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MOATAZ NASR

RETOUR D'ÉGYPTÉ

GALLERIA CONTINUA | Paris - From February 3, 2023

GALLERIA CONTINUA is glad to present the first solo exhibition dedicated to international Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr in its Parisian space. Nasr was recently presented on the French artistic scene thanks to various collective exhibitions: 2021 at the Regional Museum of Contemporary Art of Occitanie/Pyrénées-Méditerranée, in 2019 at the Tuileries Garden during FIAC Hors les Murs, as well as in 2018 at the Palais de la Porte Dorée - National Museum of the History of Immigration in Paris. The works presented in *Retour d'Égypte* retrace the last fifteen years of the artist's production, navigating between the political, social and identity issues that cross the North of the African continent and the Middle East, as well as the multiple exchanges and cultural influences with Western culture.

The exhibition begins with *Craquele*, a work from 2019 in which Moataz Nasr presents an incomplete map of the Middle East made of white porcelain. The candor and delicacy of the porcelain is however disturbed by fine cracks all over its surface. Exposing the balance and fragility of a complex multicultural and political coexistence, the artist highlights the many breakages and upheavals affecting the world today.

The precarious balance of society, as well as its fragility, are perfectly illustrated by the matches used by the artist for a series of works which we find in the exhibition: *The Flower* (2013) and *Beetle* (2023). It is an idea that the artist has nurtured since his early childhood. His grandfather often compared the caducity of human life to the fragility of the match, emphasizing however that in

this fragility a strength of conflagration also resides. Fire, capable to destroy or create, sleeps inside everyone. In *The Flower*, the motif was taken from a plate from the Fatimid period exhibited in the Cairo Museum and which was successively damaged by a series of attacks which shook Egypt at the dawn of the third anniversary of the Revolution of 2011.

This iconography of the griffin (legendary creature, often represented by the body of a horse, the wings of an eagle, the head of a rooster and the ears of a horse) is present both in *The Flower* and in the imposing leather sculpture *The return of a Griffin* (2013) which welcomes the visitor. This work, produced for the exhibition *The Journey of a Griffin* in 2013 in Santa Croce sull'Arno, a small town in Tuscany which since the 18th century has been the heart of Italian tanneries, testifies to the multiple links and influences between the Arab world and the Mediterranean basin until today. A replica of a sculpture of a griffin (the original sculpture is kept in the Pisa Cathedral Museum) tops Pisa's cathedral, near Santa Croce sull'Arno. This iconographic motif underwent a complex development during the 1st millennium BC, and its main function has always been that of an apotropaic being (who protects and wards off bad luck) and its first representation in the iconographic form that we know (half lion, half eagle) goes back to ancient Phoenician territories, located in modern Lebanon and coastal Syria. The Pisa griffin still raises many questions as to its exact origin. Probably of Islamic origin, it would have been produced between Al-Andalus (territories of the Iberian Peninsulas and part of southern France,

which was under Muslim domination between the 8th and 15th centuries) and Fatimid Egypt.

Another legendary motif that features in the exhibition is that of Apophis, the eponym of the work produced in 2019. Divinity of chaos and darkness in Ancient Egypt, this sinuous serpent, each bump of which symbolizes a moment of difficulty, appears in Egyptian iconography during times of political and social unrest. Standing threatening on its legs, or rather on its human feet, for the artist it symbolizes the past and present difficulties of his country. At each sunrise, legend has it that Apophis is defeated by the divinity Bastet.

This constant struggle between good and evil is a tale in history that is constantly repeated, another example of which is the video *The Mountain* (2017) presented at the Egyptian Pavilion of the 57th Venice Biennale. This contemporary fable addresses the constant and universal conflict between an enlightened youth and a conservative institution. Moataz Nasr uses *The Mountain* as a metaphor for triumph over the "demon" of the village (fear) who lives on top of the mountain and terrorizes the villagers after sunset. Taking her father's staff, arguably a symbol of patriarchal authority, a little girl, Zein climbs the mountain, cautiously followed by the villagers, and stabs the demon through its heart before falling to the ground, inert, leaving onlookers ignorant of his fate.

The final triumph is presented in the work *Ya Wadod* (2011). Here Moataz Nasr reveals the key or at least suggests us a path that is to be followed. Meaning "compassion", the key appears descending from the ceiling, like a call, a prayer intended for us. The subtle transparency of the alabaster underlines the mystical aspect of the work, and becomes a good omen for humanity.

Retour d'Égypte thus explores traditions and history but also geopolitics, sociology, Sufism: themes that populate and nourish the artist's works. By questioning the links woven between East and West, Moataz Nasr reveals the unstable balance of our time.

Moataz Nasr, born in 1961 in Alexandria, Egypt, is a major international figure in contemporary art. A committed, self-taught painter and sculptor, he abandoned his initial career in economics to follow his passion and become, today, one of the greatest representatives of contemporary pan-Arab art. His work sheds light on the complex cultural processes taking place in the Islamic world. Going beyond idiosyncrasies and geographical borders, his work expresses the worries and torments of the African continent.

Moataz Nasr together with artists of his generation, he founded Townhouse in Cairo in 1998, the first independent exhibition space in the country's history. The victory of the Grand Prize of the 8th Cairo International Biennale in 2001 established him as an international artist. Group shows include "The See Is My Land", curated by Francesco Bonomi and Emanuela Mazzonis (MAXXI, Rome, 2013); "Arab Contemporary Architecture, Culture, and Identity" (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, 2014); "Metropolis. Afriques Capitales", curated by Simon Njami (La Villette, Paris, 2017); "Senses of Time: Video and Film-based Arts of Africa" (LACMA and The Smithsonian National Museum of African Arts, Washington, 2017); Yinchuan Biennale, curated by Marco Scotini (Yinchuan, 2018), International Contemporary Art Exhibition, curated by Mazdak Faiznia (Yerevan, 2018). In 2017, he was selected to represent Egypt during the 57th Venice Biennale, the work presented in the Egyptian Pavilion was an immersive installation showing the original film "The Mountain". In 2018, Nasr has been invited to take part in "Abu Dhabi Art 2018 Beyond" and create a site-specific work in the historic sites in Al Ain. In 2019 he was invited to take part in the Havana Biennial and participated in Fiac Hors Les Murs with the installation of the work Sun Boat at Les Tuileries. Among the most recent solo shows are, in 2019 "The Liminal Space", in Castel del Monte, Andria, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, and "Paradise Lost" in Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, curated by Simon Njami. In 2021 Moataz Nasr won the "AVIFF-Art Film Festival" Cannes Award with the original film "The Mountain", on view at *Retour d'Égypte*, GALLERIA CONTINUA, Paris. In 2023, he will participate with an important work at the inaugural edition of the Islamic Arts Biennale: Awwal Bait.