A Jar of Marmalade

BY HANA ELHADDAD

I am not quite sure whether following an anxious white rabbit with red eyes down a hole would be very pleasant. Perhaps I would feel rushed, as though I had to catch up. Or maybe I would take my time, as Alice did during her fall into Wonderland. Perhaps like her I would look at the hole's walls and into cupboards and bookshelves, take out a jar of marmalade, and practice saying some big words.

E – nun – cia – ting these big words may help me fully grasp their meaning. I could even review my ABCs—why do I automatically associate A with Apple, B with Banana, C with Carrot? I could do away with the signifier and just focus on what I can visualize through recalling the first letter of each letter's sound. In any case, Alice suggests that falling through a rabbit-hole would offer plenty of time to think.

Sometimes it is wisest to cross-check with other reports of people falling down holes.



'When did the revolution begin?'
Image collection Lara Baladi. Author and year unknown.

In an essay she wrote in 2013 titled *BEFORE AND AFTER and the suspension of the breath in between,* Lara Baladi describes falling down YouTube during the early days of the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The artist was blown into that hole by a tornado of revolutionary iconography mainly spinning out from Cairo's Tahrir Square then rolling globally through the internet. As she attempted to salvage footage shared by protesters, Baladi's fall lasted for fifteen years, from 2011 to 2026—ample time to download the internet and, eventually, return it.

I wonder if Baladi understood early on that her hands may not bear the weight of her downloads. She reached through a gush of wind and extracted a basket which she named Tahrir Archives. Shortly after, an umbrella happened to hook its handle to the basket. Should the umbrella get a name too? Regardless, the umbrella provided shade and comfort for Baladi to sift through the basket's contents, which got louder and louder as she amassed more downloads. The noise, of course, emanated from the protesters whose creativity spurred the internet tornado. Vox Populi (Latin, voice of the people), the perfect words to practice! And the perfect name for her umbrella!

Eventually Tahrir Square was deserted but the tornado continued to whir, beyond Egypt, across the US, Europe, Latin America, new protesters, new discontents. It seemed like something even bigger was at play. Baladi's sense of urgency grew stronger as she salvaged more footage.

ONE COULD REFER TO THIS ABC AS AN ATLAS, WHERE CONSTELLATIONS OF IMAGES, QUOTATIONS, HISTORICAL EVENTS, AND ARCHIVAL MATERIAL FORM A LATERAL SYSTEM OF KNOWLEDGE

Perhaps she began to catch on to older resonances within the internet tornado, downloading photographs of the "I AM A MAN" slogan carried during the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, the lyrics of The Beatles' song "I Am the Walrus," along with the phrase spoken by God to Moses in Exodus 3:14, in the Bible, "I AM THAT I AM." Could they all be connected? I imagine a word effervescing in Lara Baladi's mind: apophenia. What a joy to have words and meanings associated in seemingly unlikely ways. Perhaps Baladi found apophenia quite important as she reached again through the wind and found a table that could house it. She placed the word on a saneya (Arabic, plate) named "أ" (aleph), the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, and laid it on the table.

She also downloaded .jpg images of a seventeenth-century painting by Rembrandt titled *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and of the black-and-white photograph of Che Guevara's corpse after his assassination in 1967.

Art historian John Berger said that both these images of death and spectacle stage the body as a point of collective observation and interpretation. Baladi placed them on a saneya titled "م" (meem) next to the word "موت" (death).

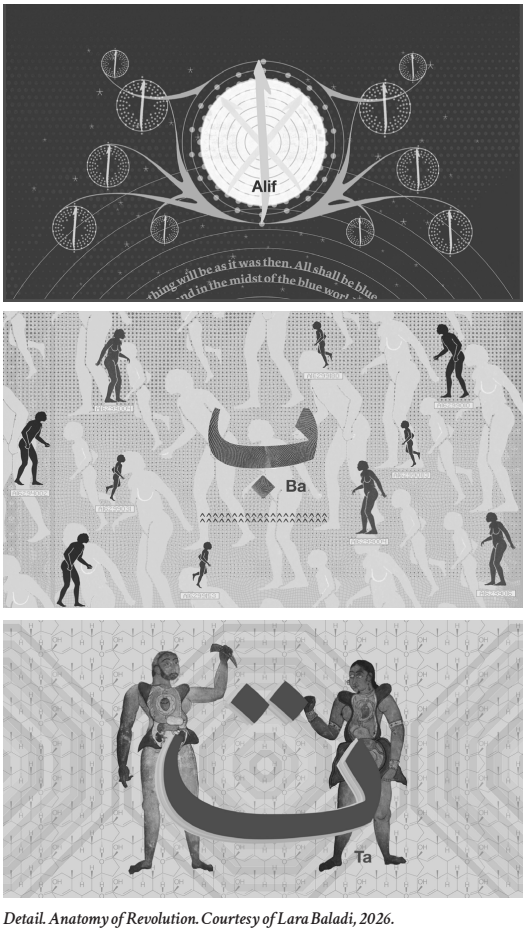
She shuddered as she continued to sail through the tornado. She reached into her basket for an answer and stumbled upon Guevara's words, "I have a wish. It is a fear as well—that in my end will be my beginning." What made the Che the Che? A commitment beyond fear? Or "FEAR NOT, FOR I AM WITH YOU," as in verse 41 in Isaiah? Before she knew it, Baladi had placed the two quotes side by side next to the word "خوف" (fear) on another saneya titled "خ" (kha). Can more of her basket's contents, grouped together on the table, carry the same fecundity of meaning?

Seven years in, Baladi's table of revolutionary iconography began to shape into the ABC she had long been creating, sowing images and texts into meaning. One could refer to this ABC as an atlas, where constellations of images, quotations, historical events, and archival material form a lateral system of knowledge.

What is the point of creating a lexicon if it is not to take out a jar of marmalade? Perhaps what Walter Benjamin said about ABCs is true, that they represent "the act of reading what was never written." Dr. Nicolaes Tulp used his anatomy table to dissect the body of Aris Kindt, who had been convicted of a crime. Can Baladi's dissection of the iconography of social movements yield a similarly anatomical knowledge of revolutions?

In 2023, Baladi thought it favorable to exit the tornado. She neatly folded her table into a website titled anatomyofrevolution.com and placed the ABC at the very tip of her umbrella's shaft, at the point where cloth meets metal.

It took Baladi three more years to unfold her website and leave it open for unsuspecting internauts to stumble upon and, like me, fall through.



Detail. Anatomy of Revolution. Courtesy of Lara Baladi, 2026.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

The Anatomist welcomes you to its first edition.

This publication accompanies the launch of *Anatomy of Revolution*, the website and archival platform created by Lara Baladi to explore the iconography and language of social movements, revolts, and revolutions. Borrowing the form of an ABC, it weaves stories and histories of resistance and quests for freedom in its broad sense through the Arabic alphabet.

One might have expected the inaugural issue of *The Anatomist* to commence with the aleph, the letter A. However, we chose to begin with zayn, or Z.

Just as the website appreciates the entangling of different subject matters, by allowing us to scroll up and down but also horizontally across the letters, *The Anatomist* proposes an approach of discovery, of reading articles in a zigzag fashion.

This first issue is dedicated to the topic of migration, broached through the journey of Egypt's diplomatic giraffe called Zarafa. In 2019, as she was initiating *the Anatomy of Revolution* ABC, Lara Baladi added
the story of Zarafa for considering ideas around diplomacy. The figure of this giraffe, forced out of her home in Sudan and into an estranged existence in France, also serves as a metaphor for migration.

Bodies, images, ideas, memories—and perhaps giraffes!—in transit determine the shape of human history. All articles in *The Anatomist* issue 1 have been commissioned to reflect displacement, borders, exile, and return. A zigzag between these subjects takes us through stories of diplomacy, of a migrant mother's plight, and of the scent of the medlar fruit, among others.

Each subsequent issue of *The Anatomist* will similarly befriend a letter, a theme, or a word drawn from *Anatomy of Revolution*. Each will come together as a companion to an exhibition, a conference, or a project connected to its content and inquiries.

This first issue was conceived as a companion to the exhibition *Z for Zarafa*.

We wish to express our special appreciation to Gypsum's director, Aleya Hamza, for her trust and enthusiasm, and to the gallery's programs manager, Sarah Sarofim, for her steadfast support throughout the production process.

