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1 February 2026

The Gulf State of Art

On the eve of Art Basel's arrival in Doha, the fair's inaugural artistic director, Wael Shawky, previews his vision for a more intimate regional fair—and opens up about the future of the Gulf art scene.



"Success, for me, is seeing artists properly encountered, galleries feeling supported, and audiences staying longer than they expected," says Art Basel Qatar artistic director Wael Shawky. Photo: Jinane Ennassi/Courtesy of Art Basel

This week, Art Basel Qatar will launch in Doha—the first fair produced by the Swiss art giant in partnership with local entities Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) and QC+. It's a unique arrangement in many ways. While Art Basel's other fairs have been driven by organic commercial opportunities, this one is meant to prime the pump of arts infrastructure growth in Doha. To that end, they've brought on the Egyptian artist **Wael Shawky** to serve as artistic director.

Shawky is the founder of MASS Alexandria, an independent studio program for young artists in the ancient city. Since 2024, he's been the artistic director of duties at the Doha Fire Station, a repurposed civil defense installation now acting as a hybrid art production, exhibition, and education space. I spoke with Shawky recently about his role in the fair, the changes he's seen in Doha, and the rise of the Gulf's art market. The below, in Shawky's own words, has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Birth of a Fair

Over time, I've seen Doha change incredibly. It's changed physically, of course, but more importantly I've seen the city develop a long-term commitment to building cultural infrastructure through museums, education, and residency programs. The patience required to do that right is rare, and is what made me willing to take on roles here that I would not take elsewhere.

So when Art Basel asked me to help shape a first edition of their new fair in Doha, with a format that departs from the traditional booth model, I was open to it. To me, it mattered that they were not interested in merely reproducing an existing model in a new geography—trying to replicate what they do in Paris or Miami here in the Gulf. Many of the works you'll see at the fair engage with memory, migration, identity, belief, architecture—issues that resonate deeply in the Gulf.

At the beginning, the role of "artistic director" was largely conceptual. It was about defining a position as it evolved: What does it mean for an art fair to be artist-led, and how far could we push that idea without losing the integrity of the platform? Once the work began in earnest, the role became much more grounded in reality: conversations with artists, galleries, institutions, partners, and the city itself. My role is to treat the art fair not only as a marketplace, but as a cultural and educational platform that responds to the realities of this region and the changing art world.

What evolved was a balance between vision and structure. I found myself mediating between the different complexities of artistic thinking, logistics, and the expectations of a global art market. In many ways, the role became less about directing and more about protecting space: for artists, for context, and for forms of engagement that don't always survive within a conventional fair format.

Art of the Gulf

I've spent a lot of time thinking about the fair's theme of "Becoming." It's not just decorative, but also a working condition, and the concept shaped very concrete decisions, particularly the focus on single-artist presentations and the move away from dense booth accumulation. This allows for narration, for continuity, and for works to exist within their own logic rather than being reduced to fragments.

"Becoming" reflects both the region and the fair itself. The Gulf is often described in terms of arrival or spectacle, but its reality is far more layered—historically, culturally, and socially. The fair mirrors that condition. It positions itself as an evolving platform, open to change, learning, and adjustment. It demonstrates that the organizers are interested in credibility built over time and their commitment to developing new markets for its global community of galleries, artists, collectors, and the public.

Critics of the Gulf's investment in sports or art often flatten very different realities into a single narrative. And though art is not outside politics, it is also not simply a tool. The question is not *why* art exists here, but *how*. Cultural production in the region is not new, nor is it superficial. What has changed is the visibility and the infrastructure supporting it. Reducing serious artistic and cultural initiatives to "laundering" ignores the agency of artists, curators, and audiences, and assumes culture exists only to serve power. That is a very limited way of understanding how art actually works.

"The City Becomes Part of the Art Fair"

This inaugural Qatar version will be a smaller fair than you may be used to from Art Basel, with just 87 galleries presenting. Keeping it at a focused scale allows us to engage closely with artists and galleries, to slow the pace, prioritize curatorial thinking and engagement, and make a more effective statement.

For audiences, it changes the experience entirely. You are invited to spend time, to reflect, to look again without the pressure to run off to the next booth. That kind of engagement is essential if the fair is to function not only as a marketplace, but also as a space of learning and encounter, where international galleries can discover local and regional artists, and vice versa.

From the outset, we knew we wanted to place artistic practices from the region at the center of the fair, which meant making sure that galleries and artists from across the MENASA region and the wider Global South were well represented. That intention was reflected in the makeup of the selection committee, which included both leading MENASA and international gallerists, as well as in our special projects commissions.

For these commissions, we conceived of Msheireb Downtown Doha not as a backdrop, but as an active participant. By placing works in public and heritage spaces, we allow art to intersect with daily life, with people who may not plan to visit the art fair at all. This gesture challenges the idea that contemporary art belongs in enclosed cultural spaces. The city becomes part of the art fair, and the fair becomes part of the city's rhythm.

Integrating the two is a crucial component of this first edition because we're trying to make the fair feel like an extension of Doha and build a certain infrastructure. For a long time, artists in the region worked without a full ecosystem around them: limited galleries, few collectors, and little connection between education and the professional art world. Art Basel Qatar cannot solve this alone, but it can intervene by creating visibility, encouraging galleries to take risks, and connecting artists to institutions and markets without forcing them to conform.

Success, for me, is seeing artists properly encountered, galleries feeling supported, and audiences staying longer than they expected. It also means narrowing the gap between artists and the art market—to the benefit of both sides—and opening space for new forms of artistic discourse to emerge.

Directing a fair does not give you control; it gives you responsibility. My role is not to dictate meaning, but to create conditions for encounters. Interpretation belongs to those who enter the space. The fair, like history, is something that becomes complete only when others begin to inhabit it.



LISSON GALLERY

Wallpaper*
18 July 2025

Wallpaper*

Wael Shawky explores a theatrical moment in history in Edinburgh

Pull strings to get there if you can, as the Egyptian artist presents the third film in his 'The Crusades Cabaret' trilogy, at Talbot Rice Gallery



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbalaa*, 2015. Film Still
(Image credit: © Wael Shawky; Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary)

Talbot Rice Gallery sits in the centre of Edinburgh, and is soon to be flooded by almost half a million visitors attending the annual [Edinburgh International Festival \(1-24 August\)](#). The gallery is participating in the festival for the first time with its new exhibition by artist Wael Shawky, who has just been announced as the artistic director of the inaugural edition of [Art Basel Qatar](#) in 2026. Shawky has just opened an exhibition [I Am Hymns of the New Temples](#) at [LUMA Arles](#) that stages his film of the same name as a monumental site specific installation in La Grande Halle. The exhibition which features sculpture and objects from the film itself follows the goddess Gaia through Pompeii where she encounters many ancient figures under the shadow of Mount Vesuvius.

His eight-part opera, *Drama 1882* (2024), was one of the most popular works at the Venice Biennale 2024, and spans the mediums of film, music, drawing, puppetry and performance, exploring moments in history with a focus on Egypt and the Middle East.

His trilogy of films, *The Cabaret Crusades*, which arguably made him famous, explores events during the Christian Crusades in the Middle East, the narratives acted out by glass marionettes who speak and sing their way through historical happenings (the first film covers 1096-1099; the second, 1099- 1149). By presenting the past in this way, Shawky raises questions about events we are living through today, offering an often-missing context for relationships between the West, Egypt and the Middle East.



Wael Shawky. *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbalaa*, 2015. Film Still

(Image credit: © Wael Shawky; Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary)

At Talbot Rice (until 28 September 2025), he is presenting the third film in this trilogy, *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015) – rooted in the period between the Second and Third Crusades in the 12th century – with *Drama 1882*, which explores the events of the Urabi revolt (1879-1882) against the British colonial power in Egypt. Set 700 years apart, these works raise many questions.

‘Both films speak about a shift that’s happening in the Middle East and in Egypt,’ says Shawky. ‘Both of them show this theatrical moment in history and ask how we can deal with history, as if it’s staged. It is not about conspiracy, it’s more about the possibility of being cheated. There is this possibility of a set-up.’

The sense in both of these films, that events are set in motion through deception, or a lack of understanding, is thrown into relief by the lack of trust there is in the media today. Almost every historical moment can feel like a sleight of hand. Looking back at events in this way highlights how little has changed and how much remains unresolved.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbalaa (Marionette)*, 2014. Murano glass
(Image credit: © Wael Shawky; Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary)

‘I learned a lot from my
experience with marionettes
– human, marionette, they’re
all hypnotised, they’re all
manipulated by something’

WAEEL SHAWKY

‘This possibility of being cheated – and of a different type of analysis, because history is human creation – [prompts us to ask] what we know about history, and how we can transform this [...] into a new, readable format,’ continues the artist.

The muted colours and the exaggerated, almost cuddly caricatures of the puppets take us somewhere else, and the sound and lure of the glass figures are transfixing. *The Secrets Of Karbala* is a two-hour epic that traces the history leading up to the Venetian attack on Constantinople (in 1204), and takes in the lust for power and money that led to events that then seemed unthinkable.

Both films are musical, and while we are carried along in their aesthetic beauty and the singing, we are transported in time and place. *Drama 1882* features adult actors rather than puppets, or children, as in other of Shawky's works, and is no less transfixing than *The Secrets of Karbala*.

‘There is the connection between both of them, then the connection of time and my own development,’ says the artist. ‘When I work with adults, I learned a lot from my experience with marionettes – human, marionette, they’re all hypnotised, they’re all manipulated by something.’

‘History is repeating itself,
but history is happening like
this today because 1,000
years ago, something
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disappear’

WAEEL SHAWKY

In Edinburgh, the films are shown alongside the marionettes from *The Secrets of Karbala*, each glass puppet dressed in its costume. These objects, made in Murano to embody Venice's role in the story, are shown suspended from their strings, in a rare opportunity to see them up close. They are shown alongside drawings and mixed-media works, lesser-seen aspects of Shawky's practice.

'I compose only for my films and for me, really,' he says of his musical elements. 'Let's consider music as a medium; I don't give it more space than it should have. I think anyone can make art. I think it is all these things that are inside of us; I really believe in what Joseph Beuys said – that everyone is an artist.'



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, 2015. Film Still

(Image credit: © Wael Shawky; Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary)

The most powerful thing about Shawky's work is how it evolves in the ever-changing context of the present. In a matter of weeks, Edinburgh will be filled with visitors from all over the world. Shawky feels that in presenting this work, questioning the status quo of the institution it sits in is one of the strongest aspects of the exhibition.

'I produced three parts of *Cabaret Crusades*, showing the Crusades story from the Arab point of view,' he says. 'I produced one in Italy, one in France, one in Germany. Let's say these [countries] are the main forces behind the Crusades, right? That, for me, is something extremely positive, that Europe is [willing] to talk about its own history, even if it's bloody, if it's not correct. I think it's also extremely positive that we're able as human beings to talk about everything. It's very important that you try to see this idea that it's not that history is repeating itself, but history is happening like this today because 1,000 years ago, something happened that will never disappear.'

Wael Shawky at Talbot Rice until 28 September 2025, trg.ed.ac.uk★

LISSON GALLERY

Art Asia Pacific
14 July 2025



One on One: Lin Jingjing on Wael Shawky

For the One on One in AAP's 144 issue, Chinese-born multimedia artist Lin Jingjing (aka Lov-Lov) reflects on her first encounter with Wael Shawky's video work at the 2024 Venice Biennale.



Installation view of **Wael Shawky's** *Drama 1882*, 45 min, at the Egyptian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, 2024. Courtesy the artist; Lisson Gallery, New York; Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut; Lia Rumma, Naples/Milan; and Barakat Contemporary, Seoul.

When I first encountered Egyptian artist Wael Shawky's 45-minute video *Drama 1882* at the 2024 Venice Biennale, I felt hypnotized, utterly defenseless, as though I had stepped into a different density of time. Shot in an historic theater in Alexandria, the musical features 150 costumed performers, enacting eight highly stylized scenes drawn from the late 19th-century 'Urabi revolt in Egypt. That conflict, I later learned, went on for three years (1879–82) and was crazily complex, with Turkish, French, British, and Egyptian factions vying for control of Lower Egypt. Today the whole dispute bears the name of Ahmed 'Urabi, an Egyptian colonel who won popular support with the rallying cry "Egypt for Egyptians!"

Shawky, now 54 and a veteran of numerous exhibitions at top-tier international venues—chose to focus on the most critical and violent phase of the uprising. In his telling, the crisis began with the murder of a local donkey owner by an anonymous Maltese man and culminated in a face-off between Alexandria residents and British troops, resulting in the deaths of approximately 300 Egyptians. The event marked the end of Ottoman control over the region and precipitated decades of British colonial rule in the Middle East.

The artist questions whether the cafe brawl was a mere coincidence, as officially recorded, or a ploy orchestrated by the British to help justify their subsequent bombardment of the city and the 70-plus years of colonial occupation that followed (1882–1956).

Shawky—who studied painting as an undergraduate at the University of Alexandria and earned an MFA at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia—composed, choreographed, and directed *Drama 1882*. Performed in classical Arabic, the work blurs the boundaries between film, performance, installation, painting, and sculpture. Shawky has long been known for examining contemporary culture through the lens of historical tradition.

His approach is metaphorical, not didactic. “This is not a truth we can truly rely on—it is a form of storytelling,” he told *The New York Times* in 2024. “My work always oscillates between myth and reality, between doubting history and believing in it. As long as gaps in knowledge exist, as long as ignorance persists, we are still making art.”

Although I knew little about the ‘Urabi revolt beforehand, *Drama 1882* consumed me with its overwhelming force. The sets resemble sculptural installations. The characters—whether alone or in groups—move in deliberately slow, sometimes forward-leaning or backward-tilting postures. Their strange and unnatural motions are neither a matter of personal rhythm nor of spontaneous emotional expression. Rather, they create slow-motion sequences dictated by an overarching narrative—a vortex of fate and memory imbued with an alien sense of time.

In this work, time is elongated and suspended, forcing us to “see” it, to witness how it is deconstructed, stretched, and replayed. Slow motion transforms chronology into a tangible texture, thickening emotions—whether terror, sorrow, or ecstasy—and infusing them with a symbolic weight. It is as if time has become a sluggish current, a floating reality—trapped in repetition, yet persistently striving for an illusory order for its fragmented narratives.

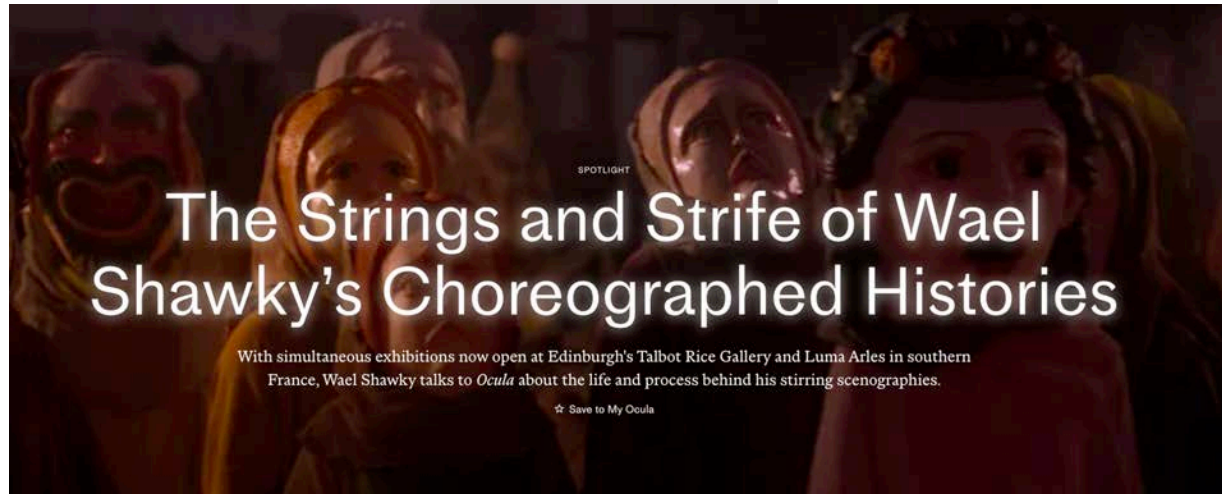
In an age dominated by short videos and explosive, constantly updated news reports, we have adopted a consumerist mode of viewing—rapid ingestion, instant reaction, quick forgetting. Shawky’s use of slow motion resists this tendency; it is a deliberate act of defiance. It forces us to pause, to enter an uncomfortable, unfamiliar, yet irresistible experiment, hovering between inevitability and agency.

Although *Drama 1882* grapples with weighty historical themes, Shawky weaves in unexpected elements—singing, puppetry, and even ironic dialogue. He does not gloss over the brutal realities of the ‘Urabi revolt—the failure of the uprising and Egypt’s subjugation to British colonial rule. Yet rather than presenting history as a fixed sequence of events, Shawky emphasizes its fluidity, defying his viewers’ hope for order and logic, subjecting them to endlessly deferred expectations. His retelling of history ebbs and flows like the tide, leaving behind only traces, echoes, contradictions, and the violent tremors of interpretation and misinterpretation.

I saw *Drama 1882* at a crucial personal moment, when I was already engaged in creating an artist identity named “Lov-Lov,” an entity without gender or personal background. An artificial intelligence creation, existing out of nothing yet capable of anything, Lov-Lov purports to match participants with romantic partners custom-made to fulfill their every desire—much like how Shawky adapts the past to suit current social or psychological needs. In works like the recent 15-meter-wide video projection *Life as a Rumor* (2025), Lov-Lov nurtures the absurd, the surreal, the poetic, even the unbelievable, aiming to reveal the paradoxes of human reality.

Ocula
07 July 2025

OCULA



Wael Shawky's works are feats of imagination and craftsmanship. Taking on monumental historical events that have redrawn national borders and violently displaced vast swathes of people, his expansive films and installations weave together ancient texts and narrative storytelling through puppetry and painting. At last year's Venice Biennale, his filmed musical play *Drama 1882* (2024) showed at the Egyptian Pavilion, delving into the country's nationalist 'Urabi Revolution, with a hypnotic rhythm driving his performers' speech and movements. The trilogy 'Cabaret Crusades' (2010–2015) recounts the history of the Crusades from an Arab perspective.

Viewers of his work will undoubtedly recognise history repeating itself. 'Cabaret Crusades' was released the same year as the Arab Spring in 2010, a movement that he notes has already become warped in its retelling. The Western brutality in *Drama 1882* echoed Israel's genocidal onslaught of Gaza when the work premiered in early 2024. While Shawky recognises that many of his pieces are searingly relevant to the times in which they are made, he intentionally avoids drawing specific contemporary comparisons. He focuses on the broader idea that the past becomes warped, erased, forgotten, and repeated—that his pieces would likely feel relevant whenever they happened to be released because the same patterns keep playing out. His research veers into fable at times, entangled with history, as in *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* (2023), an exploration of Greek mythology filmed amongst Pompeii's archaeological remains.

Artnet News
09 July 2025

artnet

Wael Shawky Named Artistic Director of Inaugural Art Basel Qatar

The fair has announced the Egyptian artist as a key lead for its first edition, as well as details about the fair format and its selection committee.



Wael Shawky, Artistic Director, Art Basel Qatar, photographed in Basel in June 2025. Photography by Matthieu Croizier for Art Basel. Courtesy of Art Basel.

As **Art Basel** prepares to launch its debut event in the Middle East, the Swiss fair group has tapped Egyptian artist **Wael Shawky** as artistic director of **Art Basel Qatar**.

Known for blending regional history and global myth in his own work, the Doha-based artist—who represented Egypt at the **60th Venice Biennale** in 2024—will work alongside **Vincenzo de Bellis**, chief artistic officer, global director of Art Basel fairs, to shape the curatorial vision of the new fair, which aims to spotlight the Gulf’s rising role in the global art ecosystem. While de Bellis will steer the business aspects of the fair, Shawky will be at the helm of its framework.

“It’s great to be part of helping establish this professional market in the whole region, not only in Doha,” said Shawky in a video call. “I believe that to have a complete system, you need to have museums, you need to have an audience, you need to have artists—but also you need to have an art market, which is something really important that Art Basel is bringing to Doha.”

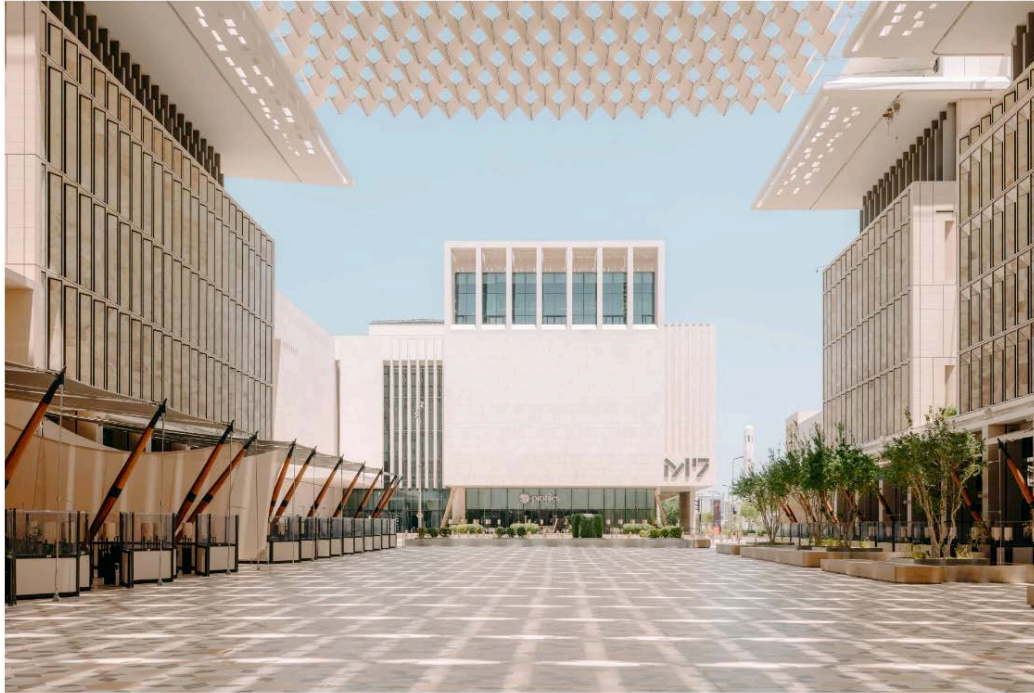
The Doha fair will run February 5 to 7, 2026, with preview days on February 3 and 4.

Earlier this spring, the fair announced its plans to expand to the Middle East, beginning with a fair numbering around 50 participating galleries in downtown Doha across two venues: **M7** and the **Doha Design District**.

The news of its fifth fair comes as the art market faces significant stagnation, sending its players on the hunt for new horizons. **Sotheby’s** had its first auction in **Saudi Arabia** in February and, in June, a group of five art market rainmakers launched a new advisory firm called **New Perspectives** that will have the Middle East as a major focus. Qatar is also increasingly becoming a power player in the west, inaugurating the **Qatar Pavilion** in Venice’s Giardini della Biennale next year.

“There has been a lot of curiosity and positivity since we announced,” said de Bellis in a video interview. “The industry has already been in Qatar, but it is still a novelty for many people, which is why it is so exciting for many of us.” He added that the news of other initiatives looking to the region is a welcome sign.

“We are happy to see that independently and separately from us, there is other activity happening in the region, which only shows the strength of the region,” he said. “Qatar is the home base, but this is an entire region we are thinking about.”



M7 in Doha, where the first edition of Art Basel Qatar will be held. Courtesy of Art Basel

New Approaches

The endeavor of Art Basel Qatar is a partnership with **Qatar Sports Investments** (QSI)—an investor in sports, culture, entertainment, and lifestyle that supported the **FIFA World Cup** in 2022—and **QC+**, a cultural commerce strategic collective under **Qatar Museums**.

While the appointment of an artist to co-lead an art fair might seem like an unusual move, Shawky, who works with **Lisson, Talbot Rice Gallery, Lia Rumma**, and **Sfier-Smeler**, is already involved in institutional programming in Qatar. In November of last year, the artist was named artistic director of Qatar Museums' creative hub, Fire Station: Artist in Residence, where he oversees the fostering of emerging artists from Qatar and the region and intends to build out an educational program.

Other Basel fairs have typically been led by gallerists, and individual sectors by curators—Shawky's institutional experience and deep ties to the region makes for a comfortable fit to work alongside de Bellis.

"I have a huge amount of respect for Wael's work as an artist and also for his knowledge of the region," said de Bellis. "We have always hired people who are very rooted within where we operate... [Wael] is a well-rounded art professional; while being always and first and foremost an artist, he is also able to look at things through a wider lens."



Vincenzo de Bellis. Courtesy of Art Basel.

A New Fair Layout

Further details have been revealed about what to expect from the layout: the fair, which is focused on around 50 galleries, will not have traditional booths.

Think of the open concept of Unlimited with the focused presentations of the Feature sector, yet with single artistic positions. Art Basel Qatar will not, de Bellis clarified, be presenting work on the scale of Unlimited. Galleries can expect a fixed price for each “booth,” similar to its special sectors; space allotted to each will be roughly identical, save for some minor differences depending on the projects being presented.

The wall-less booth approach will be continuous across its twin venues, which are walking distance apart, with what de Bellis called a “connective tissue” of **Barahat Msheireb** square between them. This in-between space will be activated with art installations, similar to the Parcours sector in **Art Basel in Basel**.

The Selection Process

Shawky will also guide the gallery selection process in consultation with the fair's new selection committee. Getting let into Art Basel, which is highly competitive, is determined via a peer-driven selection procedure with committees specific to each fair. For Doha, they are: **Lorenzo Fiaschi**, of Galleria Continua (San Gimignano, Beijing, Havana, Boissy-le-Châtel, Paris, Rome, Dubai, São Paulo); **Shireen Gandhi**, Chemould Prescott Road (Mumbai); **Daniela Gareh**, White Cube (London, Hong Kong, New York, Paris, Seoul); **Mohammed Hafiz**, Athr Gallery (Jeddah, Al Ula, Riyadh); **Sunny Rahbar**, The Third Line (Dubai), and **Gordon VeneKlasen**, Michael Werner Gallery (New York, Athens, Berlin, Los Angeles, London).



Doha, Qatar. Courtesy Art Basel

“Each gallery must bring the best of what they have, and I assume it will be extremely competitive, which is good for the sake of the value and the quality of the work,” said Shawky, with projects that focus on research, narrative, and experimentation.

The fair's inaugural theme, “Becoming,” invites galleries to explore humanity's ongoing transformation and the shifting systems that shape how we live, believe, and create meaning. A press release describes the Gulf as a “living palimpsest” where oral traditions meet digital networks and ancient trade routes evolve into modern cultural and economic

flows—making art both a witness to history and an active force in shaping human identity.

On the theme, Shawky emphasized that it is important that the region at large is considered. “It was important to make the theme connect with Doha and the Gulf, and allow imagination from the artists and the galleries,” he said. “I was interested to think of how we as human beings are seeking to always evolve and develop ... And our dream to develop out of one system into another system.”

Art Basel Qatar will run February 3–7, 2026 at M7 and the Doha Design District in Doha, Qatar.



Wael Shawky at Egyptian Pavilion at Venice, 2024. Courtesy Sfeir Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary. Photo: George Darrell.

ES: Looking back on your childhood, what do you think were your first influences?

WS: I am from Alexandria, which is Mediterranean, within the wider agricultural society of Egypt. When I was four years old, I travelled to Makkah in Saudi Arabia with my family, and studied there for almost six years. That is a big shift. Makkah is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world because of the pilgrimage. In the mid-1970s, many immigrants from Africa came and never left. It was also the beginning of this look of American modernity. To see this hybridity happening between Bedouin tribalism and all these new cars at the time, the Cadillacs ... this weird mix between different systems that have nothing to do with each other. I'm very affected by this time, and the idea of society in transition. I am interested in societies that have this dream of evolving.



ES: The manipulation of power bleeds into the very fabric of your work. In *Drama 1882* there is a palpable sense of deviance in the actors' movements and the cadence of their words. This rhythmic flow feels as though they are putting the viewer under a spell.

WS: I love the idea of transforming a human creation form, like history, into a new readable format. In my work, history might become poetic or musical. I like to present history in the form of a show. In 'Cabaret Crusades' and *Drama 1882*, even the titles reflect this. Each piece I create with scenography, costume, music; it's like a painting that's moving.

In *Drama 1882*, I was really thinking of this rhythmic movement. When you read the letters between the leaders of the Ottoman Empire and France and Russia and the British, you feel this back and forth of dominance. I was trying to translate this into the choreography. At the same time, it gives you the feeling they are hypnotised. Sometimes we create three or four layers within a scene and they each have different speeds. The main characters might be moving at normal speed while everyone else is in slow motion. Or the scenography sometimes moves at the same speed as the people.



Wael Shawky, *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* (2023) (video still). 4K video with sound, colour, VFX; Arabic. 57 min. Commissioned by Pompeii Archeological Park. © Wael Shawky, 2023. Courtesy the artist and the Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Park of Pompeii.



Wael Shawky, *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* (2023) (video still). 4K video with sound, colour, VFX; Arabic. 57 min. Commissioned by Pompeii Archeological Park. © Wael Shawky, 2023. Courtesy the artist and the Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Park of Pompeii.

ES: I first saw your work in 2016 in Turin (‘Cabaret Crusades’) and I’d never seen anything like it in an art space. It made me think of how affecting and immersive the theatre can be. How do you decide how each body of work will be realised?

WS: It depends. I made *The Cave* in 2005, where I was just walking in a supermarket reciting the Quran from memory. That was like a self-portrait, but also I wanted to see how I could work with this religious text and analyse all these stories and connect it to my own contemporary situation. I have several types of research. Sometimes it’s about historical texts, as we see in ‘Cabaret Crusades’ and *Drama 1882*; sometimes it’s about literature, or mythology, like in *I Am Hymns of the New Temples*.

I find the research amazing, because depending on the stories that I find, everything else develops. The marionettes in ‘Cabaret Crusades’, for example, came to me because I was reading about a speech by Pope Urban II in 1094. I suddenly saw everyone as a marionette because [that moment in history is] really about manipulation.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades* © The Director of Festivals (2016) (film still) 102 min with audio, sound, English subtitles, 102 min. © Wael Shawky, Courtesy Lison Gallery, Peter Sander Gallery, Lissoni, and Sander Commissioning.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades* © The Director of Festivals (2016) (film still) 102 min with audio, sound, English subtitles, 102 min. © Wael Shawky, Courtesy Lison Gallery, Peter Sander Gallery, Lissoni, and Sander Commissioning.

ES: You also weave political history into the materials. You used Murano marionettes to reference the Venetian influence on the Fourth Crusade, for example.

WS: It takes a lot of time to find the right components. The scenography for the third part of 'Cabaret Crusades' was built with remote-controlled moving rings with statues and marionettes on them. Some moved against each other, with different speeds. The idea came from looking at medieval maps and seeing how human beings are always at the centre of the universe. The main characters in 'Cabaret Crusades' are often standing in the middle while the entire world moves around them.

ES: Your work can be funny as well. When you are working with histories that are full of trauma, do you think humour can connect the viewer in an unexpected way?

WS: I love humour and I think it's extremely important. Humour will never reduce seriousness, but it will erase this drama we see in movies or on TV when you depend on the skills of the actor to give you the tears or emotions. That doesn't last; you need to have another source of emotion. I like to remove the facial expressions; having masks or marionettes does this and adds humour. I also hate the idea that I would make a film with a battle, and add [clichéd] war music, or sad music. I am concerned about the world from an educational point of view, and my real problem with art is when it has to have a certain look or feel.

ES: Do you find yourself looking to work beyond tropes or expected and familiar techniques or processes?

WS: Yes. Every project I start, I really feel like it could be a disaster. I remember a project at the Sharjah Biennial in 2013. They asked me to give a talk about the Biennial that happened in 2011. I preferred to make an art piece about it, and it started very simple but got bigger and bigger. Collaborating with all the Pakistani and Indian artists working for the Biennial, we translated the press conference into Urdu and then made a poem where we didn't change any words, we just cut and moved things like a puzzle. After that I travelled to Karachi and made a song with Qawwali musicians. At the 2013 Biennial opening, we had a big performance with the workers and people from Karachi. It was mixed with many political ideas. Pieces like this don't have a shape; you shape it with the time and research.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbalaa (Marionette)* (2014). Murano glass. 55 x 10 x 17 cm. © Wael Shawky. Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary.

ES: I have heard you refer to yourself as a translator. Translating is such a specific art form, and it makes me wonder, from all the sources you work with, confronting so many entrenched perspectives on history, how do you find your final viewpoint?

WS: Unfortunately, I cannot use everything. I try to be fair as much as possible. *The Secrets of Karbala*, the first half of ‘Cabaret Crusades’, focuses on the big battle that led to this division in the Muslim world between Shia and Sunni. I tried to take all the sources that both parties agreed on and removed myself a bit as a Muslim. I’m not the one who is making it; these ideas exist. How can I make them readable? —[O]

Wael Shawky is on view at Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh from 28 June through 28 September 2025. [Wael Shawky: I Am Hymns of the New Temples](#) is on view at LUMA Arles from 5 July to 2 November 2025.

Main image: Wael Shawky, *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* (2023) (video still). 4K video with sound, colour, VFX; Arabic. 57 min. Commissioned by Pompeii Archeological Park. © Wael Shawky, 2023. Courtesy the artist and the Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Park of Pompeii.

LISSON GALLERY

Financial Times
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Visual Arts Added

Artist Wael Shawky: 'I believe that history is a human creation'

At Luma Arles and Edinburgh's Talbot Rice Gallery, the Egyptian artist's operatic films weave together myth, Arabic texts and puppetry

In the southern French city of Arles, Wael Shawky is building his own version of Mount Vesuvius inside a former ironworks. It's typical of the Egyptian artist, who is not one to shy away from working at grand scale and this summer has exhibitions opening in both Arles and Edinburgh.

