

MOATAZ NASR - *The Tunnel*

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*Sometimes I feel as if I am holding a large loop to make things clear and seen for those who can't or maybe can
but avoiding and sometimes in some work I act like a channel, a channel to bring to life people's screams.*
Moataz Nasr

Galleria Continua is pleased to announce *The Tunnel* the first solo exhibition by Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr in China, one of the leading exponents of contemporary pan-Arab art.

Showing complex cultural processes currently underway in the Islamic world, the work of Moataz Nasr surpasses idiosyncrasies and geographical limits and voices the worries and torments of the African continent. The feeling of belonging to a specific geopolitical and cultural context and the need to maintain a link with his homeland are key elements of the artist's life and work. Art and life are inseparable for him. His childhood memories, frustrations and the society in which he is evolving seem to fuel his paintings, sculptures, videos and installations. Moataz Nasr's work concerns Egypt with its traditions, people, colours, without ever slipping into the exoticism or creating distance. It appears, on the contrary, close to everyone's preoccupations. In fact, Egypt is just a background, a territory inhabited by human beings whose fragility is universal, as are indifference, powerlessness and solitude, weaknesses inherent in human nature.

Commenting on the show, the curator Simon Njami writes: *The Tunnel is a concept of confinement, of fear, of uncertainty. It could be argued that it is a metaphor for a state of illness whose outcome is unknown. All that is known is that it's curable. That there is hope. And that it's necessary to struggle to keep the flame of life burning. The tunnel is a dark place. A sort of hell that we enter of our own free will and by trial and error. We advance by fits and starts, cautiously, afraid of bumping into a wall at each step. It is underground, like the kingdom of Hades, a subtle prison that prevents people from seeing the sun. And we are forced to return to a state of infancy. Which imprisons us in a disturbing and hostile anti-nature. The artist straightaway places us in a clear opposition between darkness and light, freedom and imprisonment, joy and sorrow. Contrasting, contradictory concepts that, through their opposition, create the tension that is at the root of this exhibition presenting the schizophrenia through which the countries of the Middle East and the Maghreb are passing, like an epidemic. The tunnel to which Moataz Nasr refers obviously reflects the way that he perceives the situation in which his own country, Egypt, finds itself.*

[...] The system set up by the artist at the Galleria Continua illustrates the tension between the visible and the invisible, this age-old opposition between the principle of desire and that of reality which obliges the Egyptian people to carry out a permanent renegotiation of its daily situation. The visible, the reality, is the exterior. It is the makeshift walls that have turned Tahrir Square into a fortified high-security camp. In the exhibition, the omnipresence of a Big Brother that aims to control lives and thoughts is represented by balloons, a metaphor for the police. Balloons that block the view, that obstruct and prevent us from seeing what is happening further away. We have to clear ourselves a way through them to get to a more open space, which could be, even if the artist is not necessarily aware of it, the now mythical Tahrir Square. We cannot escape the drawing that takes up the whole of a wall and dominates the space by imparting to it its rhythm. This allegory, which looms over the whole structure, would suffice, in itself, to sum up the concept of the exhibition. A sort of pyramidal staircase at whose summit is set an eagle, the emblem of Egypt. Symbol of a dream whose fulfilment, apparently within our reach, requires a special effort. Laid out around this main axis, the ideal to be attained, we find, face to face, the people and their potential tormenters. The crowd and the city, represented by Cairo Walk, men and women, painted in these twenty-five figurines on shelves, like passive objects that allude to Chinese sculptural traditions, and the three Falcons. There is no need here to dwell on the meaning of these birds of prey that for a while appeared on the Egyptian flag. There are also eagles made out of matchsticks, a technique of which the artist is fond.