Our heartfelt gratitude goes to the organization Threads of Hope, for its generous support and collaboration.

For their rich insights and contributions, we thank Khaïri Abaza, Jamila Abdel-Razek, Rafaëlle Berthault, Hana Elhaddad, Mai Elwakil, Ganzeer, Jonathan Hearn, Mahmoud Salem, and Amr Shalakany.

And finally, we thank you for being our first readers.

The Editors



The Anatomist is a Cairo-based publication in the form of a newspaper born in 2026 from an encounter between Lara Baladi and Farida Youssef.

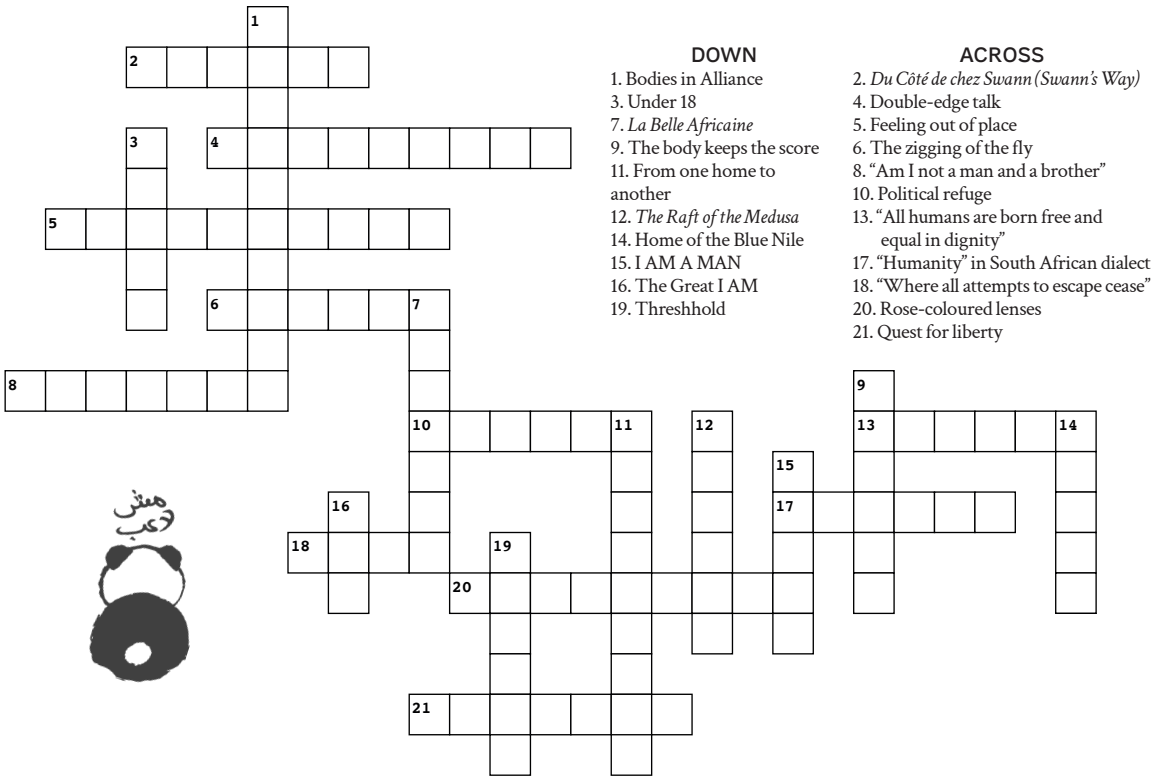
Co-edited by Lara Baladi and Farida Youssef
Copy-edited by Jenifer Evans and Zacharia Fahmi
Designed by Farida Ezzat
Printed in Cairo, Egypt, at Metropole

The Anatomist is co-produced by Gypsum and visual artist, Lara Baladi, on the occasion of *Z for Zarafa*, her first solo exhibition with Gypsum.

GYPSUM

Contact us at:
theanatomyofrevolution@gmail.com

Crossing Anatomy of Revolution



DOWN

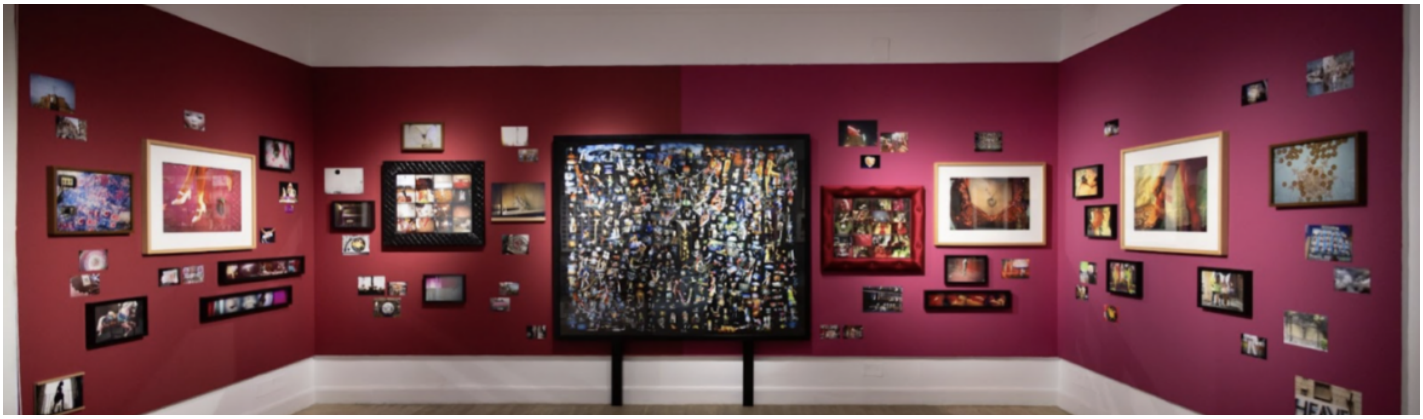
1. Bodies in Alliance
3. Under 18
7. *La Belle Africaine*
9. The body keeps the score
11. From one home to another
12. *The Raft of the Medusa*
14. Home of the Blue Nile
15. I AM A MAN
16. The Great I AM
19. Threshhold

ACROSS

2. *Du Côté de chez Swann (Swann's Way)*
4. Double-edge talk
5. Feeling out of place
6. The zigging of the fly
8. "Am I not a man and a brother"
10. Political refuge
13. "All humans are born free and equal in dignity"
17. "Humanity" in South African dialect
18. "Where all attempts to escape cease"
20. Rose-coloured lenses
21. Quest for liberty

CULTURE / EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Lara Baladi's Cosmovision



Cosmovision exhibition view. - Courtesy: TINTERA. Photo by Marc Onsi. - Photograph:

By
Hana Elhaddad

February 18, 2026

In Cosmovision, Lara Baladi breaks down photography's cadre into a discursive unfurling of her becoming from 1996 to 2011, autobiographically performing the logic of the white cube. Shown at Tintera, the exhibition ran until 11 January, and comprised over one hundred works, more than half of which were on view for the first time.

Cosmovision staged photography as an installation of practice, rather than a privileged medium, transforming Baladi's archive into an autobiographical, epistemic apparatus.