In France, a film that interweaves the origin stories of Greek and Egyptian myths will be on view at the end of an internal street lined with kiosks. In these little booths, with outer walls finished in deep pink stucco, the masks, jars and animals in clay, bronze and glass that appear on screen have come to rest in perfect three dimensions. Meanwhile in Edinburgh's Talbot Rice Gallery, the exhibition includes the third film in a trilogy called the "Cabaret Crusades". "The Secrets of Karbala" (2015) tells the story of the bloodiest period of the Crusades, from the 12th to 13th centuries, though it loops back and forwards in time over 400 years. It is two hours long and involved a team of 300. So mountains are quite within the artist's reach.

Shawky, 53, seems unflustered when I meet him at the Parc des Ateliers in Luma Arles, where his show is taking shape. Brush in hand, he is working on a large painting at one side of the Grande Halle, a 5,000 sq metre ex-industrial ironworks where trains were once built and repaired. Fantastical creatures in shades of blue and violet, with bowed heads and trailing fronds, are conjured by his hand — a process he describes as "automatic". "A drawing can take a day, an hour, 10 minutes," says Shawky, his face framed by curly black hair. "It's what I do instead of speaking or writing."



Puppet characters from 'Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala' (2015) © Courtesy Lisson Gallery © Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Yet Shawky (his name is pronounced Weh-el Sha-o-key) is an artist who deals painstakingly with words, digging into historical Arabic texts to create the libretti for his operatic films, shifting the voice from dominant west to marginalised east. “They killed everyone — Jews and Muslims,” says Shawky of the Crusaders who sought to clear the Holy Lands of so-called infidels. “In the end, it wasn’t about religion at all, but politics and power.” In “The Secrets of Karbala”, where the protagonists are marionettes fashioned in glass by the master makers of Murano, the brittle material suggests that the survival of humanity is protected by only the most fragile of skins.

“I try not to put any personal opinion into the work,” says Shawky, for whom the puppets also allow a lack of performative interpretation. “I believe that history is a human creation, and I try to translate it into a readable format through drawings, sculpture and film.” Sometimes he works with actors, as in “Drama 1882” — a retelling of ‘Urabi’s revolt, in which Britain, thanks to an initial petty conflict that arose between a Maltese man and a local donkey seller, succeeded in colonising Egypt. (It was made in 2024, and shown in the Egyptian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.) Shawky turns the actors into puppets too, directing them in swaying, robotic groups as the words are chanted in the style of the rhythmic recitation of the Koran. The effect is metronomic and mesmerising. Meanwhile, current world events mean his work is never anything less than searingly relevant.

Shawky’s stories are severe and bloody, but the world he brings to life is awash with colour and texture, time-slips and entangled ideologies. “I really love to

work with different mediums, so there are all these different dimensions,” he says. “When you walk into this room,” he says of the huge shed we are in, “you see the artefacts in bronze and velvet, and then you see them in the film, and it’s all inside this industrial architecture.”



'Drama 1882' (2024) © Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

Filmed in the archaeological park of Pompeii, the ceramic-masked actors among the ruins create a swirling dialogue between histories and times, between the thriving Roman city of Arles (whose own archaeological sites are nearby) and the commercial hub of Pompeii, whose citizens didn't see disaster coming. “I wanted the artefacts in kiosks to look like they're on sale in Pompeii's little shops,” says Shawky.

“In my films, I try to investigate the past and see how it is connected to life as we live it now,” he says. “Drama 1882”, for instance, uses the tangled narratives of the mythologies of ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian cultures to explain the development of modern European civilisation. “I'm trying to see all these things from an anthropological point of view, rather than a religious one,” he says. “I actually love religion. I am a Muslim and, for me, Islam isn't a problem, though the way people translate it might be.”

Shawky was born in Alexandria, but moved with his family to Mecca, where he lived from the age of four to 13. “It was still the Arab world, but a completely different culture,” he says. “Egypt is agricultural. Saudi is tribal and Bedouin and very tough. This was the 1970s and they didn't want to accept anyone from the outside. Arabs were driving Cadillacs in bare feet and building all these oil platforms [for the Americans], although they didn't really understand why.” The alienation he felt there, he says, has informed the way he has made art as

an adult, looking for what might bind us together rather than break us apart. “It introduced me to different cultures, different systems at an early age,” he says.



The Secrets of Karbala' © Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Later, in the mid 2000s, he lived in Istanbul, as Turkey divided into those who wanted to join the EU and those who sought to be close to the Islamic world. “There was a really big clash, demonstrations in the street,” he says, “but people were just trying to protect their identity. I understand.”

Shawky studied art in Alexandria before heading to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia to complete an MFA in 1999. “I was married to a half-American, half-Egyptian, so I didn’t have any shocks,” he says. “But I spent most of my time in my studio rather than attending classes.” What he did discover was video. “When I came back to Egypt, my work became films.”

Since then, his impact on Alexandria’s art scene has been significant. In 2010, he turned his studio into an informal art school called MASS, inviting international curators and artists to visit and give talks and guidance. “There were no conditions for entry — at one point we had someone aged 13 and someone aged 45,” Shawky says.

This year he is bringing the project to Doha, Qatar, where he was named artistic director of the Fire Station, a contemporary art space with artists’ residencies, last year. “We received 1,000 applications — 100 from China, 50 from France, even one from Israel,” he says. With his jury — which includes Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ethiopian-American artist Julie Mehretu — it is being whittled down to 20 and the courses will begin in mid-September. “It’s exactly what’s needed now,” he says.



Wael Shawky: 'I try to investigate the past and see how it is connected to life as we live it now'

With this emphasis on education, it is apt that the location of his Scottish show is University of Edinburgh's art gallery, named after the Islamic and Byzantine art historian and scholar David Talbot Rice. "It was set up to educate the students, and then the public," says the gallery's director, Tessa Giblin. "We've done shows on Brexit and abortion rights in Ireland. We want to depolarise public debate." Shawky, with his facts and counterfactuals, his puppets and mountains, seems the right man for the job.

Edinburgh, June 28-Sep 28, trg.ed.ac.uk; Arles, July 5-November 2, luma.org

Frieze Magazine
01 February 2025

FRIEZE

Wael Shawky Aims to Kill Drama in His Art

The artist's film and performance challenge how Middle Eastern history is constructed and portrayed



In one of the eeriest works at Jeddah's inaugural Islamic Arts Biennale in 2023, a trio of giant streetlights tilted slowly from side to side, soundtracked by the otherworldly hum of locusts. This kinetic sculpture was *In the Sound of Muzdalifah* (2023) by Egyptian artist Wael Shawky, known for his richly textured filmic trilogies that challenge the hagiographic construction of history. The work recalls the artist's vivid childhood experience of Hajj – the holy pilgrimage to Makkah – in which the faithful perform combined sunset and evening prayers before sleeping under the stars just outside Islam's holiest city. While intended to speak to the sense of wonder and spiritual calm the artist experienced during his pilgrimage, shown in Saudi Arabia amidst its most recent social reform, the work felt more like a portent.



Wael Shawky, *In the Sound of Muzdalifah*, 2023, mixed media sculpture, installation view. Courtesy: Diriyah Biennale Foundation; photograph: Marco Cappellletti

Although Shawky didn't know it at the time, Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s was a country about to undergo a sea change. In December 1979, several hundred anti-monarchist militants laid siege to the Great Mosque of Makkah, the holiest site in Islam. They held worshippers hostage and fought a bloody battle that lasted two weeks, ending only with help from elite tactical French military units. In response, Saudi Arabia adopted a much stricter set of religious laws, radically empowered the clergy and established the religious police, ushering in nearly four decades of austere conservatism. It was a watershed moment for a young Shawky, who was born in Alexandria but spent his preteen years in Makkah and experienced this transformation first hand. It sparked an interest in frictive clashes between disparate systems that would become central to his practice.

'It was a very crazy time,' he tells me. 'Makkah, I think, is the most cosmopolitan city ever,' he adds, pointing to the multicultural legacy of its long history of pilgrimage. Residents with origins in Africa, South and Southeast Asia and the wider Middle East, many of them undocumented, lived cheek by jowl with the

tough, deeply tribal culture of its natives, all coupled with the advent of American yeehaw. 'It's a contradiction between systems you cannot even compare. You'd see this Bedouin man, barefoot, driving a Cadillac, while his son is riding a donkey; it's all mixed. And a big part of this, of course, affected my language and my art.'



Wael Shawky, *The Cave (Hamburg)*, 2005, video still. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

Equally influential were American wrestling shows and the 1970s German gameshow *Telematch*, which showcased contestants in quasi-medieval, movement-restricting costumes, battling it out with adversaries from other cities. Both were extremely popular in Saudi Arabia and Egypt at the time. 'Already they knew about the American Dream; we knew about the WWF's Ric Flair. These different layers of systems, you'd see this in front of you all the time.' *Telematch*, in particular, inspired the series 'Telematch' (2007–ongoing), a collection of short films shot around Egypt. In *Telematch Sadat* (2007) a gang of kids re-enacts the mid-parade assassination and funeral of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, while in *Telematch Suburb* (2008), a heavy metal band plays to a thinning crowd of puzzled rural farmers.

I don't like acting; I like to kill drama in my work.

WAEEL SHAWKY

Shawky had previously experimented with both animation and casting amateur actors, and had featured in some of his own films reciting Qur'anic *suwar* (verses) in an Amsterdam supermarket (*The Cave*, 2005) or a former Swiss monastery (*A Digital Translation of a Biblical Story*, 2007). In the 'Telematch' series, he began to work with children, a group unburdened by either historical memory or dramatic convention. 'I don't like acting; I like to kill drama in my work,' he explains. 'So, when you work with kids, that achieves this idea because they don't really know what we're talking about. They don't know the history of Sadat. They don't have any preconceived idea of what this character should be like. So, when I tell them to jump from this car to this car and run and kill, they just follow.'



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, 2015, film still. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

Telematch Crusades (2009), also enacted by children, introduces the religious wars that would become the subject of his epic series 'Cabaret Crusades' (2010–15). Drawing from Lebanese historian Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1983), the trilogy spans several centuries of bloody

atrocities, pestilence, political machinations and generalized villainy. A side quest on the beginnings of the Sunni-Shia schism is especially effective in unspooling the construction of Arab identity. This is no inverted hagiography: Arabs are not presented as victims here so much as active agents of their own history. The horrors and the humanity are all the more keenly felt in Shawky's use of marionettes, who 'also don't act. When you look at a figure like [12th-century Seljuk ruler] Nur al-Din Zengi, it's very difficult to say for certain, "Oh, he was a bad man," or "He had good intentions."'

When the trilogy is shown, the films are screened alongside a display of these marionettes (and often drawings, too), extending Shawky's world building into the exhibition space. They are as bizarre as they are gorgeous, with their materiality adding another narrative layer to the work. For *The Horror Show File* (2010), the artist used 200-year-old wooden marionettes to enhance the film's visual language. In *The Path to Cairo* (2012), he turned to ceramics 'because of the religious idea of how we were created from mud'. In reference to the fact that the crusades were launched from the French town of Clermont-Ferrand in Auvergne, Shawky worked with Provençal artisans from Aubagne, who have a long history of making hand-painted terracotta *santons* (nativity figurines). And in *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015), the marionettes are fashioned from precariously fragile Murano glass, because of the film's focus on Venetian involvement in the Fourth Crusade.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades II: The Path to Cairo*, 2012, film still. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

It was in this last work, his third 'Cabaret Crusades' film, that Shawky began experimenting with inverting the image. He reprised the technique in the last of the *Al Araba Al Madfuna* (2012–16) trilogy, in which kids solemnly voice parables from the writings of Egyptian novelist Mohamed Mostagab, coupled with scenes from the artist's own experiences of Upper Egypt. Here, too, the artist continues his own personal crusade against acting: 'To enhance the idea of killing drama, I inverted the colour and inverted the light. With these types of images, you don't see even the innocence of the children anymore.'

It consequently came as a surprise to no one more than Shawky when, for his standout Egyptian pavilion presentation at last year's Venice Biennale, he wholeheartedly embraced the idea of drama. He explains that, rather than considering history as linear, in *Drama 1882* (2024), which had its US premiere at the MOCA Geffen this February, he felt he needed to explore the idea of a staged history that focuses on a single point. As such, he zoomed in on Egypt's anti-imperial Urabi Revolution, which the British crushed in 1882, before going on to occupy the country until 1956, well after its independence in 1922. 'I believe this is what I'm really trying to do since Cabaret Crusades,' he says, of his attempts to present a morally neutral narrative through marionettes. 'All the characters are presenting society, but not individuality, even if you see a name on top of them.' In particular, he speaks admiringly of German artist Gerhard Richter's ability to exert extreme control over his medium: 'Even if you know his work is made by human hand, you cannot trace the physical connection. I try to do the same: to completely erase human expression from my films, but also to make and control it.'



'Wael Shawky: Cabaret Crusades', 2015.
Installation view, MoMA PS1, New York. Courtesy:
© Wael Shawky, 2015 MoMA PS1 and Lisson
Gallery; photograph: Pablo Enriquez

Put another way: it is societies – their entire worldviews – and not human individuals who are the main characters here. Shawky achieves this through another inversion: working with professional performers for the first time to create a situation wherein dancers ‘become more hypnotized, as if they are learning from the marionettes. So, you don’t see reactions on their faces, just very slow movement from their bodies. That’s why I called it drama.’ The artist deploys a similar strategy in his latest work, *Love Story* (2024), which adapts Korean folk and fairy tales through an interpretation of traditional *pansori* – a form of storytelling that combines opera singing and movement. Another recent film, *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* (2023), takes an intermediary approach, with performers wearing masks that hide their expressions, drawing the eye to their bodily movements. The artist tells me that he is approaching future films with this same ethos: a style of ‘mixing’ that carries echoes of the cultural fusion of Makkah.

Prior to *Love Story*, Shawky had already used Urdu *qawwali* (Sufi devotionals) as well as regional forms like the Gulf's *fjiri* (pearl diver songs) in his work. Mostly, he transposes his sources to the classical Arabic of the Qur'an, composing all music in addition to writing, directing and choreographing. Yet, even as he sees himself as a translator striving to bridge different cultural forms, he is adamant that history itself, in its very contingency, is a form of human creation. He points to his generation's lived experience of the Egyptian revolution where, despite substantial documentation by media and footage filmed on individuals' phones, the government is working hard to retroactively rewrite the narrative. Suspicious of these developments, he has avoided showing in his native country since 2010, despite being based in Alexandria, and agreed to do the Egyptian pavilion at the Venice Biennale only if he was granted absolute control. The government obliged, handing over the keys along with funding responsibilities – and even eschewing the opening – with the only condition being that he show the work in Egypt after the biennial closed.



Wael Shawky, *Al Araba Al Madfuna I*, 2012, film still.
Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

‘Sometimes, I think I’m fascinated with the idea of translating societies that are moving from one system to another. Sometimes, it’s just a dream. A dream of transforming from Bedouin nomadism into an agricultural society, for instance, or into urbanism – that exists a lot in Egypt,’ he says, adding that he is particularly fascinated by religiously motivated transfigurations. He describes

the crusades as another such dream that posited a similarly linear evolution to a higher level, one seductive enough to encourage people to walk several thousand gruelling miles on foot. 'It's this religious idea that you are transforming. Even if you die, you're going to the higher place. This, for me, is like the Christian jihad. With all of this motivation, they moved from one place to another.'

Shawky is careful to caution that this dream often distorts into unimaginable absurdity, deftly captured in the gentle strangeness of his whimsical, animal-filled drawings that present a softer, more fantastical depiction of the events of his films; history as a bestiary, seen through pastel-coloured glasses. Often, the result is something far uglier, gesturing to both the decimation of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, and the current regime's efforts to terraform contemporary Egyptian society. He believes that, despite occurring a millennium ago, the events of the crusades continue to cast their shadow today. 'Although this is not the biggest massacre that happened in the Middle East, it gives an idea about the relationship between West and East. The memory of the crusades still exists today in the subconscious of the Eastern person, or the Muslim person in particular. This is what you see today in Gaza, for instance, and nobody is able to stop these crimes.'



Wael Shawky, *Drama, 1882*, 2024, installation view, commissioned by Egyptian Ministry of Culture – Accademia d'Egitto. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky, Lisson Gallery, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

After a number of projects focusing on European history – including his Arabic interpretation of the continent’s Ancient Greek foundational myth, *Isles of the Blessed (Oops!... I forgot Europe)* (2022) – Shawky is returning to the Gulf for his next work. Beginning with the 17th century migration from the Saudi mainland to what are now coastal city states, the as-yet-untitled film looks at the recent history of the Arabian Peninsula, which he is particularly drawn to because ‘it’s a history existing, but not transformed yet. The narrative here has not been processed yet in movies or anything; it’s interesting to try to play with it as a human creation.’ Recently named the first artistic director of Doha’s Fire Station, the artist will relocate his arts education centre, MASS Alexandria, to the premises for the duration of his tenure.

And if Shawky could himself travel back in time, where and when would he go? El Balyana in Upper Egypt, it turns out, where he made his *Al Araba Al Madfun* trilogy, and where there is a mysterious, water-filled underground temple, Osireion. ‘There are many, many sayings from different scholars about this place, but nobody knows what it is, and nobody knows why it’s there and why it’s located behind Seti I’s temple,’ he enthuses, noting that some academics believe the pyramids predate the Pharaohs and have striking architectural similarities to their Mesoamerican counterparts. ‘If I could go back to the time of Seti I in Egyptian history, it would be fantastic to understand Osireion’.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 249 with the headline ‘Wael Shawky’

‘2024 Overseas Exchange Exhibition: Wael Shawky’ *is on view at Daegu Art Museum, South Korea until 23 February and Wael Shawky will be on view at Talbot Rice Gallery, Scotland, from 28 June – 28 September*

Main image: Wael Shawky, I am Hymns of the New Temples (detail), 2023, film still. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky, Lisson Gallery, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

LISSON GALLERY

Artforum
September 2024





Murazaho Collective, *Takopay*, 2022/2024, polycrystalline "fibers" (copper, stainless steel, brass), *Fincks*, *Integration View*, *Amemata*, Venice, 2024. Right: "Foreigners Everywhere," Photo: Marco Zanuso.



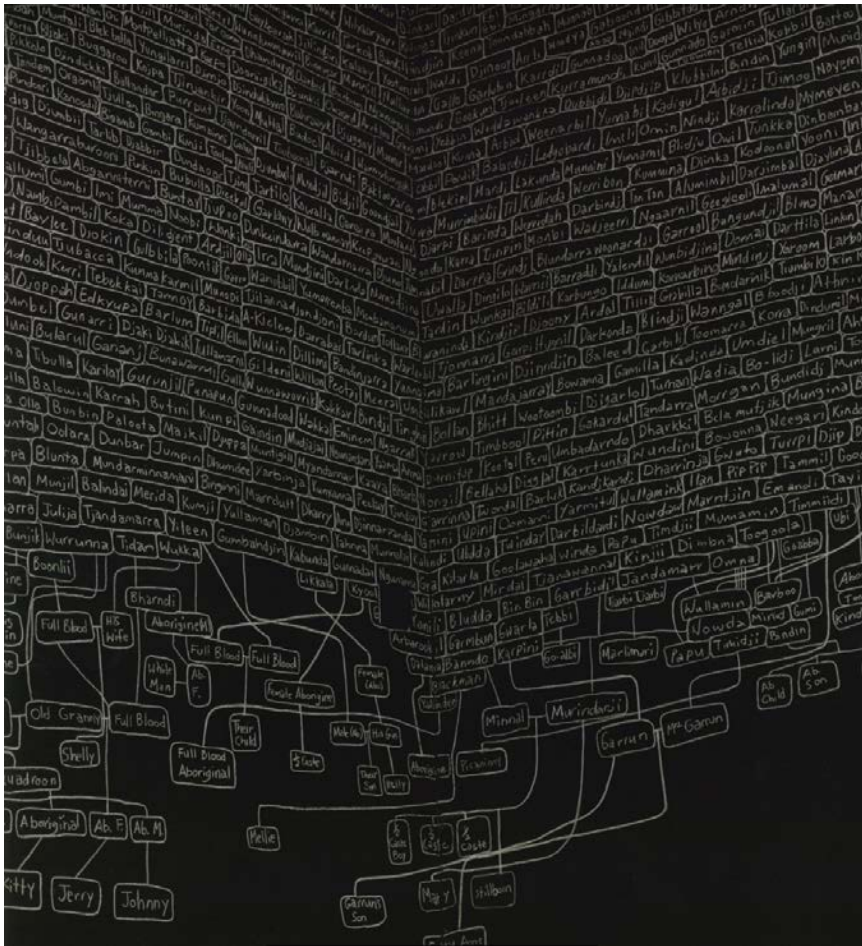
VENICE 2024

THERE ARE MANY REASONS to celebrate the Sixtieth Venice Biennale, curator Adriano Pedrosa's "*Stranieri Ovunque*" (*Foreigners Everywhere*): It is the first edition organized by a curator from South America; it celebrates artists that have been largely marginalized by the Biennale and other centers of contemporary art, including folk, outsider, and Indigenous artists; it highlights handicraft and especially textiles, which are deserving of greater critical attention; and its message of inclusivity refutes the xenophobic and fascist political rhetoric on the rise in Italy and elsewhere. At the very least, it is full of surprises.

But despite these successes, "*Foreigners Everywhere*" has been dogged by questions about what it really accomplished. Most foundationally, its relation to more mainstream art histories remains up for debate: Did it radically expand our canon of modern and contemporary artists? Or did it preserve the divisions between familiar and foreign, inverting them but leaving the hierarchical dynamics between them in place? Or did it suggest doing away with canons altogether by revealing the limits of the concept of "belonging"?

"*Foreigners Everywhere*" also has faced critiques from all sides: Did it focus too little on the politics of being a "foreigner," flattening the experiences of different kinds of "foreign" bodies across varying cultural contexts into one shared but attenuated experience of otherness? Or did it focus too much on the specifics of how certain identities are rendered "foreign," reducing art—or at least the exhibition—to the inventorying of historical wrongs?

Here, three critics who are also experienced curators—Sara Raza, Manuel Borja-Villel, and Simon Njami—help us recognize the show's merits as well as its limits, while gesturing toward how we might think about the politics of identity in the years to come.



SIMON NJAMI

DEBATES AROUND CONTEMPORARY ART have been heated by recent events—specifically, in Kassel, to name just one example. What is art today? What is admitted and what is forbidden? Is a new morality challenging the freedom once associated with art? And how does (or should) art reflect the social and political phenomena that we must contend with?

When one arrives in Venice, it is with all these questions and more in mind. Whether we like it or not, we are always curious to see how the oldest of the biennials will tackle the burning issues. In curating this year's Ivorian pavilion, the question I tried to ask myself was possible way. How can we conceive of an exhibition that speaks not only to the brain? How do we challenge the white cube and its strategies of representation, and how do we engage with a kaleidoscopic audience? Once I was done installing my own pavilion, I went to check on the work of my colleagues, starting with the Giardini. *Who were all those strangers*, I wondered, gathered in the City of Doges?

Now, nothing annoys me more in art than political correctness. This was one of the many reasons that led to my resignation from the finding committee of Documenta 16 in November 2023. When one tries to deduce, in moral terms, the good from the bad in art, I feel a lethal contradiction. Art should be a space for debate, confrontation, poetry, and—why not?—anger. Art ought to be something alive that can speak for itself, freely and without preconceptions.

I always feel strange in the Giardini, those gardens from which the world is excluded. People tend to forget that the pavilions were originally there to host a kind of Western tea-and-crumpets party. The first non-European country to join the club was Egypt, because Europe needed the Suez Canal. Yet in a contemporary context, these notions of nation and nationalism seem awkward and retrograde. A sense of world expo still floats in the air.

All the better that, this year, Egypt was a nice surprise. Wael Shawky's *Drama 1882, 2024*, is a parody of musical theater that centers on an important episode from Egyptian history, the Urabi Rebellion of 1879–82: a people's revolt against Egypt's then ruler, Tawfik Pasha, who had succumbed to imperial influence from France and Britain. Shawky's filmed musical play shows how the revolution developed from a brawl in a café to the British bombing of Alexandria, ultimately catalyzing the British occupation that lasted until 1956. Shawky's storytelling is always polysemic, mixing time and space, fantasy and reality. In this way, it also recalled the revolution of 2011, when the people of Egypt occupied Tahrir Square until the toppling of Mubarak's regime.

One can sense other echoes of earlier rebellions in our contemporary times. I passed by the Israeli pavilion, which was guarded by two policemen. The space was declared closed because of the war in the West Bank and Gaza, but in fact the public could see a video by Ruth Patir through the pavilion's glass walls. I wondered why they did not shut it down entirely.

Adriano Pedrosa's Central Pavilion, focused primarily on modern art, is somewhat deceptive. The walls outside, adorned with bright colors realized by Brazilian collective MAHKU (Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin), promise joyful moments. Inside, though, it's another story. The rooms of the "Nucleo Storico" are crammed in a chaotic way, as if the curator relied on the sheer quantity of works to make his case for the importance of alternative modernities.

I could breathe more easily when I entered "kith and kin," Archie Moore's project for the Australian pavilion, a kind of mausoleum dedicated to Indigenous Australians. The handwritten names on the walls and the

dark solemnity of the room are efficient. In the British pavilion, John Akomfrah has paid a tribute to Blackness, depicting Black history while avoiding pathos and anger. The sequence of films used footage of emancipation fighters, and contemporary scenes shot by Akomfrah himself bears witness to a story of Black poetry and strength in the face of displacement, migration, and racialization.

Most of the Giardini's pavilions follow the theme of the Biennale, "Foreigners Everywhere," to the letter. The "strange"—in the sense of the "unknown"—and the "stranger" are conjugated in every possible way. A majority of curators have dealt with their own geographies—from their immediate histories to cultural narratives familiar to their regions—which made me wonder what notion of the "stranger" they had in mind. Often,



Opposite page: View of "Kith and Kin," Archie Moore's project for the Australian pavilion, Venice. Photo: Matteo de Mays.

Above: MAHKU (Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin), Kapawe Pukoni (The Alligator Bridge), 2024, paint on building facade. Installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice. Photo: "Foreigners Everywhere." Photo: Matteo de Mays.

Below: An Italian soldier guards the locked Israeli pavilion presenting "Ruth Patir (Motherland)," Venice, April 26, 2024. Photo: Gabriel Boyer/AFP via Getty Images.



The New York Times (print)
21 July 2024

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

THE WEATHER
Today, partly cloudy, high 86. To-
night, partly cloudy, low 72. Tomor-
row, a mixture of clouds and sun and
warm, slightly more humid, high 86.
[Weather stats appear on Page 39](#)

10 AM

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Art

An Egyptian Mesmerizes in Venice

Wael Shawky turns to the past to reframe the present.

By ARUNA D'SOUZA
VENICE — If you think a filmed opera sung entirely in classical Arabic that tells, in detail, the complex story of a relatively obscure, failed 19th-century uprising in Egypt might be something less than compelling, do I have news for you.

Since the Venice Biennale opened in April, "Drama 1882," a 45-minute video at the heart of an installation by the Alexandria-based artist Wael Shawky, has been mesmerizing visitors to the Egyptian Pavilion. When I went in mid-June, long after the art world insiders had left, I watched as tourists wandered into the dark space and after a moment or two parked themselves on the floor and on benches, seduced by the candy-colored, almost cartoonish stage sets, a richly melodic score, slow-motion, stylized choreography and even a real donkey.

The images are indelible: groups of soldiers sway and swoon in perfect synchronicity; top-hatted ambassadors from European powers squat barefoot on a tilted table or hang off its edges while discussing the fate of the Middle East; dancing girls tempt a drunkard in a tavern, but despite the surrealism of the visuals, the historical facts are legit.

Shawky, 33, has made a name for himself in global art exhibitions like Documenta and the Sharjah and Istanbul Biennials by turning to the past to reframe our understanding of the present, often through filmed performances featuring marionettes, live actors in oversize masks or even children. Some of his works retell classic stories — about the Crusades, or the expulsion of Muslim Arabs from Europe — that flip the script, as it were, by seeing history through Arab eyes. In 2015, Holland Cotter,



Wael Shawky in his studio in Alexandria, Egypt.



Top, the artist Wael Shawky at his studio in Alexandria, Egypt. Above, Shawky's "Drama 1882" at the Egyptian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Left, "Drama 1882" combines opera and video. Below, the artist's "I Am Hymns of the New Temples" features performers in fantastical masks.

the co-chief art critic for The New York Times, called "Cultural Crusades" — "truly brilliant." "The story is one of almost unrelenting violence," he wrote, "which is a surprise considering that all the actors are marionettes." (Lady Gaga was also a fan.) Equally inventive, "The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version" (2017) brought to life the expulsion of Muslim Arabs from Spain in the eighth century, with singers and musicians from Sharjah and Bahrain performing live in the traditional style of Arabian Gulf pearl divers.

With "Drama 1882," Shawky uses film, sculpture and drawing to tell the story of the Urabi Revolt, led by a young military officer from a peasant family whose message of reform resonated with the common people. It purportedly began with the murder of a donkey owner by an anonymous Maltese man and ended with a clash between Alexandrians and British military forces that left around 200 Egyptians dead. The uprising signaled the end of Ottoman control of the region and precipitated British colonial domination of the Middle East for decades, including its 70-year occupation of Egypt.

The film was staged and shot at a theater in Alexandria with a cast of 150 professionals and amateurs. It is the first film on which Shawky worked with unmasked actors, he said in a video interview. "I work with marionettes, kids and masks to avoid the idea of drama in my work. I hate to have an actor use his skills to interpret," he said.

The actors' strange, slow-motion movements — falling arms, tilted walks, measured marches and stiff dances back and forth across the stage — were drawn from his work with puppets. "The performers don't really have any facial expressions," he said. "They use their bodies to convey emotion, but not their faces — they become like marionettes."

Shawky attributes the lush coloration and graphic simplicity of his staging to his easy study of painting as an undergraduate at Alexandria University.

"I looked at each scene of 'Drama 1882' as a complete painting," he told me. "I was taking at every element, every costume, down to each soldier, in a very precise way.



in a very painterly way." Shawky, who spent part of his childhood in Mecca, where his architect-engineer father worked on modernization projects, says that his mother always knew he would be an artist. But a musician, too? Despite the central role it plays in his work, he has no special training in the discipline.

"I tried to study music while I was doing my master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania, but unfortunately I was very lazy," he said. He composes on a keyboard before calling in musicians and a music arranger to transform it into a score. "Sometimes I feel that I need people to be very, very patient with me," he added with a laugh.

The installation is rounded out with a series of sculptures: vitrines that look to be straight out of a fun house, all bent legs and angles, variously filled with Murano glass pebbles, lava beans, and cast aluminum plates showing faintly rendered historical images; one glass relief depicting an amber buglike monster dancing on a fort; a large structure of clay, straw, resin, steel and copper veers between landscape, architecture and scurrying sand insect.

Shawky considered the subject of this project pertinent to the theme of this year's Biennale, "Foreigners Everywhere."

"When we talk about foreigners, it's mainly immigrants, right? In Egypt, immigrants are now coming from Syria and Sudan," he said. "But if you go back to 1882, the foreigners were actually occupiers — they were French, British, Greeks, the subjects of British colonies."

There are also very deliberate echoes here of a more recent historical upheaval in Egypt — the 2011 revolution, which deposed President Hosni Mubarak and ended decades of single-party rule. He was replaced in 2014 by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, a former general who in his third term has continued many repressive policies of his predecessor, including media censorship.

"We had hoped for a huge change, and it didn't happen," Shawky said. "It's now really a dictatorship again."

No matter how surreal his visual forms, Shawky hews closely to the historical record, often relying on scholarly accounts and archival research. "I even lift actual sentences from the written history," he said, adding, "even if I don't really believe it." That approach allows viewers to see that history is a human creation, he said. "It's not really something we can rely upon as fact — it's a form of storytelling," he said.

When he was approached by the Egyptian ministry of culture to represent his

country, Shawky hesitated. The artist had not had an exhibition in his home country since 2019 and had refused to participate in any government-sponsored activities after 2011. (But he remains engaged in the art community in Alexandria. He founded MASS Alexandria, an independent studio program for young artists, in 2010.)

His one condition was that the government allow him to work without any censorship. Since there was very little money in the ministry of culture's coffers to underwrite the show, Shawky, with the help of his galleries and a friend, Mai Elidi, was entirely responsible for its fund-raising from private sources in Egypt.

His only concession to officials was communicating in advance the topic of his project. If they were concerned about Shawky's pointed allusion to another "failed revolution" in Egyptian history, as he called it, he didn't hear about it.

Andrea Vilani, who oversees the contemporary art program at the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, suggested that Shawky also show a 2023 work that he completed there: "I Am Hymns of the New Temples," at the Museo di Palazzo Grimaldi, a 16th-century Venetian palace, not far from the Biennale grounds. The central video — again set to music — features performers in fantastical masks cavorting in the ruins of Pompeii, retelling the Greek myth of the creation of the world.

The masks are on display alongside the Grimaldi archaeological relics. "Why did I use ceramics?" Shawky joked, referring to the actors' discomfort wearing them. "Terrible! All the performers were really, really suffering because we filmed in July."

Shawky was fascinated to learn that one of the first structures uncovered at Pompeii when 16th-century archaeologists began to excavate it from the layers of ash that descended after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. was a temple dedicated not to any Greek or Roman deity — but to the Egyptian goddess Isis. It was an entry point for the artist to consider the long history of the Mediterranean as a cultural space of religious, linguistic and cultural cross-pollination and coexistence.

