by curators Bardaouil and Fellrath fundamentally as an exercise to eliminate literal and simplistic associations between artworks and the politics of revolution. "Let the art speak for itself," was the main aim.

Tea and conversation on an ahwa (street café) in any boisterous Cairo alleyway is commonplace. This exhibition held in Qatar, and now in Paris, invites a diverse and international audience to experience a contemporary moment in Egyptian art by exploring the evolution of its art scene.

The exhibition is therefore a nuanced addition to the discourse on Egyptian and Arab art that strays away from the limited post-revolutionary contemporary moment as well as from the broad, outdated approach in which Ancient Egyptian art and eccentricity characterised its entire cultural identity. It does not impose a specific narrative or identity; you get to know Nefertiti over tea.

Tea with Nefertiti is now on display at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris until 8 September 2013. Prior to Paris, it was exhibited at Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar, from 17 November 2012 to 31 March 2013.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/79592.aspx>