AD

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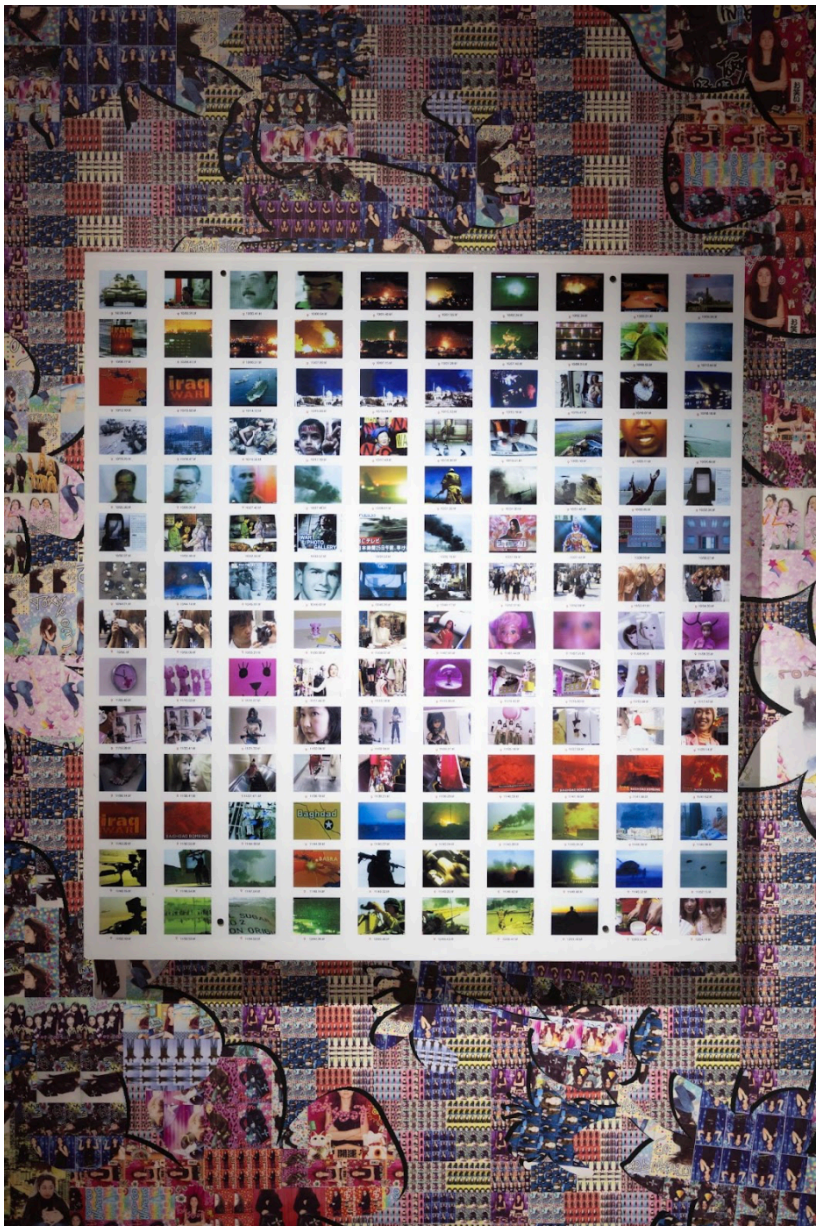
Baladi describes the period of her life as one during which she was on a quest: social, political and spiritual. In a 2016 essay for AGNI, a writing journal publication by Boston University, titled Vodka–Chamomile: cocktail for a revolution, Baladi writes: "Writing used to petrify me. Making images allowed me to speak the things I did not dare to express in words. I always thought (wrongly) that words were too specific: they could reveal too much, although they showed nothing, while images showed everything, sometimes crudely, yet stayed mute. As time goes on, what I most desperately seek is the silence between thoughts, where I can root and grow."

Baladi's Cosmovision, while seemingly an open book, remains opaque. The exhibition unfolds to me, truly, in the silence (space) between the thoughts (images). In this manner, Cosmovision speaks to me as an artwork, a spatial memoir, and I will be addressing it as such. Specific works referenced are to be considered as spatial joints that constitute the whole. Meaning-making in Cosmovision thus emerges from the embodied navigation of its fragments rather than from individual works, following a Warburgian and Benjaminian method of thinking through the visual archive. Cosmovision operates as an atlas and generates tension with linear narration, inviting the construction of meaning through juxtaposition and affect.

The making of Cosmovision officially began

during a residency at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation. In what she describes as a tiny studio space, Baladi printed a roll of photographs on a contact sheet and started cutting. She then pinned what she describes as the strongest images on her studio wall. Following this selection, Baladi grouped the remaining photographs aesthetically through tonality and feeling, a strategy she describes as something new to the way she engages with her work. She describes the collage-like aspect of compiling Cosmovision as rhythmic and story-like.

Following her return to Cairo, Baladi worked with the gallery to select the final works for display. She describes the framed works as anchor images, while the unframed works as punctuation. All displayed in affectively-inspired constellations. Only framed works were offered for sale.



Lara Baladi, Digital Alienation, Japan, 2003, edition 1 of 6, from the video and lightbox installation Shish Kebab, acetate print laminated on plexiglass, 95x102cm. Courtesy of TINTERA. Photo credit: Marc Onsi.

Having visited the show multiple times during its run, I have been continually fascinated by a wallpaper created in 2025 to complement her panel Digital Alienation (2003) from the series Shish Kebab. Digital Alienation was created following six months in Japan, a time the artist describes as overwhelming due to the sheer amount of digital images she consumed. Being in Japan at that period also coincided with the

United States invasion of Iraq, which augmented Baladi's engagement with digital imagery as she sought access to information on the region she considers home. The wallpaper placed behind the panel at Tintera comprises a collage of self-portraits from Baladi's Japan archive. Made more than 20 years after her time in Japan, the wallpaper embodies Cosmovision distilled down into a spatial joint. The wallpaper operates discursively as a meaning-making entity of her experience in Japan. Acutely so, considering her image choice in which she, herself, was the sitter. The wallpaper communicates to me the unfolding of time. Time, in Cosmovision, swims through a suspended autobiographical present. In a 2018 interview for Hromadske, Baladi describes that what interests her is how many things take on new meaning over time. How meaning-making is about "reading and understanding this moment, but in the present tense, and about transforming the present into a dynamic dialogue with a specific moment in the past."



Lara Baladi, Oum El Dounia, 2000, Egypt. Edition 3 of 6 + 2 AP, archival pigment print, 64x84cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Lara Baladi, Sandouk El Dounia, Egypt, 2001, edition 1 of 6 + 2 AP, archival pigment print, 159×197.7cm. Courtesy of the artist.

While positioned as anchors, Baladi's two monumental works, Oum El Dounia (2000) and Sondouk El Dounya (2001), do not operate as generative nodes, but somewhat stabilizing gestures within the exhibition's commercial frame.

Cosmovision marks its conclusion with Pop Corn & Revolution (2011) and an exit sign. Baladi describes 2011 as the onset of a climactic peak. She had just finished working on her series, Diary of the Future, about the death of her father, which was set to be exhibited in Qatar in December 2010, and aiming to leave for a two-month residency in Mexico in March. Then came the revolution, which took place a month before the ceiling of her old Zamalek apartment fell. Baladi recounts that it fell right where she was seated organizing documents. It fell five minutes after she stepped outside the room. She describes

how it took her days to address the fallen ceiling. Perhaps the shock engendered silence. And a need to exit.

In her most recent work, Baladi executes what she terms "performing the archive." Anatomy of Revolution (2019–) reactivates her long-term digital archive, Vox Populi, which assembles material from the 2011 Egyptian revolution alongside other global social movements. In a 2012 interview with Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, Baladi states that while she identifies as Arab and a woman, she rejects any definition of herself as a female Arab artist, claiming that "it does no more than state the obvious in a way that reveals little or nothing."

Cosmovision thus relocates Baladi's photographic practice from image-making to exhibition logic, montage and spatial thought, transcending clarity of medium. Its opacity resists geopolitical simplification, insisting on photography as being an archival and epistemic structure. In doing so, the exhibition offers a demanding form of legibility that unfolds through sustained attention.

One may ponder the name Cosmovision. Derived from cosmos, meaning universe, the name alludes to universal vision. Perhaps some sort of universality of being. In keeping with its title, Cosmovision does not manifest through a linear reading, and the connections it engenders are spatial, conceptual and

relational. Baladi's exploration of self, in other words, appears as a constellation. Cosmovision thus carries out an epistemically and esoterically informed unmaking of the medium of photography, acting as a punctuation in an artistic and cultural landscape that has distilled fine art photography down to a framed artifact in a canonized white cube.

Through the white cube, Baladi turns the medium inward, mobilizing it as an epistemic structure. In the interview with Bardaouil and Fellrath, she emphasized the importance of making her work accessible "so that people without formal art backgrounds can understand and engage with it." While photographers such as Wolfgang Tillmans similarly dismantle hierarchies of display through informal installation, Tillmans directs this visual democracy outward, toward the social world. Baladi, by contrast, turns it inward, mobilizing photography as an autobiographical and esoteric structure of becoming.