It also allowed Shawky to explore the idea of justice. "The movie ends with Zeus realizing that humanity will never be pure of their sins," he said. "They started out worship dictators and power." In the video, Zeus decides to erase humanity completely.

Though very different than "Drama 1882," both films hinge on moments of violence and cataclysm that make space for something new, and hopefully more humane.

"This is a film about continuous creation and destruction, collapse and recovery, and the eternal series of destructions that feature in this history of humankind," Vilani said. "But after destruction, there is always a way to get back to another form of life. Wael re-envisions — he re-creates the possibility of not being hopeless."

Top, the artist Wael Shawky at his studio in Alexandria, Egypt. Above, Shawky's "Drama 1882" at the Egyptian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Left, "Drama 1882" combines opera and video. Below, the artist's "I Am Hymns of the New Temples" features performers in fantastical masks.

The heart of an installation includes an opera and a donkey.

LISSON GALLERY

The New York Times
20 July 2024

The New York Times

An Egyptian Artist Mesmerizes in Venice With an Opera and a Donkey

At the Biennale, Wael Shawky represented his country with a lush retelling of a failed revolution that offers hope in a troubled political landscape.



Wael Shawky, "Drama 1882," 2024, combines opera and video and dwells in the realms of myth and fact at the Egyptian Pavilion. Credit... Wael Shawky; via Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

If you think a filmed opera sung entirely in classical Arabic that tells, in detail, the complex story of a relatively obscure, failed 19th-century uprising in Egypt might be something less than compelling, do I have news for you.

Since the Venice Biennale opened in April, "Drama 1882," a 45-minute video at the heart of an installation by the Alexandria-based artist [Wael Shawky](#), has been mesmerizing visitors to the [Egyptian Pavilion](#). When I went in mid-June, long after the art world insiders had left, I watched as [tourists wandered into the dark space](#) and after a moment or two parked themselves on the floor and on benches, seduced by the candy-colored, almost cartoonish stage sets, a richly melodious score, slow-motion, stylized choreography and even a real donkey.

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Shawky, 53, has made a name for himself in global art exhibitions like Documenta and the Sharjah and Istanbul Biennials by turning to the past to reframe our understanding of the present, often through filmed performances featuring marionettes, live actors in oversize masks, or even children. Some of his works retell classic stories — about [the Crusades](#), or the expulsion of Muslim Arabs from Europe — that flip the script, as it were, by seeing history through Arab eyes. In 2015, Holland Cotter called "[Cabaret Crusades](#)" — [three sequential films shown at MoMA PSI](#) — "[truly brilliant](#)." "The story is one of almost unremitting violence," he wrote, "which is a surprise considering that all the actors are

marionettes.” (Lady Gaga was [also a fan](#).) Equally inventive, “The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version” (2017) brought to life the expulsion of Muslim Arabs from Spain in the eighth century, with singers and musicians from Sharjah and Bahrain performing live in the traditional style of Arabian Gulf pearl divers.

With “Drama 1882,” Shawky uses, film, sculpture and drawing to tell the story of the [Urabi Revolt, led by](#) a young military officer from a peasant family whose message of reform resonated with the common people. It purportedly began with the murder of a donkey owner by an anonymous Maltese man and ended with a clash between Alexandrians and British military forces that left around 300 Egyptians dead. The uprising signaled the end of Ottoman control of the region and precipitated British colonial domination of the Middle East for decades, including its 70-year occupation of Egypt.



A scene from Wael Shawky's “Drama 1882,” which was staged in Alexandria with a cast of 150. The actors “become like marionettes,” said Shawky, who reframes old stories to better understand the present. Credit...Wael Shawky; via Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

The film was staged and shot at a theater in Alexandria with a cast of 150 professionals and amateurs. It is the first film on which Shawky worked with unmasked actors, he said in a video interview. “I work with marionettes, kids and masks to avoid the idea of drama in my work. I hate when an actor uses his skills to interpret,” he said.

The actors’ strange, slow-motion movements — flailing arms, stilted walks, measured marches and stiff dances back and forth across the stage — were drawn from his work with puppets. “The performers don’t really have any facial expressions,” he said. “They use their bodies to convey expression, but not their faces — they become like marionettes.”

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Shawky, who spent part of his childhood in Mecca, where his architect-engineer father worked on modernization products, says that his mother always knew he would be an artist. But a musician, too? Despite the central role it plays in his work, he has no special training in the discipline. “I tried to study music while I was doing my master’s degree at the University of Pennsylvania, but unfortunately I was very lazy,” he said. He composes on a keyboard before calling in musicians and a music arranger to transform it into a score. “Sometimes I feel that I need people to be very, very patient with me,” he added with a laugh.



The artist Wael Shawky at his editing studio in Alexandria, Egypt, with different projects. "Telematch Suburb," drawing, graphite and oil on paper, 2008. and "I Am Hymns of the New Temples," ceramic masks, 2023. Credit...Fatma Fahmy for The New York Times

The installation is rounded out with a series of sculptures: vitrines that look to be straight out of a fun house, all bent legs and angles, variously filled with Murano glass puppets, fava beans, and cast aluminum plates showing faintly rendered historical images; one glass relief depicting an amber buglike monster dancing on a fort; a large structure of clay, straw, resin, steel, and copper veers between landscape, architecture, and scurrying sand insect.

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"We had hoped for a huge change, and it didn't happen. It's now really a dictatorship again," Shawky said.



Shawky's "Drama 1882," at the Egyptian Pavilion. Among the series of sculptures is a large structure that veers between landscape, architecture and scurrying sand insect. Credit...Wael Shawky; via Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary



Another piece takes the form of a Murano glass relief, showing a buglike creature dancing on ramparts. Credit...Wael Shawky; via Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary



A vitrine with dried fava beans. Credit...Wael Shawky; via Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

No matter how otherworldly or surreal his visual forms, Shawky hews closely to the historical record, often relying on scholarly accounts and archival research. “I even lift actual sentences from the written history,” he said, adding, “even if I don’t really believe it.” That approach allows viewers to see that history is a human creation, he said. “It’s not really something we can rely upon as fact — it’s a form of storytelling.”

By recounting history with puppet shows, operas, cabaret, musicals, Shawky allows for doubt to creep in. “My work is always floating between myth and reality, between doubting history and believing in history,” he said. “As long as there’s a gap in our knowledge, as long as there’s ignorance, we’re still making art.”

“There’s a kind of precision between images and sound and the way that stories are told in Wael’s work,” said Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, a curator who has written about the artist and featured him in [Documenta 13 in 2012](#). “He basically just presents chronology — a date, a fact, a date, a fact — and not some grand interpretation.”

When he was approached by the Egyptian ministry of culture to represent his country, Shawky hesitated. The artist had not had an exhibition in his home country since 2010 and had refused to participate in any government-sponsored activities after 2011. (But he remains engaged in the art community in Alexandria. He founded [MASS Alexandria](#), an independent studio program for young artists, in 2010.)

He felt there was a political sea change afoot to tap into: “When I talked to people in the streets, I got the feeling that people were losing trust in the systems and regimes that they used to turn to for answers. I felt that there is big change coming that will happen from people — from us.”



Installation view of Shawky’s “The Cabaret Crusades,” MoMA PS1. Credit: Pablo Enriquez/MoMA PS1

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The masks are on display alongside the Grimani's archaeological relics. "Why did I use ceramic?" Shawky joked, referring to the actors' discomfort wearing them. "Terrible! All the performers were really, really, really suffering because we filmed in July."



"I Am Hymns of the New Temples," 2023, also shown in Venice at the Palazzo Grimani. Credit...Wael Shawky; via Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary



For "I Am Hymns of the New Temples," Shawky placed his own masks and sculptures among the Palazzo Grimani's ancient relics. Credit...Federico Vespi gnani

Shawky was fascinated to learn that one of the first structures uncovered at Pompeii when 18th-century archaeologists began to excavate it from the layers of ash that descended in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79 was [a temple dedicated not to any Greek or Roman deity — but to the Egyptian goddess Isis](#). It was an entry point for the artist to consider the long history of the Mediterranean as a cultural space of religious, linguistic and cultural cross-pollination and coexistence in an era of increasing nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment.

It also allowed him to explore the idea of justice, he said. "The movie ends with Zeus realizing that humanity will never be pure of their sins. They started to worship dictators and power." In the video, Zeus decides to erase humanity completely.

Though very different than "Drama 1882" — one deals with history, the other mythology, one marks the beginning of modern Egypt, the other tells of ancient pasts — both films hinge on moments of violence and cataclysm that make space for something new, and hopefully more humane.

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Wallpaper*
May 2024

Wallpaper*

All the drama: Wael Shawky's feature-length opera for the Egyptian Pavilion in Venice

'Drama 1882', Wael Shawky's opera for the Egyptian Pavilion, is one of the must-sees at the Venice Biennale 2024



Wael Shawky, Drama 1882, 2024

(Image credit: © Wael Shawky. Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary)

BY AMAH-ROSE ABRAMS
PUBLISHED MAY 11, 2024

At the [Venice Biennale 2024](#), where decolonisation is at the forefront of the conversation, the Egyptian Pavilion's *Drama 1882* was one of the most popular presentations during the event's preview week. Renowned artist Wael Shawky's feature-length opera, staged and filmed in Alexandria, drew the longest queues in the Giardini and was many people's 'must-see' recommendation.

In this film, Shawky, who looks at pivotal moments in history with a focus on Egypt and the Middle East, considers the Urabi revolution against British imperial rule. It follows Colonel Ahmed Urabi, who founded the Egyptian Nationalist Party with the goal of achieving independence. Events build up into a full-scale British attack on Alexandria, and Urabi's subsequent exile. *Drama 1882* explores the chain of events that led up to this inflection point in a way that sheds light on both history and the world today. A huge production in scale and scope, it is an awe-inspiring work.

'Drama 1882', Wael Shawky's opera for the Egyptian Pavilion in Venice



Wael Shawky, *Drama 1882*, 2024

(Image credit: © Wael Shawky. Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary)

'We started this whole idea about this exhibition, before the fall and what is happening today in Gaza, but now of course it's linked and it's making sense,' Shawky says to Wallpaper*, speaking outside the exhibition. 'Normally, I don't like to work in a reactionary way as an artist, when there is a big event like this happening. I always like to go back – I go back to 200 years ago – and try to analyse history, to see how it relates to the present.'

The film, written and directed by the artist, marks a development in his practice. Having worked with marionettes and child actors in the past, this is his first production with a full cast. Deliberately staged as a traditional opera on a theatrical stage, it sees characters act out events leading up to 1882.

'The most important thing about this film is that I produced it in Alexandria, my city, with an amazing cast of young performers, dancers, singers and students,' Shawky adds.



Wael Shawky, Drama 1882, 2024

(Image credit: © Wael Shawky. Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary)

'A big part of this is that I feel I need to make a shift in my work... I always wanted to erase drama from my work by having marionettes or kids, or masks. This time, I said, OK, let's call it a drama! Because drama can refer to many things and can refer to catastrophe, it can refer to theatre, or a show – something staged. It can also refer to something fake.'

As the story unfolds, this double meaning, a stage for something staged, reveals itself, pointing to both historical events and today, addressing performative politics and the ripple of events through time. Muted rich tones are complemented by an immaculately staged performance with sumptuous vocals. Written after extensive research, the libretto is an education in itself.

Frieze
23 April 2024

FRIEZE

BY FRIEZE IN CRITIC'S GUIDES | 23 APR 24

The Six Best Exhibitions to See in Venice

From Yuko Mohri's delicate musical sculptures to Kapwani Kiwanga's brilliant beadwork which acts as a meditation on the history of global trade

[Wael Shawky](#) | Giardini, Egyptian pavilion | 20 April – 24 November



Wael Shawky, *Drama 1882*, 2024, installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma and Barakat Contemporary

When straight-to-gallery artist films too often resemble student video art projects, it's refreshing to encounter a consummate creative whose aesthetic vision is razor-sharp, as is his ability to execute it. *Drama 1882*, Wael Shawky's eight-part operatic film, spans

the entire right-hand wall of the dimly lit Egyptian pavilion. The atmosphere here is distinctly different from the buzz outside; visitors calmly squeeze past each other to sit, cross-legged, in front of the screen like schoolchildren who have skipped class to catch a matinee. Anticipation builds. The velvet red curtains are pulleyed back out of shot to reveal the first scene. The cinematic event of the biennale is about to begin.

Shawky, who usually employs puppets or children to star in his elaborate theatre productions, has chosen professional actors to portray the events leading up to Egypt's anti-colonial revolt, which was ultimately quashed by the British in 1882. Performed in classical Arabic, languorous heroic couplets weave across scenes with a sultry grace. Replete with swaying cast, whimsical lopsided sets, and a *mise-en-scène* that often pushes the abstract into the surreal, *Drama 1882* uses its mythic qualities to question the veracity of the history books. – *Angel Lambo*

The Art Newspaper
18 April 2024



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Homecoming for one of Egypt's leading artists as Wael Shawky shows at the country's pavilion at the Venice Biennale

Shawky's work for the Biennale, involving 400 cast and crew, recounts a 19th-century anti-colonialist uprising



Wael Shawky says that the large-scale undertaking for his Biennale video would have been "impossible in a place other than Egypt, or even Alexandria"

Photo: Lien Wevers

Melissa Gronlund

18 April 2024

Share



Wael Shawky will represent Egypt in its national pavilion, in a homecoming for the internationally acclaimed artist who has shown rarely in Egypt for the past ten years.

"I accepted this invitation in response to the changes that are happening in the world," says the artist, whose work investigates historical narratives. "I'm not only talking about the Arab world—there is wider injustice that it is important to address. For me it started

with the Russian-Ukrainian war, and it became clear that there is an end to the global system coming somehow—or that a new era is about to begin.”

Since the 2000s Shawky has been one of Egypt’s most prominent artists. He opened an art school in Alexandria, where he lives, and his performances and videos have appeared at *Documenta*, the *Sharjah Biennial*, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and at other venues around the world. However, since the closure of the independent exhibition space the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, he has kept a lower profile in Egypt itself.

African carve-up

While the subject of his Venice presentation, the video *Drama 1882*, takes place in Alexandria, Shawky has turned to it because of its global significance as one of the first episodes of anti-colonialism.

The video recounts the story of the Urabi Revolt, which was sparked in 1882 when a military officer, Ahmed Urabi, led Alexandrians in a skirmish against the British powers. It left around 250 to 300 people dead and formed the backdrop to the Istanbul Convention, in which North Africa was carved up among the European colonial powers and resulted in the British hardening their military control over Egypt.



I was interested to work with performers and to think of history as theatre

Wael Shawky, artist

“Whether Urabi is a hero or traitor depends on who wrote this history,” Shawky says. “I like this vague point in history, which you can use as more than facts. So I was interested to work with performers and to think of history as theatre. You have the written history, but you also work with it as a human creation.”

Shawky’s team is independent of the country’s ministry of culture, he says, adding that the ministry even asked the Egyptian Academy of Arts in Rome, which technically oversees the pavilion, to give him the keys to the pavilion in a symbolic gesture.

Despite Shawky’s international status, the commission also points to the precarity and financial pressure that a Venice pavilion comes with in countries that do not have generous public funding. The onus of production, fundraising and logistics has fallen entirely on the artist, who has appointed a team that raised the funds for the pavilion from private patrons in the country, all of whom supported the Venice Biennale for the first time. Shawky’s four representing galleries, Lia Rumma, Barakat Contemporary, Sfeir-Semler and Lisson, are also providing funding and logistical support.

However, Shawky underlines the extraordinary experience of pulling together to make the large-scale project. He worked at the open-air theatre in Alexandria with a cast and crew of 400—students, actors and young artists—over the course of four months, directing a live performance to transform into the video.

“It would be impossible to make this in a place other than Egypt, and even other than Alexandria,” he says of his hometown. “The cultural field has a hunger for any project where they can really get involved.”

Sotheby's
12 April 2024

Sotheby's

Beyond The Biennale: An Insider's Guide To Venice

BY CLAUDIA DWEK | APR 12, 2024

The Venice Biennale – or, to give it its formal name, the 60th International Art Exhibition – runs between 20 April and 24 November 2024. Traditionally, the highlight of the art world calendar, the Venice Biennale is a global celebration of art, old and new amidst the historic setting of Venice. Yet there is much to discover in Venice beyond the Biennale's borders, as Sotheby's Claudia Dwek shows in this personal guide to the city

Join Sotheby's Claudia Dwek in a journey through the art-filled streets of Venice, Italy's cultural cornerstone. Renowned for its Renaissance masterpieces, Murano glass, Baroque architecture, and of course vibrant art scene, Venice attracts art enthusiasts from around the globe, year-round – but no more so than every other year, when the Venice Biennale takes place. In this guide, we'll unveil the city's most treasured galleries, iconic landmarks, and hidden gems. If you are coming to Venice for the Biennale or simply a city break, whether you're drawn to the timeless works of Titian and Tintoretto or eager to explore contemporary art hotspots - or simply want to surround yourself with fish - Venice promises an immersive experience like no other.

Whenever I need to take a breather from everyday life and immerse myself in beauty and history, I take a short train ride away from my home city of Milan to Venice, my delight and refuge. There's so much here that enchants the eye and soothes the soul. I could spend days walking around the island city, savouring the silence of the water, and the peace of the Laguna. As well as the countless stunning palaces, scenic canals, historic architecture, and picturesque palazzos you can wander through the maze of ancient, twisting alleyways. Here, while losing yourself, you'll always find a charming shop, bar or restaurant. This beautiful city is truly timeless.



CLAUDIA DWEK, SENIOR VICE
PRESIDENT, CHAIRMAN,
CONTEMPORARY ART, EUROPE (MILAN)

At certain moments, Venice's unique character truly blooms, and the Art Biennale is the most vibrant of them all. Between April and November every other year, Venice thrums with artists, collectors, gallerists and art enthusiasts from around the world. Cutting-edge contemporary artworks hang on the walls and ceilings of Gothic and Renaissance buildings - old and new meeting and meshing perfectly together. And in amidst the ancient buildings, each Biennale presents the latest artistic ideas from all over the world, with artists presenting work within the pavilions of the Giardini della Biennale and the historical Arsenale – and all points in between.

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soul"**

- CLAUDIA DWEK

It's true that the canals, palazzos and alleyways have been growing busier by the year. Today, the seasoned Venice visitor might despair of finding anything novel or intriguing, amidst the familiar haunts of the Biennale. But over my years exploring the finest hidden spots Venice has to offer, I've come up with some lovely little spots to share with you. So, whether you are a regular visitor or a lucky newcomer, eager to enjoy the best this unique place has to offer, I hope you find something here to pique your interest and make your trip a memorable one.

MUST-SEE PAVILIONS - AND ESSENTIAL EXHIBITIONS

Wael Shawky at the Egyptian Pavilion



Wael Shawky *I AM HYMNS OF THE NEW TEMPLES* (2023) COURTESY LISSON GALLERY. COMMISSIONED BY POMPEII ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK AS PART OF POMPEII COMMITMENT. ARCHEOLOGICAL MATTERS (COLLECTION). WINNER OF THE PUBLIC NOTICE PAC 2020 - PROMOTED BY THE DGCC AND MIC. COURTESY LISSON GALLERY. COMMISSIONED BY POMPEII ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK AS PART OF POMPEII COMMITMENT.

Wael Shawky is representing Egypt at the Biennale this year and I am really excited to see what he will be showing. Shawky is a lyrical and imaginative storyteller, whose work typically interweaves fable, fact and fiction. For his installation at the Biennale, Shawky has created a film, *Drama 1882*, which is apparently a rendition of an original musical play, directed, choreographed, and composed by the artist, inspired by Egypt's nationalist Urabi revolution against imperial influence, between 1879-82. As well as the film, the Pavilion will also include vitrines, sculptures, paintings, drawings and a mirror relief made right here in Murano. I'm also looking forward to seeing Wael's solo exhibition *I Am Hymns of The New Temples* at Museo Palazzo Grimani (from 17 April).

'Drama 1882' The Egyptian Pavilion, Viale IV Novembre, 5, Sant'Elena Island 30132

'I Am Hymns of The New Temples', Museo Palazzo Grimani, Rugagiuffa 4858, 30122

Stir World
9 April 2024

stir world



The real and the surreal converge in Wael Shawky's immersive narratives

The artist revisits Egypt's Urabi uprising in his new work for the Venice Art Biennale 2024.

by Ranjana Dave | Published on : Apr 09, 2024

The Egyptian artist Wael Shawky may work in drawing, painting, sculpture, film and performance, but across all these disciplines, storytelling is his canvas. He builds a fascinating web of references from history and literature to create immersive narratives, inviting viewers to re-examine their understanding of history and identity. The Alexandria-born artist who lives between Egypt and the United States was chosen to represent Egypt at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, in a national pavilion commissioned by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture – Accademia d'Egitto. *Drama 1882*, created for the biennale, is a filmed rendition of an original musical play, exploring Egypt's nationalist Urabi revolution in the 19th century against imperial and colonial influence. The work is directed, choreographed and composed by Shawky and is sung in classical Arabic by professional performers.



Drama 1882, installation view, 2024, Wael Shawky

Image: © Wael Shawky, Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

Like many other national pavilions at the **Venice Art Biennale 2024**, Shawky's work draws inspiration from the biennale's theme, ***Foreigners Everywhere***. The Urabi uprising takes its name from its leader, Ahmed Urabi, an Egyptian military officer. Urabi, a colonel in the Egyptian army with roots in a peasant family, represented the concerns of the Egyptian masses. In the 1870s, Egypt was besieged by fiscal and economic crises. Ruled by Isma'il Pasha, it was heavily in debt. The country's finances were increasingly controlled by British and French colonial agents, at the behest of Egypt's European lenders. Europeans occupied key bureaucratic, military and trade positions, shutting native Egyptians out of these positions and aggravating income inequality. The 'foreigner' in 19th century Egypt held power and influence, unlike the figure of the disenfranchised 'immigrant' of today. "The interesting thing about this discourse is the idea of the foreigners—what does it mean to be 'foreigners'? Who were they? They were the occupiers—it was not the idea of immigrants that we have today," Shawky says in a press release.



Installation view of *Drama 1882*, Egypt Pavilion, Venice Art Biennale, 2024, Wael Shawky

Image: © Wael Shawky, Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

Shawky rehearses civilisational history and popular **mythology** in new formations in his work. He sees himself as a 'translator' of ideas and narratives; his role is to be a conduit between the stories he receives and the audiences who engage with his work. In his *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy of films (2010–2015), he uses marionettes and puppets to tell the story of The Crusades, the medieval conflicts between Christians and Muslims, which pitted popes and Christian kingdoms in **Europe** against Muslim territories in Europe and **Asia**. Whose interpretation of the Crusades does history favour? Shawky's work is inspired by French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf's 1983 essay, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*. In *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015), Shawky casts marionette puppets in scenes charged with frenetic action, their heads bobbing as they make weighty proclamations and decisions about the lives and destinies of others. Made of **blown glass**, the puppets are detailed and distinctive, their movements loaded with microscopic nuance—like the camel lowering its snout into hot, dry sand when Husayn, one of the key figures in the battle of Karbala, is stranded without water. The puppets are filmed on a revolving set, the camera tightly circling them to accentuate their detailed **choreography**, heightening the dramatic tension of the narrative.



Film still of *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, 2015, Wael Shawky

Image: Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Galleria Lia Rumma and Barakat Contemporary

For *Drama 1882*, Shawky worked with adult performers for the first time, in a departure from his previous casting choices—puppets, marionettes and children. He says in the press release, “Normally I insisted on erasing drama from my previous films... This time drama has several meanings: There is the sense of make-believe, connected to the idea of having a show, like theatre.” Shawky asserts that *Drama 1882* is not a theatrical performance, preferring to contextualise it as a moving painting. “The background is moving in slow motion, as if in layers. In the end, this makes the work like a moving painting, with the performers and soundtrack being elements in this composition. The word ‘drama’ has many implications: it conjures a sense of entertainment, the sense of catastrophe and our inherent doubt in history,” he says. In addition to the film, Shawky’s presentation at the biennale also includes vitrines, sculptures, paintings, drawings and a **Murano** mirror relief.

Shawky finds himself at the **Venice Art Biennale** at a crucial moment in global history, with a record number of people currently displaced by war and **climate change**. The ‘foreigner’ is a layered figure: there are foreigners everywhere, they may be queer, indigenous, they may be outsiders, or may operate on the fringes of established discourses. In contemporary realities, the foreigner is often in transit, tracing recurring pathways between the Global North and **Global South**. These perspectives inform **curator** Adriano Pedrosa’s framing of the 2024 biennale and also resonate with Shawky, who says, “This is a moment of global political urgency and revolutionary change. It seemed paramount to represent my country with a strong message at this time. To reflect on the historic occupation in Egypt felt timely, pressing and important.”

*The mandate of the 60th Venice Biennale, which aims to highlight under-represented artists and art histories, aligns with STIR’s own philosophy of challenging the status quo and presenting powerful perspectives. Explore our series on the Biennale, **STIRring ‘Everywhere’ in Venice**, which brings you a curated selection of the burgeoning creative activity in the historic city of Venice, in a range of textual and audiovisual formats.*

Frieze
9 April 2024

FRIEZE

What to See in Venice's Giardini and Arsenale

From Koo Jeong-A's scented pavilion to Julien Creuzet's 'layers of history', here's what not to miss during this year's Biennale



Wael Shawky | 'Drama 1882' | Egyptian Pavilion, Giardini | 20 April – 24 November



Wael Shawky, *I Am Hymns of the New Temples*, 2023, video still. Courtesy: Ministero della Cultura - Archaeological Park of Pompeii, in the context of Pompeii Commitment. Archaeological Matters © Wael Shawky

Some of Wael Shawky's most renowned works feature meticulously hand-crafted marionettes that depict historical events from an Arab perspective. Shawky's presentation in Venice will include a video work on the Urabi Revolution in Egypt, which was suppressed by the British. However, it's his 'extracurricular' paintings of fantastical landscapes and hallucinatory sculptures that most hold my attention. In previous exhibitions, audiences were as likely to encounter a bas relief of a comic-book dinosaur overlooking Mecca as they were to watch a film providing a deeply considered reappraisal of the Crusades. Ultimately, I find all this imaginative exploration quite striking from an artist whose thematic focus typically revolves around the weighty project of imperialism.

– ANGEL LAMBO, associate editor

Art Basel
9 April 2024

Art | Basel



'I'm so proud of this film:' Wael Shawky unveils his Venice Biennale project

The Alexandria-based artist tells Art Basel about his upcoming Egyptian pavilion

By Myrna Ayad | Apr 9, 2024 | 4 min read

It is said that when Pandora's box was opened, Zeus looked to earth from his abode on Mount Olympus and saw wars, bloodshed, carnage, and unrest. Horrified, the king of the ancient Greek gods flew into a fit of rage and vowed to destroy humanity for its corruption. And so, he commanded a deluge. 'When mankind got to that level of power-worship and dictatorship, Zeus created the flood to erase it,' says Egyptian artist **Wael Shawky** when describing his film, *I Am the Hymns of the New Temple* (2023).

The work, Shawky's first venture with Greek mythology, debuted last May at the Archaeological Park of Pompeii and was the first artwork to be created as part of 'Pompeii Commitment. Archaeological Matters' (PCAM). PCAM, a program conceived by the Italian Ministry of Culture and the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, was established to propose fresh takes on the ancient city. Shawky was initially approached by the art historian Andrea Viliani, currently the director of Rome's Museo delle Civiltà and back then, head of the research center at Castello di Rivoli. Shawky visited Pompeii in 2020; he was then put up in an apartment right next to the ancient city, where for 6 weeks in 2022, he shot *I Am the Hymns of the New Temple*.



Exhibition view of Wael Shawky, *I Am the Hymns of the New Temple* at Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.

In the approximately 1-hour-long film narrated in Arabic, Shawky explores the propagation of Greek myths, focusing on how, when, and where they were shared. 'I always try to read history based on what the sources are telling us, even if I don't believe it,' he tells Art Basel. 'I find that putting forth things as is, is a sort of critique and analysis in and of itself.' The lines of history and myth become blurred in *I Am the Hymns of the New Temple*. Set in a place covered in the volcanic ash of Mount Vesuvius, it showcases Pompeii as both a theater and archaeological site – one that stands as testament to many other faiths (the Temple of Isis, for example, a Roman sanctuary dedicated to an Egyptian goddess, is on view in the film). There are no puppets here – a narrative device often used by Shawky in his work – but real-life actors who wear luxurious ancient silks as well as masks designed by the artist and made by a team of professional ceramicists in Aubagne, France, headed by Pierre Architta, who had created over 250 ceramic marionettes for Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* in 2013.

In September 2023, 5 months after the film was shown in Pompeii, Shawky was invited by the Egyptian government to represent his country at the Venice Biennale. After lots of deliberations with his galleries (***Lisson Gallery***, ***Sfeir-Semler Gallery***, ***Lia Rumma***, and Barakat Contemporary) the Alexandria-born artist agreed on condition that he was given 'full control of the pavilion and no interference on concept or anything at all.

Like many others, Shawky felt hopeful after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. 'We thought there would be change, but the revolution failed completely,' says the artist, who has not exhibited in his home country in 13 years. Representing Egypt was a decision, he says, 'to have a voice rather than having nothing.' It was almost a no-brainer to show *I Am the Hymns of the New Temple* at the Egypt Pavilion. The galleries concurred – after all, it was not exhibited in a museum or in a magnanimous cultural platform; the Egyptian government had already given Shawky carte blanche; the Italian government was elated to show a 'native' creation at the Olympics of the art world; and then of course there was the challenge of time, with the Egyptian government's 11th-hour invitation. 'Perhaps I could make extra work alongside the film,' Shawky recalls of the initial proposal.

But something gnawed at him. His hesitation grew and could not be silenced. After discussions with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the director of Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, who encouraged Shawky to do something else, he changed course in November. Nevertheless, the Italian government was relieved with the staging of *I Am the Hymns of the New Temple* at Venice's Museo Palazzo Grimani, opening on April 17.



Puppet used in Wael Shawky, *The secrets of Karbala*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.



Puppet used in Wael Shawky, *The secrets of Karbala*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.



Exhibition view of Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades* at MoMA, New York, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.



Wael Shawky, *The Path to Cairo* (still), 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.



Wael Shawky, *The Path to Cairo* (still), 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.

By the time he had shifted the pavilion's focus, the war in Gaza was underway and Shawky – ever the repository of ideas yet to be realized – refined the concept of a film, which echoed the catastrophic events unfolding. 'It's political and historical and wholly reflective of what is happening in the world today,' he says of the film, which explores Egyptian history vis-à-vis the British Empire.

The specter of Gaza hung over this film from the start. 'It also focuses on my hometown of Alexandria and its bombardment, which echoes the bombardment of Gaza. We don't mention Gaza, but no doubt people will connect it to what is happening today,' says Shawky, who is working day and night to meet the Biennale deadline. 'I'm so proud of this film.'

He likens himself to a translator, one who takes a creative form, such as text or a story, and reinterprets it as visual art. 'This kind of process makes me feel free and I enjoy it all the more when I am working with history. I find it fascinating,' he says. 'It gets you to analyze the story – when the gap between fact and myth is big enough to be creative.'



Installation view of Wael Shawky: The Crusades and Current Stories at Aarhus Art Museum, 2018. Photograph by Anders Sune. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.

There will not just be a film in Shawky's pavilion. Audiences will also be able to see objects from the film's scenography and perhaps some drawings and paintings. 'Many things are under construction. I'm creating a world here,' he says. 'It's how to use different types of media given that each has its own limitations and dimensions. You can make things in drawings that you can't make in film; sculptures can never become drawings for example.'

In the pavilion, audiences will sample Shawky's trademark talent for illuminating the various aspects of historical events. His works have, for years, consistently unraveled stories, both untold and told; those very same stories that we believe to be true as well as those we question all at once. In short, Shawky practices being suggestive. It is a realm he is most comfortable in. 'The more accurate you are, the more analytical, rather than cynical, you become,' he states. 'Of course, we will never know the truth, and it's imperative that we ask: who is telling the story of what?'



Wael Shawky, Untitled, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.



Drawing by Wael Shawky for The secrets of Karbala, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.

Credits and Captions

Wael Shawky is represented by ***Lisson Gallery*** (London, Los Angeles, New York, Shanghai), ***Sfeir-Semler Gallery*** (Beirut, Hamburg), ***Lia Rumma*** (Milan, Naples), and Barakat Contemporary (Seoul).

Myrna Ayad is a Dubai-based arts consultant, cultural strategist, and editor, and is recognised as one of the Middle East's leading cultural commentators.

Caption for top image: Wael Shawky, *Untitled* (detail), 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.

Published on April 11, 2024.

The National
7 April 2024



For artist Wael Shawky, Venice Biennale will be his Egyptian homecoming

► The internationally renowned artist will represent his home country with new work that reframes the Urabi revolt as a musical



Wael Shawky's *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* (2023) pulls together stories from Greek and Roman mythology. Photo: Lisson Gallery



Melissa Gronlund

Apr 07, 2024



Listen In English



Listen In Arabic

Powered by automated translation

Egyptian artist Wael Shawky will be a major presence at the [Venice Biennale](#), representing the Egyptian national pavilion. Starting on April 17, he is set to stage a solo exhibition at the Museo di Palazzo Grimani, as well as display work within a presentation of the collection of Qatar Museums.

[Shawky](#) is known for his performances and videos that sift through hardened understandings of the past to force us to rethink what we know.