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To get there we follow a man, from the back, projected onto a wall, who seems to be showing us the way. The elevation in itself, the effort required by the ascent, is an invitation to calm and concentration. We are going to gain access to the inner space, that of meditation and mental strength. The strength that makes it possible to defy and to resist. The dervishes, the lions and the neon light that illustrates Ibn Arabi's profession of faith are all elements that allude to reflection, to calm. The same lions, guardians of the Qasr al-Nil Bridge in Cairo, that Nasr has made one-eyed in a photomontage which we will find upstairs. Strength carries no weight in this universe. It is rendered absurd by the harmony of the proposals. And the artist proves, if there were any need, that real power is not to be found in extreme demonstrations, but inside ourselves. It is only this calm and this asceticism that allow us to find the path of light.

*The last stage brings together new pieces and old ones. The eagle, in all its glory, keeps watch. It will not allow the falcons to deprive Egyptians of their aspirations. On the skins, two inscriptions that tell us we have finally emerged from the tunnel. The first, taken from Sufi philosophy, signifies "light on light". And the second is the sign of infinity. We might think that we can rest at last. Let ourselves go. Forget. That would not be at all like the artist, who is reminding us that the battle is not over. That it is necessary to maintain our vigilance and the spirit of freedom. That freedom is a daily struggle that involves us all. The one-eyed lion is there to remind us of the tunnel. And, if there were still any need, the video *The Echo* completes the discourse. In this journey through time that shows us two Egypts faced with the same problems, at a distance of some forty years. Perhaps the exhibition *Le tunnel* represents the third facet of this forever unfulfilled quest.*

Moataz Nasr was born in 1961 in Alexandria (Egypt). He lives and works in Cairo. After studying economics, he decided to change direction and take a studio in Old Cairo. This self-taught artist gained local recognition marked by many prizes before breaking into the international art scene in 2001, notably winning the Grand Prix at the 8th International Cairo Biennial.

The artist has participated in many important international art events, including the Venice Biennale (2003), the Seoul Biennale (2004), the Sao Paulo Biennale (2004), the Yokohama Triennale (2005), the Canarie Biennale (2008), the Lubumbashi Biennale (2010), the Thessaloniki Biennale (2011) and group events such as *Arte all'Arte* (San Gimignano, 2004), *Africa Remix* (Kunst Palast, Dusseldorf, 2004; Hayward Gallery, London, 2005; Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2005; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2006; Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2007), *Ghosts of Self and State* (Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2006) and, last but not least, a solo exhibition at The Khalid Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun, Amman, Jordan, 2006. The most recent group shows to which he has contributed include: *Machine-RAUM*, Vejle Art Museum and Spinning Factory, Vejle, Denmark, 2007/2011; *Traversées (Crossings)*, Grand Palais, Paris, France, 2008; *Les Recanters Internationales de la Photo*, Centre Cervantes, Fes, Morocco, 2008; *MidEast Cut*, The Danish Film Institute & Backyard Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark (2009); *African contemporary art*, Exhibition Center, Algiers, Algeria, 2008; *Made in Afrika*, National Museum, Nairobi, Kenya, 2008; *Taswir, Islamische Bildwelten und moderne*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Germany, 2008; *21st Century: Art in the first Decade*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, 2010; *Time After Time: Actions and Interactions*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, USA, 2012.

In the sufi garden site specific-installations *The Maze-The People Want the Fall of the Regime* (Château de Blandy-les-Tours, Blandy, France; Gothenburg, Sweden; Jardin des Tuileries, Paris, France, 2011) Nasr uses the Egyptian slogan cried out in Tahrir square, the same one that gathered together like in one and only strong body thousands of people fighting for freedom in his country and beyond, starting the Arabian spring.

In 2008 Moataz Nasr founded Darb 1718, a non-profit cultural and exhibition centre in the middle of Cairo, the mission of which is to promote Egyptian contemporary art and a knowledge of international art, to create an archive of works and to set up and maintain an up-to-date, on-line archive of Egyptian art. Darb 1718 also organizes seminars, screenings and projects in order to inform and heighten the awareness of the local community.