Cosmovision speaks to me with a visceral intensity comparable to Mona Hatoum's Hair Necklace (2013). In Hair Necklace, a sculpture comprising strands of her own hair formed into beads, threaded together and placed on a wooden display bust, Hatoum condenses displacement into an object worn against the body. In Cosmovision, Baladi unfolds displacement spatially, across an exhibition that functions as an autobiographical atlas. In

both cases, meaning-making is pressurized rather than explained. There is something grotesque about the deeply personal, a repulsive yet wholly captivating realm.

Hana Elhaddad
3 articles on Mada

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2/13/2026 Farida El Gazzar @ Art Basel Qatar, Doha (03.02.2026 – 07.02.2026)

In Qatar, I saw a Farida El Gazzar painting dance.

Nothing compares to stumbling upon a Farida El Gazzar at an art fair. Dainty, gilded frames of the artist's choosing outline velvety, luscious fields of colour, like a gold-rimmed pearl button at an antique store, but the pearl is actually porphyry. Despite their profundity, El Gazzar's paintings are minute, claiming a modesty through their scale. But all is not as it seems: the works' decorative excess, which leans on kitsch, alongside their small size, heighten intimacy with the viewer, performing an almost satirical play on the spectacle ingrained within an art fair. I first

encountered El Gazzar's work at an art fair myself, and was intrigued by the apparent lack of legibility of her seemingly mundane subject matter. At Kalfayan's booth at Qatar's inaugural Art Basel, I was able to tie some loose strands.

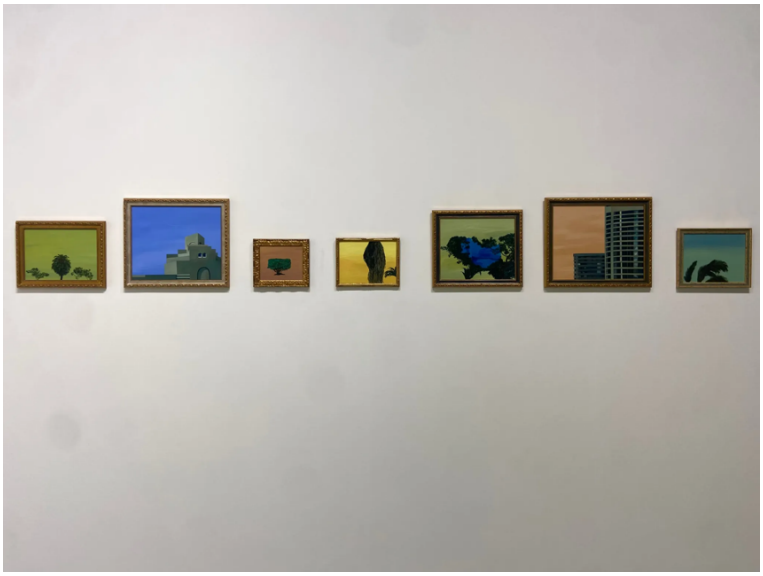


Farida El Gazzar presented by Kalfayan at Frieze London in 2024.

El Gazzar orders the framed

works on display. At the booth, the largest framed work measured 30 × 36 cm and the smallest 13 × 18 cm. Disrupting the artist's exquisite order, however, was an unframed, large, hanging, acrylic painting on unstretched canvas. *Desert Dance* (2025) measures approximately 3.8 × 5 m and is El Gazzar's largest work to have been exhibited to date. The painting departs from the artist's conventional earthy palette into a brighter realm, and her painterly strokes breathe life into vegetation that conventionally appears static in her framed works. A lifeless form still negotiates presence, however, as an angular structure seems to have slid into *Desert Dance*'s top left corner. Is this structure a residential building? Or a pyramid? Its austerity grounds the dancing life El Gazzar conceived. Despite its placement at the start of the order, which still constitutes an order, *Desert Dance* reorients the smaller works

that follow.



Farida El Gazzar presented by Kalfayan at Art Basel Qatar in 2026.

Desert Dance fits within the artist's broader interest in understanding socio-political life that gets caught up in an ever-changing yet highly structured urban landscape. El Gazzar's subject matter is usually ambiguous, which renders a sense of universality. This is carried out by drawing from a photographic archive of her walks and travels. Without preparatory

sketches, El Gazzar commences her painting process by cropping photographed forms and reformulating their colour palette in response to her mood, leaving the viewer to question whether the works are set in Athens, Kuwait, or the artist's native Alexandria. A feeling of presence permeates the artist's structures, as though architecture serves as a footprint asserting human life.

El Gazzar describes *Desert Dance* as being a response to the fair's artistic director, Wael Shawky's, theme of Becoming. Shawky spoke on his fascination with the Gulf's quest to 'become' in a panel with Rachel Whiteread on Becoming, explaining how the region puts to action a larger dream shared by societies around the world of building bigger and badder, higher and higher. A quaint ideology. El Gazzar describes becoming as a state informed by slowing down in a rapidly changing world, one that serves as a reclamation of

Archive

Jun 2026
May 2026
Mar 2026
Feb 2026
Jan 2026
Dec

humanity. The effect the works exude feels tongue-in-cheek.

At Kalfayan's booth, engaging with El Gazzar's work necessitated a walk. To the small, back to the large, again to the small, back to the whole. *Desert Dance* marks a theatrical juncture. An almost gaping hole from which the framed works emanate.

Birth is the word that surfaces when I think of El Gazzar's practice. Altogether, El Gazzar's oeuvre possesses a tonal density that is difficult to name; it feels purple, deeply so. Purple as a precious emotion that manifests through a cloud that one wafts to dissipate.

Why is *Desert Dance* unframed?

2025 Nov
2025 Sep
2025 Aug
2025 Jul
2025 May
2025 Apr
2025 Feb
2025 Jan
2025 Oct
2024 Sep
2024 Jul
2024 Jun
2024 May



Installation View, works by Farida El Gazzar, Kalfayan Galleries, Art Basel Qatar. Courtesy Kalfayan Galleries, Athens. Photo: Sebastiano Pellion Di Persano.



Detail of *Desert Dance* (2025).

2024
Apr
2024
Mar
2024

CULTURE / EXHIBITION REVIEWS

In pursuit of filling art-historical cracks: Chafik Charobim and missed opportunities



Chafik Charobim's studio archive from the collection of the artist's estate, Cairo. Photograph courtesy of Kafrawy

By Hana Elhaddad

How do you adequately fill an art-historical gap?

A retrospective for Chafik Charobim was held at the American University in Cairo's Margo Veillon Gallery of Modern Egyptian Art last December. Curated by Sama Waly, Lightmarks

AD

YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED

To set sail again and again and again until Gaza is free: Huwaida Arraf on the Freedom Flotilla Coalition

January 20, 2026

on vanishing points commemorates 50 years since the artist's passing, bringing together 50 paintings and a collection of previously unseen photographic prints to highlight the dialogue between his two interests over half a century of practice.

Charobim was the first Egyptian artist to graduate from the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome in 1923, studying under Italian painter and educator Umberto Coromaldi. His palette and technical fluency are steeped in the academic painting tradition. At a moment when modernity in Egyptian art was tied to the construction of national identity through local heritage and neo-pharaonic motifs, Charobim's work appears to have remained marginal to dominant narratives shaped by broader national movements. Charobim also resisted monetizing his work, believing that putting work for sale undermined artistic integrity. In a conversation with his daughter, she recounts that when a diplomat attempted to purchase a piece at one of Charobim's rare exhibitions, he was told it was already sold (it was not).

Since his passing, Charobim's work has been exhibited thrice, framed almost invariably as an impressionist or a realist. Waly, encountering the artist's photographic archive for the first time while browsing his family archive during her initial research phase, selected the works for display to explore the interplay between painting and photography in his practice. This review postulates that Charobim's art-

The 38-page displacement framework for a tourist hub atop the rubble of Gaza

Gaza siege: Years of disease

What's behind Egypt's green hydrogen hype?

historical relevance can be most productively understood through the photographically mediated realism that underpins his oeuvre, rather than through stylistic labels such as realism or impressionism.