For the Egyptian pavilion, he is creating the video *Drama 1882*, which hones in on a specific moment at the tail end of the Urabi revolt, a nationalist uprising in Egypt. In 1882, violence spread across Alexandria – Shawky's hometown – after what is believed to have been a dispute between a British council officer from Malta and a man whose donkey had just ferried him across town. Around 250 Egyptians are understood to have been killed, as well as 50 Europeans.

The riots were part of a larger revolt led by Ahmed Urabi, a military officer from the peasant class who sought to depose the Egyptian leader and dislodge British and French influence in the country. Though it is considered one of the first instances of Egyptian nationalism, the event was also a Pyrrhic victory. After the unrest, the British moved to officially take control of the country, and their colonial rule held well into the twentieth century.



For Shawky, whose work zeroes in on meeting points between the Arab region and Europe, the moment's sheer uncertainty gives way to artistic possibility. That stems from the status of Urabi – later vilified by the British – as a nationalist hero, to basic understandings of what happened, starting with the dispute between the two men.

"You have the written history, but you try to work with it as a human creation," he says. "With the Urabi Revolt, we know the results. But what happened to lead to the result has always been in doubt."

Shawky made the video at a historic open-air theatre in Alexandria, working through the rain and cold temperatures of the winter months with a cast and crew of nearly 400. The work is a musical, and Shawky asked the actors to perform in slow motion, often at different speeds to each other. Despite this formal estrangement, the work is relatively straightforward. For the first time, he used professional actors and has called the work a "documented play" as he leans into drama as an art form, as the title implies.

"For all the previous films, I was always trying to escape drama, by using marionettes or kids or masks," he says. "This time, I felt it was a challenge to connect history to theatre."

How we perceive history is as important to Shawky as what that history is. In the same way that water cannot be contained without a vessel, history cannot be passed on without a story, narrative or song that communicates it. In his beautiful *The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version* (2017), Shawky revisited the 11th-century Chanson de Roland – an immensely important and popular song that circulated in France for centuries – that describes the victory of the Emperor Charlemagne's nephew over the Saracens, or Muslim Arabs.



Wael Shawky's *The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version* was performed at the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2018. Photo: Sharjah Art Foundation

Shawky's version is sung in the equally ancient style of fidjeri, a form of vocal instrumentalisation that derives from pearl-diving in the Gulf. The work is a neat reversal of authority – the story told from the other point of view – but also a celebration of the Saracens. The performers, seated with drums on the stage, wear period costumes of richly embroidered linen and silk that suggest wealth, sophistication and embedded tradition, as they narrate their exploits in battle.

Shawky addressed another pitched confrontation between the Arab region and Europe in his trilogy *Cabaret Crusades* (2010-2015), a remarkably affecting work that reimagined the Crusades through marionette theatre. More than a hundred intricately costumed puppets, which Shawky found rotting in a basement of a collection in Turin, reframe the stories of the wars, showing how Arabs fought against each other, as did Europeans, rather than simply East versus West showdowns.

A departure from this black-and-white understanding also occurs in *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* (2023), which will have its premiere in Venice at the Palazzo Grimani. The work presents Pompeii as a spectacular site of myth and history intertwined, pulling together stories from Greek and Roman mythology, multiple religions and the enduring fascination after its rediscovery in 1700s. Filmed in Pompeii itself, it is the first release from the new contemporary art programme launched by the archaeological site.



Shawky's *I am Hymns of the New Temple* mixes myth and history. Photo: Lisson Gallery

Shawky's presence at Venice Biennale is also significant because it is one of the first times he has shown work affiliated with Egypt since the [revolution](#). For the past decade he has mostly travelled on the biennial and museum circuit, though he still works in Alexandria at the art school he established, Mass Alexandria.

The Egyptian pavilion is in some senses a homecoming – but it is also an organisational feat. The invitation came with little material support from the Ministry of Culture, nor – unusually – a curator, and Shawky has taken control of everything from funding to logistics.

He asked his longtime friend Mai Eldib, the Sotheby's senior vice president for the Middle East, to help with fund-raising and organisational logistics. She assembled a group of private patrons in Egypt – none of whom had previously contributed to the Venice Biennale – to underwrite the cost of production and exhibition, with Shawky's four galleries contributing further financial support.

Egyptian writer Yasmine El Rashidi took over publication for the project, and is now working as artist and curator with a team to give feedback on Shawky's work and its timely reframing of a key moment in contemporary history.

"This is really the moment to reflect on these historic events, but also the mapping of borders and how it all links to the present day," says El Rashidi. "Right now there is a sort of crumbling of the global order, and Wael's work speaks to that in its own subtle and ruminative way."

Wael Shawky's Drama 1882 will be at the Egyptian Pavilion in the Giardini for Venice Biennale from April 20 to November 24. I Am Hymns of the New Temples will be in his solo show at the Museo di Palazzo Grimani from April 17 to June 30. His work will also be part of the exhibition Your Ghosts Are Mine: Expanded Cinemas, Amplified Voices, organised by Qatar Museums at the Palazzo Franchetti from April 19 to November 24.

ArtReview
21 March 2024

ArtReview

2024 Venice Biennale pavilions: your go-to list [updated]

ArtReview News 21 March 2024 artreview.com

The latest updates: Iva Lulashi will represent the Pavilion of Albania

The [60th Venice Biennale](#), set to run from 20 April–24 November 2024, will be curated by [Adriano Pedrosa](#) – and some countries have already announced the artists who will exhibit in their national pavilions. *ArtReview* will keep a running tally as they come:



Wael Shawky. Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery

Wael Shawky will represent **Egypt**. Born in Alexandria and currently working in between his hometown and Philadelphia, where he received his MFA at the University of Pennsylvania, Shawky works in painting, film and performance to negotiate national imagination and narratives of history through extensive research. His ambitious film trilogy *Cabaret Crusades* that includes *The Horror Show Files* (2010), *The Path to Cairo* (2012), and *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015) – the latter premiered at his first major American survey at MoMA PS1 – adopts the format of puppet shows to recount a historical moment between the seventh and twelfth centuries through the perspectives of Arab scholars who lived through the time, investigating the secular motivations of the crusaders as well as power struggles within the Arab world. His recent work *The Gulf Camp project: The Wall #2* discussing post-seventeenth-century history of the Arabian peninsula – was installed at M Leuven in 2022.

LISSON GALLERY

Dezeen

5 February 2020

dezeen



Desert X installs 14 site-specific works in Saudi Arabian desert

Natashah Hitti | 5 February 2020

A host of large-scale installations have been built amidst the canyons of the Al Ula desert in Saudi Arabia that reflect the landscape and its heritage for the returning Desert X exhibition.

Previously located in the Californian desert, in the area known for hosting the annual Coachella music festival, Desert X Al Ula is the first site-responsive exhibition of its kind in Saudi Arabia.

Participating artists include Copenhagen studio Superflex, American artist Lita Albuquerque and Saudi Arabian artist Nasser Al Salem.

Each of the works, which range from artificial puddles that double as trampolines to a three-seater swing, are intended to encourage dialogue about the desert and reflect on the area's history.

Participating artists include Copenhagen studio Superflex, American artist Lita Albuquerque and Saudi Arabian artist Nasser Al Salem.

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Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim's Falling Stones Garden features 320 brightly coloured sculptures informed by the natural rockfall of the surrounding cliffs

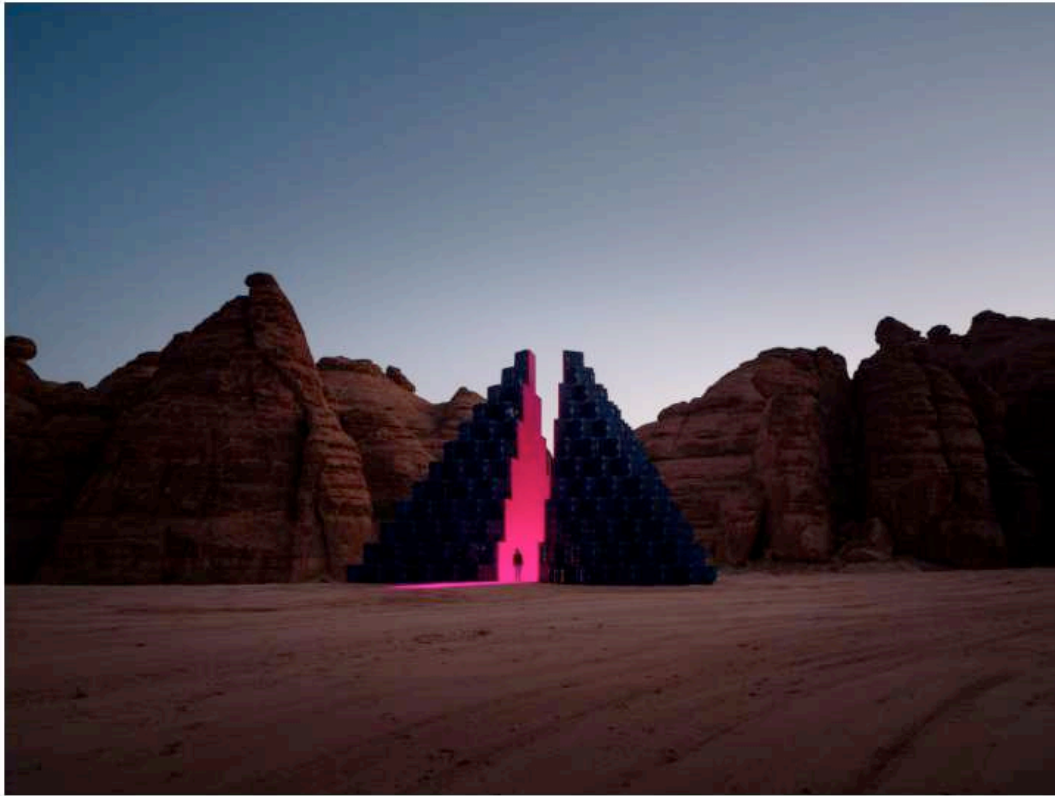


eL Seed's Mirage sculpture takes inspiration from Al Ula's ancient trade routes

The installation by French-Tunisian artist **eL Seed**, for instance, was informed by the ancient trade routes that formerly ran through the Al Ula desert. The work itself sits on site of what once was an oasis.

Titled *Mirage*, the sculpture resembles a pile of muddled letters taken from the Arabic script, which viewers can enter and walk underneath.

Instead of using striking colours as featured in the artist's other works, eL Seed opted for muted beige tones that blended in with the surrounding environment to make the sculpture almost "disappear", giving the impression of a mirage.



Rashed AlShashai's work references Al Ula's natural rock formations that were once used for shelter by travellers

Rashed Al Shashai also reflects on the desert's trading history with a pyramidal structure made from plastic pallets typically used for the transportation of goods.

Al Shashai's *A Concise Passage* installation aims to represent Al Ula as a centre for the exchange of ideas rather than goods, and a generator of meaning and understanding rather than commerce.



Manal Al Dowayan created a set of puddle-like installations made from large trampolines

According to Desert X artistic director Neville Wakefield, who co-curated the exhibition with Raneem Farsi and Aya Alireza, site-specific works such as these are informed by land art from the late 1960s and early 70s.

At this time, artists “consciously gravitated towards the remote as a means of breaking down the walls – physical, experiential and economic – of the institutions to which they felt bound,” Wakefield said.



Zahrah AlGhamdi placed thousands of old date tins in a glistening river-like formation as an ode to the desert's agricultural wealth

“Since then, globalisation has left us with a radically altered perception of the world,” he continued. “The universe may have contracted but cultural walls remain.”

By bringing a site-specific contemporary art exhibition to the Saudi desert, the curators hope to create connections between different individuals by sparking conversations about culture.



Gisela Colon's work is juxtaposed against the natural canyon backdrop to reflect the precariousness of human life in the anthropocene era

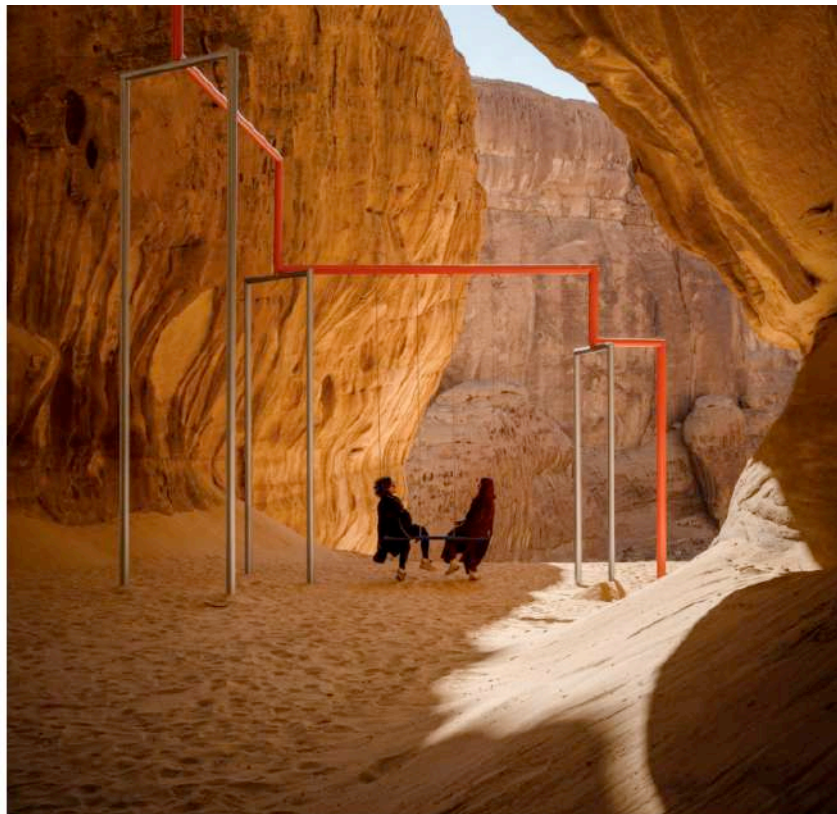
Designed to be both futuristic and as a hint to ancient totems, [Gisela Colon](#)'s monolithic work *The Future is Now* brings together old and new, while [Rayyane Tabet](#)'s *Steel Rings* installation references the Trans-Arabian Pipe Line.

Around 6000 tin date containers, which were once integral to Al Ula's agricultural wealth, make up [Zahrah AlGhamdi](#)'s *Glimpses of the Past* work, while [Muhannad Shono](#)'s *The Lost Path* is made from thousands of plastic pipes that come together to form a snaking, almost hair-like, sculpture.

[Sherin Guirguis](#) wedged a sculpture of a Bedouin anklet in between a rock crevice for her *Kholkhal Aliaa* work, while [Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim](#)'s *Falling Stones Garden* sees rock-like forms painted in vibrant colours to express the fragility of the desert ecosystem.



Nasser Al Salem installed a short tunnel in the Saudi desert for his [Amma Qabl](#) artwork

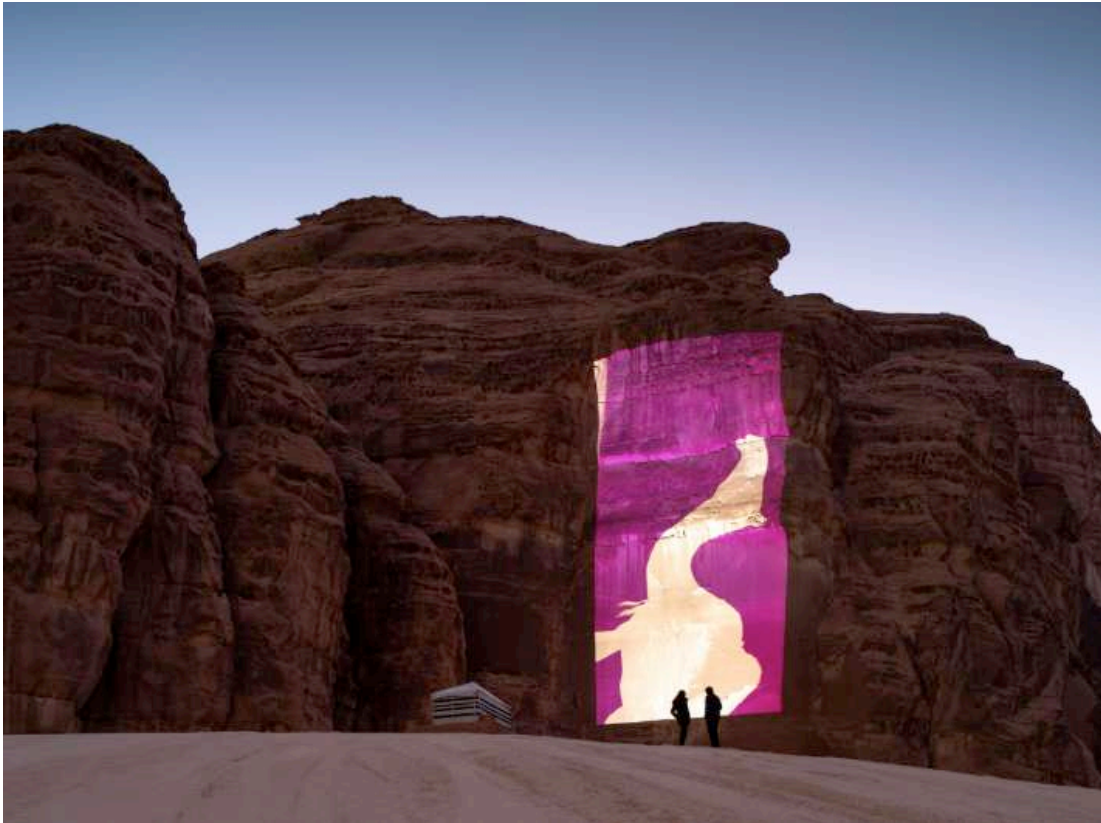


Superflex studio's [One Two Three Swing!](#) features several sets of three-seated swings conjoined by a zig-zagging support

Other contributing artists include Lebanese artist [Nadim Karam](#), Egyptian artist [Wael Shawky](#) and Saudi Arabian artist [Manal AlDowayan](#).

Desert X Al Ula is organised by the [Royal Commission of Al Ula \(RCU\)](#) in collaboration with Desert X, which took place in 2017 and 2019 and will return for its third edition in the California desert on 6 February 2021.

Desert X Al Ula runs from 31 January until 7 March 2020.



Last year's [Desert X exhibition](#) saw a total of 18 artists and groups create installations to the biennial, which were spread across California's Coachella Valley.

Designs included Sterling Ruby's monolithic fluorescent orange block, titled [Specter](#), and Pia Camil's rainbow arches designed as a comment on current immigration policies.

Read more: [Design](#) | [Saudi Arabia](#) | [Desert](#) | [Exhibitions](#) | [Installations](#) | [Desert X](#)

CairoScene
2 February 2020

cairo
SCENE

THIS EGYPTIAN ARTIST MERGES BEDOUIN HISTORY AND SURREALISM

The installation was a part of the Desert X event.



FARAH IBRAHIM

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Date

02/02/2020 16:11



Egyptian artist Wael Shawky's newest art piece uses the mountainous landscape of the desert as a backdrop for his video work, which got featured at the Desert X event. The piece - titled 'Dictums: Manqia II' - uses inverted images in negative colours to project a herd of black prize camels, aka majahims, across the desert's sand dunes, creating a surreal impression that the camels are walking across the mountains and towards the sky.

Majahim camels originate from Saudi Arabia, where the Desert X event is held. The video work's use of negative colour inversion transforms the camel's bodies into ghost-like figures— symbolizing the prized animals' return to their homes. The colour inversion also highlights themes of memory, history and the nomadic lifestyle which speaks to the larger topic of Bedouin history, a subject Shawky previously visited in his Telematch and Dictums series.

In partnership with the video projection, Shawky also created a mud house, and a tent which sits at the top of the house's roof. The three pieces merge together to create a surrealist landscape. What do you think of Shawky's work? Let us know in the comments below.

LISSON GALLERY

ArtReview

February 2020

Watching Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show* (2010), I found myself singing along. In the film, which uses marionettes to tell a history of the Crusades from an Arab perspective, a group of costumed puppets dance to an infectious melody picked out by ecstatic whoops and claps. In New York's MOMA PS1 I opened Shazam on my phone, but the app didn't recognise the tune and a moment later the scene changed. The song lasted less than a minute, and I haven't heard it since. But four years later, I can still recall that melody. (The same cannot be said for the intricacies of the Crusades.)

In *Musiophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (2007), Oliver Sacks offers some context on how tenacious earworms can be. In his mid-seventies, he could still hear in his inner ear a Hebrew song about a little goat, sung on Seder nights in his Orthodox childhood home. His point is not that earworms offer Proustian portals to our past but that melodies are encoded in the brain directly. While the taste and smell of a coffee-soaked madeleine might conjure memories of the past by association, music is patterned like the mind itself. If a song is sufficiently catchy – simple and repetitive – you might remember it for the rest of your life. Brushing your teeth, say, or waiting for a train, the tune can at any point erupt into your consciousness and loop uncontrollably. This is disheartening news for anyone familiar with *Axel F* by Crazy Frog.

I happened to be listening to Robyn's *Baby Forgive Me* while reading Sacks's book and, while I've had to reread chapters from *Musiophilia* to jog my memory of it, I can pull up her melancholy synth line without effort. The culmination of a neurologist's lifelong fascination with music and a four-bar loop in a synth-pop banger can't be directly compared, but, as Sacks argues and Robyn demonstrates, music and memory are intimately linked. This sensitivity can leave us vulnerable.

My brain is particularly susceptible to the kind of chipper, major-key melodies and clap-happy rhythms of Shawky's tune: a residue, perhaps, of enjoying the songs I sang in primary school assemblies. Songwriters and ad-execs know exactly how powerful a memorable line can be. I will never resent David Bowie for inscribing the riff from *Sound and Vision* into my mind, but I can't say the same for "Washing machines live longer with Calgon!" or the insidious jingle for Capital FM circa 1995, which give me the sense that, as William Burroughs warned, mass media is a virus that allows corporations to wriggle into and control our minds. However hard I try to filter my exposure, I absorb and store sonic input indiscriminately: it makes no difference to my unconscious brain if a tune is delivered by a great artist or on behalf of Cillit Bang.

Sounding off



Patrick Langley gets trapped in the music

The wall separating art from the propaganda of consumer capitalism is, on a neurological level, more permeable than I want to admit.

Sacks argues that music is 'engraved' on a 'defenceless' brain and calls the ubiquity of music in the modern age a 'bombardment'. I thought he was overstating the case until I remembered the tinnitus-induced musical hallucinations my late step-grandmother suffered from during her final years, when the theme song from *Chariots of Fire* played in her head day and night. She described her experience as 'torture'. It prompted me to think again about how dangerous earworms are, and whether I'll eventually pay the price for looping tracks like Robyn's while I wash the dishes.

For hearing people, the only way properly to legislate against the torment of a stuck song in old age is to avoid music altogether. But who among us could do that? I like to think that the art I love, in its ambivalence and complexity, mitigates against the reductive, viral forms of consumer culture that earworms help to propagate. We may be defenceless against these mnemonic devices but, as Shawky's video demonstrated, the simplest of forms can be a vehicle for open-ended and unresolved content. That they can encapsulate an issue without diminishing its complexity is due in part, I think, to repetition and in part to the fact that melody ultimately transcends language. As such, Shawky's song distilled an impossibly complex history and irresistibly simple truth: that we would do better to listen to other cultures than enter into wars against them.

Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades 111: The Secrets of Karbalaa* (still), 2015, 1110 film, colour, sound, English subtitles © the artist. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London & New York

Patrick Langley is a critic and novelist based in London

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Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbalaa* (still), 2015, HD film, colour, sound, English subtitles. © the artist. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London & New York

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Artforum
December 2019

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Wael Shawky

LISSON GALLERY

The sensuous impact of Wael Shawky's exhibition "The Gulf Project Camp" at Lisson Gallery was stunning, immediate. Soaring walls glistened, slicked with a pearly pink that offset the poisonously fulgent cyan of a crumbly, crenellated gypsum structure zigzagging to nowhere in the middle of the room. Then we noticed the scent—a deeply historical aroma that emanated from five grand reliefs exquisitely crafted out of hefty timber planks that were between four hundred and two thousand years old. The gallery told me the ancient cellulose was obtained from a company in Mestre, Italy, known for its vast resources, but I wondered if the wood was truly that old or if I was falling for a bit of mythmaking—which would be in keeping with the program of Shawky's "Gulf Project Camp" series, with its encrypted allusions to the history of the Arab peninsula commingled with layers of fantasy.

The first of these pieces was *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood* (after *Khamsa 'Five Poems' by Nizami, 1442*), all works 2019, whose title references a splendid illuminated manuscript of poems by Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), a hero of Persian literature. Sprouting out of terra-cotta and pastel-blue rocks is a gorgeous building—its facade cut with seemingly impossible and intricately rendered patterns—replete with arches, ramparts supporting azure turrets, and a dome. The palace's various wings are depicted in a flat, stylized perspective—appropriate to the kind of art that was created in Ganjavi's era. And looming behind all of this is an enormous animal equipped with a curiously impressive nose. Its blue skin is textured with delicate carvings to indicate shaggy fur. The beast's eye is closed—so that the viewer could admire its luxurious lashes.

In the massive *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood* (after 'Hajj [Panoramic Overview of Mecca]' by Andreas Magnus Hunglinger, 1803), we found a dinosaur-like being with an elegant, attenuated neck and a craggy, mountainous body. It peacefully guards the extraordinary (and extraordinarily empty) holy site of the work's title. *The Gulf Project Camp: Mirror* (after Mir Sayyid Ali's 'Nightlife of the Palace',

1539–1543 CE), was one of the show's two marvelous bas-relief glass pieces manufactured by the Berengo Studio in Venice. In it, a mystical, camel-like creature presides over a monochromatic tableau in pale petal pink where the exterior of a royal dwelling has been removed to reveal a city's worth of small figures busily engaged in activities from serving bread to sermonizing. A mirror placed behind the glass allowed us to see its crystalline layers, veined with minuscule cracks and speckled with air bubbles, adding to the sense of timeworn beauty.

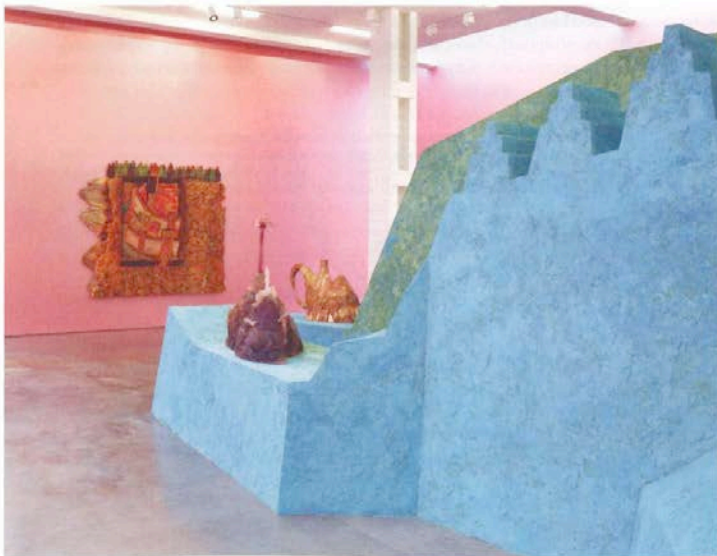
Shawky then absconded into pure reverie with a theatrical gypsum construction supporting five sculptures that are paradoxically futuristic while also belonging to some alternative past. A fuchsia palm tree and roseate architectural ruin, *The Gulf Project Camp: Glass Sculpture # 1*, seemed to glow as if extracted from a luminous computer screen, while the bronze *The Gulf Project Camp: Sculpture # 4* presented a creepily arachnoid mountain range containing a proudly erect minaret.

Shawky's projects tend to be substantial and imposing in their materiality and are sometimes accompanied by ethereal drawings, like footnotes to his slippery stories. That was the case here, too—a side gallery presented thirty-seven mixed-media paintings on cotton paper. Recognizable figures emerged (Richard Nixon's leering mug; a suspicious-looking King Faisal of Saudi Arabia), but they didn't illuminate Shawky's abstractly poetic narrative so much as interject iconography culled from numerous sources to confound a peaceful, chimerical landscape.

At the gallery's front desk was a copy of Abdul Rahman Munif's 1984 novel, *Cities of Salt*, about the discovery of oil in an idyllic oasis. In an interview about the book, the author predicted a time when "the first waves will dissolve the salt and reduce these great glass cities [of the Persian Gulf] to dust." But his book ends with the words "hope for the best. No one can read the future." Shawky, similarly, dismantles canonical histories of the region's past. His art makes room for magic, faith, and strangeness, offering us possibilities we couldn't otherwise imagine.

—Ania Szremski

View of "Wael Shawky," 2019. Background: *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood* (after 'Nighttime in a City' by Mir Sayyid Ali, c.1540), 2019. Foreground, from left: *The Gulf Project Camp: Glass Sculpture # 1*, 2019; *The Gulf Project Camp: Sculpture # 5*, 2019.



Pierre Soulages

LÉVY GORVY

In an homage to Pierre Soulages's indomitable spirit, this mini survey at Lévy Gorvy featured twenty of the French artist's oils made between 1954 and 2019. He is still amazingly productive and still obsessed with the color black, even at the grand old age of ninety-nine. At this stage of the human life cycle, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson has said, the only choice a person has is to either stagnate or to keep pushing along, full steam ahead. Soulages has clearly chosen the latter. He has never stopped being generative, despite the fact that his trademark hue is "a totally-dead silence . . . a silence with no possibilities," as Wassily Kandinsky wrote. The Russian abstractionist also said that "the silence of black is the silence of death," but clearly Soulages has found in it life and enormous creative possibility. Each of Soulages's canvases is like a phoenix that has risen from the ashes. His briskly varied strokes—flamboyant or calm, sharp or slapdash—are exquisitely nuanced and fresh. By comparison, Ad Reinhardt's solemn, dusky monochromes feel static, dead-end.

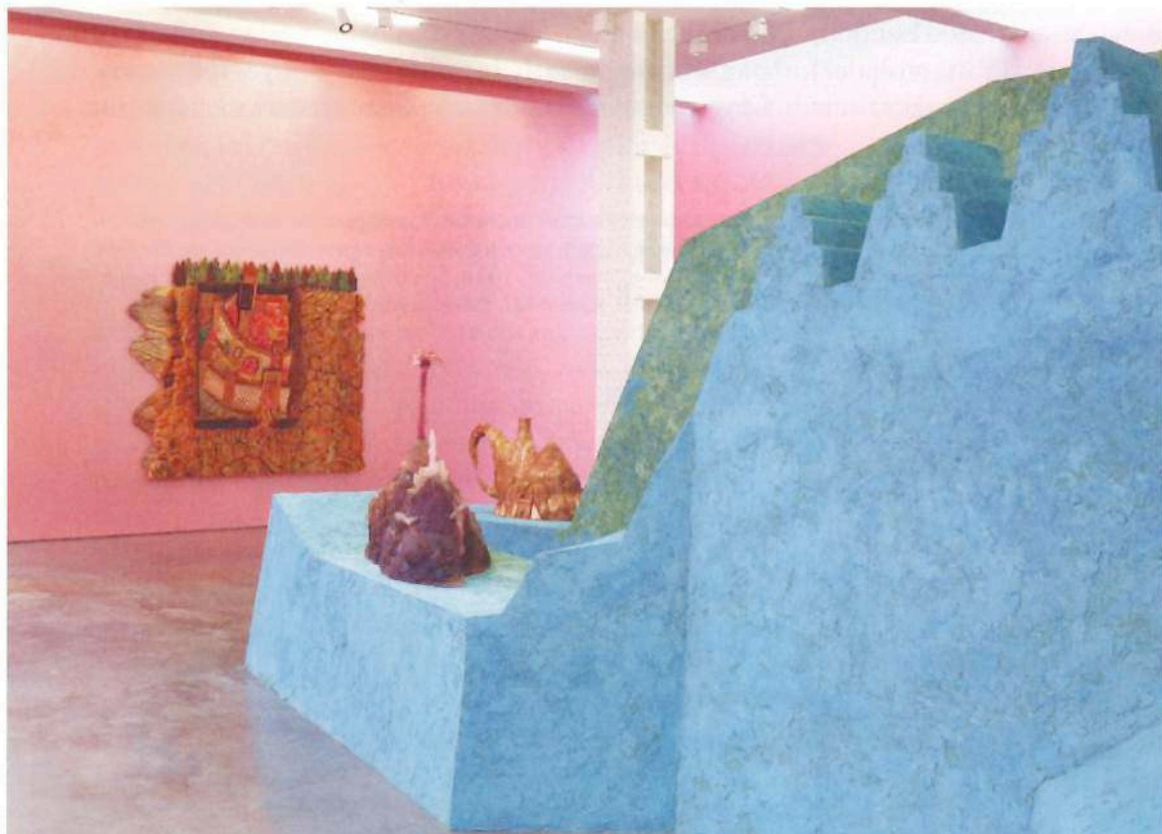
Kandinsky also stated that black is "a kind of neutral background against which the minutest shades of other colours stand clearly forward." But the creamy yellow of Soulages's *Peinture 125 x 202 cm, 30 octobre 1958* (Painting 125 x 202 cm, October 30, 1958) is slowly but surely being absorbed into the twilight, while the hints of sky blue lurking between the onyx slabs of *Peinture 130 x 97 cm, 5 mai 1959* (Painting 130 x 97 cm, May 5, 1959) all but disappear, like the straws

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View of "Wael Shawky,"
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Artnet
15 October, 2019

artnet[®]news

On View

'I'm Questioning How Much I Believe in It': Artist Wael Shawky on His Fantastical Remapping of Arab History

The artist playfully thumbs at the boundaries between history and storytelling.

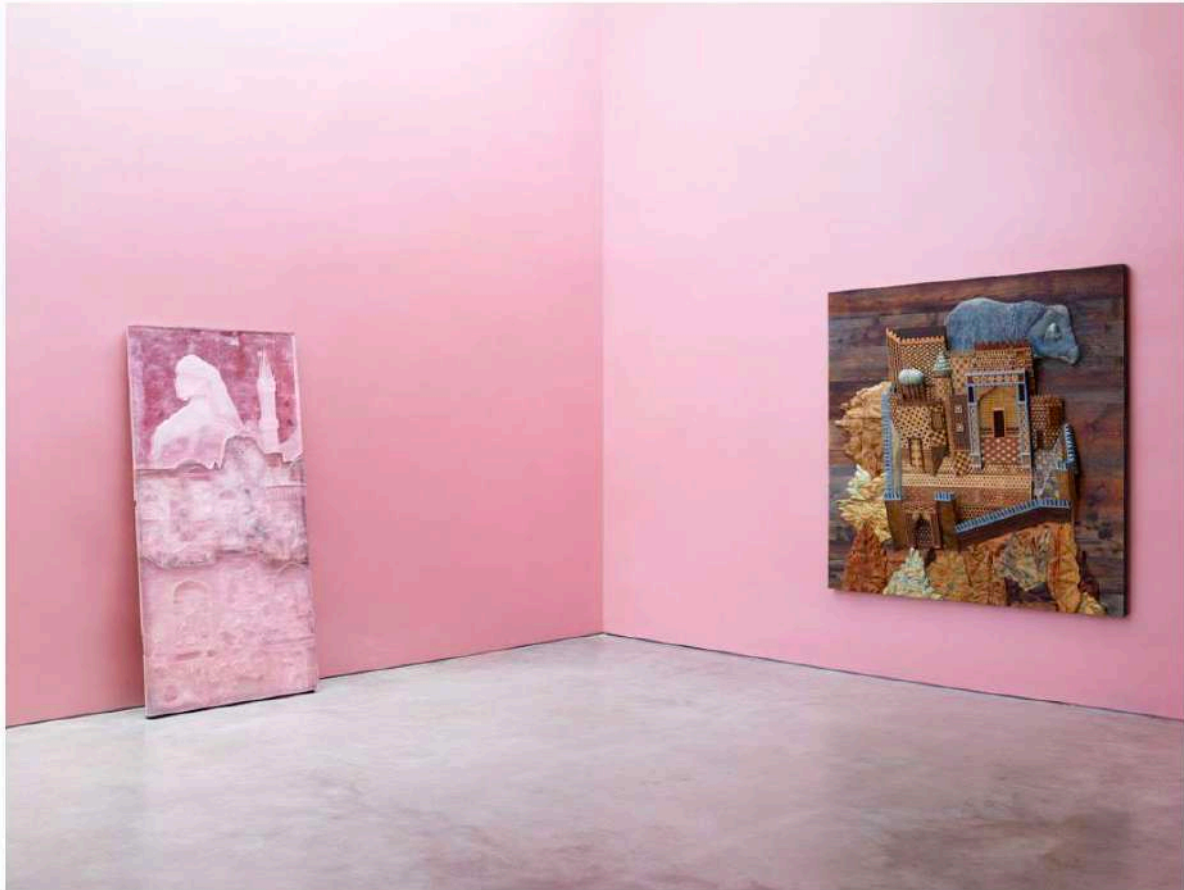
Katie White, October 15, 2019



Installation view of "Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp," 2019. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Maps are the age-old tool that help us humans orient ourselves, allowing us to conceptualize the world's terrain and land masses all the way down to our own neighborhood blocks. And, as our everyday reliance on GPS today would indicate, people trust maps.

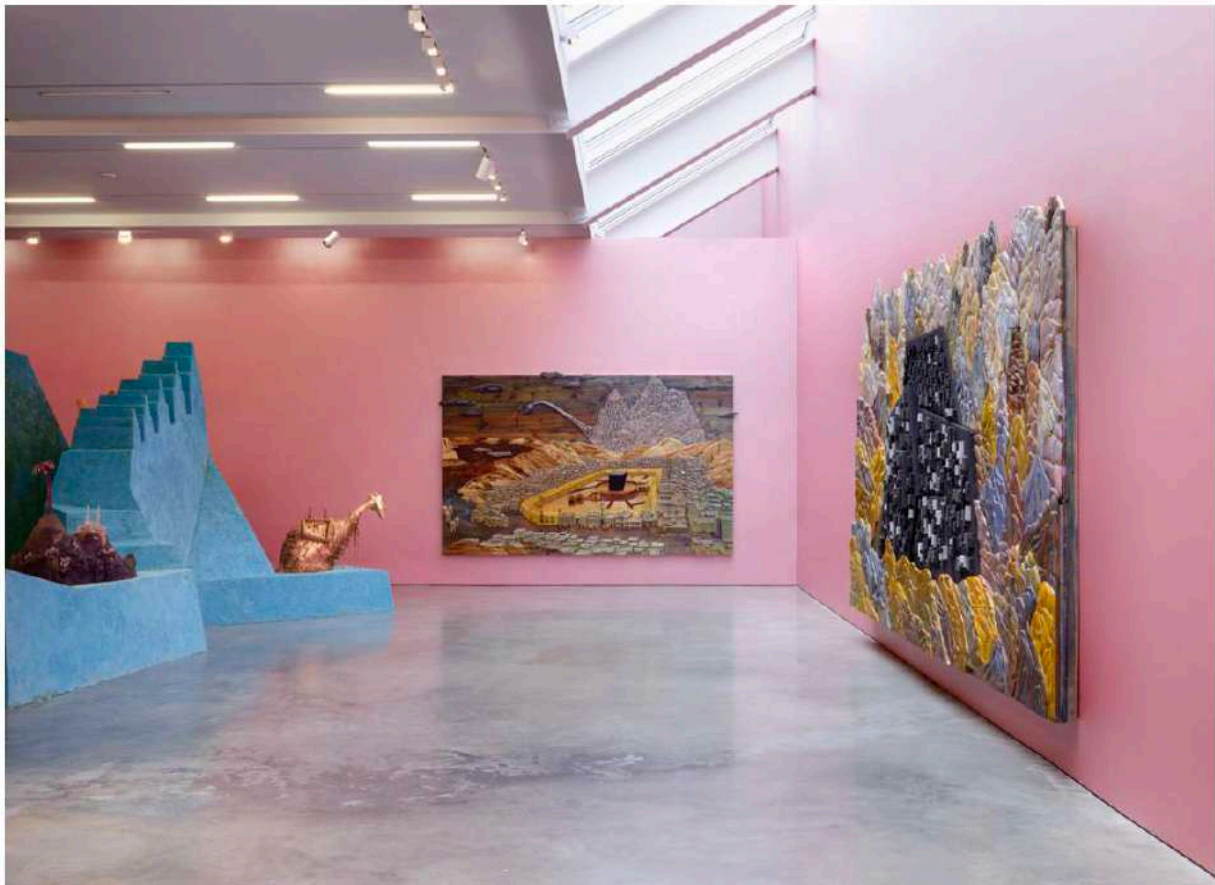
But for Alexandria-born artist Wael Shawky, maps are better thought of as imaginary spaces—where mountains are flattened, lands are stretched and shrunk, rushing waterways marked as steady lines. All historical documents are, in his view, a mode of storytelling, and the narrators are not always so reliable.



Installation view of "Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp," 2019. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

In "The Gulf Project Camp," Shawky's debut exhibition at [Lisson Gallery](#) in New York, and his first show in the city since MoMA PS1's "Cabaret Crusades" in 2015, the artist is immersing visitors in a theatrical sculptural environment that melds together antiquated European maps of the Middle East, Shawky's own drawings, and scenes and figures from the history and lore of the Arabian Peninsula.

A mountain-like crenelated, turquoise wall installation dominates the gallery, which also serves as a stage for a few of the artist's new bronze sculptures —themselves whimsical amalgamations of animals and terrains of the region. Elsewhere are intricate wood relief carvings dated between 400 and 2000 years old, ice-like cast glass sculptures produced in Venice, and, in a smaller back room, several dozen of Shawky's new ink and oil drawings



Installation view of "Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp," 2019. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Throughout the exhibition, Shawky playfully thumbs at the boundaries between history and storytelling. This ethos is captured nicely in a wood-carving entitled *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood (after 'Hajj (Panoramic Overview of Mecca)'* by *Andreas Magnus Hunglinger, 1803*. The work depicts a 17th-century map of Mecca drawn by a European cartographer—an incongruous continental European mountain range fills the background. To his own version Shawky has added a creature that's part camel, part rock formation, which sits monumentally in the background, unpinning any lingering associations with a factual reality.

Curious and playful absurdities abound. Shawky has been researching and developing many of the ideas explored in the show for a forthcoming new film series titled *The Gulf Project*, which will focus on the Arab Peninsula from the 17th century to the present day, and the transformation of the urbanism and ruling families in Gulf societies. Perhaps the films will draw history in harder lines, but here at least it is presented as a plaything, acting out in costumes and colors, or like an illustrated storybook that's waiting for its newest retelling



Installation view of "Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp," 2019. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

LISSON GALLERY

Frieze
9 October, 2019

Frieze

Reviews /

Wael Shawky Takes on the 'Dinosaur' of US Imperialism in the Gulf

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BY MURTAZA VALI
9 OCT 2019

The artist's fantastical sculptures and bas reliefs, on view at Lisson, New York, combine prehistoric creatures with oil barons and kings

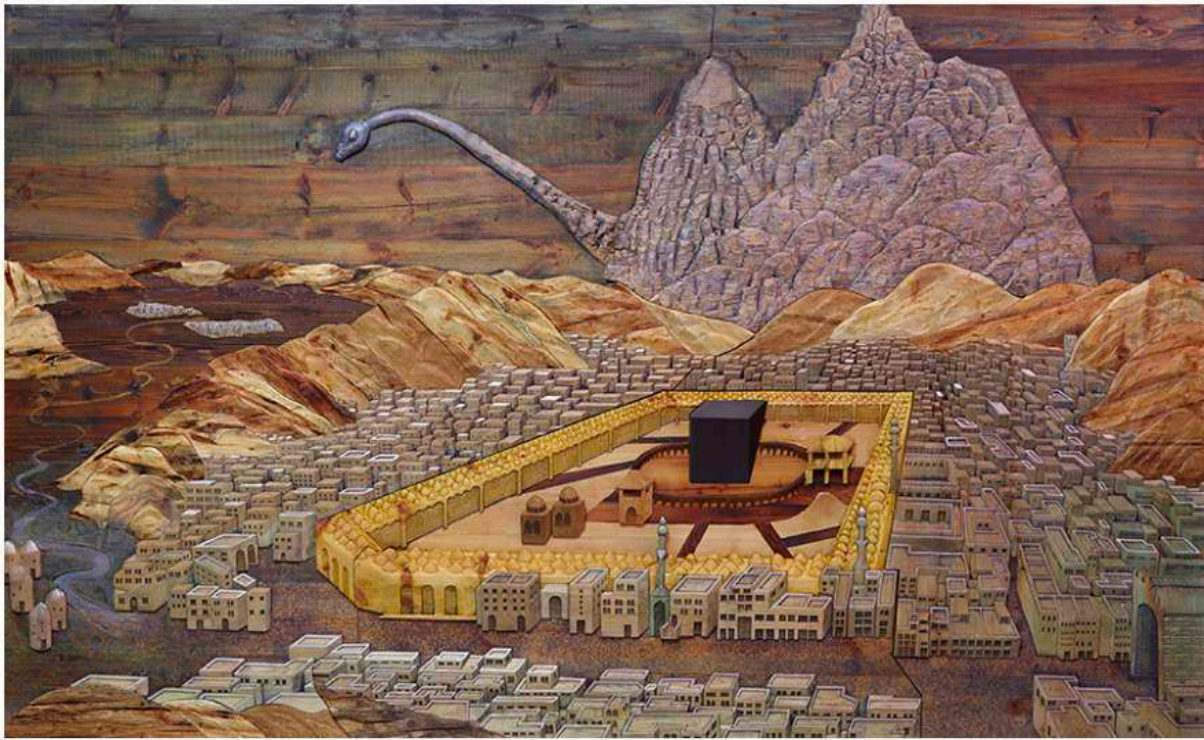


A follow-up to 'Cabaret Crusades' (2010–2015), his widely-exhibited trilogy of films narrating the Crusades from an Arab perspective, Wael Shawky's latest exhibition, 'The Gulf Project Camp', focuses on the history of the Arabian Peninsula since the 17th century. At the show's entrance, a hand-drawn map depicting historical regional powers, such as the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires, sketches out its geographical scope. If 'Cabaret Crusades' traced the origins of European colonialism in the Levant, Shawky's latest work tackles the American imperialism that followed the discovery of oil there.



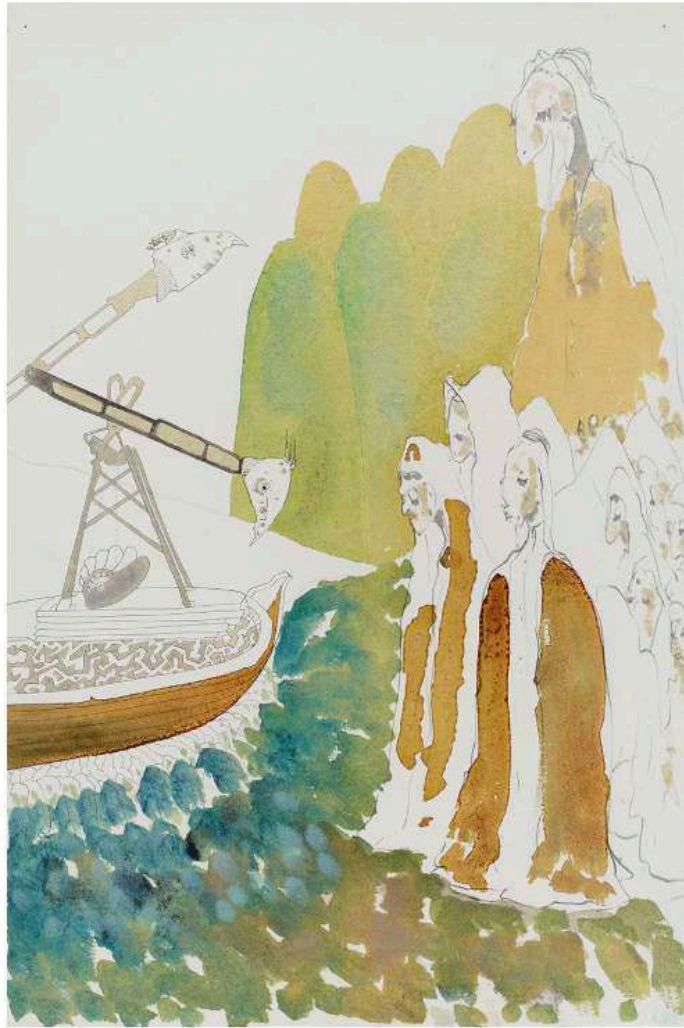
Wael Shawky, *The Gulf Project Camp: Sculpture # 1*, 2019, bronze, asphalt and tar, 96 x 190 x 65 cm. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

A series of large bas-reliefs draw their visual cues from the art and visual culture of the period: from the famous miniatures of Mir Sayyid Ali, active during the mid-1500s at both the Safavid and Mughal courts, to other frequently illuminated medieval texts such as the 'Khamisa' of Nizami (12th century) or Jami's 'Haft Awrang' (c.1468-1485). Shawky deftly transforms the characteristic flattened perspective of these vignettes of court life and palace intrigue into interlocking jumbles of richly patterned planes hand-carved out of antique wood or cast from translucent glass. In his monumental painted panel *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood (after 'Hajj (Panoramic Overview of Mecca)' by Andreas Magnus Hunglinger, 1803)* (2019), he eerily empties the view in an 1803 panorama of Mecca of its people, situating it in a time before or beyond history. The only sign of life is a dinosaur surveying the site, its long slender neck emerging from a mountain that also stands in as its body. Appearing throughout these works, such fantastical beasts are benign presences, their thickly lashed eyes closed demurely as if lost in thought or reverie. When such creatures are absent, Shawky cleverly renders the craggy terrain surrounding his cityscapes in a manner that suggests scaly reptilian skin, sublimating the mythic into the natural. This monstrous fusion of animal, architecture and landscape is most successful in the accompanying sculptures (four in bronze, one in luminous lavender glass), which suggest scenes from a post-apocalyptic future as much as some primordial past. The sculptures are displayed on an enormous zig-zagging wall, whose crenellations and faux-stucco surface recall the region's dusty architecture while its teal colour adds another touch of otherworldly whimsy.



Wael Shawky, *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood (after 'Hajj (Panoramic Overview of Mecca)' by Andreas Magnus Hunglinger, 1803)*, 2019, oil on carved wood, 250 x 400 x 15 cm. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

In the back room, a series of wonderfully playful mixed media drawings ('The Gulf Project Camp: Drawings', 2019) feels like exploratory sketches for the objects or, perhaps, a mood board for a forthcoming film. Here, historical references are more overt, featuring images of key power players who have shaped the Gulf – from the nineteenth-century Ottoman general Ahmed Mokhtar Pasha to more familiar faces, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Richard Nixon and King Faisal. The machinery and infrastructure of oil extraction and transportation also appear: a tanker filled with cylindrical vats, a wrecked oil truck, various boats, airplanes and even a submarine. In Abdelrahman Munif's epic *Cities of Salt* (1984), one of the few literary texts that narrate the effects of oil's discovery on the region's desert-dwellers (a copy of which sits on the gallery's front desk), the natives regard such monstrous modern intrusions with fascination and fear. Shawky visualizes this apprehension: the bobbing ends of derricks are transformed into beaked avian heads, while camels in cowboy hats and suits caricature American oilmen.



Wael Shawky,
*The Gulf Project
Camp: Drawing
29, 2019,*
graphite, ink,
oil and mixed
media on
cotton paper,
57 x 38 cm.
Courtesy: ©
Wael Shawky
and Lisson
Gallery

In interviews, Shawky has discussed his use of myth, metamorphosis and the monstrous as strategies for challenging the authority of history. In these surreal drawings satire emerges as an effective mode of critique in a region where history continues to be heavily contested and is often dictated by the state. They also capture the absurd speed and scale by which the oil boom jolted nomadic communities into futuristic urbanization. Shawky brilliantly illustrates this transition – which profoundly scrambled traditional ways of living in and understanding the world throughout the Gulf region – as a chair swing ride that resembles a mechanized palm tree, or a supersized cheeseburger mysteriously floating out at the sea.

Wael Shawky, 'The Gulf Project Camp' continues at Lisson Gallery, New York, USA, through 16 October 2019.

Main image: Wael Shawky, The Gulf Project Camp: Desertscape # 1, 2019, oil on carved wood, 575 x 290 x 18 cm. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

LISSON GALLERY

Art in America
8 October, 2019

Art in America

REVIEWS Oct 8, 2019

Sultans, Hybrid Creatures, and Richard Nixon Mingle in Wael Shawky's Fantastical Gulf Landscape

NEW YORK

at Lisson



For Wael Shawky's exhibition at Lisson, "The Gulf Project Camp," the gallery's walls were painted bubblegum pink and the main room was dominated by a mammoth sky-blue structure. What at first suggested the venue for a turbocharged gender-reveal party was in fact a lavish installation offering a deep dive into Middle Eastern history. The works on view (all 2019) related to Shawky's forthcoming film series "The Gulf Project," which, according to the exhibition materials, will explore the physical and economic development of the Arabian Gulf from the seventeenth century to today through the lives of its ruling families. The presentation cast extensive historical research through the lens of fantasy, recalling the projects for which Shawky is best known: the film trilogies "Al Araba al Madfuna" (2012–16),

based on Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab's phantasmagorical short stories of rural Egyptian life, and "Cabaret Crusades" (2010–15), which reconstructs the eponymous religious wars through puppetry.

The show felt like a stage set, with props and scenery in place but no actors to interact with them. It was theatrical and impotent at once—a fitting metaphor for the Gulf, where mimesis is elevated to a state policy (build copies of other places and they will come) and frustrated ambitions of the type exemplified by Dubai's long-delayed Falconcity of Wonders, a massive real estate development with internationally themed neighborhoods and replicas of world monuments, are common. The aforementioned blue structure contributed greatly to the exhibition's staginess. Serving as a pedestal for bronze sculptures depicting chimeric hybrids of architectural models and mythological creatures of a sort you might find beautifully illuminated in a medieval bestiary, it was an elaborate construction replete with crenellated walls, steps, and an alleyway.

Five stunning reliefs carved in wood and accented with metallic paint hung on the surrounding walls. They depict views of the Gulf region's landscapes and palace life adapted from early modern sources, primarily Iranian and Indian miniatures. The largest, however, is based on an 1803 panoramic engraving by the Austrian orientalist Andreas Magnus Hunglinger that shows the inner compound of Mecca during the Hajj but without the worshippers who would usually throng this type of scene. Looming over the landscape in Shawky's version is a curiously machinelike mash-up of a brontosaurus and the Loch Ness monster, a hybrid creature that makes several cameos in the works. According to the exhibition text, the relief was carved from wood that is "between 400 and 2,000 years old." (The bombast is an extremely Gulf move.)

A suite of drawings in a back room, suggesting film storyboards, rendered key moments in the region's genealogies of power in a similarly fantastical language. *Drawing #5* depicts military helicopters awaiting a giant hamburger arriving by sea, echoing the arrival of sixteenth-century Portuguese ships seen in *Drawing #2*—a deft analogy of hard and soft power, colonists old and new. In *Drawing #16*, we see King Faisal of Saudi Arabia meeting Richard Nixon in 1971, inaugurating the cozy Saudi-US relationship that continues to the present day, their bodies blending in with their architectural surroundings.

We know that the transmission of history is arbitrary, constructed, and rife with mythmaking. But Shawky turns the fiction up to eleven, engineering a candy-colored historical topography for the Gulf that's as realistic as Agrabah in Disney's *Aladdin*. It's particularly successful since the Gulf itself effaces its past, by way of hyperdevelopment, and has an outside reputation that lends its own surrealist cast to the affair.



REVIEW - 13 APR 2018

Around Town: Sharjah March Meetings

For the three-day event in the UAE, the best works and talks were ones in which geographical and cultural hybridity shone through

BY PABLO LARIOS

It's early evening in Sharjah. I'm one of 100-odd people sitting in an outdoor square, flanked by the cubic buildings of the city's old town. Before us glows a cartoonish diorama of a Mediterranean city: red-roofed houses, a pink river, city walls and crumbling towers. On stage, around 20 men begin to tap the lulling baritone of jahlahs and clay-pot drums, singing fidjeri, the songs sung by pearl divers in the Gulf. For Wael Shawky's *Song of Roland: The Arabic Version* (2017), the foundational epic of Old French is transposed to classical Arabic and traditional song. While the original *chanson de geste* (song of heroic deeds) from c.1100 glorifies the defeat of Carolingian armies during a Basque-Qasawi Muslim ambush in the Pyrenees in 778 CE, Shawky's reversal of its Eurocentrism is biting and topical in an age of renewed fault lines between East and West, religion and secularism: 'for wrong is with the Muslims, but with the Christians right'.



Wael Shawky, *The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version*, 2018, performance documentation, Sharjah Art Foundation's March Meeting 2018. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation

'Active Forms', this year's March Meeting (the eleventh edition, held at the Sharjah Art Foundation), was an impassioned three-day tangle of performances, five exhibitions and numerous discussions, mostly hinging on our globalized present in which periphery and centre are knotted. The presenters were refreshingly global, hailing from Australia, Bangladesh, the Gulf, Iraq, Japan, Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere; from Kazakhstan, Almagul Menlibayeva spoke about her photography documenting climate change in the Aral Sea, which has all but disappeared after the Soviet diversion of its source rivers.

The best works and talks were ones in which geographical and cultural hybridity shone through in all its messiness. Mona Saudi's exhibition, 'Poetry and Form', assembled the artist's delightfully weird, formalistic, abstract stone sculptures and drawings influenced by her personal correspondence with Arab-language poets Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish. In the 'Active Forms' exhibition, Maha Maamoun's video *Dear Animal* (2006) sees a drug dealer turn into a goat-like animal (from a story by Egyptian writer Haytham el-Wardany): a compelling articulation of the ways in which myth converges with personal experience. At the heritage house of Bait Al Serkal, Cairo-based artist Anna Boghiguan presented an impressive retrospective of her life's work (which has travelled from Castello di Rivoli, Turin), seemingly set in a future-present in which the world's bees have become extinct and the boats that once carried salt for trading are beached (*The Salt Traders*, 2015). Besides wafting sails, artist books, collages and paintings (such as the 90-piece drawing suite from 2011-12, 'Unfinished Symphony', there's a life-sized representation of her Cairo studio, and a hidden room in which dead bees drip from a giant wax ear (*Tunnel of Life*, 2018), like a surreal ode to history's unreal turns.



Anna Boghiguan, *The Salt Traders*, 2018, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view: Sharjah Art Foundation, 2018. Courtesy of Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea on loan from Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea CRT; photograph: Sharjah Art Foundation

Speakers pointed to our need, in the arts and elsewhere, for modes of cultural intersectionality: welcoming differences of geography, context and intention. Artists Marwa Arsanios, Dale Harding and Naeem Mohaiemen showed how terms such as Global South and Third World are in themselves conflictual: the now-derided nomenclature Third World was once associated with theorist Homi K. Bhabha's positive notion of a Third Space. Mohaiemen spoke of networks of radical South-East Asian publishers in New York in the run-up to 9/11; Harding, of museums as sites of tension and exclusion for his partly indigenous Australian family.

Reversing the dominant gaze emerged as a common concern: for example, in filmmakers John Akomfrah and Reem Shilleh's presentation about the 'militant image' or in the Kuwait-born artist Monira Al-Qadiri's talk, partly about her decade spent in Japan. Malian writer, filmmaker and theorist Manthia Diawara offered some insight into how to connect disparate lands and political activism, relating *négritude*, 1960s pan-Africanism and pan-Arab movements. Diawara followed cultural theorist and poet Édouard Glissant (who died in 2011) on a cross-Atlantic trip that ended in Glissant's native Martinique: 'I accept my opacity,' Glissant said. 'Everyone likes broccoli, but I hate it. But do I know why?'



Hajra Waheed, *Hold everything dear*, 2018, performance documentation. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation

Unsurprisingly, it was the older participants who had the most to say. Reading a new essay, 'Art and Resistance' (2018), Rasheed Araeen spoke of the expectation he met in the UK, when he moved from Pakistan in 1964, that he make art representative of his identity: 'My experience of being defined by this continued imperialism was so shattering that I could not ignore it.' He penned manifestos and founded journals such as *Black Phoenix* and *Third Text* to bring these issues to the fore. 'My point', Araeen stated, 'is that imperialism has not ended and is still here, and it influences the production of art and its legitimation,' adding: 'Without resisting and confronting it we cannot produce anything worthwhile.'

It seems apt that no common language of resistance emerged in 'Active Forms'. The best artists here demonstrated that the way forward lies in encouraging hybridities and syncretism – the very 'creolization' spoken of by Glissant. If we don't embrace the strange unwieldiness of the pluralities of our time, we'll fall back into the dichotomous medievalism of 'The Song of Roland', which presaged: 'Ye are likely to fight such a battle as was never fought before.'

The 10th March Meeting, 'Active Forms' <<http://sharjahart.org/march-meeting-2018>> , 2018, ran at Sharjah Art Foundation from 17–19 March.

Main image: Zineb Sedira, *Sunken Stories (detail)*, 2018, wooden boats, resin, stainless steel and steel reinforcement bars, dimensions variable, installation view, SAF Art Spaces, Sharjah. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation

Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES, THE HORROR SHOW FILE*, 2010, HD video, color, sound, 31 min 49 sec / *KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, DIE HORRORSHOW-AKTE*, HD-Video, Farbe, Ton.

BORIS GROYS

THE RETURN OF THE STRINGS

Wael Shawky's "Cabaret Crusades" video trilogy—*THE HORROR SHOW FILE* (2010), *THE PATH TO CAIRO* (2012), and *THE SECRETS OF KARBALA* (2014)—tells the story of the first Crusade. Started by a call issued by Pope Urban II in 1095 to conquer the Holy Land, it led to the establishment of the kingdom of Jerusalem by the Crusaders and ended with their defeat by the armies of Saladin nearly a hundred years later. Shawky's narrative is adapted from historian Amin Maalouf's book *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1984), which is written from a perfectly modern, secular perspective: History is narrated as made by men who are driven by interests and passions. The videos tell the story of the violent expansion of the Crusaders into Muslim lands, of terror against the population, of treason and intrigues that dominated Muslim politics in these years and made resistance against the Crusaders almost impossible. Only very slowly did the Muslims find political and

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military unity that was necessary for liberation. In other words, on the level of narration we have here a piece of secular, modern historiography as it is generally practiced in our time.

However, on the visual level Shawky's videos plunge viewers into the atmosphere of the medieval chronicles. The principle characters of the story are represented by marionettes rather than by living actors and the "real" landscapes of the Middle East are substituted by highly artificial medieval miniatures. Medieval chronicles, including the chronicles of the Crusades, do not clearly differentiate between history and myth, acts of men and acts of God, natural and supernatural powers, men and animals, living and dead. Their true topic is the miraculous: the promise of the miracle, waiting for the miracle, experiencing the miracle, remembering the miracle. The same can be said about the theater of marionettes, which had an important place in medieval culture. The mere fact that inanimate figures could move and act as if they were men or animals or ghosts or gods was experienced by the public as a miracle—as



a momentous suspension of the opposition between life and death.

Today, puppet theater is associated mostly with children's spectacles or films. The use of puppets suggests the purely fictional character of a story and the dominance of entertainment value over content. Shawky alludes to this conventional use of puppets when he titles his trilogy "Cabaret Crusades"—cabaret being associated in our cultural imagination with light entertainment. However, in the Middle Ages, the puppet theater—even if it was mostly directed toward an unsophisticated audience—dealt with serious matters; often it demonstrated man confronting supernatural powers and challenging fate. Not accidentally, Don Juan and Faust were originally figures of the puppet theater. With the emergence of the Enlightenment, the situation changed. The use of marionettes was scorned because it demonstrated the dependence of human beings on the supernatural. Liberation meant shaking off the strings that turned men into puppets manipulated by external powers.

The phrase "no strings attached" still aptly summarizes our understanding of freedom. Shawky has reattached the strings to the characters in his videos. This return of the strings is made even more spectacular by the fact that the marionettes are no longer seen in the familiar context of the puppet theater. Shawky's strings seem to hang from nowhere—and thus the characters seem to be moved by the invisible hand of fate. The return of the strings means the return of the miraculous, unexpected, and fated. The contrast between secular, prosaic, rationally built narrative, and the visual world in which myth and the miraculous dominate creates inner tension and a dynamic that keep viewers enthralled throughout the entire cycle.

A week before I began to write this text, I saw the complete *Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth, staged by Frank Castorf. I was struck by the similarity between Wagner's and Shawky's projects. Wagner also tried to tell myth by means of secular art—in his case, opera. Both *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and "Cabaret Crusades" are Gesamtkunstwerks. They show the world in its totality thrown off balance by an unlawful, criminal act fueled by human hubris. In the case of Wagner, it is the theft of the *Rheingold*. In the case of Shawky,



Wael Shawky, "Myth and Legends," installation view,
Serpentine Gallery London, 2013 – 2014 / Installationsansicht.
(PHOTO: HUGO GLENDINNING)

it is the intrusion of the Crusaders into the Middle East. Both criminal acts have the power to make time out of joint, to change the normal course of things, producing a state of chaos and causing extreme violence, treason, and suffering. And in both cases, the world comes back to its right course when this criminal act is corrected: The *Rheingold* is brought back to the Rhine; the Crusaders are driven from the Holy Land.

The concept of the right course of things is probably the oldest concept that mankind has created to explain the human condition. The Chinese called it *Dao*; the Romans called it *fatum*. The biblical religions, questioning this concept, substituted *fatum* with the will of God. But as time went by, the concept of *fatum* reemerged. Not accidentally, both Wagner and Shawky have chosen the Middle Ages as the setting for their works. The Middle Ages reasserted faith in the right course of things—and also the belief that the attempt to act against the *fatum* will inevitably be punished. But why did Wagner return to the idea of the right course of things in the nineteenth century? And why does Shawky do it now?

Wagner wrote his *Ring des Nibelungen* at the time of the Industrial Revolution, which created a rupture, a break with the traditional way of life. Gold seemed to give unlimited power to those who owned it. At the end of the *Ring*, the gold disappears again into the waters of the Rhine. But that does not necessarily mean a return to the pre-capitalist past; it means simply that gold loses its magic, its promise of absolute power. It is interesting in this respect that Castorf stages the *Ring* as a revolutionary, Marxist, Communist epic. Here not capitalism but, rather, the revolutionary Marxist movement is presented as a manifestation of human hubris. The flow of the Rhine becomes the flow of capital. Onstage, the Rhine is substituted by the New York Stock Exchange—and it is the place to which the Daughters of the Rhine bring the gold that was variously stolen by Marxist revolutionaries, Russian oil tycoons, and revolutionary adventurers. The *Ring* is staged as a failure of anti-capitalist revolution instead of a metaphor of the failure of the capitalist revolution. In both cases, the world comes back to its course, after its violent interruption comes to an end.