Chafik Charobim's studio archive from the collection of the artist's estate, Cairo. Photograph courtesy of Kafrawy

The exhibition text presents to me a conundrum: Charobim is described as painting en plein air while also drawing extensively from photographic archives. The text does not differentiate between these practices but frames both as documenting Egypt's modernization, "Charobim's body of work offers a rare glimpse into the birthplace of modern culture in Egypt, capturing ordinary people, daily life transforming, beach culture, crowds, friends, figures he met along the way — and also an expression of a passionate

treatment of light." While en plein air painting and photographic mediation are not historically incompatible, the exhibition's failure to distinguish between works produced through direct outdoor observation and those constructed in the studio obscures the methodological stakes of Charobim's practice. This is key in light of the fact that Charobim's art-historical significance seems to emerge through his use of the camera as a mediating tool, rather than through stylistic classification alone. In his work, the camera acts as an extension of his vision, allowing him to articulate his inner perspective vis-à-vis the artistic currents of the time.

Research on the history of photography as practiced by Egyptian photographers remains fragmented and uneven and is less accessible than parallel studies of painting. In her book Photography and Egypt, Maria Golia stated that foreigners dominated Egypt's early photographic history, and that the first Egyptian to use a camera was Colonel Mohammed Sadiq Bey, a survey engineer who initially only captured Islamic architectural monuments during a trip to Madina. Nationalist shifts in the country's landscape in the 1920s, alongside ongoing modernization, made photography more accessible to Egyptians as both a professional and artistic medium, with photography education introduced at Helwan University's Faculty of Applied Arts in 1929 and the Société des amis de l'art holding the first of its annual

photography exhibitions in 1933.

Charobim's daughter recounts that he was close friends with an Armenian photographer based near his Zamalek home. The two would sit for hours discussing photography. Owning a 1920s projector, Charobim would project his images on a wall and draw from them. His photographic practice, therefore, did not exist in a vacuum, and may actually point toward an art-historical gap that warrants further investigation: how did technological modernization influence the practice of Egyptian artists in the early twentieth century? And, consequently, where does Egyptian realism sit in its wake?



Chafik Charobim, Cheikh Abou Anwar, 1954. Oil on panel, 58 x 48 cm. Collection of the artist's estate, Cairo. Photograph courtesy of Kafrawy



Chafik Charobim, Maternité (Motherhood), 1949. Oil on panel, 49 × 48 cm. Collection of the artist's estate, Cairo

In a lecture accompanying the exhibition, art historian and critic Yasser Mongy discussed the politics of visibility in Egypt and the paradoxes of pioneering and concealment in modern Egyptian art. He highlighted how gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of robust ethnographic studies of Egyptian art history, impede critical engagement, foregrounding how the interplay between the art market, art criticism and academic writing shapes how "stars" are manufactured and remembered. With this lack, Mongy noted that Charobim's Orientalist tendencies, well-appearing in the exhibition, may have limited his visibility.

While Orientalist tropes are often undervalued in Egyptian art history, exhibitions like this one can counteract the marginalization Mongy

identifies by situating underrepresented artists within broader historical currents, through acknowledging the gaps in primary and secondary sources.

Going through the exhibition, one may be quick to point out the Orientalist scenes that surface through some of the works, such as the peasant woman carrying a jug, the breastfeeding woman and the sheikh. The subjects initially appear documentary, but Waly's selected archival photographs reveal their careful composition — not only of the Orientalist scenes, but of the nudes as well. Charobim overlaid circulating tropes to construct images that reflect the intellectual and artistic discourse of his time. This complicates reductive readings of Charobim's Orientalism as ethnographic or documentary, revealing it instead as a constructed visual language shaped through nuanced photographic staging, rather than one stemming from his imagination, as was often the case with European orientalists.

This became explicit to me as I reflected upon the sitters' identities in his photographs. If Charobim is to be compartmentalized as an Orientalist painter, then the identities of the sitters staging the Orientalist scenes, and his compositional decisions, are worth studying. Charobim was well-versed in the intellectual currents of his time. This is particularly evident in his photographic interest in the "mad woman," la folle, a figure that, according to

Waly, occupied an entire dossier in his photographic archive.

This is timely, considering that representations of madness, or hysteria, were transformed by the nineteenth-century medical photographic archive Iconographie photographique de la salpêtrière, which codified hysteria among women and later informed Sigmund Freud's theorization of hysteria, developed during his period as a student of Jean-Martin Chacrot, who oversaw the archive's creation. Hysteria subsequently became the subject of a vast visual culture, with references in the work of Surrealists such as André Breton and Salvador Dalí. Notably, there was a rise in translation efforts of psychoanalytic literature in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s, as Omnia El Shakry documents in The Arabic Freud. While no direct line of transmission can be established, Charobim's photographic interest in the "mad woman" trope contributes to a broader visual regime through which hysteria, femininity and the body were rendered legible in modern visual culture.

The exhibition unfolds across three rooms titled: At the White Sea: Beach culture, crowd watching; There was once a flood: Daily life, ordinary people; and At Studio Helwan: Models, lifelong friends. While visually compelling, these diffuse titles risk glossing over the art-historical nuances crucial to understanding and situating Charobim's practice. Retrospective exhibitions carry a

responsibility not only to display works, but to contextualize them for audiences, thereby preserving and transmitting knowledge. In not doing so, one risks diminishing rather than amplifying Charobim's historiographic value.

This glossing over reflects a broader trend in Egypt where art is often valued for its beauty and decorative qualities, rather than for its historical or cultural contribution. In the absence of such distinctions, the exhibition risks flattening methodological differences that are crucial to understanding Charobim's practice.

If the exhibition's goal is merely dissemination, it eloquently succeeds by bringing to light Charobim's photographic work. Yet, given the gaping holes in literature on Egyptian art history, post-mortem exhibitions, particularly those supported by artists' families, are foundational for engaging the public and shaping cultural memory. It is a fragile endeavour, especially at a time when the afterlife of this lack of art-historical literacy is evident in the many decorative works dotting galleries and art exhibitions across the country. In the absence of robust museum infrastructure, retrospective exhibitions of historical artists are left to shoulder an uneven historiographic burden.

Institutional authority in Egypt has long shaped what is remembered, exhibited and canonized. As artist, writer and curator Ahmed

Shawky Hassan argues in a piece for Madina Magazine on his recent exhibition 99 Objects of Interest at Cairo Gallery, the creation of a state canon in the 1960s by Egypt's first culture minister, Tharwat Okasha — through his mawsuʿat tarikh al-fann (Encyclopedia of Art History) — did not constitute a neutral translation of European narratives. Rather, it carried out a process of recomposition and selection that produced a particular vision of "global art" approved by the regime, as part of the Gamal Abdel Nasser-era cultural nation-building project. In this sense, the question is not whether exhibitions are political, but which regimes of visibility they reproduce or contest.

Charobim's remarkable practice likely did not fit the traditional state-sanctioned tropes of his time, nor does it now. His work and vision, situated at the intersection of photographic mediation, Orientalist influence, technical mastery and authentic artistic vision, demands careful positioning within the broader landscape of modern Egyptian art. Photography, rather than being a mere fascination, seems to have anchored his practice, allowing him to study the human body, compose his figurative works and stage a realism true to his own eye. Without curatorial differentiation, however, viewers are left to consume Charobim's work aesthetically rather than historically or critically.

As I contemplate this exhibition, I ask myself how a museum operating within established

curatorial and historiographic protocols might have organized this show. Such an institution would first and foremost focus on knowledge production. It would seek to understand the broader histories of photography and painting that nurtured the local and international artistic landscape which informed Charobim's practice. This would involve archival and comparative research, as well as a study of his photographic archive alongside his paintings.

The exhibition would likely be structured chronologically and methodologically. For example, it would allot sections to Charobim's biographical development, his painting en plein air versus his constraining realism, his engagement with Orientalism and his interest in the human body. The museum would also catalogue the exhibition as an art-historical intervention and commission a critical essay on Charobim's relationship to photography, a historiographic text on Egyptian realism, an analysis of his institutional absence and archival gaps, an annotated chronology of his artistic development, and a comprehensive exhibition history encompassing all of his solo and group showings, including those carried out privately.

Finally, a museum would treat the archive itself as fragile, contested and incomplete, and would frame objects accordingly. During my visit, two young visitors attempted to use Charobim's projector without permission; their surprise at my intervention underscored the need for

educational framing and supervision.

I beg to argue that imagining how a museum might have organized this exhibition is not an abstract exercise, but a way to identify what knowledge production could look like as we strive to move forward — so that historical artists like Charobim are not only made visible, but studied and understood.

That such art historical gaps are addressed through university galleries and family estates rather than state museums is itself symptomatic of Egypt's institutional condition.

Hana Elhaddad
3 articles on Mada



1/9/2026
Ramzi Mallat @ Project Loop, London (27.11.2025 – 17.01.2026)

Ramzi Mallat's solo exhibition titled Aporia at Project Loop in London percolates within an epistemic impasse, produced by the reckoning with an impossible truth in the wake of rupture. Rather than marking passage from one state to another, Mallat's oeuvre dwells within the impasse. In line with Derrida's definition of Aporia as an irresolvable condition that nonetheless demands engagement, the exhibition establishes a site of suspension that is vast, unstable, and sharply edged. The exhibited works are weighty and voluminous and ground the act of seeing.

Vain Sorrowful and Bellicose (2023), a three-metre structure

composed of a jute rope bearing cut-steel Arabic script from the artist's *Ode to Gibran Khalil Gibran* (2022), anchors the exhibition. Gibran's quotation, "the self is a sea boundless and immeasurable," is rendered illegible through the rearrangement of its letters and the removal of diacritical marks. At the knot where rope meets steel in *Vain Sorrowful and Bellicose*, copper dendrites emerge, suggesting repeated immersion or growth through erosion. The work is inspired by Etel Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse*, which explores existential grounding amid catastrophe, enacted through language. Adnan's use of French rather than Arabic articulates Mallat's grappling with the concept of internal exile rendered by an inability to express oneself in the language of one's native land. The work thus confronts the irony of the self imagined as boundless yet anchored in language, culture, and contested belonging.

Sharpness recurs as a formal and affective register in the exhibition, most pronounced in *Adrift* (2023). The boat structure references an oil tanker, a cargo ship, and a traditional fishing boat. It is soiled, indicating use, and two evil eyes sit at its bow. A Levantine mandaloun window bars the interior, attaching the vessel to the domestic despite its evocation of departure. One may ask, where does the domestic realm manifest during migration? How does one carry the home with oneself? What happens when the home is not the place in which one physically dwells? At a time when Levantine domesticity is routinely permeated by “outside” forces such as violence, history, colonial power, war, and displacement, the concept of home becomes a site of exposure. Mallat’s insertion of the mandaloun thus collapses the distinction between interior and exterior. As per Homi Bhabha’s definition of the unhomely, the

domestic is rendered porous, a site of visibility and risk rather than refuge. Home, in *Adrift*, is not carried forward and left intact, but fractured and reconstituted as a threshold one is forced to inhabit rather than cross.



Installation view, Ramzi Mallat, *Aporia*, exhibition at Loop, London, 2025. From left to right: *Adrift*, *Vain Sorrowful and Bellicose*, *Billow and Behold*. Photo courtesy of the artist and Loop, London.

Mallat's grappling with the unhomely extends beyond Aporia and permeates across his wider

practice. In an interview I conducted with Mallat regarding *Not Your Martyr* (2024), a sculptural installation exhibited during last year's London Design Festival at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the artist describes home as manifesting in the ephemeral. His body of work thus seeks to preserve the fleeting in the material. The installation was made to commemorate the 2020 Beirut port blast and comprises over 260 glass ma'amouls, traditional filled shortbreads shared across the Arab world during festive occasions. In Lebanon, ma'amoul moulds are often passed down through generations. The moulds were historically carved with family initials and adorned with motifs of flowers, petals, and sunbursts as symbols of continuity and regeneration. As a food item, ma'amoul also carries decay within its identity: a memento mori of sorts, binding nourishment that brings about life to impermanence. Rendered in

glass, the ma'amouls confront the disaster directly through their material continuity with the glass shards that caused death and injury.

From a distance, Mallat's ma'amouls resemble maritime fossils. A nautical quality reverberates with a recurring spatial logic across his practice. Mallat renders the sea as both a site of passage and erasure, origin and grave. In *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe frames the sea as a lawless space, often naturalized as a zone of risk in which responsibility dissolves. More than five years after the blast in Beirut, accountability among the Lebanese authorities remains unresolved. Against this backdrop, *Not Your Martyr*, exhibited in the V&A's Medieval and Renaissance Galleries five years after the explosion, refuses to settle for the monumental finality implied by conventional memorials. Where *Not Your Martyr* gathers loss into a fragile

offering, *Adrift* instead confronts the viewer with unshielded exposure.



Ramzi Mallat, *Not Your Martyr*, 2023, LDF 2025 at V&A South Kensington, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The works communicate distinct registers of reckoning: one rooted in the tenderness of tradition and generosity, the other in the violence of uprooted passage. Informed by Amin Maalouf's *Adrift*, Mallat's boat reframes the nautical as a state of inhabiting an unmoored world. The anchor then conceptually evokes the

necessity of engagement with what remains. In this register, the sharpness articulated by *Adrift* proves markedly less forgiving.

If *Adrift* stages exposure through movement, *Billow and Behold (2023)* turns inward, toward vision itself as a compromised form of protection. The work anthropomorphizes the recursiveness of a lifetime looping between protection and loss. The glass-and-resin sculpture takes the form of two eye sockets, within which multiple evil eyes are suspended. The sockets evoke a sea-like motion through their voluminous, undulating form. The evil eyes, while static, appear on the verge of movement. Their entrapment within the transparent sockets may gesture toward an interiority of seeing, both physical and metaphorical, as a condition in which vision negotiates its existence. The transparency of the sockets suggest a collective or universal act of observation.

Billow and Behold reckons with the arbitrariness of truth and the fickleness of sight and its insufficiency as a means of protection. The evil eye functions here as a culturally administered ritual of informal shielding: a refusal of mortality in the face of abandonment. Following Plato's definition of Aporia, the evil eye articulates the moment of profound doubt that follows questioning. Mallat's evil eye gives form to the insistence that life still matters, operating as an object through which collective belief materializes.



Ramzi Mallat, *Constellations of Protection*, 2023–2024. Patinated bronze, Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and Loop, London.

The evil eye functions as a conceptual throughline in Mallat's oeuvre. In *Constellations of Protection* (2024), the bronze sculptures modelled on the 'Eye

Archive

Jun 2026
May 2026
Mar 2026
Feb 2026
Jan 2026

Complex' artifacts unearthed in Tell Brak in Syria have eyes that are pierced by what seem to be meat hooks that hang them. Mallat first encountered the artifacts during a visit to the Nabu Museum in Chekka. In an attempt to research them further, Mallat came to a sobering realization that the only in-depth visual information available online about the artifacts came from auction house catalogues. The work thus articulates a suspension of disbelief that compelled its making: attempting to salvage one's cultural memory through a form of protection already inscribed by loss. In a 2025 exhibition at Takeover Beirut, the bronze sculptures were displayed in a room with a blown-up wallpaper of Mallat's *Vista Vision* (2024). During the process of confrontation with one's failure to protect one's heritage, one tries to salvage the residue, living through the recognition that cultural memory survives through failure rather than preservation.

Dec 2025
Nov 2025
Sep 2025
Aug 2025
Jul 2025
May 2025
Apr 2025
Feb 2025
Jan 2025
Oct 2024
Sep 2024
Jul 2024
Jun 2024

This work takes on a different reading in Aporia, expanding the temporal reckoning toward the infinity of an ongoing legacy produced by the impossibility of the artifacts' repatriation; rendering the infinite Now, where time fails to advance, into a claustrophobic temporal threshold.