If Castorf radically modernizes Wagner's cycle to demonstrate its universality and relevance for our own time, Shawky practices aesthetic archaization by substituting actors with puppets. But, of course, both of these works belong to our contemporaneity. In the case of Shawky's videos, this connection is obvious enough—one needs only to watch the news from the Middle East. But there is, of course, a deeper connection of the work to the contemporary condition. In recent decades, we have been confronted with a chain of revolutions and counter-revolutions all over the world, including Egypt. These events show that the course of things can be violently interrupted at certain points in time, but this interruption cannot be stabilized. Revolutions are followed by restoration, intrusions by resistance. No historical force is forceful enough to put the course of things under its control.

In a somewhat paradoxical way, this insight leads to a new evaluation of the role of personality in history. Instead of classes and nations, which were understood as collective historical subjects that could dominate the world, individuals now reappear on the historical scene. Some of these individuals, Nibelung or Crusader, try to take fate into their hands, to define the course of history, to take the place of the invisible puppeteer. Like Don Juan and Faust, these hubristic actors move inexorably toward catastrophe and defeat. Other individuals know their limits and become successful within them. This view of history is neither progressive nor reactionary, neither critical nor affirmative. It accepts the status quo—but it accepts it as a flow that inevitably changes everything. In Shawky's videos, history is shown at once as a narrative describing the actions of real men with real interests and passions and as a stage on which these men hang from strings operated by fate. It is, actually, a very contemporary view of history that in recent times has manifested its miraculous and fateful dimension.

Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES*, DRAWING, 2013,
metallic paint, gouache, and pencil on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 1/4" /
KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, ZEICHNUNG,
Metallfarbe, Gouache und Farbstift auf Papier, 29,8 x 21 cm.





Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES, THE SECRET OF KARBALA*, 2014, marionettes, production photos / *KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, DAS GEHEIMNIS VON KERBALA*, Marionetten, Produktionsphotos. (PHOTOS: ARNIKA FÜRGUT, KUNSTSAMMLUNG NRW)



Wael Shawky in Milan: A cosmopolitan artistic ecumenopolis exists just behind the carnage



Dan Jakubowski
January 2, 2017

Wael Shawky, who has achieved global recognition for his epic video productions, is currently showing at three different galleries across northern Italy. Taken together, the shows at Castello di Rivoli, Fondazione Merz and the Lisson Gallery Milan present something of a mid-career retrospective, displaying the artist's surreal and meticulously researched re-imaginings of Upper Egyptian storytelling and the history of the Crusades. Given that Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades*, his more renowned film trilogy, portrays the Crusades as a monstrous danse macabre between Arab and European cultures, Italy avails itself as an appropriate setting. One imagines the aberrant marionettes that populate the *Crusades* films as they march through the Alps and foothills outside Milan and Turin, a brigade of murderous toys on its way to commit atrocity in the Holy Land.

The exhibition at the Lisson Gallery presents a selection of drawings Shawky made while preparing his two video trilogies, *Cabaret Crusades* (2010-2015) and *Al Araba Al Madfuna* (2012-2016). Those trilogies, which have appeared in various incarnations during the past six years, are often accompanied by immersive installations. The Fondazione Merz shows the *Al Araba* trilogy in full for the first time, projecting it in a gallery space filled with sand. Viewers watch the films while sitting on miniature sand dunes, the darkened and cool interior of the Fondazione echoing the many subterranean spaces of *Al Araba*. Nearby, at the Castello di Rivoli, are the three *Cabaret* films, installed in the cavernous top floor of the converted castle. The space is punctuated by bubblegum-pink medieval fortifications Shawky constructed for the show. Inside, the viewer finds small, cave-like projection theaters where each film plays on loop. Outside the cotton-candy ramparts, a long marble platform, gleaming white in the gallery lights, holds small bonsai trees, flowers, and members of the Murano-glass marionette cast from *Secrets of Karbala*, the third *Cabaret* film. Their grotesque, chimerical personas are offset by their fragile, effervescent materiality. Like

translucent crustacea and emaciated, masked phantoms, the puppets stand frozen alongside the films they dramatize to such eerie effect.

The least bombastic of the three shows, yet also the most illuminative of Shawky's practice, the drawing exhibition at the Lisson provides a view onto the preparatory connective tissue that links the *Cabaret* and *Al Araba* projects. During my trip across northern Italy to review the three shows, I saw the Lisson exhibition last, and its quiet, self-contained air contrasted markedly with the environmental thrill and macabre theater on display at the two larger exhibitions. There is one room, 13 small drawings and a large mirror with the map of a Crusades-era city sandblasted on its surface (*Cabaret Crusades, Map 3, 2016*). For what the show lacks in showmanship, it more than makes up for in the gentle sense of mystery that surrounds the drawings, as well as the opportunity to divine some of the connecting strands that bridge and unite the two trilogies. These larger projects have dominated Shawky's career during the past half-decade, continuing his earlier engagement with the ways historical narrative necessarily alters what it seeks to document, the unfolding of human events in time. These drawings bear witness to an artist playing with ideas and forms as they make the transition from his whimsical handling of graphite, ink and loose pigment to the high drama and disturbing undertones that define his films. They also show Shawky's interest in transformation and the grotesque, two concepts that permeate his film projects and frame his approach to the practice of history. Finally, most notably in the mirror work, this show helps flesh out what I think of as Shawky's career-spanning project of artistic ecumenopolis – a city that covers the entire surface of a world – in which he freely borrows from the material and visual culture of the Levant and the Western Mediterranean to give fleeting, barely recognizable form to a cosmopolitan community of artists and artisans indebted to history, even as they give searing representation to its atrocities.



The drawings, all made in 2015, are directly related to the *Al Araba* trilogy by their names. They show strange, distended creatures that are part man, part animal, and sometimes part inanimate object. In one

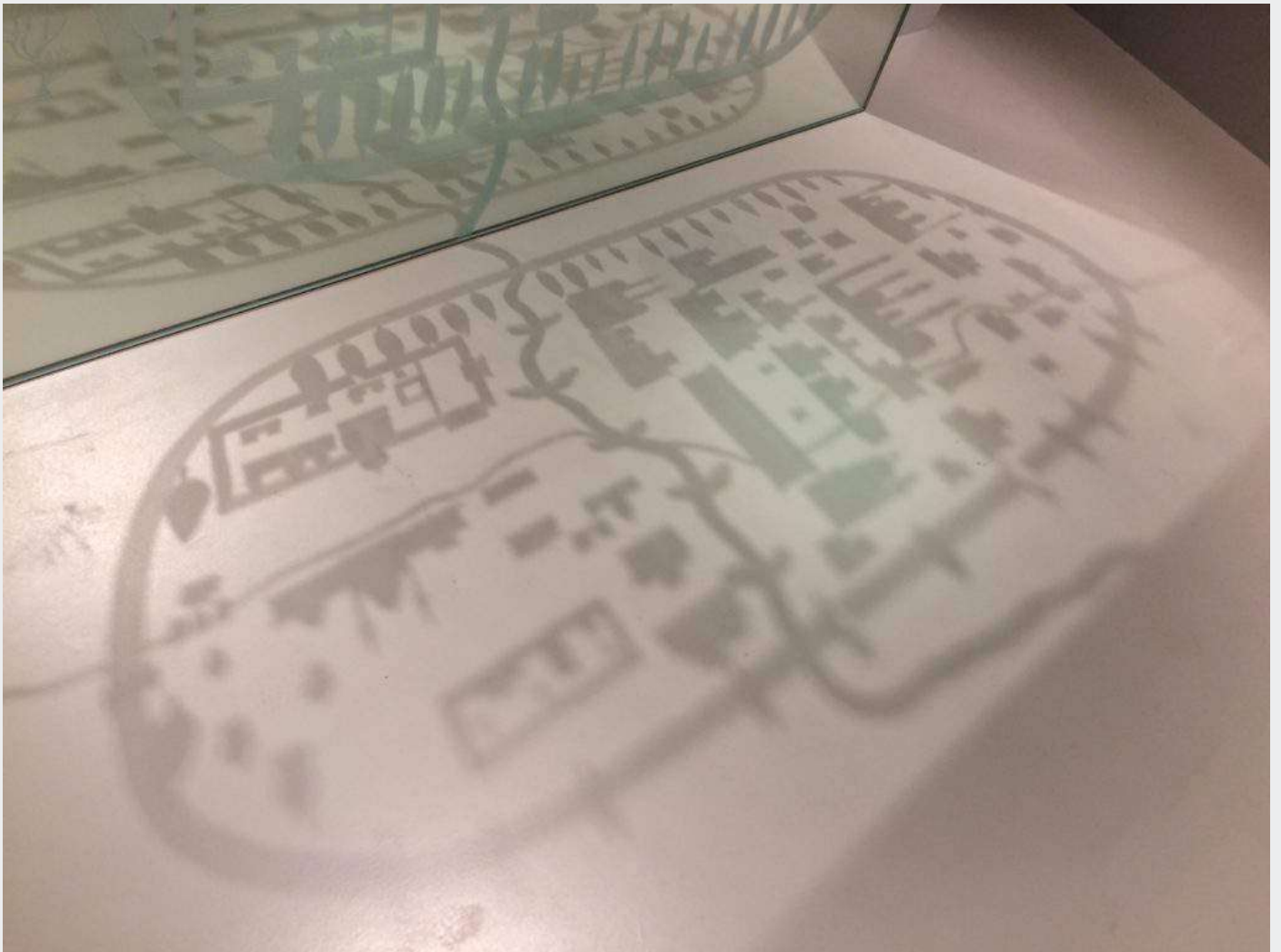
drawing, two gargantuan turtle-like beings lay asleep, their noses touching in the barest suggestion of a kiss. A city sprawls out on the shell of one of the creatures, the buildings delineated in thin lines of ink. Minarets sprout out of the turtle-thing's flank, and, further back in the drawing's landscape, a cyclopean ruin stands, all right angles and straight lines, in stark contrast to the biomorphic, gestural quality of the turtle-cities. In another, an orange and pink longboat glides over a colorfully speckled sea, its front end a parrot's head. The boat seems to contain a small human settlement, with the suggestion of people brought forth by tiny dots of pigment. A delicate palm tree springs out of the stern. Three more colorful drawings bear the obvious influence of Pharaonic visual culture, their flattened depth of field mimicking wall reliefs in ancient Egyptian tombs. One shows the jackal-headed Anubis, an Egyptian god associated with mummification and the afterlife, tending to a royal sarcophagus, the outline of his rigid body standing out against a solid background of saturated orange gouache. All of the drawings have been sprinkled with shrewd amounts of metallic glitter, their surfaces sparkling gently.



The narratives of the *Al Araba* films are each adapted from short stories by Egyptian author Mohamed Mustageb. These stories tell tales of small Egyptian villages that undergo watershed changes due to shifts in tradition or mystical intervention. *Al Araba Al Madfuna I* (2012) is based on the story *The J-B-Rs*, which recounts how a hamlet takes up a series of animals as their main source of material welfare. As they change from camels to mules to, finally, the forbidden pig, the townspeople find that their bodies undergo bizarre metamorphosis to become more like their animal of choice. *Al Araba Al Madfuna III* (2016), based on Mustageb's *Sunflowers*, tells the story of a village that adopts the sunflower as its principal crop, only to have their fortunes turn when the irrepressible plant overtakes their farms and invades the very heart of the village itself.

Shawky's drawings show the fanciful results of similar transformations. A building morphs into a monitor lizard. One side of a hill stretches out to become the neck of a sad-eyed brontosaurus. Minarets turn into writhing snakes. Crowds of people gather peacefully under the body of a multi-limbed, faceless monster.

The ways communities interact and change one another through war and material culture has been a perennial concern for Shawky throughout his career, and he wields the grotesque as a powerful symbolic mode in his latest films and drawings as a way to represent the transformations wrought through conflict, border-crossing and material exchange. According to the American art historian Frances Connelly, the grotesque is a playful, impure and hybrid mode of expression, one uniquely suited to a globalizing world in which local tradition is always already mingled with alien cultural forces. While ostensibly located in historical or mythical realms, the grotesques of Shawky's films and drawings have much to say about the globalization and cultural mixing that began, the artist's work seems to suggest, far before the modern era, during events like the Crusades. In Shawky's work, the grotesque is a signature of cultural contact and transformation, two unfoldings that are inextricably linked.



Finally, there is the meter-tall mirror, which sits on the Lisson's floor, leaning against the gallery's back wall. It presents the round form of a Crusades-era city map, buildings walled in by a circular fortification and bisected by a river. The image of the map is projected on the floor as a shadow by the mirror's reflection. Appropriations of the historical material and visual cultures of the Levant, the Middle East and the Western Mediterranean is a central part of Shawky's *Cabaret* trilogy. The puppets that occupy the films' roles were made by European artisans using centuries-old techniques. *Path to Cairo*, the second film, features ceramic marionettes created by French santonniers (Nativity scene sculptors), while the third film has a cast of 300 glass marionettes made by glass-workers in Venice. During a conversation with the artist in 2013, Shawky told me that he referenced Giotto's frescoes, Renaissance cosmograms, medieval cartography, ballads sung by Sunni pearl fishers from Bahrain and Shia prayer songs called *radouds*. The final stage of Shawky's work on the Crusades was another act of cultural appropriation: He reimagined, with woodworkers from Italy's Veneto region, the Crusades paintings of Eugène Delacroix, Cornelis Claesz van Wieringen, and Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Hesse as large-scale wooden reliefs. Grotesques also populate

these reworkings. An aquatic behemoth floats alongside the battleships of van Wieringen's work, and a long-necked phantasm hovers above the drama of a court scene by Hesse. Sandblasted mirror-making is another Venetian medium.

Shawky's Crusades-centered works all emerge from these constellations of influence and networks of artistic collaboration. Even while they represent sectarian bitterness and politico-religious massacre, they exist as artworks due to the cooperation of European and Levantine artisans and the intermixing of traditions from the very geographical areas that were once beset by religious conflict. Shawky's work cuts both ways, presenting an apocalyptic vision of a world thrown into chaos that is nonetheless the product of peaceful artistic exchange. Even as Constantinople burns in *Secrets of Karbala*, the partnerships that brought this spectacle to fruition shine forth, suggesting a cosmopolitan artistic ecumenopolis that exists just behind the carnage. That the mirror work at Lisson represents a city – one shaped like a world, and that is also twinned by its own shadow version – goes straight to the heart of Shawky's project. For while there is plenty of barbarity and fearful transformation on display in his films, they also bare the traces of another way, a grotesque intermixing peaceably and reciprocally shot through with the neighbors' strangeness.

Wael Shawky shows at Lisson Gallery, Milan from November 9, 2016 to January 13, 2017.

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PULLING

The Egyptian artist Wael Shawky is best known for his series of films in which puppets act out the Crusades. He meets *Apollo* in Turin to discuss the ironies and absurdities of history

By Sameer Rahim
Portrait by Luca Campri

THE STRIINGS



1. Wael Shawky (b. 1971),
photographed in Milan
in November 2016

Shortly after Jerusalem falls to the Crusaders in 1099, a Damascene judge called Abu Saad al-Harawi arrives at Baghdad's great mosque and begins ostentatiously eating bread. It is Ramadan and an angry crowd gathers: 'How dare you eat in the mosque when other people fast?' Having got their attention, al-Harawi climbs the pulpit to sing a lament: 'We have mingled blood with flowing tears and there is no room left for pity...your brothers in Syria have no dwelling place save the saddles of camels and the bellies of vultures.'

Given current events in the Middle East, this scene from Egyptian video artist Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades* feels spookily resonant. When I meet Shawky in Turin, where he has two exhibitions running concurrently until February (alongside an exhibition of his drawings at Lison Gallery in Milan; Figs. 9 & 10), he insists that when he conceived the sequence Syria was peaceful. 'I mean, seriously, there was nothing at all,' he says, in his boyish, earnest tone. By a grim twist of fate, though, the three films that make up *Cabaret Crusades* (2010–15) are set mainly between Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo – the three centres of power in the current Syrian conflict. 'This is so weird,' he tells me, shaking his head at the coincidence.

What makes it weirder is how Shawky tells the tale. Rather than real actors in medieval garb – in the style of Ridley Scott's epic *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), or the popular Arab television series *Omar* (2012) about an early caliph – *Cabaret Crusades* has intricately created marionettes playing all the major figures, from Pope Urban II to Saladin. His perspective is also unusual. Rather than using Western chronicles, he uses Muslim sources as recounted by the novelist Amin Maalouf in his *Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1983). All three videos and 26 of the marionettes are

being shown in the atmospheric surroundings of the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea at the Castello di Rivoli just outside Turin – which, by another happy chance, overlooks a Crusader route used by local monks. Anyone catching five or ten minutes in the gallery is bound to be intrigued by *Cabaret Crusades*; but to appreciate the depth of the work requires multiple viewings. Luckily, Shawky is an artist to whom it's easy to become addicted.

Wael Shawky (the 'k' is silent) was born in Alexandria in 1971. He spent his childhood in Mecca and his work still bears the imprint of Islamic aesthetics. After graduating from art school in Alexandria in 1994, he went to Philadelphia to study for an MFA. He won an Ernst Schering Foundation Art Award in 2011, and is recognised as one of the most original video artists around. His early work shows a fondness for surreal juxtaposition. In *The Cave* (2005), Shawky filmed himself walking through a German supermarket reciting the Qur'an by heart. These days speaking Arabic in public can get you funny looks. But the passages he chose are respected by Eastern and Western traditions – the Islamic 'Companions of the Cave' are the Christian 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus', found in the *Golden Legend*. There were also oblique parallels with Egypt under Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship. In the story, the men and their dog escape a tyrant by hiding in a cave, where God grants them slumber until a better ruler appears.

Shawky touched more explicitly on politics in 2007 with *Telematch Sadat*, in which children re-enact the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat. He drew inspiration from a German television programme popular in the Arab world called *Telematch*, in which rival towns compete in a series of physical challenges, all in fancy dress and to a zany soundtrack – a bit like *It's a Knockout*.

'Wael Shawky is a master of unexpected connections'

2. *Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File* (film still), 2010, Wael Shawky, HD video, colour, sound, approx. 32 mins



3. *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* (film still), 2012, Wael Shawky, HD video, colour, sound, 58 mins

The same childlike treatment of serious subject matter would become a running theme in *Cabaret Crusades*.

Shawky tells me that he chose marionettes for their endearing, naive quality, which makes them superior to actors. 'You can see yourself, project yourself on a marionette in a way that you can't with a professional actor – even if it's Al Pacino because you can never forget you're watching someone acting.' He echoes the German playwright Heinrich von Kleist, who in his 1810 essay, 'On the Marionette Theatre', has a puppeteer argue that 'where grace is concerned, it is impossible for man to come anywhere near a puppet.' (Shawky has recently illustrated the essay with his own drawings.)

For *The Horror Show File* (2010; Fig. 2), the first film in the *Cabaret Crusades* series, he repurposed 120 wooden marionettes that were rotting in the basement of the Lupi Collection in Turin. With the aid of the Pistoletto Foundation, 'we changed the costumes and fixed the mechanisms inside them'. Their peeling paint and chipped faces evoke the ravages of Justinian's Plague in 541, which opens the Prologue. It might seem strange to begin 650 years before the Crusades were launched, but Shawky takes the long view. Perhaps 50 million people died in that plague, making the Byzantine Empire ripe for Arab conquest 100 years later – a takeover that eventually prompted the Christian reconquest.

The next two films, *The Path to Cairo* (2012; Fig. 3) and *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015; Figs. 4 & 6), are more ambitious – the latter is feature-length. For them, Shawky designed his own marionettes, first using ceramics and then Murano glass (Fig. 7). Gradually, the figures become less naturalistic and more animal-like, resembling the African mask collection Shawky studied at the Met in

New York. As the wars drag on, both Franks and Arabs become more brittle and translucent, drained of humanity. Standing next to a set of the foot-high marionettes, Shawky describes the challenge of creating them. The biggest question was, 'How to find the right traditional craft to connect with the story?' He supervised the glasswork at the Adriano Berengo studio in Venice. That city plays a crucial part in the narrative, as *The Secrets of Karbala* ends in 1204 with the Venetian Doge sacking Constantinople. So Venice is a source of beauty and cruelty – a typically ironic touch from an artist who enjoys playing with conventional assumptions.

Only once in the series does a marionette entirely reflect its character's villainy: Shimr ibn thil-Jawshan has huge teeth, a skeletal head and pit-black eyes. Shimr is a notorious figure in Islamic history. He murdered the Prophet Mohammed's grandson in 681 in Karbala (that is the secret of the title), precipitating the Sunni-Shia split. While the Crusades were being fought, says Shawky, 'there was another parallel conflict between Sunni and Shia. Of course people don't talk about it a lot but it exists.' Before he retook Jerusalem, Saladin destroyed the Shia Fatimid Empire in Egypt – which he regarded, if anything, as a more significant foe than the Franks. 'It was important to start the last film with Karbala and end with the attack by the Catholics on Orthodox Constantinople. To show that this was not a religious war at all: it was absolutely about power and economics, just like when the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed was killed, it was simply for power.'

Just as with Shakespeare's histories, reading the sources helps you work out what the artist has chosen to focus on or has refashioned. At the siege of Antioch in 1097, the city's leader expels his Christian subjects in

4. *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala* (film still), 2015, Wael Shawky, HD video, colour, sound, approx. 120 mins



Courtesy Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg and Lison Gallery, London; © Wael Shawky

Courtesy Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg and Lison Gallery, London; © Wael Shawky / Courtesy Wael Shawky and Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg; © Wael Shawky

case they betray him. But the guilty man is one of his own, a disgruntled armorer who laughs manically as he opens his window to the Franks. (At this point the film, usually straight-faced, goes a bit *Team America*.) Look closely, though, and you notice the window is designed as an upside-down cross – a hint that the Crusaders are not exactly following in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace. As both Frankish and Arab chroniclers attest, the starving Franks succumbed to roasting and eating dead Muslims. The scene in which a marionette corpse is turned on a spit is gruesomely funny.

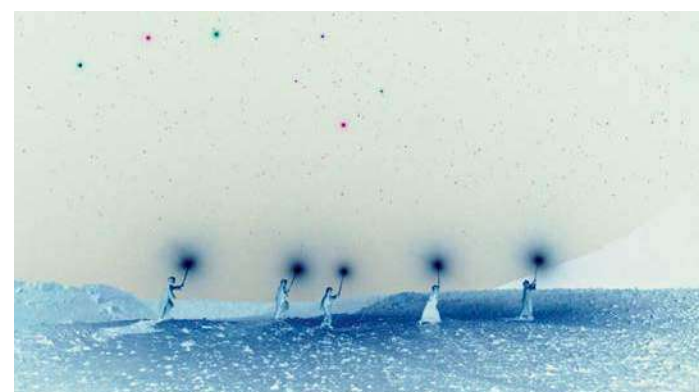
Initially Shawky thought he should make *Cabaret Crusades* in English to suit an international market. ‘Then I discovered this is absolutely wrong and since it’s based on the Arab historians, it has to be extremely classical Arabic, completely.’ The choice to make all the characters – sultan or pope – speak Arabic blurs the lines between the two sides, and draws a clear one to the present day. When Pope Urban II delivers his belligerent 1095 sermon calling for a crusade, he lambasts a ‘filthy race’ occupying Christian ground. He reminds you of George W. Bush calling for a ‘crusade’ for freedom after 9/11, but also Osama bin Laden, who in similar classical Arabic would condemn ‘filthy’ Westerners occupying the Muslim holy lands.

Perhaps the most ravishingly complex moment in the whole sequence features one of its few female personalities. Princess Alice, the daughter of Baldwin II of Jerusalem, is portrayed as a long-lashed camel marionette. (This is a compliment: the word for beauty in Arabic, *jameel*, is

related to the word for camel, *jamal*.) She is a second-generation Crusader gone native. ‘The people of Antioch,’ Shawky says, ‘were Muslims who loved Alice very much because she was sympathising with them more than the Crusaders.’ She threatened an alliance with Aleppo until her father quelled her resistance. She begged forgiveness. ‘I found the best way to express this was to give her some verses from the *Song of Roland*,’ Shawky tells me. Up in her tower, Alice sings a seductive passage from the medieval French epic about Charlemagne’s victory over the Muslims: ‘Not a Muslim did there remain, / But confessed was Christian or else was slain.’ Shawky explains that ‘It’s a fantastic song. It shows that the more you are cutting off heads, the closer you are to God. It’s like a Christian version of jihad!’ Like his marionettes, Shawky can be unnervingly straight-faced.

Each film has a distinctive visual language. The muddy colours of *The Horror Show File* reflect the medieval Europe where the story begins. *The Path to Cairo* borrows from brightly-coloured Islamic miniatures, especially those of the 16th-century Bosnian cartographer Matrakçı Nasuh. ‘In Aleppo we used his map as a basis, but made it more like a pop-up book.’ The pink towers in *The Secrets of Karbala*, recreated full-scale in the Castello di Rivoli, were inspired both by Matrakçı and by Giotto’s frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Shawky is foreshadowing the Italian victory in the third film’s final scene – and the coming Renaissance.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, director of the Castello di Rivoli and the curator of the show, tells me that Shawky



5. *Al Araba Al Madfuna I* (film stills), 2011, Wael Shawky, HD video, b/w, sound, approx. 21 mins

6. *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala* (film still), 2015, Wael Shawky, HD video, colour, sound, approx. 120 mins



7. Marionette from *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala*, 2014, Wael Shawky, Murano glass, fabric, metal, 58.4x20.3x12.7cm

Co-produced by Sharjah Art Foundation & Wiener Festwochen; courtesy the artist & Sharjah Art Foundation; © Wael Shawky / Courtesy Wael Shawky and Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg; © Wael Shawky

Courtesy Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg and Lisson Gallery, London; © Wael Shawky

believes, ‘We are all like marionettes, manipulated by forces we cannot see.’ He allows the strings to be obviously visible in the films: every step and speech is controlled by a higher power – God perhaps, or the historian, or the artist. But the gravity-defying marionettes have a life of their own; their movements are never fully under the puppet-masters’ control. They are free and unfree at the same time: in other words, disconcertingly human.

At the Fondazione Merz in central Turin, Shawky has complementary sets of films. *Al Araba Al Madfuna* (2012–16; Fig. 5) is a mysterious work that brings together ancient Egyptian lore, folk-tales, and popular Arab cinema. In the three videos, children dressed as adults – boys with moustaches and turbans, girls dressed as stern matrons – sit together in their village telling each other fantastical stories. For example, the people who lose the ability to speak and invent a new sign language through clapping; or a shaggy dog story about which animal is luckiest for the village to adopt. The children mime the words with adult voices dubbed over in Shawky’s favoured classical Arabic.

The third video, premiered in Turin, was filmed near a village called Al Araba Al Madfuna, at the temple to Seti I (c. 1290 BC). ‘I had to get a lot of permissions and bribes to do this,’ Shawky says, but he says it was worth it. The Osireion, situated behind the temple, is a strange place. ‘It’s full of myth, just like the history of the Crusades, but even more complex. Because we don’t really know what it was for.’ The Book of the Dead on the walls implies it was a tomb of some kind; a waterway connects underground chambers and some speculate it was where the Pharaoh was bathed before mummification. Even the source of the water is unknown. ‘Some say that it’s coming from the river, the Nile, and many people say it’s got nothing to do with the Nile. I like the uncertainty: it’s where you make art.’

We watch the children ride into the Osireion by boat, examine the hieroglyphs, make gestures, form the shape of a scene. But at the same time, they recite a story which is not about ancient Egypt at all – instead it’s taken from the Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab’s 1983 collection of parables. (Once more note Shawky’s taste for weird juxtapositions.) Mustagab’s story tells how for a long time the village used sunflowers to decorate their agricultural fields. One day, a farmer discovers the flower has edible seeds which can be sold to the neighbours. The village becomes wealthy, leaves behind its old-fashioned ways and starts to import all its food.

I put it to Shawky that the modern equivalent of sunflower seeds is oil, whose discovery has enriched the Arab world and caused no end of trouble. (This is prefigured in *The Horror Show File*, when the Arabs are shown filling barrels up with thick black oil, which they use both

‘You can project yourself on a marionette in a way that you can’t with a professional actor’

in their medicine and to make Greek fire.) He allows the interpretation, but I suspect he feels it is a bit obvious. 'It also tells you how a country, for example, decided to close all its factories and just import Chinese and Turkish goods.' Another parallel with modern Egypt. In fact, the film could be set in any period, its temporal strangeness intensified by his decision to invert the colouration so that the green water of the Osireion turns purple, and the stars are dark dots in a bright night sky.

The metaphor of multiple time frames is carried into how the Fondazione Merz present the videos. Abdellah Karroum, director of the Arab Museum of Modern Art (Mathaf) in Doha and the show's curator, explains that the first *Al Araba Al Madfuna* film is the furthest away from the viewer, down dark steps and in a tomb-like basement. 'You excavate the oldest film first,' Karroum tells me, 'before going up to see the more recent ones.'

You are also encouraged to sit on artificial sand dunes, though when I am there no one is willing to spoil their designer Italian gear and instead they perch on the edges (Fig. 8). Looming over us is a bulbous yellow tower punctuated with holes. It is a replica of the towers used as a backdrop for the second film. Shawky tells me he found them in a village between Alexandria and Cairo, many damaged with their honeycomb insides exposed. They could conceivably have dated from ancient Egypt or Crusader times but, Shawky discovered, they were built in the 1930s for catching pigeons. 'But now they don't use them so it became like a ruined city...really it was surreal to see this place.' A place with a prosaic purpose – a 'factory of meat', in the artist's words – has since taken on romantic and sinister connotations. The pigeons mated in the honeycomb holes – a literal love nest – while they waited to be slaughtered. I am reminded of the towers in *Cabaret Crusades*. The Antioch tower where Alice sings so charmingly of killing the enemy; the Tower of David in Jerusalem, from which its Arab defender peers at the Frankish army; the moated citadel of Aleppo, where civilians flock for protection. Immerse yourself long enough in Shawky's work and everything seems to flow together in a stream of history and images.

Shawky is a master of unexpected connections. He once spent eight months in Istanbul reading Sufi poets; he was trying to learn 'how to kill your will and become a receiver, which means leaving yourself to God'. Struggling to put this into practice in distracting Istanbul, he booked a flight to the Kurdish borderlands. But he just missed the flight. On a whim, he took the next plane to wherever it was headed. He ended up in the Anatolian city of Konya at 2am. He asked a local man where he was. 'This city is the shrine of Rumi,' the great Sufi poet. 'Okay,' said Shawky, 'I understand why I'm here.' The best thing about his Turkey trip was the serendipitous experience in his final week. 'Art can be a way of learning,' he says, 'let us say discovering.' **A**

Sameer Rahim is arts and books editor of *Prospect*.

'Wael Shawky' is at the Castello di Rivoli, Turin, until 5 February (www.castellodirivoli.org); 'Wael Shawky: Al Araba Al Madfuna' is at the Fondazione Merz, Turin, until 5 February (www.fondazionemerz.org).



8. Installation view, 'Wael Shawky: Al Araba Al Madfuna' at the Fondazione Merz, Turin



9. *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, Drawings, 2015, Wael Shawky, graphite, pigments, ink, and oil on paper, 29.7 x 42cm

10. *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala* (Drawing), 2014, Wael Shawky, graphite, ink and oil on paper, 140 x 100cm

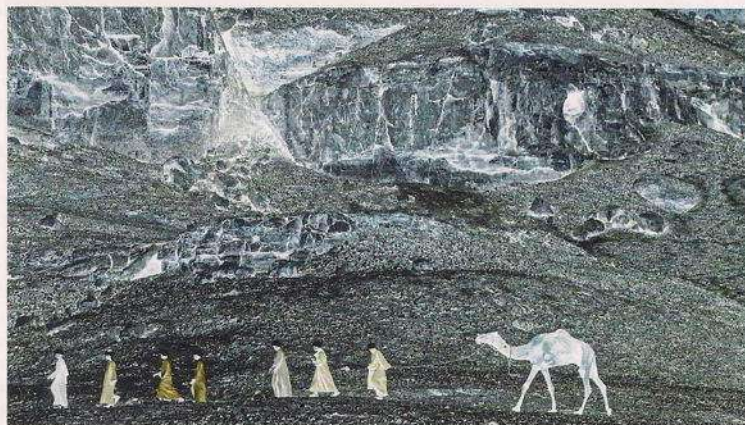


Photo: Andrea Guermani; courtesy Fondazione Merz / Figs. 9 & 10: courtesy Lisson Gallery; © Wael Shawky

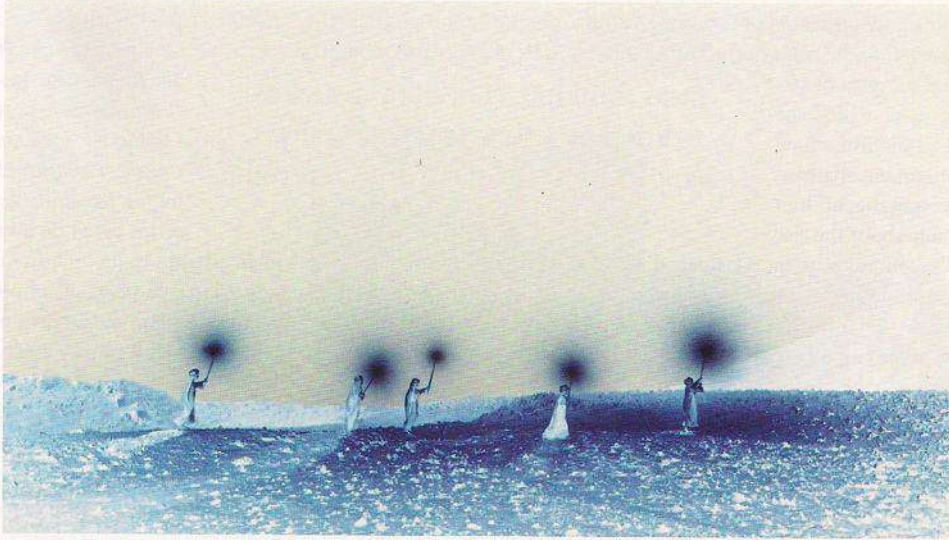
ArtReview

Wael Shawky

by Mark Rappolt



In linking fiction to fact across two sprawling film trilogies and many related works, the Egyptian artist is making his case for history to be treated as a work of art



above and facing page *Al Araba Al Madfuna 111* (stills), 2016,
4k video, 25 min. Courtesy the artist

Right now he's nominated for the 2016 Hugo Boss art prize and one of the most celebrated contemporary artists from the Middle East, but if, for some reason, the artmaking business doesn't work out for him, Wael Shawky might find himself well suited to an alternative career as a director of horror films. Take his latest filmwork, *Al Araba Al Madfuna III* (2016), a first edit of which premiered at the Kunsthaus Zürich this past summer. The final instalment of a trilogy, begun in 2012, that will be exhibited in its entirety (together with a series of related drawings and installations) at Turin's Fondazione Merz this November (last year, Shawky won the inaugural edition of the biennial Mario Merz Prize), the film, eerily presented in negative, features a group of children going down into the ruins of the Osirion temple, part of the limestone funeral complex of Seti I in Abydos, Egypt (near which the village of Al Araba Al Madfuna now sits), to witness an enigmatic, shamanistic ritual. Along the way, the children narrate a tale in Arabic about the rise and fall of a village's economy once local farmers discover the financial rewards of growing sunflower seeds: 'Sunflowers' by Mohamed Mustagab (whose stories – all from the 1983 collection *Dayrout Al Sharif* – also form the basis of the two previous films in the series). But they do it, as is again the case in the previous instalments, in the voices of adults. It's as if they were possessed by both the past (the voices of an older generation) and the future (the voices of the adults they will become), while their present status is squeezed away. We see children in the picture in front of us, but that childhood is denied through their articulation of the words of another (Mustagab's) in the voices of yet others (the adults who read Mustagab's words). Our eyes reveal a fact and our ears reveal it to be a fiction. Or perhaps that's the other way round. Like many of the best artworks, *Al Araba Al Madfuna III* teases the mind through acts of sensory manipulation. Which is, when you're the one experiencing the manipulation, a slightly uncanny or plain creepy experience. The feeling is even more intense when you're watching children enacting something they presumably don't really understand. Perhaps it's no accident that the first instalment of the work for which Shawky is best known, the *Cabaret Crusades* film trilogy (2010–15), is titled *The Horror Show File*.