May 2024
Apr 2024
Mar 2024

The exhibition dwells in what the artist calls a "poetics of aftermath." Informed by a diasporic entanglement, Mallat translates the lived condition of moving through the world as the subject of a never-ending aftermath, as an aesthetic gesture through the performance of a ritualized rumination. The resulting show at Project Loop feels cold. Deep-sea cold. This exhibition renders the deep sea as a pressure-filled space that curates a multisensory experience of oppression. Aporia confronts one with mortality, and the sea is referenced as a lethal threshold rather than a neutral

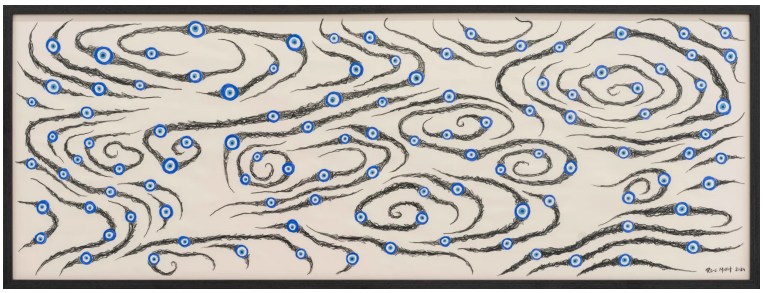
entity. The sea thus emerges as a highly managed zone of abandonment, and the boat becomes a space where the right to life is no longer assured. The concept of “crossing,” therefore, is politically lethal and lacks reciprocity. The anchor embodies the feeling of wafting in inky stillness. Without movement, there is imminent death. The sea is the threshold of Mallat’s Aporia.

Aporia runs until the 17th of January, 2026



Ramzi Mallat, *Billow and Behold*, 2023. Glass and resin, Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and Loop,

London.



Ramzi Mallat, *Vista Visions VIII*, 2024. Wax pencil on paper, 119 x 45 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist and Loop, London.

About the Author

Hana Elhaddad runs the Arab Art Review. Hana is an art writer and researcher based in Cairo. She also runs Barra, a project space experimenting with contemporary exhibition practices in Egypt.

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CULTURE / ART

A visitor's guide to Cairo Design Week after John Berger



By
Hana Elhaddad

December 18, 2025

For its third and largest edition, the self-proclaimed fastest-growing design week in the region set out to transform Cairo into an "open-air design playground." Its ambition took physical form: oversized see-saws at the entrance of the Islamic Ceramics Museum, an immersive sensory room on Zamalek's 26 of July Street and mirrors with a Khalil Gibran quote stickered on them that felt lifted out of a therapy session, reminding you to "forget not

AD

YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED

To set sail again and again and again until Gaza is free: Huwaida Arraf on the Freedom Flotilla Coalition

The 38-page displacement framework for a tourist hub atop the rubble of Gaza

that the Earth delights to feel your bare feet."

A spectacle promising grounding and play in a suspended city.

Suspension is an essential term in my lexicon, one I keep returning to as I meditate on Cairo's urban fabric and my place within it. Suspension, to me, conjures the absence of embodied perception, which indexes a profoundly different state. Embodied perception is the return to the body during moments of mental overstimulation. The visceral reactions that guide decision-making; the state of flow. Joy. Tapping into the less rational sides of one's being.

Since moving back to Cairo, I have been interested in suspension in the spatial, moral and political sense: a way of moving through the world without being in it, a dislocation from place. A passerby drops a Molto wrapper on the ground without a second thought — a detachment from place, self and ethics. Spatial suspension is a dislocation from responsibility and material reality.

Suspension here is a personal and collective mode of surviving a city that overwhelms, the product of a long-standing separation between citizens and the infrastructures meant to hold them. It is a form of anesthetizing the senses to keep moving. The Molto wrapper is a microscale example of suspended living — there is no intention behind the act, laying bare the everyday erosion of responsibility and

What's behind Egypt's green hydrogen hype?

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normalization of non-relation to place.

Cairo Design Week meticulously positions itself within this non-relation to place, turning it into a ticketed spectacle, for profit. Much like the compound advertisements lining Cairo's highways, the Week treats design as advertisements treat lifestyle: as an oil painting. Curated by Egypt's brand-fixated creative industry and catered to a suspended audience. John Berger's Ways of Seeing is a rudder here. The oil painting, Berger argues, is proof of wealth, ownership and culture. In the context of the Week, design becomes an articulation of the idea that "you are what you have." On the receiving end, there is an audience performing a version of cultural fluency conducive to cultural capital.

Where has embodied intelligence gone?

Design, as I know it, is embodied intelligence: intelligent form arising from intention shaped by a spatial and material awareness. Designer Paul Rand's definition of design as a method of putting form and content together also resonates. What differentiates design from art is the inherent value or intention embedded within form, which art does not require. When form and content cohere, design can be imbued with political, historical and cultural relevance. Think the mashrabiyya, a staple of historic Cairo's windows, where design and geometry are intentionally employed to address privacy norms, gendered spatial practices and climatic

factors. Or Coptic weaving, a marrying of material intelligence with formal systems of craft, functional integration and cultural symbolism. Coherence of form and content require embodiment during making. This is because embodied knowledge (the visceral reaction to a material, gesture or idea) relates to a primordial Knowing that links to a universal Being, which allows us to experience design (and art) collectively. Hollow form, therefore, is one that has lost its grounding in the material, historical and sensorial intelligence, informed by embodiment.

As with art, a designer's embodied presence is paramount; without it, the audience's capacity for critical evaluation, creative insight and appreciation of materiality becomes obsolete. Suspension (detachment from one's embodiedness) yields design that is sanitized, depoliticized and severed from its own viscerality. This fractures the connection between form and content. And so I ask: how can design be consumed meaningfully when embodied presence is suspended in both the producer and the consumer? Cairo Design Week's focus on sensory rooms and curated tactility mimics embodiment, rather than nurturing the infrastructures and ecosystems that might actually produce it.

"Design so I can see you."

This is the Week's slogan. If design demands seeing, then how one sees and who is seeing

merit attention. Berger's insistence that "what you see is relative to your position in the world," accompanied me through each venue. Seeing is conditioned by class, geography and access.

Berger writes that we transform our lives by buying things; that we believe that we become richer through possession, even as we become poorer for having spent the money. Glamour, he writes, is "the state of being envied" invoked by seeing. I thought of glamour as I entered Heliopolis' Cayan Court. What does it mean to place one foot after the other, traversing a red carpet that stretches from the dirt on Cairo's streets to the curated haven formed by Ebb & Flow Studios, Hanimex, Point Carpet, Esorus, and, at center-stage, Valu Café? What do the names even mean? Glamour, according to Berger, is the promise of transformation and an invitation to become enviable.

Publicity depends on ideals of selfhood imposed by glamour. Publicity also caters to a suspended viewer who may be mobilized by images of what is absent. In this way, the Week helps reshape what it means to want and consume in the context of Cairo.

Berger then notes that "soon after we see, we become aware that we can also be seen — the eye of the other combines with our own, making it entirely credible that we are part of the visible world." Cairo Design Week fetishizes seeing as such. At each venue, English-

speaking guides welcome an expensively dressed audience eager to be seen as belonging. Some of this audience is part of a growing class residing in gated compounds on Cairo's peripheries, engaging with the city's core only in episodes. I remember moving through crowds huddled for pictures in front of the self-proclaimed sculptural installations scattered around the Aicha Fahmy Palace's exterior, the reimagined pearl pavilion and Dr. Greiche's When the Nile Takes Shape, amongst other design artifacts. They are scenes of image-making and the act of seeing amongst a suspended population.

Same, same, same

I dropped by Heliopolis' venues on Friday morning. By the time I reached Villa Magenta, I had already encountered the same curvilinear couch five times, each accompanied by a poetic, algorithmic wall text about mindfulness and craftsmanship. Going through the villa's ground floor, my mind felt oversaturated with sameness, and I needed to leave. I had a funny exchange with a guide as I was going: How did you find it? It's all the same. She laughs. Did you visit the bathroom? Yes, it's lovely. But you must visit the upper floor, I promise it's different. What is different about it? It comprises two very different uses of material. Oh? Yes, one uses leather and the other marble. I go upstairs. What caught my attention was a little GPT-generated poem on the wall next to the leather section titled Forms of devotion,

where "visitors are invited to witness, reflect, and respond to one question: what is your spirit devoted to?" I rush back downstairs.

So, how did you find it? It's all the same.

Sameness is an inevitable byproduct of suspended cities: form detached from content, images detached from materiality, and, back to the highway advertisements, publicity detached from lived context. For Berger, sameness is the aesthetic of absence: absence of craft, rootedness and embodied perception. Cairo Design Week amplifies this absence, curating a spectacular uniformity that values visibility instead of meaning. The Week cultivates conditions in which form is fetishized and content is emulated; sameness proliferates.