Yet the *Al Araba Al Madfuna* trilogy wasn't born as a tribute to something like *The Exorcist*; rather it was inspired by a visit Shawky made to the village in the early 2000s, where the Egyptian artist encountered tunnels that local people had dug (sometimes from under their homes) in an attempt to access the pharaonic treasures they believed to be buried on the ancient site – these villagers relying on sources that operate on a metaphysical level (magic, artworks, Biblical tales) to guide them in their quest for physical objects (gold). Fictions are linked to fact (even if the existence of treasure in this case may only be a notional fact), in a manner that questions the nature of both. "I thought, 'ok, how can I translate this entire experience into a film?'" Shawky explains when we meet in Doha (*Al Araba Al Madfuna III* was commissioned by the Qatar Museums), where the Alexandria-based artist is currently conducting research that will lead to a new project on the establishment of the Gulf States. "I was thinking, 'I need to create two different systems that are really happening at the same time, but you can't even

‘I was thinking, “I need to create two different systems that are really happening at the same time, but you can’t even compare them”’

‘It’s like trying to see human desires. You don’t see it as good people, bad people, evil, I think. It’s really more like human desires that are trying to survive’

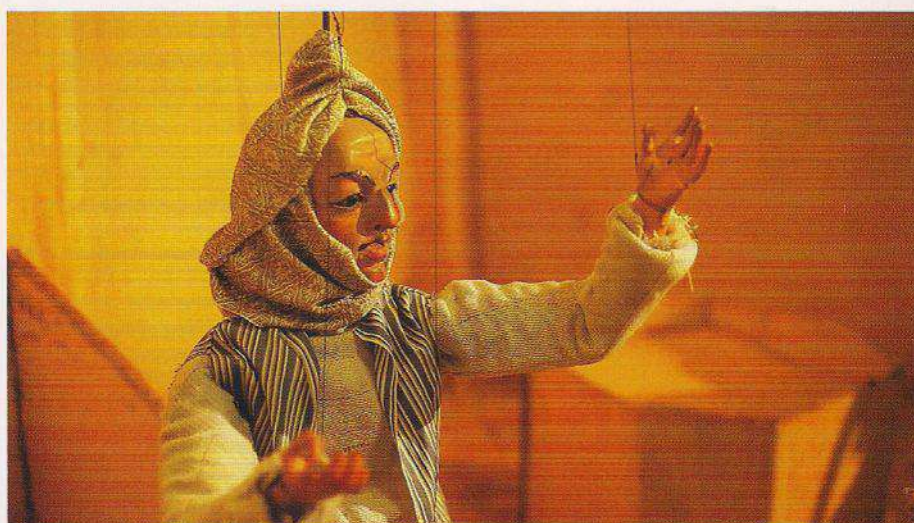
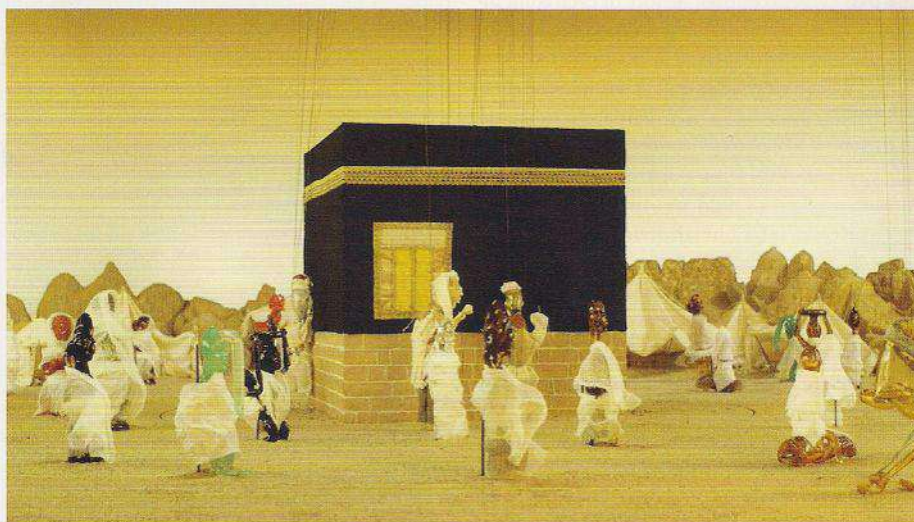
compare them.’ So this is exactly what is happening. You have one story that is happening with the kids, but you hear the voice from adults, not coming from the kids. They are telling a story of something completely different from the visual.” Although as a viewer, the experience of watching the film and (if you don't understand Arabic) reading the subtitles is one in which you are constantly trying to match the sense of one to the other, in order to synthesise a coherent whole. And in a way it's exactly this kind of synthetic process, perhaps in itself a human instinct, that forms one of the primary subject matters of Shawky's work to date.

Certainly it lies at the heart of his much-praised and written-about *Cabaret Crusades*, which, in addition to *The Horror Show File*, comprises *The Path to Cairo* (2012) and *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015), and is inspired by Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1983). Drawing on Maalouf, Shawky's films use a script based on a variety of Arab historians and writers in an attempt to provide an Arab perspective on the Crusades (from 1095 to 1204) with all the complexity of infighting and betrayals that surrounded them, and more importantly to expose and deconstruct how their history is put together. All the characters are played by marionettes.

"I think the concept of the historian is part of the propaganda for the system, for the king or the sultan," Shawky explains. "For example, one of the characters that I used in *Cabaret Crusades* is someone called Usama ibn Munqidh [1095–1188]. Usama ibn Munqidh is a historian, he wrote about the Crusades' history. So I made him one of the marionettes who was playing a role inside the film, because he noticed things. But he was not only a historian, he was also the foreign ambassador of Damascus during this time. So imagine he is part of the regime, he's the foreign ambassador, he's the minister of someone called Mu'in ad-Din Unur; Unur is the governor of Damascus at this time. So can we know if Mu'in ad-Din Unur is someone similar to Bashar al-Assad or not? I mean, how will we measure this? Since the writer is part of the regime already."

The narrative of *Cabaret Crusades* starts with the 1095 speech by Pope Urban II (undocumented except in five wildly differing after-the-fact accounts) that initiated the First Crusade (1095–99) and ends with the Fourth Crusade (1202–04), which led to the sack of Constantinople, by which time much of the crusading enterprise had become a quest for cash rather than anything to do with Christians or Muslims. That last bit sound familiar? The contemporary resonances of this history are certainly evident.

Besides their obvious evincing of the sense that the protagonists in *Cabaret Crusades*, just as the children in *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, are being manipulated (of Urban's speech, the artist says, "In the end we don't know exactly what he said, but we know more about the result. We expect that this guy had amazing charisma to convince people to walk first from Germany until they reached Constantinople"), the marionettes, with their sometimes grotesque features and jerky actions, also foreground the sense that the history they enact is handcrafted and shaped. That the first film uses marionettes from a historical collection in Turin, the second marionettes made by ceramic craftsmen in the South of France and the last marionettes made out



top Cabaret Crusades 111: The Secrets of Karbala (still), 2015, HD video, colour, sound, English subtitles, 120 min

above Cabaret Crusades 1: The Horror Show File, 2010, HD video, colour, sound, English subtitles, 31 min 49 sec

both images © the artist. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London, Milan & New York

of Murano glass, locating this Arabic story in the European terrain from which the Crusades originated, further complicates any stable notions of identity or ownership.

At the heart of all this lies a sense of history as being the product of human creation rather than an accumulation of facts. Perhaps it exposes the more terrifying implications of Joseph Beuys's famous dictum 'jeder Mensch ein Künstler'. While for the German artist this meant a call for a type of social sculpture in which 'every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism', for Shawky there's a sense that every account of history or even contemporary decision-making (on a sociopolitical and economic level in particular) exists as something manufactured or manipulated. As if it were a work of art. And we can clearly see that at work in the rhetoric that surrounds everything from the US presidential elections and Brexit to the conflict in Syria and current disputes in the South and East China Seas. Is Shawky then advocating a distrust of all accounts of historical and current conflict? Should we distrust everything people say? "I think it's like trying to see human desires," he says. "You don't see it as good people, bad people, evil, I think. It's really more like human desires that are trying to survive, and really running after authority, this is really the main issue for everyone. Using religion for authority and for political-economic reasons also. This is from both sides: whether the Crusaders or the Muslims, our leaders are the same. I believe it's really about this, about the propaganda. And not only the propaganda: the authenticity and the legitimisation that is given to written history as if it's a fact, just because we have it."

Shawky is not shy either of tackling the propaganda, received wisdom and obfuscation that frequently dominate artworld discourse. *Dictums* (2013) was a live performance at that year's Sharjah Biennial for which the artist gathered 30 workers, primarily of Pakistani origin,

to chant a song made up from words derived from the event's curatorial statement, translated into Urdu and accompanied by musicians trained in Sufi ballads. Given the nature of Shawky's work and the fact that we're sitting in a large studio in Doha's Fire Station residency complex that is almost entirely empty save for some sofas and chairs, and a few drawings on a table, with the artist pointing out that everybody has left town because of the heat (it was already 30 degrees when I landed, shortly before 6am), it might be easy to assume that a logical consequence of living in a propaganda-saturated world would be to resort to some sort of ascetic, perhaps even solipsistic withdrawal from it. In an early videowork, *Cave* (2004), the artist strolls around a supermarket reciting the Arabic verses from Surah 18 of the Qu'ran from memory. The Surah concerns a group of youths who retreat to a cave to escape persecution for maintaining their faith in God in a kingdom enforcing idolatry. They return to society after 300 (solar) years. "I don't think it was even about the contradiction between a religious text and the supermarket," the artist recalls. "It was more about the idea that as a human being anyone can be that isolated, living his or her entire world in a supermarket." He continues quietly, "But you cannot isolate forever. You have to isolate to gain the wisdom, then you have to go back to the society to correct it or to make good. I think this is amazing." He's off to the library and I'm off to catch a plane. ar

The complete trilogy Al Arabia Al Madfuna will be on show at the Fondazione Merz, Turin, from 3 November to 5 February. The artist will also be the subject of a concurrent retrospective at the Castello di Rivoli, also in Turin, and an exhibition at Lisson Gallery, Milan, from 10 November to 7 January. He is nominated for the Hugo Boss Prize 2016, the winner of which will be announced 20 October



*Al Arabia Al Madfuna 1 (still), 2012, HD video, b/w, sound, 21 min.
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg*

Daily Sabah

26 July 2016

<http://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2016/07/26/hashashin-and-crusaders-a-history-of-the-middle-east-according-to-wael-shawky>

DAILY SABAH ARTS

Hashashin and Crusaders: A history of the Middle East according to Wael Shawky

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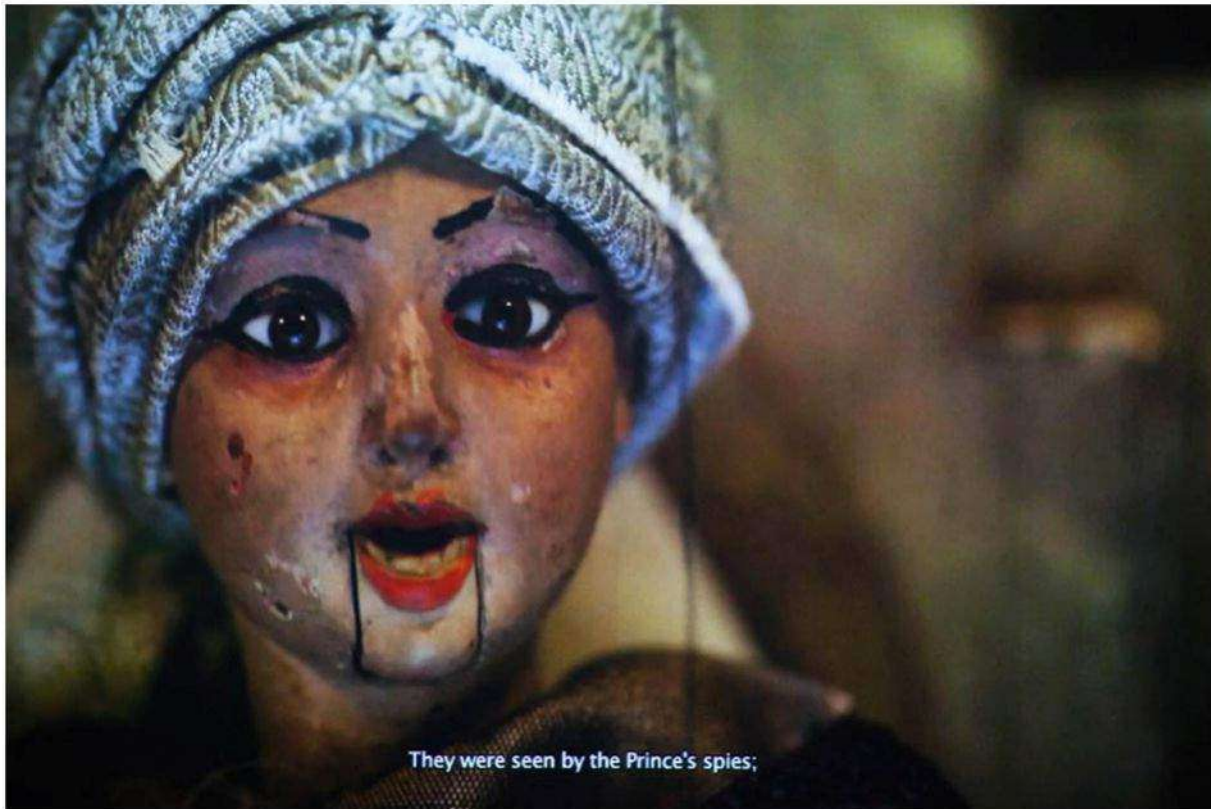
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Published
July 26, 2016



Egyptian artist Wael Shawky's video titled 'Road to Cairo' is part of his Cabaret Crusades trilogy, based on Amin Maalouf's book, 'The Crusades through Arab Eyes' and can be seen at the Istanbul Pera Museum as part of the Jameel Prize Exhibition until August 14

I first encountered Wael Shawky's work in 2015 at the "Rainbow in the Dark" exhibition at Salt Galata. One always hesitates before committing oneself to viewing a video piece due to the fact that there is never enough time to do so at exhibitions and one tries to spend an equal amount of time in front of each artwork. It was with such reservations that I entered the chamber where I would see Shawky's video. From my first glimpse of "Road to Cairo," the second episode of his series, "Cabaret Crusades," I was hooked, staying in the chamber the entire hour and singing Wael Shawky's praises ever since.

To be honest, it's a bit unfair. Shawky takes several of my interests and rolls them into a ball of magic which mesmerizes me. He uses marionettes to act out the scenes described in Amin Maalouf's acclaimed historical book, "The Crusades through Arab Eyes." Puppetry and marionettes have long been an interest of mine, as they are a very effective form of storytelling; likely because, in my opinion, marionettes reflect the helplessness of the human condition. You can literally see the strings of fate, history or whatever name you prefer to use directing people's actions while displaying a heightened sense of inevitability and melancholy in the viewer. The marionettes in "The Road to Cairo" are made of clay; the material which is, according to the Quran, what humans are made of. These figurines also appear like aborted attempts to imitate human beings; handmade in the style of the Aubagne region of France.



The "Cabaret Crusades" trilogy is mostly a story about violent and power-hungry men but when women make an appearance, they become even more potent.

The puppets that Shawky has created to play in the roles of various amirs, knights and lords of the Middle Ages are disfigured and ugly, to the extent that some of them - Muslim as well as Christian - have animal faces. Add to this the uncanniness of the voices coming from faces and mouths that do not move and the enchanting atmosphere is complete. The way that Shawky manages to keep the faces of the puppets either devoid of emotion and stone-cold or full of passion or anger depending on narrative demands, is truly fascinating. Music, camera angle and inflection of voice are all elements Shawky uses to create the flawless performance. The marionettes, representing both European or Arab characters, all speak in Arabic. It is, for no good historical reason, disorienting to hear Christian rhetoric in Arabic, and we have the crusading Europeans in this film speaking the language - they are as it were dubbed into Arabic. It is also a reversal of our visual and cinematic memory: not Arabs speaking in English, but Europeans speaking in Arabic in the Holy Land.

The story of the Crusades, as we know from history, is one of power, anger, betrayal and violence. The videos cover a very long period of history, taking us on a geographic journey from Rheinland to Venice, Constantinople, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Mecca. When Shawky introduces various scenes, the relevant historical date and the name of the city appear briefly on the screen, but sometimes the cut from one city and date to another is not clear. There are too many characters to keep track of but the overarching message is evident. During the Crusader kingdoms in the Middle East, both Muslims and Christians changed sides, made pacts with "the enemy" to beat their "own" and had no scruples in doing so. We see that there is enough violence and schism among Muslims without the explosive addition of the Crusaders into the mix. We see Hassan Sabbah and his hashashin in their lair, sitting in a circle with their dead marionette eyes, shaking their heads, totally under the control of their leader's suggestions (naturally with the help of drugs). We watch them sway as they sit, the camera zooms into their individual but indistinguishable misshapen faces, and then the music heightens to a rave-like intensity. Then we see them going into the mosque in Baghdad and assassinating people. The protruding animal-like mouths of the marionettes come into their own during these moments of murder and death. It is hard not to draw parallels with DAESH members detonating bombs near the Mosque of the Prophet or brainwashed Turkish officers bombing the Parliament.



The "Cabaret Crusades" trilogy is, of course, mostly a story about violent and power-hungry men but when women make an appearance, they become even more potent. There's the daughter of the amir of Aleppo who seems to be given in marriage to men several times over to procure a ruler who will strengthen the town militarily. However, the groom is assassinated each time and then we see an interminable wedding scene, with people dancing with the bride in the middle, as if there's been a glitch in the film and we're seeing the same scene over and over. There is the daughter of the King of Jerusalem who is forced to make an agreement with the Muslims who want to take back al-Quds, and who sings of her desperation from a tower. It is like a siren's song and the singer sounds not unlike Fayrouz.

The third episode of "Cabaret Crusades," which I saw at the 2015 Istanbul Biennale in a hamam in the Byzantine heart of Istanbul, Balat, is called "The Secrets of Karbala," but it deals equally with Christian internecine violence. The most dramatic scene for an Istanbulite like me is the Latin Crusaders coming to Hagia Sophia, looting it and setting it ablaze, and then setting off in sails with crosses blown to a large scale by the wind, towards Palestine. The marionettes, this time, are made of colored Venetian glass and indeed, some of the story is set in Venice.

Happily, the "Road to Cairo" returned, as it should, to Istanbul this summer with the Jameel Prize exhibition, and I readily spent another disturbed hour in a dark room contemplating history. The first episode of Shawky's trilogy, "The Horror Show Files," in which the marionettes are made of wood, has not yet made it to Istanbul. Although this is in some ways unfortunate, it's also nice to know that there is still more Shawky for me to discover. ■

Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES, THE HORROR SHOW FILE*, 2010, HD video, color, sound, 31 min 49 sec / *KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, DIE HORRORSHOW-AKTE*, HD-Video, Farbe, Ton.

BORIS GROYS

THE RETURN OF THE STRINGS

Wael Shawky's "Cabaret Crusades" video trilogy—*THE HORROR SHOW FILE* (2010), *THE PATH TO CAIRO* (2012), and *THE SECRETS OF KARBALA* (2014)—tells the story of the first Crusade. Started by a call issued by Pope Urban II in 1095 to conquer the Holy Land, it led to the establishment of the kingdom of Jerusalem by the Crusaders and ended with their defeat by the armies of Saladin nearly a hundred years later. Shawky's narrative is adapted from historian Amin Maalouf's book *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1984), which is written from a perfectly modern, secular perspective: History is narrated as made by men who are driven by interests and passions. The videos tell the story of the violent expansion of the Crusaders into Muslim lands, of terror against the population, of treason and intrigues that dominated Muslim politics in these years and made resistance against the Crusaders almost impossible. Only very slowly did the Muslims find political and

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military unity that was necessary for liberation. In other words, on the level of narration we have here a piece of secular, modern historiography as it is generally practiced in our time.

However, on the visual level Shawky's videos plunge viewers into the atmosphere of the medieval chronicles. The principle characters of the story are represented by marionettes rather than by living actors and the "real" landscapes of the Middle East are substituted by highly artificial medieval miniatures. Medieval chronicles, including the chronicles of the Crusades, do not clearly differentiate between history and myth, acts of men and acts of God, natural and supernatural powers, men and animals, living and dead. Their true topic is the miraculous: the promise of the miracle, waiting for the miracle, experiencing the miracle, remembering the miracle. The same can be said about the theater of marionettes, which had an important place in medieval culture. The mere fact that inanimate figures could move and act as if they were men or animals or ghosts or gods was experienced by the public as a miracle—as



a momentous suspension of the opposition between life and death.

Today, puppet theater is associated mostly with children's spectacles or films. The use of puppets suggests the purely fictional character of a story and the dominance of entertainment value over content. Shawky alludes to this conventional use of puppets when he titles his trilogy "Cabaret Crusades"—cabaret being associated in our cultural imagination with light entertainment. However, in the Middle Ages, the puppet theater—even if it was mostly directed toward an unsophisticated audience—dealt with serious matters; often it demonstrated man confronting supernatural powers and challenging fate. Not accidentally, Don Juan and Faust were originally figures of the puppet theater. With the emergence of the Enlightenment, the situation changed. The use of marionettes was scorned because it demonstrated the dependence of human beings on the supernatural. Liberation meant shaking off the strings that turned men into puppets manipulated by external powers.

The phrase "no strings attached" still aptly summarizes our understanding of freedom. Shawky has reattached the strings to the characters in his videos. This return of the strings is made even more spectacular by the fact that the marionettes are no longer seen in the familiar context of the puppet theater. Shawky's strings seem to hang from nowhere—and thus the characters seem to be moved by the invisible hand of fate. The return of the strings means the return of the miraculous, unexpected, and fated. The contrast between secular, prosaic, rationally built narrative, and the visual world in which myth and the miraculous dominate creates inner tension and a dynamic that keep viewers enthralled throughout the entire cycle.

A week before I began to write this text, I saw the complete *Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth, staged by Frank Castorf. I was struck by the similarity between Wagner's and Shawky's projects. Wagner also tried to tell myth by means of secular art—in his case, opera. Both *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and "Cabaret Crusades" are Gesamtkunstwerks. They show the world in its totality thrown off balance by an unlawful, criminal act fueled by human hubris. In the case of Wagner, it is the theft of the *Rheingold*. In the case of Shawky,



Wael Shawky, "Myth and Legends," installation view,
Serpentine Gallery London, 2013 – 2014 / Installationsansicht.
(PHOTO: HUGO GLENDINNING)

it is the intrusion of the Crusaders into the Middle East. Both criminal acts have the power to make time out of joint, to change the normal course of things, producing a state of chaos and causing extreme violence, treason, and suffering. And in both cases, the world comes back to its right course when this criminal act is corrected: The *Rheingold* is brought back to the Rhine; the Crusaders are driven from the Holy Land.

The concept of the right course of things is probably the oldest concept that mankind has created to explain the human condition. The Chinese called it *Dao*; the Romans called it *fatum*. The biblical religions, questioning this concept, substituted *fatum* with the will of God. But as time went by, the concept of *fatum* reemerged. Not accidentally, both Wagner and Shawky have chosen the Middle Ages as the setting for their works. The Middle Ages reasserted faith in the right course of things—and also the belief that the attempt to act against the *fatum* will inevitably be punished. But why did Wagner return to the idea of the right course of things in the nineteenth century? And why does Shawky do it now?

Wagner wrote his *Ring des Nibelungen* at the time of the Industrial Revolution, which created a rupture, a break with the traditional way of life. Gold seemed to give unlimited power to those who owned it. At the end of the *Ring*, the gold disappears again into the waters of the Rhine. But that does not necessarily mean a return to the pre-capitalist past; it means simply that gold loses its magic, its promise of absolute power. It is interesting in this respect that Castorf stages the *Ring* as a revolutionary, Marxist, Communist epic. Here not capitalism but, rather, the revolutionary Marxist movement is presented as a manifestation of human hubris. The flow of the Rhine becomes the flow of capital. Onstage, the Rhine is substituted by the New York Stock Exchange—and it is the place to which the Daughters of the Rhine bring the gold that was variously stolen by Marxist revolutionaries, Russian oil tycoons, and revolutionary adventurers. The *Ring* is staged as a failure of anti-capitalist revolution instead of a metaphor of the failure of the capitalist revolution. In both cases, the world comes back to its course, after its violent interruption comes to an end.

If Castorf radically modernizes Wagner's cycle to demonstrate its universality and relevance for our own time, Shawky practices aesthetic archaization by substituting actors with puppets. But, of course, both of these works belong to our contemporaneity. In the case of Shawky's videos, this connection is obvious enough—one needs only to watch the news from the Middle East. But there is, of course, a deeper connection of the work to the contemporary condition. In recent decades, we have been confronted with a chain of revolutions and counter-revolutions all over the world, including Egypt. These events show that the course of things can be violently interrupted at certain points in time, but this interruption cannot be stabilized. Revolutions are followed by restoration, intrusions by resistance. No historical force is forceful enough to put the course of things under its control.

In a somewhat paradoxical way, this insight leads to a new evaluation of the role of personality in history. Instead of classes and nations, which were understood as collective historical subjects that could dominate the world, individuals now reappear on the historical scene. Some of these individuals, Nibelung or Crusader, try to take fate into their hands, to define the course of history, to take the place of the invisible puppeteer. Like Don Juan and Faust, these hubristic actors move inexorably toward catastrophe and defeat. Other individuals know their limits and become successful within them. This view of history is neither progressive nor reactionary, neither critical nor affirmative. It accepts the status quo—but it accepts it as a flow that inevitably changes everything. In Shawky's videos, history is shown at once as a narrative describing the actions of real men with real interests and passions and as a stage on which these men hang from strings operated by fate. It is, actually, a very contemporary view of history that in recent times has manifested its miraculous and fateful dimension.

Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES*, DRAWING, 2013,
metallic paint, gouache, and pencil on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 1/4" /
KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, ZEICHNUNG,
Metallfarbe, Gouache und Farbstift auf Papier, 29,8 x 21 cm.





Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades, The Secret of Karbala*, 2014, marionettes, production photos / *Kabarettistische Kreuzzüge, Das Geheimnis von Karbala*, Marionetten, Produktionsphotos. (Photos: Arnika Fürgut, Kunstsammlung NRW)



VULTURE

Wael Shawky's Epic Films Will Completely Change How You See the Crusades

By Jerry Saltz [Follow @jerrysaltz](#)

July 15, 2015
12:19 p.m.

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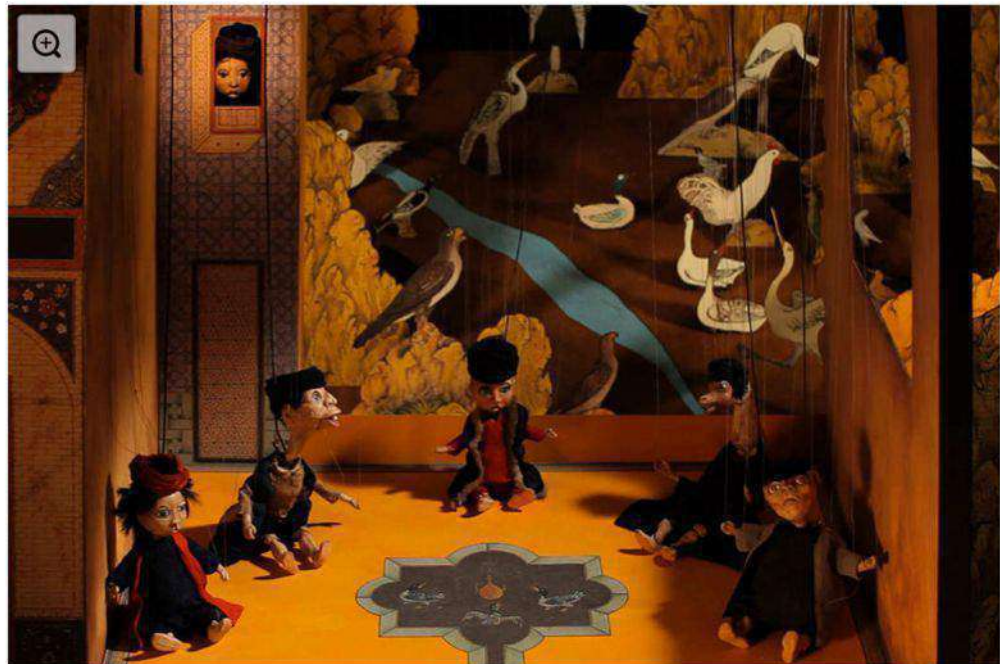


Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

One of the more florid and unfashionable forms an artist can use these days is the epic. Of course, no one denies the greatness of Homer, the Mahabharata, Gilgamesh, *The Aeneid*, Dante, Milton, or Melville. Few would argue with Philip Glass, Francis Ford Coppola, Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Kara Walker, and maybe Matthew Barney — though he is often castigated and snickered at for his form. Yet these days, the epic is often the domain of the overblown Hollywood blockbuster sequel, pseudo-intellectual serial television dramas, and multipart books about soft-core porn or young-adult coming-of-age or dying stories. Epics are viewed as overwrought, platitudinous, clichéd, swollen with sincerity and melodrama, a form of eras gone by. Not by me: I love epics for how their authors can claim to be channeling muses and deities who speak through them, recounting stupendous narratives. I love art that attempts to be about everything, to catalogue a moral universe, show us a thing from every side, tell a tale with so many levels that the tale is always unfolding.

Egypt-born and -based Wael Shawky inhabits the epic's structure impeccably, and in the most unexpected way possible: with puppets. In a lush, labyrinthine trilogy of films being exhibited at MoMA PS1, he uses sublimely designed, marvelously costumed ensembles of marionettes and puppets — some made centuries ago, others fashioned by the artist of Murano glass. These imaginary beings act against painted backdrops, in little built cities, citadels, and battlements; they move in surreal landscapes, speaking Arabic, dancing, singing. With his supernal sense of sound, staging, pacing, and color, Shawky uses these puppets and backdrops to transmit the horror, hate, vanity, slander, and circles of hell of the clash between civilizations known as the Crusades. We watch tragedies unfolding that cannot be stopped, waves of ever-worsening invective. Making the films more powerful and timely, everything in them echoes desperately into the present. As organized by Klaus Biesenbach with Margaret Aldredge, the show couldn't be better, or more ably installed. It is one of the best exhibitions of the season.



Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

Cabaret Crusades gives us the crusades as seen through an Arab perspective, based as it is on essays by contemporary Lebanese historian Amin Maalouf. The first two films of *Cabaret Crusades* are *The Horror Show File* and *The Path to Cairo* — 32 and 58 minutes, respectively, made in 2010 and 2012. They are the most intoxicating, savage masterpieces of the Crusades I've seen anywhere, on film or otherwise. Each film opens with a spectacular shot. Part II begins in 1099 with Jerusalem burning. Between 60,000 and 100,000 Crusaders have taken and ransacked the holy city. The conflagration is reminiscent of the incredible opening shot of *Apocalypse Now* — Jim Morrison singing “The End” against a Vietnamese jungle erupting into fire. After a prologue scene of plague-ravaged Constantinople, Part I gives us the fateful day of November 27, 1095, and Pope Urban II in France calling on all European Christians to fight against Muslims to reclaim the holy land. “God wills it,” he proclaims. This sets in motion a story that unspools still. Even the places in Shawky's films are sickeningly familiar: Aleppo and Damascus in Syria, Mossul and Baghdad in Iraq, Mecca, Cairo, Lebanon, Palestine, and, of course, Jerusalem. Although the films only encompass a little more than 55 years, Shawky brilliantly makes this time frame feel endless, shot through with delusion, hubris, and power-mad folly.



Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

The show includes three enormous vitrines displaying scores of the puppets used in the films. These beautiful sculptures seen en masse triggered wistful wishing that I'd spent more of my life watching puppets. In the films the figures truly come alive: Shawky and his puppeteers are masters of nuanced body language. Marionettes move almost in slowmotion, strings always visible. Yet somehow these levels of artifice become more real than actors acting. Eyes blink in 1,000-mile stares; mouths click-clack open and closed, never synched with words; hands motion in circles; animals stand looking aimlessly about. The animals are our entry points; we helplessly look on. Shawky is a connoisseur of sulking, sullenness, suffering, telling this tale of the beginning, of never forgetting, of blood libels and vengeance.

As with many epics, there are scenes recounting marriages, deaths, and ritual moments in cosmic detail; feasting; sleepless nights; celebration. Maybe only puppets can give us these things too big to grasp otherwise. There's great oratorical prowess here, too, highly stylized forms of address: elegies, epitaphs, hymns, laments, oaths, pleas, prayers, and prophecies — all would seem cheesy if delivered by actors. Best are the scenes delivered in song. The action stops as a character breaks into rhythmic dirge or ecstatic aria delivered to drums and other exotic instruments. (I imagined Wagner's "Ring Cycle" done with puppets.) Characters beseech deities, beg forgiveness, bid farewell to families, and sentence loved ones to death. Even small scenes can shatter. In one sequence, the Pope's forces march through Germany and decide to kill all Jews. So go these holy warriors.



Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

We also witness endless Muslim plots upon other Muslims, sect upon sect, Sunni versus Shia, potentates betraying each other, sending assassins to kill leaders and children, murdering their own families, ransacking one another's cities. There are no heroes in Shawky's art of anticlimaxes, no resolutions. His is an epic of grandeur with intensity, just continuous houses of death.

Part III, *Secrets of Karbala*, is as beautiful as the first two films. But at two hours — and, seemingly, with a much bigger budget — most of Shawky's attention here looks like it went into the puppets and sets. Action becomes monotonous; the script is all stalemate; the film fizzles. I hope Shawky takes up the story one more time, if only to provide a better bookend to this otherwise brilliant series.



Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

Two other things about this show make this exhibition pressing. The first may be banal but is important in art world circles. *Cabaret Crusades* reminds us that Klaus Biesenbach is fine at what he does best: making shows and projects like this at PS1. His surveys of Ryan Trecartin and Laurel Nakadate; his “Fassbinder Berlin Alexanderplatz”; the 2000 “Disasters of War” he organized, pairing Jake and Dinos Chapman with Henry Darger; and his 2013 group show about ecological changes were all good. But it needs to be made plain as day: Biesenbach is not a scholar or an intellect, maybe not even a curator, per se; he’s an impresario who has been given too much power at MoMA. Starting with his 2010 Mariana Abramovic show, he’s had a deleterious effect on the museum, culminating with this season’s Björk debacle. No matter, he can be good at this sort of show.

Far darker, seeing *Cabaret Crusades* made me remember how the past is never past. Watching Shawky’s characters forever recounting the reasons for their killing, I remembered a reporter once asking a Bosnian warlord how a particular skirmish began and hearing him flatly begin, “Well, back in 1385 ...” Shawky’s films remind us that only one day after September 11, 2001, George W. Bush called for a “crusade.” Almost echoing Pope Urban II, he incited the West to “defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world.” Shawky’s art makes us know this in our bones, makes us wonder if we’re addicted to and in satanic love with war. After thousands of years, the words attributed to Plato only ring truer: “Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

**A version of this article appears in the July 27, 2015 issue of New York Magazine.*

TAGS: WAEL SHAWKY | CRUSADES | MOMA | PS1 | MORE

Interview: Egyptian artist Wael Shawky on faith, oil, politics – and puppetry

By Rachel Spence



Marionettes in an installation at the gallery, which also features the artist's films

I am less than gracious when a dawn alarm tugs me from my bed on a Saturday morning to watch the first part of *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, the artist Wael Shawky's latest film. But an interview with Shawky at 10am makes the viewing essential.

Grumpily, I press "play", and the Nile glides across the screen in monochrome. The scene cuts to a dark chamber peopled by children dressed as men. As one digs a hole in the floor, the others tell the story of a community who, on the advice of their dying leaders, devote themselves to the worship of various animals until they mutate into hybrids. A parable warning us of the perils of blind faith, it enraptures through the musical voices (which are adult); the solemn conviction on the children's faces; and the equilibrium of the images as they shift between the airless cave and the ancient river.



Wael Shawky at the Serpentine

The fact that, by the end, my imagination feels renewed owes much to Shawky's gifts as a storyteller. Nevertheless, that is just the tip of a far more complex vision. "You are watching one story but you are hearing another story. You are watching a kid but you are hearing a man, so you are focusing on two systems simultaneously," he tells me as we sit in the lobby of his Marylebone hotel, sipping coffee from paper cups.

The tale of the hybrid villagers was originally a story by the late Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab. It is typical of Shawky to layer one imaginative gesture on to another so the spectator is left enlightened yet giddy by the pyramid of shifting expressions.

This vertiginous vision has propelled him to the peak of the contemporary art world. The recipient of numerous awards, including the Sharjah Biennial prize this year, he has had solo shows at the KW Contemporary Art Institute in Berlin and the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Now it is London's turn: his new exhibition, *Wael Shawky: al-Qurban*, opened this week at the Serpentine Gallery.

Shawky was born in Alexandria, Egypt, but spent his youth in Mecca, where his father worked as an engineer. "I think I was making all the drawings for every activity in the whole school," he remembers, laughing. Now 42, today dressed in a casual blue T-shirt and jeans, his easygoing manner and ready smile ensure that he retains a light-hearted, youthful air.

From the first, he possessed a subtlety of mind. Traumatized by his return to Alexandria when he was 13, he entered a “very turbulent” adolescent crisis. Solace came at 17, when he enrolled at the city’s Academy of Fine Arts. “From that moment, I don’t think I was thinking of anything else [except art].”

Lessons at the academy were “mainly drawing and painting”, he recalls. Other than the groundbreaking work being done at Cairo’s non-profit Townhouse Gallery – which gave Shawky several early solo shows – Egypt had almost no contemporary art scene. His awakening occurred on a trip to Madrid, where he saw Bill Viola’s videos at the Reina Sofia museum. “It was really, really great.” He pauses. “I hadn’t seen anything like that in Egypt at all.”

He started to visit New York every summer. Soon, a crucial influence was Joseph Beuys. “Oh my God, yes. That was the man,” he breathes. “The idea that the material itself became a vehicle for human belief was very important for me,” he continues, citing Beuys’ custom of making installations out of fat which, according to his own self-mythology, had saved him when he was shot down as a pilot in the second world war.

“In order for you to receive any information from this cube of fat, for example, you had to believe in its chemical content. For me this is a bit religious. It is [similar] to when you look at the Koran or the Bible. It’s a book which is sacred as it is, even if you don’t open it, because you believe in its chemical content.”

A flair for expressing the flawed, contradictory processes by which we arrive at faith and knowledge is the bedrock of Shawky’s vision. As a young artist, he made installations out of asphalt to reflect his childhood in Mecca – to “understand the relationship between me and my family and Saudi Arabia, which had discovered oil and the British and American oil companies were arriving. All the modernity that I lived in the 1970s in Saudi Arabia [was] based on this western arrival. The asphalt was a metaphor for oil, of course.”

Paradoxically, his gift for deconstruction hinges on his feeling for old-fashioned narrative. The work that catapulted him to the world’s attention was *Cabaret Crusades*, a two-part film in which marionettes act out the medieval struggle for control over the Middle East. A spine-tingling anti-epic, it leaves viewers appalled by the carnage yet riveted by Shawky’s meticulous mapping of the era’s Byzantine twists and turns. “I had to do a lot of research,” he agrees. A crucial source was *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1984), a history of the period by the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf. “It shows you that history can be told from a different angle ... from the Arab side.”

His new two-part film, *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, is also grounded in his fascination with the way that the stories we tell ourselves – uncertain, mutable, contingent – evolve into unquestioned beliefs. Its seeds were sown more than 10 years ago when a friend invited Shawky to witness a ritual in a village in upper Egypt. There, he explains, there is a ritual of digging through the floors of homes in the hope of discovering buried Pharaonic treasure. “But it is impossible to discover a tomb unless you break the spells of the Pharaohs that act as protection on the door of the chamber.” Night after night he watched as his friend, who works as a medium, engaged in his dialogue “with something like ghosts”.



Marionettes in an installation at the gallery

What fascinated him was the dichotomy between the means and the end. “They use a metaphysical system, magic essentially, to reach a material, physical system: gold.”

The second part of the film, which premieres this week at the Serpentine, turns on a rumour. “It’s set outdoors and you see one group of kids going to another group of kids spreading this story.”

Like the first film, the tale the children are telling was written by Mustagab. Entitled *The Offering*, it centres on a village of traders who, suddenly afflicted by muteness, transform themselves into entertainers who clap at parties. When a man comes to restore their voices, he disappears mysteriously. “Perhaps the villagers killed them because they didn’t want to lose the clapping.”

Given the tortuous history of Shawky’s own region and the nature of his interests – social transformation, the nature of faith, power and communication, the way our collective fantasies can tip into psychosis – how does he succeed in making work which is profoundly relevant to its political moment yet also sufficient unto itself?

“I try as much as I can not to react to current political events,” he says. “You can’t expect a revolution to happen today. I [may] be making a film about the revolution [tomorrow]: that’s changeable. Yes, the revolution will happen and we will support the army now, and the second day the army will cheat on you. You will change your mind after you made the film; this is not art, it is just reactionary activity. Art must be much bigger than this.”

We have been talking for two hours and Shawky has a plane to catch, yet he never glances at his watch or mobile phone. That lucid, scrupulous commitment to presence is the key to his art’s power. It is what compelled him to, for example, track down a particular *radood* – a Shia religious singer – to play the part of Ibn al-Khashshab, an important Shia leader with a role in *Cabaret Crusades*. “I did think: why am I being that precise? Perhaps nobody will notice the *radood*.” He pauses. “But it’s internal.”

*Serpentine Gallery, London, to February 9. serpentinegalleries.org Lisson Gallery, London, January 31--March 8 2014.
lissongallery.com*

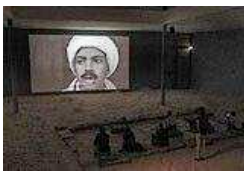
This piece has been amended since first publication to reflect the fact that Wael Shawky has had a solo show at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, not the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis



Wael Shawky: *Al Araba Al Madfuna*

Interview about his new video work
By Pat Binder & Gerhard Haupt | October 2012

A solo exhibition by Wael Shawky is currently on view at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, one of Berlin's most important art institutions. It is part of the art prize awarded every two years by the Schering Foundation, with which the Egyptian artist has now been honored.



Wael Shawky created the new video installation *Al Araba Al Madfuna* especially for this showing. To this end, the floor of the KW's largest hall was covered with sand. The viewer can sit on stones that are arranged like the remnants of the foundations of a house in the desert. The black-and-white video shows a dimly illuminated, sparse assembly room. Sitting in it are small boys, clothed like grown men, many of them with glued-on moustaches. With the voices of adults, the children tell a story written by the author Mohamed Mustagab (see the interview). All the while, one of the boys digs an ever-deeper hole in floor of the room.



Binder & Haupt: Your exhibition in Berlin is named after your new video installation *Al Araba Al Madfuna*. What gave rise to it? What ideas and context are behind it?

Wael Shawky: The idea goes back to an experience I had ten years ago. A friend invited me to accompany him to *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, a village in Upper Egypt. My friend claimed he could heal people and even find pharaonic treasures under the ground. Upper Egypt has a long tradition of treasure hunting; so-called sheikhs are brought in to help. They are something like shamans who call on "spirits" to find the location of hidden graves of the old Egyptians.



This metaphysical world has always fascinated me, so I accompanied him to *Al Araba Al Madfuna*. We spent ten days there, almost always in one of the typical assembly rooms reserved for men only, where we also slept and ate and where the villagers constantly came to greet us. Some of them simply sat there silently for hours. That's why I decided to shoot my film in a single room.

Binder & Haupt: Do people really dig for treasure in such rooms?

Wael Shawky: Indeed, that's what they do in many houses in this village, sometimes for years. When one of these sheikhs comes and says that he "feels" that there is a treasure there, the family begins at once. Although they find nothing even after digging meters deep, their hope persists. So they get another sheikh, and he then says his predecessor erred and they have to search just a meter to the right. Sometimes a whole generation dies and the next one has the same dream and continues, so that they can definitely dig for twenty years in the same spot.



Binder & Haupt: Do the people occasionally find something valuable?

Wael Shawky: Sometimes. And then the whole village is in an uproar and digs for the next twenty years...



Binder & Haupt: Well, it's definitely a very important archaeological zone. Al Araba Al Madfuna is on the same hill under which a temple for the ancient Egyptian god Osiris was discovered at the beginning of the 20th century.



Wael Shawky: Yes, it's really incredible to see this remote area today and remember that this is the same place where, a long time ago in ancient Abydos, one of ancient Egypt's most important necropolises was.

Binder & Haupt: Far beyond the anecdotal aspect, your film is a powerful metaphor. Why do you have the characters played by children dressed up as men and have their voices spoken by adults?

Wael Shawky: First, because I enjoy working with kids. For me, that's the best. They are the future of society, they have no dramatic memories, they don't know Mohamed Mustagab – the author of the story – and they don't know anything about the ancient Egyptian Osirion or anything that this is about. They don't have any rigid ideas yet about how things should go. When you work with kids, you don't have this complexity with gender complexity or the acting skills. Basically, it's like with marionettes. The meaning of the theme has top priority, which is why it's tremendously important to have a strong script and concept, and the kids can convey it incredibly well and without any clichés.



But in this case, working with kids was a little different. In this project, I depicted the male society of Upper Egypt, to which women have no entry. I thereby wanted to transport the experiences I myself had there. But there are additional aspects. During my stay, I not only saw how the sheikh instructed people in digging for treasures, but also how he began with his healing. Maybe because they have so intensely to do with a metaphysical world, you often meet people in these villages who are somehow "possessed". For example children who speak with the voices of older men. And "exorcists are supposed to heal such cases; the only difference is that they use the Koran instead of the Cross. I've seen it myself.



Binder & Haupt: Do these ancient shamanistic beliefs still have influence in Upper Egypt? Doesn't it really contradict the Koran?

Wael Shawky: Yes, it's against the Koran, but that's how it is with human greed. I think it's unbelievable how a metaphysical system is used for crude materialism. All these means like the Koran and magic and everything imaginable are employed for a materialistic purpose: to dig up treasure. The people know that if they find something, they can sell it for millions of dollars, and that's the whole aim. And if a find *is* made, there are established rules for dividing the windfall. A third goes to the owner of the building, a third to the sheikh using the spirits to lead the search, and the rest for the people who did the digging. And sometimes something even for the police who protected the seekers, because of course this digging for treasure is illegal.



Binder & Haupt: But the story that you have the children tell in Al Araba Al Madfuna doesn't have anything directly to do with this digging for pharaonic treasures. What is Mohamed Mustagab's parable about?

Wael Shawky: It's about how one generation inherits the ideologies of its forebears, how they believe in them, and how such ideas can be taken to extremes. In this simple story, Mohamed Mustagab speaks about a

tribe whose leader is dying and from whom the members of the tribe surrounding him ask for a "last word". Before dying, he answers, "I advise you to get a camel." Until that time, there are only donkeys in the whole settlement, and the people are knowledgeable only about donkeys. But now it was time to get a camel, and this idea grows larger and larger for them until they begin to import camels. Mohamed Mustagab describes how the camel begins to determine their entire life and how their houses, their clothing, and at some point even their own appearance adapts to the camels.

Later the new leader is asked on his deathbed for *his* final instructions, and he says, "I advise you to get a mule." And once again, a fundamental change is made. Suddenly the people feel disgusted by the camels and can no longer understand how they were ever able to live with these weird creatures. So they get mules, and the same adaptation occurs as once when they were obsessed with camels, up to the adaptation of their own bodies. The story ends with the third leader, shortly before his death, telling the members of the tribe, "I advise you to get a pig." This is a light, short, beautiful story, but I think it is extremely important in the context of a society that is built on the legacy of its forebears and that takes that too seriously.

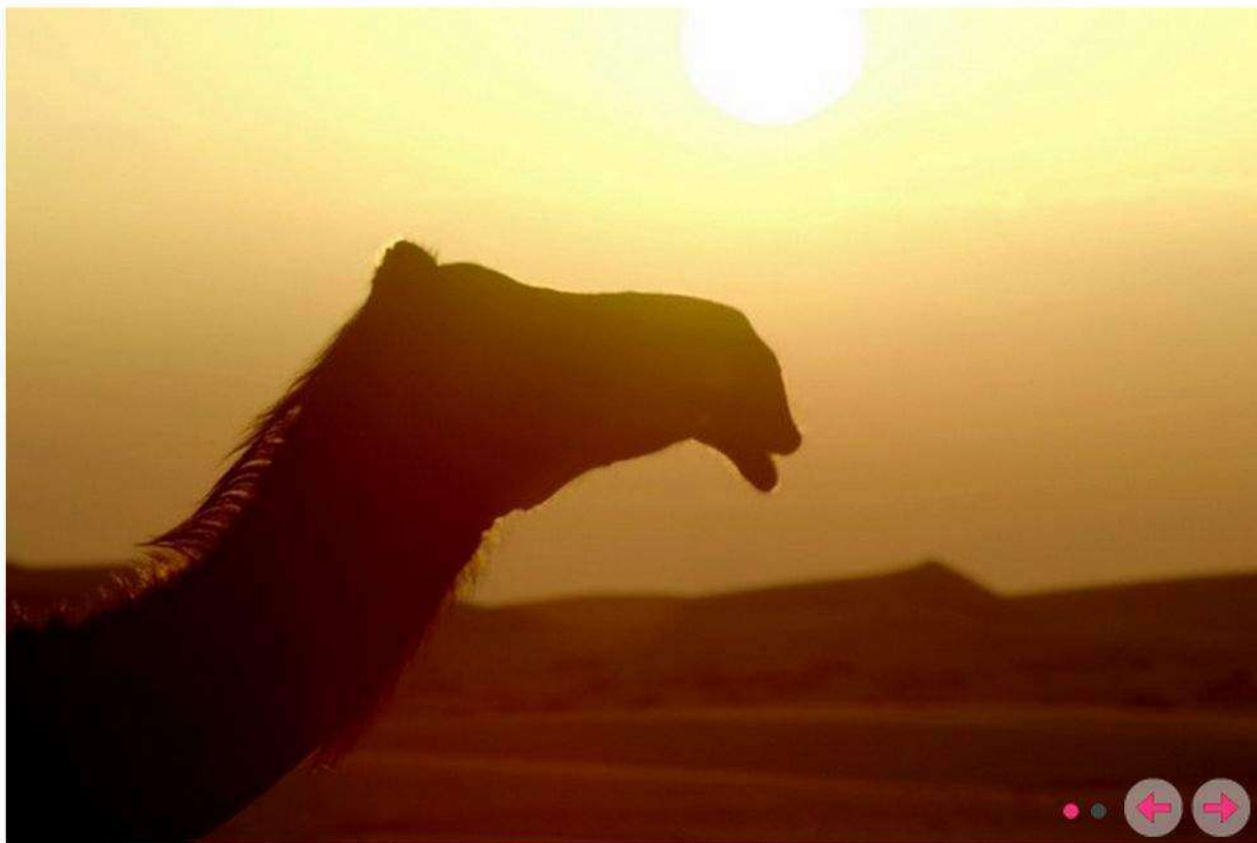
Binder & Haupt: It's also a striking parable for the absurd degree to which a credulous society permits itself to be manipulated by its spiritual leaders.

Wael Shawky: Yes, definitely.

Wael Shawky (born in Alexandria in 1971) studied fine arts at the University of Alexandria and at the Graduate School of Fine Arts of the University of Pennsylvania (USA). In 2010, he established the studio space and study program MASS Alexandria. His works have been shown at the [50th Biennale di Venezia](#) (2003), the 12th Istanbul Biennale (2011), and currently at [dOCUMENTA \(13\)](#) in Kassel (2012), among others. Wael Shawky is among the first five artists announced by the [11th Sharjah Biennial](#), 2013.

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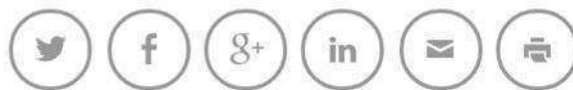


A scene from Dictums: Manqia I, which focuses on the prized black camels, screening at London's Lisson Gallery. Courtesy Wael Shawky/Lisson Gallery

The UAE and majahim camels are at the centre of Wael Shawky's film Dictums: Manqia I

Ben East

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Black camels amble through the desert near Abu Dhabi. Silhouetted against the hot sun, they look both indignant and regal. They're certainly unlikely stars. But with a single majahim camel selling for a staggering Dh7.5 million in the past at the Al Dhafra Festival, it's not surprising the annual camel beauty pageant is beginning to capture headlines worldwide – as well as the attention of the artist Wael Shawky, who puts the majahim camels centre stage in his new film Dictums: Manqia I.

"As someone from Alexandria who grew up in Saudi Arabia, I found the camel beauty industry – and it is becoming an industry – interesting," says Shawky. "The black camels aren't from the Emirates. They're moved from Saudi, and so I thought it might be interesting to explore the wealth that comes from this symbol of the nomad. Most of my work has to do with the idea of a society changing from nomadism to urbanism."

The film, will screen at London's Lisson Gallery on Friday, was shot on location, near Abu Dhabi. It's a new addition to Shawky's Dictums series – at the Sharjah Biennale in 2013 he brought together 30 primarily Pakistani workers to make a song in qawwali, a form of Sufi devotional music. Except, the lyrics were explicitly referencing their status as migrant workers.

“I wanted to look at the concept of importing and exporting labourers in the Gulf,” Shawky explains. “I have a lot of respect for the Sharjah director [of the biennial], Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi actually, because, really, the participants were critiquing the claims the Biennial makes: that it breaks down the gaps between the contemporary art scene and the local community. “It was really touching, actually, to give these people a voice where they otherwise wouldn’t have one. It’s nice to think they were involved, rather than just criticising the situation from the outside.”

Shawky, 42, is honest enough to admit that the link between the Sharjah work, which will be displayed in documentary format at Lisson, and Manqia I is tenuous. Still, they do both look at the movement of people for work – someone has to drive the camels – and as The National noted last month, this camel industry is made possible by low-cost migrant labour, handlers from Sudan and Bangladesh living on farms and caring for the animals while the owners are at work in the cities.

But what isn’t in doubt is that Shawky has developed into a thought-provoking filmmaker. Across London at the prestigious Serpentine Gallery, another three of his films have been on show since November – and they’re quite stunning.

“I wanted to look at little sections of Arab history, because most of it is told by the West,” he says of his Cabaret Crusades series, which makes use of marionettes to re-enact key events from the Crusades. “It’s not about telling you who is wrong or right, it’s thinking about how you see the same moment in history from the other side.”

But it’s the way Shawky presents these stories that is fascinating.

In Horror Show File (2010) he used 200-year-old Italian marionettes to depict both Christian and Muslim leaders as violent and motivated by greed. Two years on, in Path to Cairo, he was working with French ceramicists to design 110 of his own intricate figures, which take on human, animal and hybrid forms. The puppetry itself is magical, the grotesque figures singularly expressive.

“The reason I like to use puppets and why children speak adult parts in my other film Al Araba Al Madfuna II, is that I like to remove the drama,” he says. “Not concentrating on an actor makes you think about the real value of the text. Even if I don’t believe everything that is said, in a way that’s the point, too, in terms of how I think history has been written. My work is always about people making their own judgements.”

All this might sound lofty, but what is impressive about Shawky’s work is his commitment to storytelling. These are not “art films” for people to dip in and out of as they make their way through a gallery. They demand – and reward – attention.

“I’d love to show them in the UAE,” he says. “I’m actually in talks with Guggenheim to work on a project with them for 2015. But don’t ask me where exactly Manqia I was filmed, because I really don’t know.”

• **Wael Shawky: Dictums is at Lisson Gallery in London from January 31 to March 8 (www.lissongallery.com). His exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London, runs until February 9 (www.serpentinegalleries.org)**

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Wael Shawky

ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

WRITER Kevin Jones PHOTOGRAPHER Pauline Bengnies

Couldn't load plug-in.

Egyptian artist Wael Shawky shares his memories of growing up in Mecca – and why he's building Alexandria's first alternative art school

A black-haired man ambles through a bland Amsterdam supermarket, his pace steady, his gaze determined. Face to the camera, he rattles off an uninterrupted stream of Arabic, as if delivering an ambulant news report in monotone. Aloof, vaguely interested shoppers dart past him as he slaloms through stacks of cabbage and grazes displays of toilet rolls. In a single take, he tells the Qur'anic tale of young 'sleepers' who hid in a cave, only to wake up 300 years later, utterly out of sync with the world.

The roving narrator is Egyptian artist Wael Shawky. The 12-minute film, his 2005 work 'The Cave' (Amsterdam). This single piece (one of two in which the artist actually appears) epitomises the pedigree of this rising-star artist, whose approach is as nimble as it is challenging.

Wael Shawky's signature is that he never makes a statement in his art. He is adamantly neutral. The viewer is left to wallow in an ambient uneasiness, unsure how to resolve the questions raised by the tensions in his work – an unorthodox artistic strategy, to say the least, particularly for an artist wielding such slippery issues as spirituality, consumerism, authority and the spectacle of globalisation.



Shawky has the gentle affability that has long been an Egyptian hallmark, his broad features animated by a candid energy. His growing international acclaim has resulted in prolonged absences from his hometown of Alexandria. Yet the most telling chapter of his life unfolded not in the land of the pharaohs, but in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. 'I grew up in Mecca in the 70s,' he reveals, 'and Saudi Arabia had a huge impact on me as an artist. As a kid, I was a bit isolated, which encouraged me to use my imagination all the time, to fill in the void of social activities. Almost all of my current work contains what I experienced during this period.'



"During this year's Sharjah Biennial 11, Shawky took home one of two awards for an exceptional contribution to SB11 for 'Dictums 10:120'"

Unsurprisingly, much of this work involves religion. 'What's interesting about Wael,' Lebanese gallerist Andrée Sfeir-Semler once shared in an interview, 'and what's different about his work compared to that of other conceptual artists, is the way he takes religion into account.' Shawky himself is quick to spot a link to his formative Saudi years. Works like 'The Cave', 'Al Aqsa Park' (imagine the Dome of the Rock as an amusement park joy ride), the rarely seen 'Digital Church' (imagine The Cave set in a Catholic church) and the ongoing video series 'Cabaret Crusades' (Amin Maalouf's book 'The Crusades Through Arab Eyes' as marionette musical theatre) all manipulate religion, yet the artist's stance remains steadfastly ambiguous.

Shawky admits to being fascinated by the metaphysical world, so it seems somehow logical that magic should spark his artistic curiosity. 'Al Araba al Madfuna', a video and erstwhile installation that premiered at Berlin's KW Institute for Contemporary Art in August 2012, is a surreal tale of human greed, with a cast of confounded elders (played by children) and shamanistic treasure-hunters digging for pharaonic relics, set in the eponymous Upper Egyptian village.

Less magical and more mystical, the premier of 'Dictums 10:120' at the Sharjah Biennial 11 in 2013 was a watershed moment in Shawky's nearly 20-year career. The Sharjah Art Foundation's Witness Programme, an international residency in which the artist participated during Sharjah Biennial 10, was the initial breeding ground for the concept, articulated around the idea of the Biennial's public. Two years later, after extensive research and a timely epiphany by a Sharjah Art Foundation staffer, 'Dictums 10:120' sprang melodiously to life.

In a narrow, sun-drenched alleyway snaking between the Foundation's newly built spaces, two human columns of South Asian musicians line the walls. Dressed in crisp tunics, the 30 men sit cross-legged on pastel-coloured cushions, eyes fixed on two rock-star-status qawwals, Fareed Ayaz and Abu Muhammad, perched on the podium before them like twin leaders at the helm of a galley of musical oarsmen. The qawwals wave, the music starts. Syncopated drums are a counterpoint to the musicians' fluid hand-claps, as the qawwals' Urdu chants ricochet off the walls, echoed by the chorus of seated men. This qawwali song is the heir to a centuries-old tradition of Sufi devotional music. It is also a bold piece of contemporary art.

The lyrics of the song are in fact Urdu-translated snippets from curatorial talks held during Sharjah Biennial 10 (the 10:120 of the title mimicking the partition of sacred texts into books, verses, suras). 'The curatorial text is holy,' says Shawky, somewhat ironically, before embarking on an explanation of how workshops with the Foundation's primarily Pakistani technical crews pitted the workers against the sacrosanct rhetoric of art: they deconstructed art-speak and made a song out of it.

Much noise has recently surrounded the overuse of a particular strain of obtuse art world jargon, sarcastically labelled International Art English. In 'Dictums 10:120', this metalanguage is, for once, fully accessible to the Urdu speakers who comprise much of Sharjah's community (and who thronged to the performances), yet it was indecipherable for the assembled denizens of the art world. 'Ultimately, this is a work about power,' confides Shawky. 'The curatorial discourse is delivered by them,' pointing to the rows of South Asian singers/clappers. Clearly, the work questions institutional authority, while a verse like, 'As Jack said, we want to be as close as possible/To the street without smothering the street,' with its reference to ousted Sharjah Biennial 10 director Jack Persekian, also spotlights this Biennial's stated intention of engaging with the community.

Although he has been in the international eye of art circles for many years, 'Dictums 10:120' truly seemed to hurl Shawky even further into the limelight: 'Everyone I talk to tells me about this work. I really can't understand how so many people have seen it!' Such is the state of Shawky's rising celebrity. 'The best part about this fame is that I don't have time to think about it [laughs]. But it is a beautiful feeling – that you can speak a universal human language, escaping the limitations of locality.'

When he is in his 'locality', it is mostly to spend time with his 'students'. In 2010, Shawky founded MASS Alexandria, the first independent studio programme for young artists in Egypt. 'Essentially, I don't have a studio today. I gave it to MASS,' he explains, referencing the sacrifice of his 400 square metre basement space in the working class Miami neighbourhood to the residency programme he now runs. The idea is to have a group of students making work in the Alexandria studio space every six months. Add to this a programme of talks, lectures, seminars and a guest list of visiting artists, curators and educators that reads like a who's who of contemporary visual culture. Artist Francis Alÿs was a recent recruit from Shawky's stint in Sharjah.

According to the artist, there is no proper art education system in Alexandria. Of course, there is his alma mater, the Alexandria Academy of Fine Arts, but an indolent regime had pretty much forsaken it, letting it fade into dusty uniformity. Carefully choosing his words in what seems like a moment of self-imposed political correctness, the artist explains that MASS is not intended to replace, but to extend and enhance the traditional system. Shawky speaks passionately about MASS, likening it to a 'small academy' which seems even to have claimed its place in the community. 'Because MASS is a basement,' he recalls, 'we used it for the first days of the revolution as a bunker for the entire street. But we also had to stop the programme for two months.'

Somewhat forlorn when the programmes are interrupted, or when his travels prevent him from overseeing the artistic proceedings as closely as he would like, he nonetheless has devised a robust itinerary of international jaunts for the budding artists in his charge. 'Last year, ten students went to DOCUMENTA (13) for one month during the opening, working directly with the artists there, and of course attending all the talks and so on.' This year, a handful of industrious MASS youngsters were on hand to watch the blossoming of the Sharjah Biennial – an experience they zealously documented on their purpose-built Tumblr site. Towards the end of 2013, others will have a group show in the Sharjah Art Foundation's newly built spaces, a stone's throw from the site of their mentor's previous 'Dictums 10:120' performance.

The Egyptian cultural landscape has vastly changed, as of late. The disappearance of the non-commercial art space Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (ACAF) has, locally at least, intensified the attention on successful initiatives like MASS. In Cairo, a spate of alternative art spaces has cropped up, such as the confusingly named, contextresponsive Beirut, in Agouza, and the artist-run Nile Sunset Annex. 'These new entities are necessary,' he agrees, 'but they need to be sustained, which is hard.'

A question about his future projects brings a glint to Shawky's eyes. He enthusiastically recounts choice morsels from the third part of 'Cabaret Crusades', tentatively entitled 'The Secret of Karbala' – a musically rich close-up on the split between Shi'i and Sunni Islam. His research in Upper Egypt for 'Al Araba al Madfuna' whet his appetite for exploring pharaonic history. So, will it be like 'Cabaret Crusades', set in ancient Egypt? 'I personally don't believe in history,' he claims. 'Only in our translation of it.' Previously, the artist-as-translator was a role he willingly accepted, even cultivated. But now he distances himself from it. 'It's not like that anymore. It is freer. A large part of it is about creation.' This shift suddenly brings to mind the tousled-haired figure gliding through the drab supermarket aisles in 'The Cave'. If nothing else, Shawky is nimble. His ambiguity is perhaps his clearest asset. It makes his art at once absorbing and frustrating. And it makes him someone who can never be accurately profiled.