I left the venue and walked towards another. I racked my brain on how differences in creative outputs are perceived in suspension. How was the leather section different from that of the marble? Sameness here is the reproduction of images detached from material, place and labour, rather than a lack of originality. It is what happens when design becomes image-based publicity. Design as forms that repeat themselves endlessly. Suspension produces sameness because nothing can differentiate itself. When perception is suspended, everything looks the same because everything is seen the same way. Sameness, is, in this sense, a conjuring of absence, where images

substitute the social, material and historical grounding that would otherwise differentiate things.

CDW and its afterlives

Though still costly for most of the city's population, Cairo Design Week offers access to an experience of design and spectacle that might otherwise be out of reach for a substantial portion of the public. In a society disengaged from the materiality of creation, I wonder about the afterlife of this access. Berger describes publicity as the engine of consumer society, an entity that propagates through images a society's belief in itself. Publicity acts upon those who constitute the market. If the audience constituting the market lacks the embodied awareness that nurtures critical engagement, art and design become commodities rather than objects that can bring about social change or innovation. In a society where seeing is restricted and privileged, where access is governed by premeditated and highly curated tastes and aesthetics, can nuanced creation prosper?

On Sunday, I took a visiting friend on a walk from the Nile's bank to Khan al-Khalili, passing through souqs, workshops and craftspeople, in areas that I would not traverse myself as a resident of Cairo. We stumbled across a knife-sharpening workshop that has been operating for over a hundred years. Two men, lovingly holding knives they were shaping, were telling

us about their craft. My friend, who lives in Switzerland, remarked that their knives could rival the Swiss Army Knife. Farther along, we encountered a drop forger shaping jewelry. Craft felt scarce, nevertheless. The living culture of making feels fragile. As the sun began to set, we wrapped up our tour of old Cairo, exiting through Ataba. Aisles of plastic goods, made-in-China imports and amorphous "design" pieces catered to lower-income residents. On our way downtown, we dropped by Kodak Court, one of Cairo Design Week's venues. Over and over, I kept thinking about the fragility of craft in Cairo and the Week's abstraction of the lived city. I kept thinking of the suspension that yields the apathy with which the city's inhabitants engage with craft.

The absurdity of Cairo Design Week starts to sink in. Design is embodied intelligence. Design needs the legitimacy and discourse of art, its critical apparatus, and the prestige of display and curation, which Design Week facilitates. But what is design when embodiment is factored out? What is design's afterlife when experienced by a suspended audience? Rather than interrupting it, Cairo Design Week aestheticizes suspension, staging the systems instead of engaging the conditions that produce them. The challenge of nurturing creative practice in Cairo is to reclaim embodied seeing, to render the city a contested and productive space rather than a sanitized parade-ground.

What remains is the challenge of cultivating conditions under which embodied perception can return.

Hana Elhaddad
3 articles on Mada

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Why Egypt is suddenly on the global art world's radar

With the Grand Egyptian Museum open and Alexandria's biennial returning, Egypt is positioning itself as a regional cultural force. But its most compelling artistic energy comes from independent voices and overlooked institutions.

WRITER Hana Elhaddad

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There are a few moments in my life that I can call cultural resets. One of the most memorable was when, on a hot summer morning in May 2023, I encountered Egyptian artist Maha Maamoun's work for the first time. Fresh out of a gruelling degree in Toronto, I had fled to Manhattan to visit the museums. At The Met, tucked into gallery 914, was Maamoun's eight-

minute video “2026” (2010), alongside her photographic series “Domestic Tourism I” (2005). It dawned on me that Egypt is a tourist spectacle, even for those of us who grew up there.

In the video, Maamoun recreates a scenario from Chris Marker’s 1962 film *La Jetée*, a story about a man journeying back in time in post-apocalyptic Paris. In Maamoun’s version, an actor delivers an excerpt from Mahmoud Osman’s science-fiction novel, *The Revolution of 2053: The Beginning* (2007). The text describes a night by the pyramids on a sanitised Giza Plateau with nothing in sight but the Grand Egyptian Museum (Gem). Initially proposed in 1992 and later formalised through an international design competition in 2002, the Gem was still under construction when Maamoun conceived “2026”. In the piece, the actor describes scenes of great wealth and food alongside images of superbly dressed expats and tourists dining leisurely. The scene is abruptly juxtaposed with deprivation, as starving children receive aid from an armoured car. I remember feeling uneasy after those eight minutes; I felt the hollowness of the museum’s spectacle on a visceral level.

In 2018, Egypt’s Ministry of Tourism launched Egypt – Experience & Invest: an initiative promoting culture as a tool for attracting visitors and investment. The campaign arrived two years before the closure of Townhouse Gallery, a vital independent contemporary-art

space founded in 1998 by Canadian expat and long-time Cairo resident William Wells, who was expelled from Egypt in 2020. From a modest alleyway in downtown Cairo, Townhouse nurtured a generation of artists including Wael Shawky, now artistic director of Art Basel Qatar, and Maamoun herself.

Experience Egypt champions initiatives such as Art Cairo, Cairo Photo Week and Art d'Égypte, a cultural firm that seeks to connect Egyptian art with the world. The firm touts "a three-billion global reach, three-million exhibition views and more than 10,000 cultural conversations". Those figures are unsurprisingly unsubstantiated. But it's also unclear what they mean. What is a cultural conversation, exactly?



Ring of truth: "Maat" by artist Salha el-Masry, part of the fifth edition of the *Forever is Now* exhibition by Art d'Egypte at Giza *(Image: Khaled Desouki/AFP via Getty Images)*

At its 2025 edition, Art d'Égypte staged a

monumental show by the pyramids. The only Egyptian artist featured was ceramicist Salha El Masry, whose work, the firm says, draws from the country's pre-dynastic past – a dazzling display, yet hardly a speck of Cairo's dust in sight.

Art d'Égypte's downtown satellite, the Cairo International Art District (CIAD), is in the same quarter that was once home to Townhouse. Al Ismaelia for Real Estate Development owns the spaces, whose CEO declared at CIAD's press launch that "art has the power to transform how people see heritage." The restored El Shorbagy building, where the selected works align perfectly with the branded wallpaper, is a remarkable example of Welsh-inspired medieval architecture. On the rooftop, visitors are invited to pose before a billboard that shouts, "AN ARTIST LIVES IN EVERYONE".

The Gem, which finally opened on 1 November, is a colossal undertaking. After more than 20 years of planning, the mammoth institution designed by Irish firm Heneghan Peng Architects, contains more than 50,000 artefacts spanning 5,000 years of civilisation and markets itself as the largest museum in the world dedicated to ancient Egypt. Upon entry, you're greeted by an 83-tonne sculpture of the pharaoh Ramses II that once stood in Cairo's Ramses Square, in front of the central railway station. The Ministry of Tourism insists that the Gem will offer a wholly new experience of

Egyptian heritage. During the Gem's opening week, my social-media feeds were saturated with AI-generated content from its official accounts.

Coinciding with the Gem's opening is the announcement of the Alexandria Biennale's return in 2026 after a 12-year hiatus. Its wistful theme, This Too Shall Pass, focuses on environmental issues, with the entire city set to become an open exhibition space. Egypt's culture minister has stressed that art is integral to Alexandria's identity, and that reinstating the biennial will have a significant impact on instilling aesthetic ideals in its youth. Yet, meaningful cultural institutions in Alexandria have long struggled to stay afloat. Among them, Mass Alexandria, founded by Wael Shawky and curator Sarah Rifky, offered seminars in art history, criticism and contemporary practice from 2010 to 2012, modestly addressing Egypt's art-education gap. Briefly revived in 2016, Mass graduated a cohort that included Marianne Fahmy and Yasmine El Meleegy, who exhibited with Cairo's Gypsum Gallery at this year's Frieze London.

For the past decade, state-led initiatives have been funnelling money into rebranding the nation as a global art destination – a process that often smooths over its artistic and social realities. Egypt's most vital institutions still lie beneath the surface.

The Arab Art Review was a short-form criticism project initiated in February 2024.

The project manifested through a website and Instagram account.

The website was archived by the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine on 1 September 2026 and remains accessible here:

https://web.archive.org/web/20260901104245/https://thearabartreview.wordpress.com/

Please get in touch for further information or access to specific archived posts.

